A COLD POT DOES NOT BOIL: A CASE STUDY OF THE VIRGINIA BEACH CITY MUNICIPAL CENTER SHOOTING TO UNDERSTAND DISGRUNTLED EMPLOYEE VIOLENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

KARLY RONELL BYNUM. A Cold Pot Does Not Boil: A Case Study of the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center Shooting to Understand Disgruntled Employee Violence (Under the direction of Dr. Cliff Scott)

The phenomenon of the violent disgruntled employee is a symptom of increasing mass violence in the U.S. Previous literature on mass violence in the workplace is mostly based on the individual psychologization of attackers. This case study is a reaction to the need for organizational leaders and scholars to critically address (1) the relationship between institutional environments and the development of violence, and (2) why pre-attack behaviors fail to trigger risk response thresholds in some organizations. This study of the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center workplace shooting ends with a discussion of a new approach to understand the cultural, structural, and larger socioeconomic influences that contributed to a violent outcome. The analysis uses high-reliability organizational theory as a central framework to understand how sensemaking within the organizational culture of Virginia Beach City enabled the conditions for violence to occur, and for the pre-attack warning signs to be missed. A focus on organizational culture departs from the dominant focus on individual risk factors and implicates a new critical exploration of how organizational culture can provoke or enable workplace violence in bureaucratic organizations.

Keywords: Workplace violence, Mass shooting, Organizational culture, HRO theory, Reliability, Sensemaking, Bureaucracy

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CWB	counterproductive workplace behavior
HRO	high reliability organization
IRA	institutional rage attacks
VBCMC	Virginia Beach City Municipal Center
VBPD	Virginia Beach Police Department
WPV	workplace Violence

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A Cold Pot Does Not Boil: A Case Study of the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center Shooting to Understand Disgruntled Employee Violence

On August 20, 1986, a postal employee at the Edmonton, Oklahoma post office brought two pistols and two hundred rounds of ammunition to work in his mailbag. In less than fifteen minutes, the postal worker shot and killed fourteen coworkers and then himself. This event signaled the beginning of an age of workplace rage attacks in the U.S., including seven more postal employee shootings. By 1996, the phenomenon of the workplace shooter was a staple of corporate vernacular. The trope of the violent disgruntled employee or the coworker who "goes postal" (Ames, 2005) is a symbolic consequence of the normalization of toxic workplace environments. From 2013 to 2020, more than 90 U.S. employees were killed by a coworker (Shavin, 2015). The shocking nature of workplace shootings has contributed to the misperception that they are unpredictable, uncharacteristic, or unrelated to the workplace itself. Organizations that focus solely on eradicating the "bad apples" in their organization are not only misguided in how they imagine the emergence of disgruntled employee violence but also sidestep the deeper consequences and insidious ways that workplace culture norms contribute to the risk of WPV (Brassel, 2020, p 71).

Although workplace homicides represent the smallest percentage of workplace violence, these events are highly publicized with a strong emphasis in police and media accounts on psychoanalyzing the individual assailant and diminishing the role of the organization. The problem this paper addresses is this common perception of rampage attacks at work as random or only motivated by undetectable personal issues. I offer a qualitative iterative case study of a workplace shooting that had "no motive" to contribute to more relevant understandings of how the workplace environment enables and constrains response to the risk of disgruntled employee

violence (Allyn, 2019). The following case study is focused on the workplace shooting at the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center (VBCMC) in Virginia Beach City, Virginia which occurred on May 31st, 2019.

The timeline and background of the VBCMC case represent an archetypal example of the 21st-century American workplace shooting. The significance of this study is rooted in the rising tide of domestic terrorism in the U.S., chiefly concerning mass shootings in bureaucratic institutional settings, such as universities, corporate offices, and military bases. Scholarly interest in disgruntled employee violence has been increasing since the first widely publicized workplace rampage attack in 1989 was carried out by an employee at a printing company. Workplace shootings are a phenomenon associated with the 1990s and early 2000s. At the last peak in the 1990s, the Justice Department reported an average of 20 workers were murdered and 18,000 were assaulted each week by a supervisor or (ex)coworker (Laurent, 1996). Although workplace shootings occur with less frequency in the 2010s and beyond than they did in the 1990s, the average fatality rate of a workplace shooting has increased, indicating a rise in the intensity of homicidal rage that disgruntled employees relate to their work along with expanded access to semi-automatic weapons. The phenomenon of the mass shooter and the anti-establishment manifesto is all too familiar in institutional contexts. This case study uses cultural concepts of reliability and sensemaking to investigate what systemic vulnerabilities appear in generically shooter-prone institutions. What is it about educational, business, and post office environments that make them distinctly prone to disgruntled member violence? In the following discussion, I support the claim that there are common workplace cultural practices that, when not adequately understood as potential drivers of vulnerability, will increase the likelihood that the risk of employee violence will go unchecked.

The case of the VBCMC shooting is useful for investigating the relationship between cultural factors and violent outcomes because it is unremarkable, and to those familiar with the U.S. mass shooting narrative, this case is exceptionally typical. The VBCMC case closely follows the scripts of prior mass shootings, offering very little unique character to the portfolio of mass shootings except that it highlights areas of organizational weakness in the context of what should have been learned from previous rampage attacks. The case study method is useful here in that it will help make the familiar unfamiliar, and recontextualize the WPV conversation. The case is characterized by all the familiar themes of U.S. mass shootings prior to 2019, including the infamous Xerox shooting in Hawaii, UPS shooting in California, factory shooting in Orlando, and even the Columbine, Parkland, and UNC Charlotte school shootings (Ames, 2004).

Connecting the VBCMC case to previous literature on mass violence and other similar real-life cases will support the goal of understanding what cultural phenomena are more likely to enable failed detection of disgruntled employee violence. One theoretical pillar of the study, taken from literature on organizational culture and high-reliability organizations (HROs), is that the ability of members to sense and respond to various environmental cues, including risks and crises, is based in the invisible forces of culture (Weick, 1988). Organizational communication research used to support this thesis will include scholarship on organizational culture (Bantz,1993; Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006; Eisenberg, 1988, 1998; Rodman, 2017; Sander-Stadt & Hamington, 2009; Schein, 1988; Yilmaz, 2014), bureaucracy, sensemaking, (Gephart, Jr., 2004; Jeong, 2008; Perrow, 1999a,1999b; Weick, 1988; Weick et al., 2005) and reliability (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1990; Roux-Dufort, 2009; Scott & Trethewey, 2008; Short, Jr., 1984; Weick, 1987).

A focus on organizational culture is useful for this topic because it enables a holistic assessment of multidimensional and complex components of risk development and response. Culture is developed through shared experiences. Experiences tend to be more homogenously shared than shared meanings because experiences are situated and have fewer interpretive alternatives (Weick, 2001). Charles Bantz's organizational communication culture (OCC) method of interpreting organizational communication cultures is aligned with the objective of this thesis because it is a systematic approach to digesting meaning around organizational crises (Bantz, 1993). The use of a cultural lens to examine this case of a workplace shooting event is also important to develop the transition of workplace shooting crisis literature from attacker-focused to environment and context-focused. Using a cultural perspective to analyze the VBCMC case will point out the communicative patterns of organizing that enable or fail to mitigate workplace violence.

Communication research on workplace violence (WPV) consists of several perspectives that are collapsed into a critical interpretive cultural lens in this study, one that allows analysts to include concepts like organizational power, politics, and identity as potential explanatory factors Allcorn, 1994; Ames, 2005; Chappell & Di Martino, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2013). The use of this mixed lens will support the critical analysis of themes in workplace culture which indicate inequity, marginalization, or race, gender, and class barriers to communication and opportunity that lead to anti-organizational sentiment. This study will also draw upon literature from communication and social psychology relating to destructive workplace communication, including bullying, anger and aggression, and mass shootings, including school shootings and previous institutional rampage attacks (IRA). This study is theoretically situated in the gaps between organizational communication research about organizational conflict and workplace

violence, research from social sciences about institutional rage attacks, and theoretical understandings about workplace culture and organizational reliability as contributors to organizational safety. The organizational communication culture approach is relevant to this case study because there is a need to isolate the WPV phenomenon from the psychologization of school shooter literature, and to recontextualize the problem as a product of patterned communication and organizing rather than random acts of "bad apple" employees.

The objective guiding this thesis is that a case analysis of the VBCMC shooting will help future researchers and practitioners understand how organizational processes tolerate and benefit from various forms of aggression, including pre-attack behaviors. The guiding assumptions grounding this study are that elements of HRO and sensemaking theory can be integrated into WPV awareness and preparedness strategy and scholarship to better evaluate how the everyday functions of an organization serve and are served by problems with systems of meanings related to risk. The VBCMC shooting case is used to uncover the ways that organizational communication patterns in the case influenced the escalation of aggressive conflict at work and are systemically and politically blind to risks of disgruntled employee violence.

Background

At 10:31 AM on May 31st, 2019, a nine-year employee of the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center sends a brief and cordial email of resignation from their position as a mid-level engineer for the city. He states that he has enjoyed his time with the city but, due to personal reasons, he must resign. The employee's supervisor responds, thanking him for his two-week notice, and asks to confirm that the employee's last day will be June 14th. The employee confirms. The supervisor forwards the resignation to other managers. The employee then spends the morning answering work-related emails and accessing maps of the layout of Building 2

where his workstation is located. The day proceeds as usual. Later in the afternoon, at 3:57 PM, after visiting three external job sites with co-workers, the employee is seen in the bathroom on his floor in Building 2 brushing his teeth like he did every day after eating.

Minutes later, the recently resigned Public Works employee made a quick trip to his car in the parking lot. Between 4:00 and 4:05 pm, he enters Building 2 from the ground floor parking lot using key card access, and a witness observes the employee with what appears to be a gun in hand, and another person lying bleeding on the floor. The first victim, though, was another man sitting in his car in the parking lot waiting to fulfill a work permit, he was not an employee in the City. The next two were City employees, one lay dead on the sidewalk outside and another in the stairwell. The first 911 call is placed to the Virginia Beach Police Department at 4:06:32 pm. Police entered the building at 4:10 pm, only two minutes after receiving the call from dispatch at 4:08:19 pm.

At 4:11 pm, a civilian pulls the fire alarm on the second floor to alert the rest of the building. Meanwhile, the attacker moves three times between the second and third floors, cycling through the stairwells to avoid capture as he works his way from the east to the west side of the building. Witnesses say the attacker shot some people on sight and walked past others as if they were not there (Miller, 2019). At 4:15, the attacker shoots two more employees on the second floor, a total of nine fatalities on the upper floors. Fire from the attacker injures one of the responding officers, and a shootout ensues. Minutes later, at 4:18, the attacker is shot by an officer. The SWAT team arrives at 4:26 pm during the standoff and the attacker refuses to drop his weapon, he is crouched behind a desk in a corner office, still firing at police. At 4:44, the attacker is critically injured by police fire and taken into custody. First aid is rendered, but by 5:32, the suspect is pronounced dead at the local hospital.

The entire incident lasted less than 45 minutes. By 4:44 PM, the employee had fatally shot 12 coworkers including two department supervisors, critically injured four civilians, and one responding officer, with firearms he owned legally and kept in his car (Allyn, 2019; Miller, 2019). The guns used in the attack were two .45 caliber pistols (the same model used in the Edmonton post office attack in 1989) and were purchased in 2016 and 2018. Sixteen civilians were shot that day by the former Virginia Beach City employee before he was fatally wounded in a shootout with the police and within hours. The outcome of the attacker's final moments is similar to those of many other mass shooters. Though there was no suicide note or verbal expression of contemplation, evidence suggests the attack was planned to conclude with suicide by police.

The attacker was an Army National Guard veteran and carried out the shooting with legally owned firearms and a suppressor. He was an African American man in his early forties who had, according to multiple accounts, recently finalized his divorce from his wife of 10 years that began with separation in 2016 and was final by September 2017. The influence of the divorce is cited heavily in the investigative reports from the police and hired consultants as a triggering event for the attack. The shooter's personal behavioral background became the center of the dialogue and investigation. Media coverage emphasized how other employees perceived the attacker's everyday behavior as withdrawn, isolated, and curt. Accounts from neighbors labeled the attacker as 'paranoid', 'quiet', 'shy' (Miller, 2019). Images of the curtain-drawn windows and security cameras around the attacker's condo are shown on TV to increase the perception of his diminished mental state.

Speculations about the motive for the attack emerge immediately from survivors, investigators, and the media. While witnesses claimed the attack was unprovoked, various

responses from other employees claimed that the organization failed to respond to the 'toxic' work environment and they were 'not surprised' that a shooting occurred (Boyd, 2019; Miller, 2019). In August 2018, the attacker drafted an email expressing concerns about being "sandbagged" at work (Hillard Heintze, 2019, p. 30) after being put on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) following his annual evaluation. One month later, in September 2018, the attacker emailed his Department Head after submitting multiple grievances in response to the "Improvement Required" reprimand, stating that he "is clearly discriminated against by being assigned critical projects above his paygrade" (p.30). The former employee was then informed that the reprimand will remain. This was the last formal attempt the employee made to resolve his work-related problems.

By November 2018, the attacker is no longer speaking to his mother or ex-wife. In January 2019, he accesses TV coverage of the Orland Square Mall shooting in Illinois from January 22nd. April 2019, he drafts emails about his suspicious and irrational beliefs, his stressors, and professional relationships, and purchases ballistic body armor and a rifle. Between April and May 2019, the soon-to-be attacker studies maps of Building 2 where he works and sets his automatic email reply to 'Out of Office' for May 24-28, 2019, the days before the attack. He then works on resolving an issue with procurement, sending normal work emails, then purchases a rifle case and three rifle magazines. During this time, he is also accessing videos about the UNC Charlotte university shooting from April 30th, 2019.

Ultimately, after reviews conducted by a third-party investigation team and the Virginia Beach Sheriff's department, it was concluded that no "leakage" or pre-attack behaviors could have been identified for intervention. Despite a history of negative performance reviews, a recorded pattern of paranoid or obsessive behaviors, and several accounts of uncomfortable

social interactions, the official stance of the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center leadership remains that there were no indicators of risk of violence to which leadership could have proactively responded.

The responses from the Mayor, Police Chief, and the President of the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center were aligned with the results of the inquiries and restated the unclear motive and lack of direct cause for the attack. The focus of the response was transcendent, focused on grief and healing, and assumed a learning approach focused on preventing future incidents. Local and national news outlets dedicated coverage to this gap in the story between the public's understanding of mass shootings as inevitable and the surprised tone of organizational responses (Boyd, 2019; Hafner et al., 2019; Miller, 2019; Ortiz, 2019). The assertion of absence of possible intervention opportunities saturated the dominant media and organizational narratives and served to rhetorically purge the organization and its leadership of guilt, focusing instead on scapegoating the attacker (Burke, 1950). The decided lack of motivation for the attack portrayed by the organization, incident investigations, and media coverage effectively shifted the blame for the event away from the organization and into obscurity. The benefit of this approach response is that it perpetuates the popular belief that mass shooters are independently troubled, and the influences of the environment are negligible, therefore the institution ought not to accept too much responsibility for having missed any exhibited pre-attack behaviors or allowing aggression to ferment in the workplace. The third-party investigation conducted by Hillard Heintze also concluded that there were no indicators of previous aggression and no pre-violent behavioral traits exhibited by the shooter prior to the attacks. Although the attacker had no record of aggressive behavior, the investigation lists several workplace and personal warning signs that should have been taken together to understand where the attacker's aggression was coming from.

For example, more than two years of job performance issues, a recent divorce, a military background, preoccupation with firearms, and a socially isolated lifestyle (Hilliard Heintze, 2019; VBPD, 2021).

The recommendations from the investigation were contradictory, arguing both that the attack was not preventable, but also outlining several suggestions regarding changes to organizational structure and HR processes directed at improving employee culture and relations and being more prepared to identify early indicators of pre-violent risk. Inconsistencies in the response represent a significant disconnection between acceptable organizational cultural practices and understandings of workplace violence. To address the gap in previous research on the relationship between overall organizational culture and fatal workplace violence, I offer a case study of the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center shooting to better describe how perceived injustices at work contribute to violence at work (Allcorn, 1994). The role of this case study is not to insert opinion about the attacker's motive but rather to understand how the culture of the organization and the communication-based s cultural sensemaking practices that sustain it both failed to prevent and arguably contributed to the escalation of the attacker's perceived conflict to the point of rampage violence. The difference in the approach taken in this study about WPV is the emphasis on cultural predictors of violence instead of individual or personal.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review will cover (1) the foundations of the cultural lens, (2) sensemaking, (3) reliability, (4) literature relating to counterproductive workplace behavior.

Cultural Approach to Organizing

In an organization such as a school or office, culture includes all the habitual ways of being among others, both constructive and destructive, that influence how employees collectively see the organization and attempt to adapt to events in its environment. The tools for organizational members to create meaning are supplied by the environment. The concept of bounded rationality is the starting point for this cultural approach, referring to the enabling and constraining effect that a cultural environment has on members' ability to create meanings. Bounded rationality is the concept that an organization's capacity to make meaning is shaped and constrained by the tools available in their environment (Simon, 1976).

The definition of organizational culture is abstract and takes many forms. Edgar Schein (1988) noted that culture includes basic shared assumptions, including relational style, group norms and values, informal philosophy, and habits of thinking, acting, and speaking that organizational members used to adapt to shifts in their environments. Culture does not exist without ongoing communication among members, it is actively co-constructed and maintained through interaction (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001; Schein, 1998; Weick 1987). While culture is grounded in an organizational context, it is also "superorganic"- greater than the sum of its parts (Lowie, 1987 as cited in Snyder et al., 2016), and is created through communication within members of the system (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993).

An interpretive perspective on organizational culture is proposed by Bantz (1993), claiming that methods of understanding culture should center communication and interaction.

Bantz's (1993) interpretive OCC method is designed to provide a picture of the organization as a dynamic system instead of a snapshot of a fixed point in time (Snyder et all, 2016). Additionally, the OCC model is primarily concerned with studying the meaning-making tools that are necessary for organizational members to interpret and participate in culture (Bantz, 1993). To understand the VBCMC case, I use Bantz's OCC model as a framework for interrogating the language, rituals and routines, symbols, and stories and metaphors of the organization (Bantz, 1993; Snyder et al., 2016).

The conceptual holism of culture makes it a useful lens for understanding the WPV phenomenon because it enables researchers to shine a critical floodlight across the organization and identify toxic blind spots. As workplace communication cycles develop cultural patterns, workplace culture informs and is informed by leadership. The reciprocal nature of culture and leadership in organizational contexts means that understanding one will help describe the other (Schein, 1988). Culture is a nebulous and often unspoken set of attitudes and beliefs about the way things are done in an organization. For Senge (1990), cultural participants are often blind to their role in the organization, which leads to an inability to appropriately discuss issues in the system (as cited in Eisenberg, 1993). Exploring and negotiating alternative realities is a situated process that is reflexive, emergent, and ongoing.

Culture is suspended in an ongoing flow of shared communication experiences. In the context of the workplace, patterns of cultural communication are shaped by the power structure of the organization. Structural or formal systems of power are reinforced through less formal cultural patterns of communication (Cantu et al., 2020). Top-down power structures are common in bureaucratic institutions such as government municipalities and universities. The context of power, especially in hierarchical organizations, contributes to perceptions of injustice, inequity,

and mistreatment, which are common latent factors in workplaces that are prone to employee violence. The patterns that become familiar and habitual evolve over time, moving with and against the explicit goals or objectives of the organization.

The articulation of the relationship between organizational culture and crisis marks an important development in scholarship around business and crisis management. As popular and academic interest in crisis management caught ablaze in the 1980s, so too did organizational cultural research. Pauchant & Mitroff (1992) assert that a company's potential for the crisis should be audited using frameworks that go beyond the physical and structural provisions. Instead, the core assumptions and beliefs imbued in the organization should be understood as fundamental to the development of a 'crisis prepared culture' (p. 71). Pauchant & Mitroff (1992, p. 72) criticize the ethical failures of businesses who ignore cultural indicators of risk, arguing that ignoring 'soft' issues in crisis generation can be as damning as a nonexistent crisis plan.

The cultural approach is also important to combat myopic organizational approaches to mass violence in the workplace. Maintaining the precedented focus on any pre-attack warning signs displayed by the attacker(s) will limit the efficacy of prevention strategies by shrinking the scope to the individual factors leading to the event. Introducing cultural strategy as risk management will expand the toolbox for organizational practitioners and leaders to identify indicators of developing risk of violence in their team, workplace, or organization. To complement the cultural interpretation of the case, literature on organizational reliability will ground the discussion of how responses (or non-responses) to emergent hazards are socially constructed in organizations.

Reliability

Reliability is a feature of collectively mindful organizational cultures that recognize that communication leads people to see things and not see things in particular ways and use this

insight to prevent low probability, high impact errors (Weick et al., 2005). Weick & Sutcliffe (2001, 2007) outline the hallmarks of high-reliability organizational culture assumed to enable collective ability to catch weak or small 'red flags' of vulnerability before they develop into disasters. First, high-reliability organizations (HROs) are constructively preoccupied with failure (e.g., talking openly about near misses, encouraging error reporting). Secondly, HROs are reluctant to oversimplify interpretations of situations. Instead, there is an emphasis on creating more complete and nuanced descriptions of events or conditions, and uniformity of thought is not encouraged. Third, HROs are sensitive to internal operations. Cultures that pay attention to ineffective operations, even when they are not causing direct harm, will be more resilient and adaptable. Fourth, highly reliable cultures are committed to resilience and will rehearse crisis response plans (e.g., fire drills). Finally, decision-making in HROs flows toward expertise, not authority. HROs defer to expertise and follow the law of the situation to respond to complex issues (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; 2007).

While most literature on organizational crises is related to external affairs, the topic of workplace violence is a uniquely internal problem related to the immediate cultural environment. Reliability is a socially constructed notion of risk perception that is created and maintained by communication processes in an organization (Weick, 1987). The concept can also be defined as the amount of control an organization has over preventing accidents, managing risks, and minimizing crisis outcomes (Rijpma, 1997; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Most studies about typical workplace environments are not as concerned with reliability because the standard workplace is relatively low risk. Reliability and safety studies are most frequently applied in case studies of high-reliability organizations, organizations that regularly manage low probability, high impact hazards, such as nuclear plants, fire departments, hospitals, and air traffic control centers

(Rijpma, 1997; Weick, 1987). Communication literature on mindfulness and safety cultures overlap because contextual awareness has implications for supporting safe processes at work.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) describe the high-reliability approach as based on mindfulness, as in, characterized by the "continuous updating and deepening of increasingly plausible interpretations of what the context is, what problems define it, and what remedies it contains" (p. 3). The basis of mindfulness is the notion that all reality is socially constructed and is actively maintained through cycles of information co-processing. Mindfulness consists of 'open and receptive awareness', and one key implication of the area of research on workplace bullying is that mindfulness in organizations can become routine, and this may increase leadership capacity to respond proactively to bullying behavior (Eisenberg, 1998; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, 2005).

Reliability theory is a relevant concept for analyzing the VBCMC shooting because it can be used to investigate long-term, undetected development of anti-organizational sentiment that escalated to extreme employee frustration. The VBCMC case is also useful for connecting safety literature to studies of the risk of violence and safety in traditionally low-risk workplaces such as cubicle-style offices or grocery stores. In a more recent study about collective mindfulness, high-reliability theory (HRO) was applied to examine how a computer security company achieved high reliability by using mindfulness practices to adapt to the challenges of automation (Salovaara et al., 2019). The unique role of automation, in this case, is that automatic sequences of thinking, or algorithms, are constrained by the frame problem; the theoretical impossibility for preparing agents for environments for which they lack associated rules (Dennett, 1984 as cited in Salovaara et al., 2019).

Safety is the psychological and discursive absence of the perception of risk (Rochlin, 1999; Weick, 1987). However, an unperceived risk is not an absent one. Weick's tenants of reliability describe safety as a "dynamic non-event" (Weick, 1987, p. 118). Weick uses an example of air traffic controllers to ground the untested nature of non-events as a measure of safe operation. Weick (1987) found that it was more likely for air traffic controllers to experience accidents on light days when they are not constantly sweeping the screen for indicators of risk (p.118). Weick's important contribution from his foundational study of reliability is the claim that attentiveness and reliability would go hand in hand if the cultural stance on safety could move away from the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mindset (p. 119).

Safe operation at work includes psychological and interpersonal safety, and measures that must be taken by the organization to model mindful attitudes and behaviors to manage safe forms of aggression at work (Rochlin, 1999). According to various studies on mindfulness, complex interaction, and heedful interrelating at work, internal communication processes enable and constrain the emergence and management of hazards (Rochlin, 1999; Scott & Trethewey, 2008). The principles of high-reliability organization (HRO) theory are that reliable organizations are (1) preoccupied with failure, (2) reluctant to simplify, (3) sensitive to operations, (4) committed to resilience, (5) deferent to expertise (Fransen, 2020; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Together, the features of HRO theory are used here to understand how the VBCMC shooting may have been an unintentional product of what happens when poor sensemaking practices become normal.

Simpson (1996) claims danger is a physical and embodied reality. The current study will build on this idea to understand how people and organizations make sense of unobservable but embodied danger- like brushing off your gut feeling that your coworker has been acting strange,

or that people are ‘only joking’ when talking about killing their boss (Simpson, 1996). Cognitive frameworks shape perceptions of humor, fear, and excitement- and the competitive, individualistic themes of the average U.S organizational culture can lead to harmful associations of risk signals with success (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2013; Simpson, 1996). The findings of some case studies in high-reliability contexts suggest that some workgroups reward active risk perception and value good safety culture over a perfect record (Collinson, 1999). In contrast, Weick (2001) found that sometimes the perception of risk is discouraged so that the status quo is not disrupted.

Bureaucracy

Traditional organizational theorists share the assumption that large-scale efficiency is made possible by conformity to central rules of instrumental rationality. Weber’s concept of rationality in an organization is a dichotomy of value rationality and instrumental rationality, in which the latter is deemed utilitarian and practical, and the former as irrational and not aligned with the dictation or intention of the organization (Oakes, 2003). Some reliability-seeking organizations take a reductive approach to emotionality that frames non-aggressive emotions as a threat to reliability. In contrast, Allen at el. (2013) submit that there is untapped value for organizations to reduce reliability problems by calling upon emotions as a resource for the detection and appropriate response to anomalous events. In organizations, the role of emotion and emotion regulation rules enable and constrain the capacity for members to adequately heed early warning signs of risk). In one HRO case study of high steel ironworkers, Haas (1977) found that perceptions and behavioral responses to danger were developed out of interactions and that the steelworkers used feeling and display rules as a mechanism of control in their environment. For HROs, emotions are attached to important meanings, and the signal provision

of emotion (SPE) helps members interpret, appraise, and apply meaning to unusual occurrences in the environment (Allen et al., 2013, p. 4).

Correspondingly, the concept of bounded emotionality is offered by Mumby & Putnam (1992) as a response to the organizational and theoretical limits of rationality as bound by a context. Bounded rationality is the concept that members' perception of emerging information within the organization is contingent upon the needs, values, existing structures of the environment. Organizations cannot interpret or respond to all internal and external changes, so the process of creating meaning begins with the limits of accessible, oftentimes limited, information (Simon, 1976). Rationality is not bad, but bounded rationality at the social and individual levels privileges instrumental processes and excludes alternative community-based models for developing reason (Mumby & Putnam, 1992, p. 480).

As defined by Weber (1946, 1947), a *bureaucracy* is a set of systems and interpersonal rules and roles in an organization that is embedded in a process of calculated, purpose-driven formalization (Cockerham, 2015; Serpa & Ferreira, 2019). In short, bureaucracy is the "phenomenon of the rationalization of the world", which Weber calls "inevitable" (Paiva, 2014, p. 439 as cited in Serna & Ferreira, 2019). It is an effort to create a controllable, predictable social world. Bureaucratic organizations rely heavily on formal rationality supplied by those in positions of the organization, and the process of creating formalized meanings is materialized through homogeneity and conventionalization, limiting variation (Oakes, 2003).

The concept of bureaucracy is widely disseminated throughout sociology and organizational studies, and many associated features of bureaucratic administration are considered negative. In modern organizations, bureaucracy is based on these principles: emphasis on written rules and regulations, the structured hierarchy of authority, formal social

relationships based on member roles, regular wage stability, separation of employee ownership and function, and divisions of work with high specialization and standardization (Ingersoll, 1993). For Weber, the bureaucracy was a theoretical ideal because it represents superior technical efficiency and capacity to manage complex, specialized human activity in ways that are optimally rational and fair (Cockerham, 2015). Examples of bureaucratic organizations include local government municipalities such as prison, postal, or public works, military organizations, and educational institutions, among others. Weber's concepts were later expanded to account for the potential dysfunctionalities emerging in scholarship around bureaucratic systems. Several researchers have directed attention to organizations that appear to be Weberian bureaucracies in structure, but are not rational, purposeful systems, like schools, hospitals, and government municipalities. Such organizations are referred to as 'organized anarchies' or 'loosely coupled systems' (Ingersoll, 1993).

The loosely coupled perspective has been used to understand schools and hospitals as an example of bureaucratic structures with unusually rampant disorganization and decentralization from central meaning, rationality, function, etc. Top-down, overly controlled bureaucratic systems are deeply rooted in mainstream organizing theory, and research has begun to popularize new humanistic perspectives of bureaucratically structured organizations. Weber warned of the inherent dehumanization tendencies of rigid, rule-bound, bureaucratically managed systems, and the possibility that progress would be bound up in the 'iron cage' of over-regulation (Cockerham, 2015). To make adequate sense and achieve stability, an organization's internal environment needs to match the complexity of the environment. This concept of requisite variety is important to reliability because the complexity of an anomalous event likely will exceed the

internal complexity of an organizational system and people who manage it, therefore reflexivity and intersubjectivity are crucial to overcoming bureaucratic limits of response.

The impersonality and formality achieved by bureaucratic rationalization increase the predictability of organizational objectives and functions while turning attention away from personal, non-operational threats and complexities. In a case study of City Managers in the U.S., Baez, and Abolafia (2002) grounded a new entrepreneurial approach to bureaucratic management that assumes institutional change is created out of a sensemaking process that is also changeable and informed by member positioning and alignment within the organization. One key finding was that City Managers were able to actualize more policy and behavioral change when they enacted an ongoing, purposive use of symbols and language to signal expectations across all levels of the organization (Baez & Abolafia, 2002, p. 26).

Sensemaking

Relevant to the cultural approach to organizing is the concept of *sensemaking;* a dynamic process of organizing and creating the environment through shared symbols. Sensemaking is a retroactive and improvisational cycle of creating and accepting meaning as prompted by violated expectations (Frandsen, 2020; Weick, 1988; Weick et al., 2005) which occurs at the individual, social, and organizational levels- each process creating different meanings (Frandsen, 2020; Samnani, 2013). The process of creating intersubjective meanings through action is divided into ongoing and overlapping sequences by which a more ordered environment is enacted, and more cues can be identified (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014 as cited in Frandsen, 2020).

The key concept of sensemaking for this discussion of workplace culture is *enactment;* "the socio-psychological phenomenon of someone "predicting" or expecting something, and this expectation comes true simply because one believes it will," and their behaviors will then fulfill

their beliefs (Weick, 1988 as cited in Frandsen, 2020, p. 183). An enacted environment is the product of the successful completion of the sensemaking process ending with *retention* (Weick, 1979 as cited in Fransen, 2020). Berger (1966) claims language is central to the creation of sensemaking through action because words and symbols are the objectification of actions. The perceptions of such language are then subjectively internalized and enacted as organizational roles and performance, which then make up a legitimizing social order (as cited in Snyder et al., 2016). While sensemaking is typically used as a systems theory, there is also a link between sensemaking and culture (Weick, 2001 as cited in Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). Sensemaking is a frequently applied concept in crisis communication, and Weick (1969) argued that the day-to-day routine existence of organizations, and nobody knows enough about what happens between crises (Frandsen, 2020).

Sensemaking is a process of reducing equivocality and solving problems by *enacting* (action), *selection* (interpretation), and *retention* (Jeong & Brower, 2008; Weick, 1987; Weick et al., 2005). The properties of sensemaking are understood as (1) based in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues, (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" (Weick, 1995, p. 17). Sensemaking is a term used to describe the social process of developing shared meaning that is incited by a disruption to the system or status quo (Weick, 1995 as cited in Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006). Disruptions are also referred to as interruptions, unmet expectations, incongruous events, or crises (Jablin & Kramer, 1998; Mandler, 1984; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988 as cited in Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006). Reflexivity is essential to productive sensemaking practices and will enable an organization to bounce back more effectively if they are responsive to the needs of the moment. Organizations and their members are embedded in a

situation which they are both authoring and responding to. Thus, proper reflexivity in an organization enables better sensemaking and reliable culture (Brown et al., 2014).

All industries experience organizational crises, and the quiet employee "gone postal" is one increasingly common example (Ames, 2005). The process of creating shared meaning from shared crisis experience in an organization is both reflective and predictive based on contextually or personally informed assumptions. Sensemaking is fundamental to understanding the ways that risks are attended to and legitimated in organizational settings (Gephart, Jr., 1984; 2004). Sensemaking involves turning experiences or situations into words and shared meanings that can be used to incite action (Taylor & Van Every, 2000 p. 275 as cited in Weick et al., 2005). Managing unexpected cues is not always triggered by a major crisis. Instead, Weick (2001) argues, organizational life can be deceptively simple. The tragedy of sensemaking in organizations is that intention, action, misunderstandings, and actual outcomes can fail to coincide as intended. Therein lies the rub; sensemaking can sometimes make things worse (Weick, 2001).

Organizations are semi-permeable systems in which all meaning is learned, practiced, and applied through stages of sensemaking. This process is relevant to a case study of workplace violence because it can be used to guide a discussion of the impact of top-down organizational sensemaking in post-crisis responses. The sensemaking cycle is an ongoing pattern of negotiating human collaboration in which action must come before sense is made- more simply, actions without clear meaning will inform the next cycle of sensemaking (Weick, 1988). This means that those who are first to act upon a situation, often those in leadership positions, are the first to provide meaning to a situation and establish guidelines for individual sensemaking. The

study of organizational sensemaking is significant because it provides a system for understanding the ways individuals in organizations generate their own realities (Jeong & Brower, 2008).

Power also influences the process of making sense in organizations. Power operates within each translation of experience into meaning and allocation of resources (Gephart, Jr., 2004). Sensemaking is a process of negotiating dominant cultural narratives between the leader and member voices. The process of constructing social meaning can also be a self-fulfilling cycle wherein, "people act in such a way that their assumptions of reality become warranted" (Weick, 1995, p. 36). Thus, organizational cultures that uphold the belief that indicators of WPV will be overt and impossible to miss are more likely to behave in ways that contribute to nonresponse to early warning signs. Literature on sensemaking shows that cultural power lies in the mundane, unannounced, and taken-for-granted patterns of communication (Gephart, Jr., 2004). Dougherty & Smythe (2004) use sexual harassment as an example of how sensemaking processes embed toxic behaviors into culture. Organizational culture is informed and mobilized by the sensemaking process, and the combined concepts enable an exploration of the relationship between cultural workplace norms and outcomes.

Cycles of sensemaking are a useful lens for understanding the case of the VBCMC shooting because of the apparent disconnect between individual and organizational meanings. The sensemaking process is not a democratic system wherein all meanings are equal. Meanings are shaped, encouraged, or suppressed by structures of power (Mills, 2003; Weick et al., 2005). Dissenting realities are often discouraged from the formal ontological structure. The more complex and hierarchical an organization becomes, the more likely it is that the organization will become susceptible to risks due to misunderstandings or inattentional blindness (Weick, 1987).

Variables for making sense in interrupted environments are surveilled by members from the environment and the cultural memory of previous shared events. The capacity of an organization or its members to consider possible meanings when confronted by a crisis or indicators of crisis risk is bound by the complexity of the system (Weick, 1987; 1988). When faced with novel situations, members of organizations will apply habitual cycles of sensemaking to create meaning and reduce anxiety about an issue or phenomenon. Using cognitive patterns and discursive cycles, features of the environment are synthesized into existing modes of thinking- the path of least resistance.

Meanings are not homogenous or given equal consideration in organizations. The shape of and direction of the flow of power often informs collective modes of crisis response and reasoning in organizations. The case of the Shoreham Nuclear Power Station is used by Perrow (1996) as an example of how organizational policies influence the sensemaking cycle and contribute to organizational failures. The Long Island Lighting Company (LILCO) formulated plans required by federal regulation for the emergency evacuation of Long Island in the event of a nuclear accident. For crisis management scholars, these internal policies are also known as "fantasy documents" because they may be inaccurate representations of risk and organizational mode.

The fantasy is so-called because the implication of these written procedures is they prepare leaders to assume all response functions would function perfectly the first time by supporting an unrealistic view of improbable crisis events (Clarke & Perrow, 1996, p.1041). Because LILCO's accident mitigation and evacuation plans were untested against real crisis situations, Perrow's analysis claims fantasy documents, such as evacuation plans or policies, normalize danger by allowing organizations and experts to claim that problems are under control

when in fact the risky gaps are built into the rhetoric (Clarke & Perrow, 1996). The LILCO evacuation preparedness failure example of the ripple of top-down sensemaking sets an important standard for crisis managers to align their reality with the rest of the system, not just policies. Crises related to non-cooperative behavior in the workplace present a similar problem for sensemaking because the risks and indicators are loosely defined and highly subjective.

Counterproductive Workplace Behavior & Anger

Counterproductive Workplace Behavior (CWB) is a set of many types of employee misdeeds, including theft from the employer, sexual harassment, bullying, excessive absenteeism, etc. CWB can operate from the target or actor perspective and calls for expanded literature to also recognize the necessity for depictions of intersubjective experiences in workplace policies about conflict (Raver, 2013). A cornerstone of the scholarship on CWB comes from Robinson & Bennett's (1995) study that showed that CWB could generally be categorized as either organizationally or interpersonally driven (as cited in Raver, 2013). Another important division in the literature is the separation of the attacker and victim perspectives, both of which can be accounted for using CWB. Literature on CWB, such as sexual harassment, found that academic approaches to workplace issues were too focused on either the victim or the attacker, and not enough attention was given to the role of the organizational context and culture that perpetuates the behavior (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004)

The CWB framework operates from the perspective that conflict management studies and CWB literature are divided along a didactic of conflict as productive or always negative (Raver, 2013). Conflict scholars argue that the context and the type of conflict determine the usefulness of the conflict. CWB scholars are more likely to assert that because of the hot and highly affective nature of conflict, it is predominately associated with negative outcomes (Raver (2013).

American workplace norms are commonly suspended in a tension between rational behavior and emotional behavior (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006). Historically, the tendency to favor rational behavior has led to a pattern of emotional denial, reframing, rationalization, and translation among employees. When work-related aggression is not addressed appropriately, it can develop into various forms of CWB.

Workplace aggression refers to a set of behaviors broadly defined as intentional efforts to harm current or previous coworkers, supervisors, or organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). Violence and aggression have been studied mostly by psychologists, criminal justice scholars, and mental health researchers (O'Leary- Kelly et al., 1996). Buss's (1961) typology of aggression classifies three dimensions of workplace aggression; physical/ verbal, active/passive, and direct/indirect (cited in Coombs & Holladay, 2004). Previous research has identified a dearth in the perceived acceptability of different forms of aggression.

Research on individual warning signs for risk of workplace violence (WPV) is much more developed than that of cultural or environmental forces and based on general assumptions gleaned from previous attacker-centric WPV studies, a set of cultural factors were loosely proposed by the FBI as potential contributors to 'negativity and stress' at work. For managing WPV risks at the cultural level, the FBI (2003, p. 33) recognizes the following workplace characteristics as linked to disgruntled employee violence: "One-size-fits-all approach, Rigidity, inflexibility, Denial of a problem(s), Lack of communication with key parties, Lack of collaboration, Ignoring respect, Lack of clear written policy, Lack of careful evaluation of job applicants. No [organizational] documentation, Lack of awareness of cultural/ diversity issues, passing around "bad apples", Lack of an organization-wide commitment to safety." These factors from the FBI are a calibrating starting point for understanding how the following findings from

the VBCMC case are related to limitations in current organizational communication culture and possible extensions of HRO scholarship.

The origins of anger are biological and social and typically rooted in feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, or stress (Allcorn, 1994; Coombs & Holladay, 2004; O'Leary- Kelly et al., 1996). The social origins of anger can be external or internal. This study will focus on the external origins, such as perceived injustice, bullying, humiliation, or diminished importance (Allcorn, 1994). Anger is a complicated, multi-step process in which a pattern of thoughts, feelings, and experiences leads to becoming angry. The model sequence usually begins with a set of expectations that are not met, an aversive interpretation, a negative judgment, and finally labeling the experience as anger. The speed, duration, intensity, and response to felt anger are determined by feedback from the environment (Allcorn, 1994; O'Leary- Kelly et al., 1996; Paetzold et al., 2007). Expressing anger or aggression at work can be positive or negative, but the available tools of expressing dissenting emotions are limited by a gendered binary.

Sociological and organizational forces influence the types of dissenting expressions that are tolerated or acknowledged at work (Abdennur, 2020). Aggression and anger are broadly defined in the workplace as any communication that is an intentional or unintentional attack toward others' reputations, reflects indifference to values, and is harmful to the organization at some level (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009, p.391. Models for understanding and managing anger at work are divided into gendered binary frameworks that favor rationality over emotion (Allen et al., 2014; Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006; Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). Women are more likely to submit to unfairness at work and remain silent or engage in positive or self-sacrificing expressions of stress, frustration, or anger. Men are more likely to engage in overt, active forms of dissent that are catalyzed by a buildup of frustration over time (Allcorn, 1994).

The recommended model to replace the anger binary is to blend the two gendered expectations. This combination would support the authorization of feelings of anger as well as appropriate forms of expression and control (Allcorn, 1994; Winderman, 2014). Managers should learn to criticize and take criticism more constructively, practice listening, and develop responsive feedback loops to avoid hostile one-on-ones with direct reports (Allcorn, 2001, Bierck, 2001). The blend of traditionally feminine listening styles and positive use of negative feelings with the masculine norms of self-advocacy and use of voice would support the ideal model of organizational aggression management. Expressions of aggression can be influenced by masculine or feminine preferences. Moral guidelines for 'right' or 'wrong' expressions of negative emotions in the workplace are guided by gendered stereotypes (Allcorn, 1994; Domagalski & Steelman, 2007).

The important implication of the gendered aggression framework is that masculine forms of aggression have been falsely conflated with violence to the point that healthy forms of aggression (e.g., objectivity, abstraction, non-avoidance, truthfulness) can also be prohibited under standard organizational 'Zero Tolerance' policies against conflict. Systems of gendered aggression management, according to Alexander Abdennur (2020), pave the way for non-confrontational, or *camouflaged* aggression to develop. Abdennur (2020) proposes the bimodal theory of aggression expression using an animal predator/ prey metaphor that posits human expressions of aggression are grounded in the biosocial space. The tension between overt and covert aggression is maintained by possibilities for expression within each mode, either confrontational or non-confrontational aggression. The limitation of alternatives on either side will incur a preference for the other mode. In accordance with the literature, it stands to reason that systemic or cultural repression of all confrontational aggression in an organization will lead

to an increase in less-obvious, more deceptive, and more toxic forms of aggression (Allcorn, 1994; Domagalski & Steelman, 2007; Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006). Anger at work is also an ethical issue because of the implications for agency, mobility, and inclusion. Based on the literature, it should be assumed that denying anger in all forms puts disadvantages the organization's ability to respond appropriately to the angry individual or protect the organization from risks of developing violence.

Organizational Influences on Anger

An organization may unintentionally trigger aggressive responses through formal or informal structures (O'Leary- Kelly et al., 1996; Paetzold et al., 2007). Research on organizationally motivated anger suggests that aggression and violence can be mitigated through prediction or prevention through late intervention. Bandura's (1973) social learning model has been used to illustrate the contagion effect of aggressive behavior as prompted by external forces as opposed to internal or individual (O'Leary- Kelly et al., 1996). Observational learning contributes to the tendencies for zero-tolerance policies to fail. Punishment for anger is not an effective or appropriate form of discouragement, partly because due to definitional problems that limit the ability to teach behavioral and moral options for dissent (Coombs & Holladay, 2004).

Results from the development of the Workplace Aggression Tolerance Questionnaire (WATQ) found that verbal and passive aggression was the most acceptable forms of workplace aggression (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). The turn toward these more underground forms of organizational resistance as more appropriate is tied to stereotypes of gendered emotional expression and carries implications for the capacity to prevent escalation.

Previous studies on active shooting events found that disgruntled employee violence tends to unfold under a key set of circumstances. A popular-press study of rage attacks in the

U.S. since the Reagan administration argues that workplace shootings and school shootings are obviously linked by what they share in context (Ames, 2005). The storylines of the disgruntled employee shooter and the school shooter are almost an exact match. Characteristics of violent-prone workplaces have been identified in previous studies as rife with different types of hostility and ongoing patterns of harassment (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2007).

When used to act against perceived injustices, such as direct or indirect mistreatment, different expressions of anger are deemed appropriate by the cultural standards of the organization (Gossett & Kilker, 2006; Kassing, 2008; Winderman, 2014). Negative use of voice against an employer is usually triggered by an adverse event. The resulting dissenting anger can then be construed as "a moral obligation, a political right, a minor inconvenience, or a punishable violation of loyalty" (Sprague & Rudd, p. 180 as cited in Kassing, 2008). Scholars have used a four-part framework to explain why some employees would speak out against employer practices and others would stay silent: exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect (Gossett & Kilker, 2006).

If dissenting voices are ignored, frustrated employees may become increasingly desperate and aggressive in their efforts to be heard. The exit response is not exclusively aggressive or violent, but when an employee's attempt to use voice as a tool for political cooperation is denied, alternative methods may be sought by suppressed individuals (Deetz, 1998 as cited in Gossett & Kilker, 2006). The subversion and limitation of honest expressive opportunities at work is one way that organizational environments invite angry employees to be sneakier and more deceptive with their use of voice. This study falls into an emerging vein of conflict management research that focuses on how environmental forces shape expressions of anger. Relevant scholarly investments have been made in areas of study focused on the link between emotional and physical abuse in organized settings and violent outcomes.

Workplace Bullying

Research on workplace shooting events operates in the shadow of interdisciplinary literature on school shootings that emphasizes the effects of bullying on individual and cooperative communication. A significant portion of the claims and hypothesis in the research on mass shootings includes references to bullying as a preceptor for triggering rampage violence. Literature about how employees make sense of targeted aggression at work found that targets believe their bullies are evil, their coworkers and supervisors are complicit, and the norms of US business culture are responsible (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Paetzold et al., 2007).

A survey about bullying found that workplace bullying was usually defined in terms of bullies as deviants, leaders as incompetent, and an ongoing perception of targeted mistreatment or injustice (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). Other studies on workplace bullying have looked at why targets of bullying can feel powerless, and how their language frames their sense of personal reality (Eisenberg, 1998; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011). In a study of workplace bullying prevalence in the U.S., an evaluation of responses concluded that the phenomenon is under-analyzed and under-reported (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Workplace bullying is a term that is now being folded under a larger wing of organizational research interested in workplace *toxicity*.

Toxic cultures are defined as harmful interactive environments in which abuse is manifested, condoned, and perpetuated by macro, meso, and micro communicative elements (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2011). Relevant to the risk of violence, toxic workplaces have toxic habits of risk perception that condone, ignore, misperceive, or tolerate harmful communication processes. A case study of crisis development of a French grocery chain investigated how toxicity contributes to crises. In 2002, there were so many supervisor-employee conflicts

reported at a grocery store location that it became a journalistic frenzy (Roux-Defort, 2009). The case study of the conflict and response found the atmosphere of the store was reportedly tense, partly due to an exceptionally authoritarian supervisor. Also, a deeper investigation found that the situation had been reported to central human resources so many times that management accepted the frequency as proof that conflict was normal. Consultants discovered that the human resources department had gradually 'become used to' the tensions and ignored them (Roux-Defort, 2009 p. 10). This case of the French grocery store also suggests the usefulness of studying unusual or crisis situations to re-consider normalcy.

Research Questions

The *Boiling Pot* metaphor in the title is a framing device for the conversation about workplace violence as an inevitable outcome of a build-up of intensifying forces acting on or in a shared environment. For water to boil, a heat source must speed up the molecules until the water begins to change state, bubbling and releasing gas. The metaphor supports the central interest of the case, which is that water does not boil instantly or without being acted upon by other forces. Thus, disgruntled employees do not resort to homicidal or suicidal action without first moving through a period of aggressive gestation. To illustrate the importance of ongoing environmental influences on the development of workplace anger, I conducted a case study of a U.S. workplace shooting from 2019 using a mixed cultural approach to understand (1) what organizational cultural features may allow or condone conflict escalation, and (2) how the communication environment in the workplace shapes the modes of response to early risk indicators.

The research questions are focused on creating a deeper understanding of how the risk of violence can develop without intervention based on what can be observed in cultural communication. The important implication to be exhumed through these research questions is

that disgruntled employee violence is a result of an accumulation of organizational imperfections, thus the system is not a bystander to violence, rather, it is an incubator (Roux-Dufort, 2009). Additionally, the meaning-making processes within organizations create reliability conditions that lead to limited ability to respond to warning signs of risk. This case study will use the VBCMC case to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What features of the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center workplace culture appear to foster aggressive conflict escalation?

RQ2: How did sensemaking processes among Virginia Beach City Municipal Center employees contribute to the insufficient appraisal of disgruntled employee violence risk?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study uses a single explanatory qualitative case study method to provide a detailed and layered description of a phenomenon for purposes of theory development. Case studies are useful for understanding and interpreting phenomena of which little research exists. Case studies are anchored in real-life, which makes them useful for writing evocative critical analyses and rich descriptions of events and creating a highly attuned account of one specific instance or group of similar instances to inform future practices and beliefs (Creswell, 1998).

Case Study Definition & Application

According to Yin (2017), a case study is a method that investigates some phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not apparent. Case studies create highly focused and attuned accounts of one specific instance or a group of similar instances to inform future practices and beliefs (Creswell, 1998). Preferred data collection methods use several sources to support the essential understanding of the specific case.

The results of case studies cannot be widely generalized to whole populations, but because are used to study elements *in situ*, and results of this method are useful for developing or testing theory and new hypotheses (Yin, 1981, 2009). To address a lack of critical scholarship about why mass shootings occur most commonly in educational and workplace environments, this thesis used a case study method to generate a culture-focused foundation for future studies to create more effective hypotheses about pre-attack features of environments and contexts instead of individuals. Other case studies have been conducted to investigate business relationships in the banking world using both primary and secondary texts (Dibb & Meadows, 2001). Both internal documents from the organization and secondary media coverage were used.

Data from all available sources are compiled to create a thick description of the shooting event as well as a full account of the social and environmental cues. Unlike other cases of workplace violence, the Virginia Beach City Municipal Center shooting was highly documented due to the extreme nature of the event and the situational ties to other significant mass shootings in the same year. To learn from the VBCMC shooting, I used a case study design, focused on a particular problem, situation, phenomenon, or event (Creswell, 1998).

The case study method is often used to study how knowledge is used to make decisions. This method is used to study the VBCMC because the events related to the shootings have no clear beginning or endpoints, and instead, the case is represented by a long series of decisions. Additionally, the direct and indirect implications are too complex to be understood using single-factor theories (Yin, 2017).

Case studies are a common method of study for events that cannot be replicated using experimental design to test causation and develop theory, thus it is the ideal method for examining instances of fatal violence and IRAs because of the special circumstances that they occur under. Research on school shootings has used case studies to understand how violence is related to the communication context in which the attack occurs, such as bullying or rejection as a motivator (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2013). This study builds on extant themes in the literature on school shootings and offers new connections to HRO and sensemaking theory to draw further conclusions about how the cultural environment at the VBCMC may have contributed to the attack. To create a holistic view of the pre-attack conditions of the VBCMC case, the boundaries of the case are bound by their relevance to the key evidence of the shooting and the workplace culture. Under examination, in this case, are significant turning points in the organization, including the relevant cultural documents in the few years leading up to and immediately after

the shooting. The data analyzed here include organizational and media documents that are illustrative or descriptive of the socioenvironmental conditions of the workplace and sensemaking processes leading up to and prior to the shooting. The data is also interpreted to understand how members interpreted emergent events in the context of the existing culture and, how new meanings were shaped by existing meaning systems.

Data Collection

Case studies may include a variety of relevant evidence. Sources analyzed for the case of the Virginia Beach City Municipal center shooting included illustrative organizational materials gathered from several different sources that are publicly available either in the media or on the VBCMC website. Data was gathered from external and internal sources to triangulate the data. Sources will include several in-depth reports directly related to the shooting events and several documents and media that complement the official documents from the City. Central to the case is the commissioned post-accident investigation report published in late 2019. The City of Virginia Beach paid an outside investigation firm, Hillard Heintze, to analyze the shooting and make recommendations. The full report from Hillard Heintze, a security risk management firm, is 262 pages and includes an intensive review of the events on May 31, as well as several key pieces of cultural insight and day-to-day operations at the City., including newsletters, cultural strategy documents, project reports, and letters from leaders.

The Hillard Heintze investigation took place from July 22 to November 19, 2020, during which the team of investigators conducted interviews, collected observations, and reviewed the evidence. The direction from the Virginia Beach City Council requested that a refined timeline of the events of May 31, 2019, the attacker's employment and workplace interaction history, and a review of City policies and emergency notification systems. Results from two surveys are also

included. The first was implemented across the organization by a third-party company, People Element. The second survey was specifically for employees in the building where the shooting occurred. Four listening sessions were held for employees and community members. Feedback from these sessions is incorporated in the review. More than 230 interviews were conducted with stakeholders including witnesses, employees, and family members of the victim, attacker, supervisors, and officers on the scene. Public inquiries from a direct access line

Other critical areas assessed in the report include physical security, human resources management, threat and violence risk management, law enforcement, command and control, and forensic psychology. On physical security, the report covers a walk-through of the campus and the police response. Exclusive to the Hillard Heintze reports are the index and assessment of 335,000 company emails and 6,500 documents from the attacker's work devices. Also provided are the results of an analysis of social media sites and public records for information about the attacker's background and possible motives. A retrospective threat assessment of the shooter is included based on amassed documents, family information, social, military, and employment history.

Released in response to the Hillard Heintze investigative report is the *Response to Independent Investigation Report* by the City Manager and Council of Virginia Beach City. The stated purpose of the City's response is to understand the circumstances surrounding the events and rectify and potential security gaps going forward. It is also noted in the City's response that there are some parts of the investigative report with which the City does not agree. This document was released approximately six months following the publication of the Hillard Heintze review on March 3, 2020. The City's response outlines the Key Findings from the third-party report and groups their responses to the recommendations in three categories: human

resources, public safety, and facilities security. The response concludes with an estimated budget and plan of implementation in response to each of the 58 recommendations.

While the 911 calls, police reports, and emergency services transcripts are analyzed in the report by Hillard Heintze, I also accessed the primary sources from the Virginia Beach Police Department (VBPD) to identify any bias differences in the reports. The police report goes into full detail of the timeline of events on May 31st, a background check on the attacker, Multiple City documents related to the event are also available via a Freedom of Information Act Request submitted by Gary Harki, a journalist local to The Virginian Pilot. Other journalistic sources are used to supplement the eyewitness and employee statements in the investigation and police reports. Long-term local media coverage is gathered primarily from The Virginian-Pilot. National media sources will include coverage from CNN, BBC, USA Today, and the New York Times. The timeline of media data collected spans from the day of the event May 31, 2019, through the time of this study in 2021.

The final data sources that inform the analysis are three websites associated with the City of Virginia Beach. First, the federally sponsored Virginia Beach Strong Center website, https://thevbstrongcenter.org.The VB Strong Center is a support network for individuals or groups impacted by the tragedy of May 31, 2019. The physical office and the telephone or virtual services are provided in partnership with Sentra healthcare. The next website, https://loveforvb.com, is a virtual memorial space hosted by the City and contains information about each victim, the decision-making process for remembrance and memorial spaces, a rundown of the organization's communications around the event, and a media gallery. Finally, content on the official website for the Virginia Beach Municipal center, www.vbgov.com/,

contains several internal documents, department newsletters, and updates on organizational responses to the events on May 31, 2019.

Data Analysis

The case study was analyzed using a knowledge-driven model based on the assumption that good, basic research questions will eventually lead to practical applications (Weiss, 1979 as cited in Yin, 1981; 2009). A qualitative iterative analysis was conducted (alternating etic/emic), using a mixture of inductive and deductive analysis, allowing new themes to emerge while also recognizing established sensitizing concepts (Tracy et al., 2007; Tracy, 2013). Using the iterative approach to analyze the case consisted of alternating attention between broad theoretical sites and emerging data as the understanding of the phenomenon gradually becomes more specific (Miles & Huberman, 1980 as cited in Tracy, 2013). This approach is systematic and reflexive and began with a general understanding of the case and progressively refined the focus.

I analyzed the data using a rigorous, multi-step coding process to yield targeted interpretive themes. In the first round of analysis, I read the materials and conduct open coding to establish a base set of themes. The themes I looked for in the data were coded in three categories: Content, discourse, and context. The content codes were used to organize background information and calibrating facts from the texts. Examples of content codes may include descriptions and timelines of events or individual experiences and eyewitness accounts. The second category of codes was discursive, focusing on *how* things are talked about. This includes nonverbal cues and the relationship aspect of messages. The final set of codes were contextual. Codes in the context category are related to power, environment, and big-picture communication. In the first stage of coding, the data was sorted, categorized, and interrelated based on emerging themes relevant to the interpretation of the case. This was achieved using NVIVO to code text

and videos. Codebooks were evaluated and refined before moving on to the focused coding stage.

After the open coding stage, I identified the most frequently occurring themes to create a filtered codebook with quotes from the texts to conduct focused coding. Focused took place after at least one thorough reading and a round of coding was conducted, and the most frequently occurring codes were compiled. The act of focusing on the codes was a process of sorting the codebook by frequency and conducting additional comb-throughs of the data to ensure my interpretation is aligned with the top codes. The third step of the analysis was to review the data again and make connections across the codes using axial coding. This step moved beyond pure description and pushed the analysis to another level of abstraction by identifying relationships between code descriptions and their conceptual relationship to the phenomenon. Codes were used as links between contextual definitions of communication patterns to concepts in the relevant literature. This layered analysis supports the connection of the specific case to the larger implications for managing the risk of violence in organizations.

An iterative method of analysis allowed the most significant themes to emerge from the data and support claims of a connection between the case and the larger contemporary phenomenon. Literature was drawn from scholarship relevant to organizational culture, sensemaking cycles, reliability, and counterproductive workplace behaviors to create a backdrop of understanding for the case of the Virginia Beach City Municipal center shooting. Findings will be organized into thematic categories. Van Manen (1980) defines thematic analysis as the process of recovering embodied and dramatized themes in the changing meanings and imagery in the text. The anticipated concepts are sensitized by the literature on organizational communication culture and workplace violence. The organizational cultural lens frames the

analysis of how the VBCMC functioned as a cooperative, organic, social system and business, and how ways of organizing promote toxic workplace communication.

Data analysis for this study used a constructivist approach to read in between the lines of the communication around the VBCMC shooting. The cultural perspective was used to target themes related to systems of power, equity, and organizing, and norms or expectations for conflict management and risk prevention in the contemporary workplace. Using the concepts of reliability and sensemaking, the analysis of the VBCMC cultural case study revealed a system of ongoing sensemaking patterns which reduced the organization's ability to catch the warning signs before the event or make useful meaning during the post-event recovery.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Qualitative studies regarding the environmental factors at work that may contribute to violence are not widely developed enough to offer a definitive metric for what kinds of workplaces precipitate violent outcomes. The findings of the current study are divided into three large categories about culture, reliability, and sensemaking practices that played a role in the outcome of May 31st, 2019. The themes interpreted from the data begin with (1) low sensitivity to early warning signs of WPV was an indicator of poor sensemaking patterns and problems with reliability culture, then (2) disconnection between cultural texts and espoused values contributed to a diminished capacity to catch early warning signs, and (3) oversimplified internal communications did not match the complexity of the VB City organization or risk of workplace violence.

Low Sensitivity to Early Warning Signs of WPV was an Indicator of Poor Sensemaking Patterns and Problems with Reliability Culture

The first significant set of findings show that low responsiveness to 'red' flags in the organization was an enactment of cultural meanings around workplace violence risk. Data indicate that the organization's collective enactment of cultural meanings around WPV significantly constrained the organization's capacity to respond to early indicators of risk. Sensitivity to pre-attack communication can be understood as organizational sensemaking activity (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Using a sensemaking approach to look at the VBCMC case, the data revealed clues about how cultural forces created the necessary conditions for WPV to occur and the system of shared meanings that allowed 'red flags' to slip through the cracks.

In the VBCMC case, it was not a lack of an ability to notice the pre-attack indicators in their environment, rather, it was an issue how these cues were labeled and the problems they represented sustained in the 1-2 years leading up to the event. Ambiguous warning signs were

enacted in the organization, but they were interpreted or dismissed in ways that attenuated perceived risk. The tension of risk awareness and response is more dependent on issues of collective interpretation than the intensity of the indicators. Virginia Beach City employee responses to the shooting revealed patterns of sensemaking and language that constituted the organizational capacity to catch and swiftly react to warning signs. Employee responses to the shooting in Building 2 were mostly unanimous, with members claiming they were shocked but also 'not surprised' (Boyd, 2019). The development of shared meanings around the shooting was not merely an immediate interpretation of events. Rather, the meanings created among employees following the tragedy were shaped by the ongoing cycles of culturally derived sensemaking in the organization.

Sensemaking cycles are punctuated by turning points or interruptions to predictable meanings (Weick et al., 2005). In the context of symbolic meaning construction in the VBCMC, the shooting represented a shift in dominant meanings among employees or a shift in enacted reality. For employees, the attacker's actions were an affirmation of critical suspicions about the organization that was a product of ongoing sensemaking patterns about problems in the organization. The VBCMC organization's sensemaking patterns before, during, and after the shooting are reflective of its longstanding structures of meaning around safety and WPV. In the investigation and response, the high impact, low probability circumstances of the mass shooting were used as both a dismissal of the possibility of prevention and nonresponse to the relationship between collective communication behaviors and WPV risk.

Dismissive Cultural Patterns Informed Sensemaking Habits around WPV Risks

The larger theme of failed risk appraisal and responses enacted via ongoing sensemaking cycles can be broken down into subthemes that reflect the various ways this outcome was accomplished. The first subtheme regards how conflict cues were assigned inadequate symbolic

weight. Selective attention to conditions of WPV risks led to safety gaps in the months leading up to the attack at the VBCMC. Part of the normal meaning-making cycle for the VBCMC included a collective complacency related to less-than-ideal interpersonal conditions, which tended to normalize behavior that would likely produce concern in other settings. For many departments in the VBCMC, the data indicates many employees believed the City and its leaders had a habit of improper responses to workplace and community issues. For example, when the VBPD and the Hilliard Heintze firm hosted community listening sessions, one 16-year HR employee spoke up about her belief that the workplace environment was toxic. She directed one comment at a particular supervisor, saying "I'm going to be honest with you, I don't detect any sincerity from you at all. You are exactly the same type of supervisor that probably pushed this guy to do that" (Hafner, 2019). The supervisor asked the employee to leave for being condescending, telling her "this is not the time" (Hafner, 2019). The employee said she has always been vocal about her opinion that she considers the VBCMC a hostile work environment, and now believes the shooting "could have been prevented". Three days after the incident, the employee received notice that she is being charged with a Class 1 Misdemeanor for Disturbing the Peace, and four protective orders from supervisors in her department. "I never cursed," she said, "I was sitting down the whole time," and yet the supervisor was allegedly threatened for her life (Harper, 2019). The employee emailed the City Manager, Dave Hansen, and council members and got no response (Hafner, 2019).

A recurring theme identified in the case data was that conflicts, when reported, were treated not as an opportunity for learning about vulnerability to hazard but rather as a nuisance to be minimized or even punished. This pattern is evident in the organizational texts in a few forms. Dismissive or improper organizational responses to signs of various workplace conflicts

informed the sensemaking behaviors of VBCMC employees before, during, and after the shooting. In the months leading up to the shooting on May 31st, 2019, the capacity for employees to effectively identify or manage risks of internal issues was diminished by the communication patterns of complacency around employee relations issues which had been learned, accepted, and repeated throughout the VBCMC.

A pattern of dismissal and nonresponse to indicators of workplace conflict appeared as a typical result perpetuated by poor leadership. The investigation confirmed that the City "did not train employees on their role in helping identify behaviors and information that can help prevent an act of workplace violence" (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 159). The important implication related to concepts of sensemaking is that the actions of leaders end up becoming folded into employee meanings, and so VBCMC employees learned not to pay attention to warning signs that they were not trained to understand (Weick & Roberts, 1993).

May 31st, 2019 was a Friday. The timeline of the shooting suggests that there were several warning signs in the weeks leading up to that Friday to which there was no appropriate intervention. Behind closed doors, the soon-to-be shooter was making numerous online and in-store purchases including a rifle, body armor, and a suppressor (Hilliard Heintze, p. 30). By May 23rd, the employee set his work email to an automatic "Out of Office" reply through the 28th, then purchased three rifle magazines and a rifle case the next day (VBPD, 2021). At this point, there are work-related early warning signs embedded in his usual behavior which were dismissed by those around him, especially managers and supervisors, including accidents, performance decline, withdrawal, sleep disturbances, and irritability (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 139). The day before the shooting, Thursday, May 30th, the employee was dealing with a threatening voicemail from the Procurement Office, stating that he had "made an unauthorized purchase and violated a

City ordinance" (Hillard Heintze, 2019, p. 31). He tells his supervisor he is too upset to meet with the Procurement Officer that day, and instead and pays $3,027.48 from his personal checking account to correct the issue. No small sum for a City employee, but still, the supervisors do not offer further support to resolve the issue or inquire about his strange attitude. That night, he calls his ex-wife and his mother, both of whom he had cut contact in 2018 (VBPD, 2021, p. 17). He talks about his trouble sleeping and problems with supervisors and apologizes for his failed marriage.

Using the conflict-avoidant management style is not usually advisable, and though it was not the primary system of conflict management for all VBCMC workplace issues, 'red flags' of WPV development fell into the nonresponse pattern. Employees told investigators that "their concerns go unaddressed and that they have little to no options for 'being heard'" (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, 122). A situation with another disgruntled employee occurred two days before the shooting who was given a pre-dismissal notice on May 29th, the day before their formal termination and had a strong negative reaction. This employee was escorted to their car and a police officer was stationed at Building 2 for the remainder of the day. Many City employees initially believed this former employee was the attacker on May 31st after hearing of their termination through word of mouth. Employees reported having "concerns that this other employee would become violent," based on known workplace issues over the past two years and felt the issue was "not properly addressed by management" (p. 36, 130). The reason the nonresponse habit of organizational leaders and supervisors is significant for understanding reliable outcomes is that even though the cultural and individual warning signs become more pronounced, the reaction to ignore warning signs has already been retained (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Even though a disgruntled employee was escorted from the building only two days

before, the VBCMC failed to tune into the cultural indicators related to the threat, and to respond to the incident thoroughly, instead of just brushing it off as an isolated incident. In terms of reliability, this incident with the disgruntled employee prior to the shooting could be considered a near-miss or an almost-failure. However, the VBCMC members failed to register the incident as such. The lack of strong reaction to this event indicated that members did not code the event as a clue of undercurrent problems regarding WPV and that issues of that nature were considered unusual and dismissible.

VBCMC Employee Sensemaking Framework Was Not Equipped to Appropriately Understand WPV Warning Signs

The organizational documents released after the shooting support the hypothesis from previous literature that the organization was not prepared to adequately label the pre-attack communication behaviors in the workplace. The cultural norms of the VB City organization played an important role in influencing how meanings are assigned to 'red flags' when they appear. Collective symbolic realities are central to this approach to understanding reliability in the context of internally developing risks. In the case of the VBCMC shooting, the problem with the organization's failure to prevent the event was partially due to an inadequate system of meanings that were culturally assigned to the 'red flags' for WPV appearing in the environment.

Leading up to the event, the attacker was generally considered by other employees to be a "decent guy" and an upstanding employee (Miller et al., 2019). The VBMC the attacker was described by coworkers as quiet, private, shy, and reserved, usually kept his office door closed, and had little social interaction outside of work matters. Some described him as introverted, a "good listener" and "a polite young man" (McCammon, 2019; USDHS, 2019; VBPD, 2021, p. 21). Others characterized him as paranoid and schizophrenic (Finley, 2019). Another individual close to the subject reported that he was frustrated about management passing him over for a

promotion, and believed race was involved (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 53). Of his workplace behaviors, interviews with coworkers revealed:

> Others described him as disciplined, organized, and, at times, inflexible. Still, others characterized his behaviors as consistent with those suffering from an obsessive-compulsive disorder – referencing, for example, that he brushed his teeth in the workplace restroom every day at the same time. Some coworkers noted that he could be distant and reserved while some found him to be engaging. All emphasized that most of their interactions with him were about work duties rather than personal matters. We located several email threads relating to his personal life in which he discusses with two coworkers that he was getting divorced. Hilliard Heintze, 2019, P. 53)

Some pre-attack behaviors were noticed and assigned labels with individualistic attributions that downplayed risks, such as the subject's withdrawn and neurotic personality at work, and a history of issues communicating with supervisors (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 40). 'Red flags' became blended into the everyday norms and expectations. At the time of the VBCMC shooting, the pre-attack environment did not trigger adequate responses because they became 'yellow'…then 'green' flags, signs of normal operation. For most mass shooters, the first concerning behaviors occur more than 25+ months before the attack (FBI, 2014). Job-related stressors are the third most common category of pre-attack influences. For the shooter, he was put on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) after encountering "challenges at work regarding maintaining appropriate financial and contracting records and engaging with citizens and contractors," and the next year of performance communication with the subject's supervisor was tense:

> Although the subject had successfully completed the earlier Performance Improvement Plan, his supervisor noted that he was unable to maintain an acceptable level of performance with respect to his project management duties and did not exhibit good judgment. On July 12, 2018, the subject's supervisor issued him a Written Reprimand for Poor Performance. In sum, his supervisor cited him for failing to perform assigned duties as an Engineer III. The supervisor reminded the subject that they had had several prior discussions with him to address his deficits. (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 43)

The problem with not understanding ‘red flags’ is that there is no way to monitor increasing warning signs of WPV when the current implied checklist for risk indicators does not account for the most recent understandings about managing WPV risks. Warning signs were inadequately assigned on behalf of individual communication behaviors and the lack of response also indicates a limited lens for understanding the connection between organizational cultural environments and WPV.

These interactions regarding the subject’s PIP became increasingly discontented. The employee was re-issued his original 2017 PIP and Performance Expectations Letter, and in response, submitted a hand-written comment saying “I am in disagreement with the assigned scores and accusations. […] I am clearly being asked to meet a level of expectation that did not exist...” The next day, he emailed his supervisors and said, “I would like to revise my remarks on the Performance Evaluation Form for Employee Comments. I felt a little under the gun and I have developed a more appropriate response. […] Response: I do love being a City employee, but I am clearly being blindsided and railroaded in this review which is directly related to the recent reprimand that was issued simultaneously. […] Up until a month ago I was completely unaware that any issue exists with my performance. These allegations are trumped up and exaggerated” (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 45).

Despite these negatively charged performance review interactions with his supervisors and a known personal history of stress at home related to his divorce, the supervisors and HR contacts were not sensitive enough to these triggers to understand the increasing possibility that WPV may occur. The attacker’s behaviors leading up to the shooting were perceived as a case of normal, expected, even preferred employee communication behavior for maintaining norms in the context of the VBCMC. Even though almost half of the mass shooters in 2017 and 2018 in

the U.S. exhibited socially isolating behaviors, examples of paranoia, and performance issues, the VBCMC culture was not equipped with the knowledge or sensitivity to operations that would have enabled a more effective, earlier intervention as these warning signs emerged (USDHS, 2019, p 24; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

Indeed, witnesses attested that "everything seemed normal that day (Miller et al., 2019). Even in the minutes before the attacker re-entered Building 2 with firearms, his demeanor, and the tone of the office, did not raise any eyebrows. There was "nothing out of the ordinary" (Miller et al., 2019). This is the same sentiment of the employees at SeaWorld who witnessed the killer whale Tilikum viciously maim and drown their trainer. In the months leading up to the whale's violent behavior, the less-than-ideal environmental conditions had become normal; little stimulation, no room to grow, isolation from the herd, repetitive work demands. This status quo informed poor sensemaking habits that allowed the SeaWorld organization to quell any contrary meanings about whether an intelligent animal in debilitating conditions would ever *snap*. For employees of the VBCMC, learned cycles of sensemaking habits before the accident, as well as post-crisis communication patterns, reflected and sustained the shared idea that the individuals who "go postal" seem ordinary despite obvious CWB, signs of personal distress, or perceived mistreatment (Ames, 2005; Chappell & Di Martino, 2006). These pre-attack communication behaviors fit into the norms of bureaucratic organizing, fraught with miscommunication, dehumanization of members, and over-formalization, which contribute to a cultural environment that has a limited sense of where unsavory behaviors cross the line to become risky.

Why does it make sense for the VBCMC to ignore mentions of potentially *toxic* workplace conduct or environments? Meanings that benefit the organization and leader reputations were prioritized through action. Just like in SeaWorld, we see the VBCMC

organizational responses prioritized those meanings which protect the civil representation of the City as reputable, mindful, and benevolent. The total representation of events as vocalized by the City and the hired investigation firm was considerably more optimistic than the public responses.

Limited Organizational Reflexiveness as a Characteristic of Low Cultural Reliability

The conclusion of the investigative report and the City's response do not reflect a critical understanding of how these sentiments about the Values and Ethics of the City are related to potential reliability gaps connected to the May 31 shooting. The difference between the organizational leadership's preferred view of the organization versus that of the community and eyewitnesses is reflective of a failure of the dominant organizational system of meaning to extrapolate useful complexity from the survey feedback during their consideration of 'Organizational Influences' on the shooting, or what may also be referred to as the 'motive' (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p 122). In the City's formal response to the investigation summary from Hilliard Heintze, the City reiterated that "The attacker did not demonstrate any warning signs or behaviors that would have merited an intervention ahead of the incident," and "we continue to struggle with the fact that no clear motive for this horrible event has emerged (Leahy, 2020). The bureaucratic barriers of rigidity and inefficient vertical communication may have impeded the recognition of warning signs, but the real trouble with the organization's response begins here; "There are parts of the independent review with which we agree and there are some we do not" (Leahy, 2020, p. 2). Ultimately, the investigation firm recommended 58 opportunities for improvement, including the top six key findings: 1. First responders and employees acted courageously, 2. The attacker did not display any warning signs or prohibited behaviors, 3. Need to improve WPV prevention plan, 4. Need to restructure HR department, 5. Improve emergency

communication strategy, and 6. Improve various physical and technical security elements (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 17).

The City's response goes on to say that Hilliard Heintze *did* identify "several pre-incident risk factors [that were] not high-risk warnings," therefore justifying the later dismissal of several recommendations. This issue of perception reflects and perpetuates the traditional view that extreme danger will be announced by warning signs of equally extreme intensity and clarity. HRO risk detection works the opposite way, recognizing that the most important indicators of vulnerability occur early and weakly. Unlike bureaucratic organizations such as the VBCMC, HRO's recognize that early detection of weak cues is especially critical because these are the risk indicators that are typically inadequately interpreted (Fransen, 2020; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; Weick et al., 2005).

Many HR and WPV related recommendations are labeled as 'already in place' in the City's response, but the data of the case shows this is unlikely. For example, the recommendation to "Champion Workplace Violence Prevention" was not aligned with the reality of the VBCMC under City Manager Dave Hansen. The response states, "City leadership supports violence prevention and does not consider it a passing initiative. All complaints are taken seriously" (Leahy, 2020). This sentiment is not aligned with the reality that many complaints were made, about this shooter and the other suspect employee from the day before, that were ignored. One of the victims, Kate Nixon, told her husband "she didn't like to be around [the shooter], a fellow engineer- he gave off 'real bad vibes' and she'd had to write him up several times for issues with performance and attitude" (Hafner, 2019). They both worked on the second floor in Building 2.

The issue that the community and employees took with the overall conclusion of the City's report released in 2021 in tandem with the VBPD, which indicated 'no identifiable

motive,' is rooted in this feedback about the environment that was inadequately evaluated as a point of uncertainty. In response to the final summary of findings released by the VBPD, the daughter of one of the victims tweeted her opinion of the report; "Laughable and expected. Thanks, VB for making our wounds deeper and insulting us further! No motive? Really? Anyone with a brain can put two and two together!!!!! Maybe the state investigation will give answers. At this point, my faith that any truth will ever be revealed is lost" (Snelling-Hart, 2021 as cited in Finley, 2021).

Meanings regarding WPV before and after the event were complicated by the multiplicity of authoritative voices acting against the community, victims, and employees. A small circle of senior stakeholders who had a very specific set of goals for operations and managing the mission of the City was legitimized by their status within their organization. As a result, victims and their families got the message that their opinions about the event would never be regarded with the same weight. The final 2021 report summary concluded that the VBPD found "No evidence that sheds light on the gunman's motivations" (VBPD, 2021). One widowed husband, Jason Nixon, has come forward several times since the shooting to press the City for more answers, saying "The city of Virginia Beach and the Virginia Beach Police Department should be ashamed of themselves," Nixon said, "All I want is accountability- you can't tell me there's no motive, I'm not stupid" (Weatherton, 2021a).

There is significance to be found in the *difference* in meaning between the official event reports and the testimonies from witnesses and families. Not only were there multiple employee testimonies of a toxic workplace as a contributing factor, but there were also several concerns raised about how issues of race and discrimination were managed at the VBCMC. Issues included allegations that African American employees were being treated differently, were often

more subject to discipline than white counterparts, and were less likely to be promoted (Ortiz, 2020). At one of the community listening sessions conducted by the investigation firm, City employees said victim Keith Cox spoke out before his death about the discrimination taking place at the municipal center and how city leaders continuously failed to address the problem (Boyd, 2019). Investigators became aware of an alleged incident several years before the shooting in which the suspect claimed to his supervisor that a co-worker used an extremely offensive racial slur to describe him in an unknown context. The co-worker denied the claim, and the supervisor attempted to mediate the matter in the presence of both employees. The record of this meeting is not available. The accused co-worker left the City two months later, and the allegation was dismissed (VBPD, 2021).

A company culture based on racial tolerance, equal opportunities, and cooperation can be a barrier to WPV. Inversely, if discrimination and segregation are explicitly or implicitly part of the culture of the company, this can be reflected in communication behaviors with the internal and external stakeholders (Chappell & Di Martino, 2006, p. 126). In the yearly Human Resources Commission report from 2017, there was a callout to write a "Letter to City Council urging them to conduct an inclusive disparity study for the City of VB" (Rice, 2017, p. 8). The City's Human Rights Commission (different from the Human Resources department) organized a community meeting with the beach Resort Advisory Committee in 2017 to discuss issues with the local event, "College Beach Weekend (CBW) 2017. The meeting was called in response to a community petition which was submitted to City Council in hopes to put an end to the summer concert event. The Joint Oceanfront Committee (JOC) met in monthly meetings between 2017 and 2018 to discuss alternatives for making CBW fun, welcoming, safe, and less of a nuisance to residents. In the introduction to the meeting notes, the topic of the issue is previewed by saying,

“The crowd has historically been predominantly college-age, out of town and local visitors of African American descent.” Racial dialogue is a central theme of the JOC report. Stating that among other attendees, the JOC invited “leaders from the African American Community and other community leaders” to participate (JOC, 2018). It is also noted that the JOC meetings covered “lengthy discussions [about] real and perceived racial tensions and the short- and long-term impact that could have on [the] City as a whole.’ (Joint Oceanfront Committee, 2018). The representation of city management’s opinions about racial tensions within the City as an organization is combined with a lack of acknowledgment as one example of how the VBCMC exhibits low reflexivity to lower-level meanings. The culture of the organization from roughly 2016-2021 reflects this challenging disconnect between the perceived work environment of leaders versus employees.

In the open-ended cultural survey responses of Fall 2019, employees most frequently inserted ad-lib comments related to ‘Environment’ (HH, 2019, p. 11). These comments referenced a lack of satisfaction with being treated with respect as an employee and criticisms of the City’s Diversity and Inclusion efforts. While the change in mindfulness of this issue is demonstrated in some updated departmental communications, Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) metrics have been the lowest-scoring employee survey categories since 2013 (City of Virginia Beach, 2013; 2018; 2020). This is a key problem with VBCMC's reliability culture because the actions regarding D&I measures of the highest organizational leaders are not completely with the meanings of their employees.

In 2018, the City Manager faced backlash for racially charged comments and texts (Skelton, 2018), and his behavior was a model for the rest of the Deputy City Manager’s office. From spring to fall 2019, the company survey question with the greatest decrease in affirmative

responses was “The City does not tolerate discrimination based on age, gender, race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, etc. and treats the issue with great importance” (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 223). Despite an increase in promotional efforts around the D&I initiative since 2010, the VBCMC leadership training, policies, and unspoken standards of communication fail to reflect a true value of inclusion.

Troubled Relationships with VBCMC Leaders Created Problems with Cultural Reliability

The City Manager at the time of the shooting, Dave Hansen, was not renowned for amiability or approachability. Strategically appointed in 2017 after the previous manager’s retirement after 30+ years, Hansen was strongly disliked as a leader because of his brash candor and penchant for aggressive, inconsiderate leadership communication. He was a military veteran hired for his results-oriented style (Skelton, 2019). In 2018, hostile text messages from Hansen emerged out of a financial disagreement with a state transportation official. Hansen texted his then deputy City Manager, “Told Will I don't want to meet with Aubrey cuz he's going to have to put a cotton ball up his nose after I punch him” (Skelton, 2018). Before this incident, Hansen forwarded confidential information to an outside developer after a closed session meeting about an upcoming City project, which upset and disturbed other City Council members (Skelton, 2019). Later, in another text message controversy, Hansen referred to racial equality activists in the community as ‘five percenters,’ a pejorative term for minority groups (Skelton, 2019). Several community groups began to call for Hansen’s removal from office because of these transgressions. In March 2019, for a second time, the Virginia Beach Interdenominational Minister’s Conference formally petitioned for Hansen’s firing. Writing in a letter to the City Council “The toxic work environment that currently exists within the city of Virginia Beach,

which we believe contributed to the horrific event that took place on May 31, 2019, in Building 2, is a result of poor leadership at the very top echelons of the city" (Skelton, 2019).

Hansen as acting City Manager became representative of the VBCMC culture at the time, whether his conduct was an accurate symbol of organizational standards or not. Records indicate the attacker had recorded communication with three of the managers who were killed, and two of them were in his direct line of command (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, 112). These are the only victims who were believed to be targeted, and it is significant to consider the role of employee-supervisor relations as an inciting interactive pattern that may have influenced the event and the selection of victims for the attacker. Ineffective leadership is one component of the incubation period for accidents, which includes multiple errors of organizational design and system operations (Vaughn, 1990, p. 225). The normalization of masochistic leadership at the VBCMC meant that small operational deviances or risks were embedded in the normal pattern of work behavior as detrimental cooperation with cultural or contractual standards (Vaughn, 1990). The unscrupulous behavior within the City Manager's office was a factor that put the city at risk, and at the same time, contributed to the norm of overlooking problematic behavior that would be considered deviant in another organization.

Families believed leaders were more interested in protecting their reputations after the shooting than empathizing with victim's families. The final summary report was a huge disappointment to families and the community because it offered no closure and none of the insight into the organizational influences that the survivors and employees were expecting. The final VBPD report makes no mention of whether there was a hostile work environment at the City, which Hillard Heintze said would be a focus of their investigations (Virginian-Pilot &

Daily Press, 2021). Virginia Beach has conducted employee surveys and made other efforts to address those concerns, but its absence in the report is notable.

Post-investigation follow-ups with managers were not effective because the organization/ employee relationship was damaged by the pattern of dismissal, nonresponse, and self-interested behavior carried on in the months leading up to May 31, 2019. One of the victim's widows complained to *USA Today* that he was upset about the red flags (e.g., personal stressors, job problems, access to weapons) which were ignored by his deceased partner's boss, and he believed that the issues which contributed to the event "may go beyond the shooting suspect" (Ortiz, 2019). This is the nature of WPV. The environment is indelibly related to the outcome and interpretations of events occurring within. For the VBCMC, one of these elements of low reliability was rooted in unequal or ineffective work relationships with leaders, and the belief that leaders are indifferent.

Ultimately, problems with leader relationships limited the reliability of the VBCMC and increased the likelihood that a WPV event would occur without early intervention. From the top, the City Manager at the time of the shooting demonstrated a standard of behavior that normalized deviance, such as ignoring problematic behaviors and complying with leaders against better training or judgment. The consequences of Hansen's poor leadership trickled down through the City and damaged employee-supervisor trust leading up to and after the incident through insensitive and inconsistent communication styles from leaders. VBCMC leaders evidently followed a habit of dismissive and nonresponsive reactions to employee issues which widened the reliability gaps and diminished the perceived importance of employee issues and created the perfect conditions for a disgruntled employee to transcend from upset to uncontrollable rage.

Disconnection Between Cultural Texts and Espoused Values Contributed to Diminished Capacity to Catch Early Warning Signs

The VBCMC's current mission statement and core values are written in a way that appears to prioritize the citizens of Virginia Beach over the employees. The mission statement is vague, "The City of Virginia Beach exists to enhance the economic, educational, social, and physical quality of the community and provide sustainable municipal services which are valued by its citizens" (City of Virginia Beach, 2018), and the values are long and open-ended. The values include multiple bullet points for each competency, starting with Quality Customer Service, Teamwork, Leadership and Learning, Integrity, Commitment, and Inclusion & Diversity. The most recent update to the City's values was in 2010 when the Diversity and Inclusion value was added. Together, the mission statement and values represent the backbone of the VBCMC culture. When put into action, the vertebrae fell apart easily, because the VBCMC lacked the central leadership to enact cohesive core meanings throughout the organization. Because the City's written goals were not aligned with their true everyday values in lived situations, it was difficult for employees and leaders to know what to do in the case of an anomalous event or warning sign.

The first people in an organization expected to set an example are leaders, and the VBCMC leadership actions did not measure up to the values statement and the mission they claim to uphold. Policies did not match processes; the City had many best practices on paper regarding employment processes- but many policies were outdated or not followed. What was being said did not match the 'tone' of what was being done. This issue of documentation not matching actual meaning-making *in situ* created an issue of reliability by limiting the ability to predict in the environment and normalizing major gaps between espoused values and values in use during everyday practice. Actions spoke louder than meanings on paper, so when the

shooting occurred, employees interpreted meanings from patterns in the environment, not policies. Survey results from the investigation revealed that some of the lowest scoring questions included “My manager / The City Manager’s decision making is based on the City’s Values,” “When problems occur, our managers try to understand what happened,” and “Proper steps are taken to ensure employee safety” (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, pp. 165-166). These areas of low perception indicate a communication problem between stated values and employee expectations.

Daily practices also did not reflect the various policies related to risk mitigating HR operations. City-facing policies were generally aligned with actions because community-serving functions are subjected to budgetary review and are made publicly available. However, VBCMC data suggest that everyday employee-serving functions of the City, especially HR, were disconnected from written policies. For example, the investigation revealed that the policies for hiring and onboarding included in the Recruitment, Applications, and Employment Policy, which was last updated on November 28, 2018, were aligned with best standard practices for safety and equity. However, for example, the investigation found that hiring managers often did not follow through on the final procedural step of calling new hire references and double-checking the candidate was truthful about their background, impacting safety (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 124). The City’s response to the recommendations regarding policy implementation, including hiring and background checks, was to reaffirm the rigorous documentation of policies. Using the performance review policies as an example, the City’s disciplinary procedures are well documented, however, the steps outlined in the document are not reflected in the training and alleged attentiveness of supervisors. The standards of punishment for employees are also arbitrary, and for most instances of discipline which do not exceed 40-hour suspension, the manager does not have to seek approval from HR (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 129). The lack of

checks and balances around the enactment of these policy interpretations becomes problematic because deviations from the policy are normalized and perpetuated through sensemaking cycles.

Meanings developed in the gaps between what was being done and not done; the bureaucratic inefficiencies created tension between multiple realities about the workplace experience wherein the processes benefitted some members and not others. Patterns of everyday workplace communication were at odds with the spirit and intention of city policies. Specifically, employee survey responses allege that the problem with the policy enforcement was inconsistent management and poor leaders (Hilliard Heintze, 2019). The intended meanings of organizational policies then became eclipsed by socially learned expectations. For example, the Employee Reporting Protocols were limited by punitive overtones, such as 'Zero Tolerance' and 'prohibited behaviors' (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, pp. 123-124). When implemented properly, reporting policies should avoid creating a 'whistleblower mentality' and focus on courtesy, respect, and safety (p. 124). In the case of the VBCMC shooting, there were several cases of employees who said they avoided reporting issues to their manager, despite the written command of policies, because they feared retaliation (p. 136). The significant consequence of this tension between meanings of text versus reality is that employees base expectations on the information in their lived environment, but the formal communications they receive based on out-of-touch policies increased ambiguity.

Policies were well-written and centrally available on the company intranet. There was, however, a disconnection between how some policies were written and how their meanings were put into action (Kirby & Krone, 2002). After the subject received a Written Reprimand for Poor Performance in 2018, he initiated the formal grievance process per the HR policy, completing the first three steps. However, after reaching the HR department director with the third step, he chose

to end his grievance process (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 126). The grievance policy was consistent with those of other governmental employers, and the stated goal was to "obtain a complete understanding of employee concerns and to have them settled as soon as possible at the lowest possible supervisory level" (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, pp. 126-127). There was no documented reason why the employee ended the formal grievance process, but from the context, it can be inferred that following the formal grievance policy was not producing satisfying results, likely due to a lack of supervisor training around job performance discussions (p. 21). Also important in this context is that two of the managers who were involved in the grievance were targeted in the shooting less than a year later. This example helps illustrate the disconnection between policy intent versus action, and how structure, culture, and leadership played a role in normalizing the ineffective implementation of written procedures.

One obstacle of the VB organization is its size and stratification. The campus is a sprawling, bustling center, located just east of a golf course, that serves the city courthouse, police headquarters, and all the public works offices in over twenty buildings (Miller et al., 2019). All these departments had different ways of enacting policy expectations in their teams, which is generally a positive indicator of reliability. Many departments are not similar in function, and therefore the systems of meanings related to WPV that should be present across the organization, are disjointed. For example, the Aquarium and Library services departments have different levels of sensitivity and sensemaking skills around WPV indicators than the Courthouse. The predictive power of the environment was limited by a lack of centralized meanings around WPV indicators. Although they shared elevators and floor space, most operations were siloed into their discrete business functions and sensemaking cycles.

Consequentially, lessons learned from near misses or emerging WPV risks across the organization were not usually communicated across departments.

The 2019-2020 (Community Service Business) CSB Administrative Requirements published by the Human Services departments of the VB City included prevention of workplace violence on a checklist of other requirements for an organization to be considered legitimate. This list of minimum policy requirements was comprehensive of typical human resources issues. What the requirement report lacked was an indication of the possibility that policies are not sentient and must be enforced by a human resources representative to enter the organizational consciousness. The recommendations from the Hilliard Heintze investigation regarding the use of policy identified several issues with the implementation of various procedures at different levels of management which were based on the gap between policy intention and action. For example, the City claimed to be focused on WPV prevention as an ongoing issue, however, their policy is not 'sufficiently robust' and its requirements were not 'embraced by leaders, managers, and employees' (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 19). Additionally, the WPV awareness programs offered in the City were voluntary with limited availability. Connected to this key finding is the related reliability failure of a lack of central documentation to guide everyday conduct at work.

The disconnection between cultural texts and espoused values at the VBCMC was a weakness of reliability operations because meanings on paper, in minds, and in between, were not clearly aligned in a way that members were able to make productive sense. Because all departments had different standards of detection that were not grounded in centralized expectations for WPV risk prevention, new meanings emerged in the various departments and contributed to the normalization of deviant behavior in some teams, such as Public Works and the City Manager office. The size and functional separation of the VBCMC also helped create

siloed environments that failed to learn or exchange reliability communication among the departments or buildings on campus. Member sensemaking processes were bound by the disconnected environments of their local department and contributed to increased ambiguity around risk detection.

Lack of Central Cultural Documents Constrained Employee Sensemaking Processes Around Ambiguous Warning Signs of WPV

A differentiation perspective of organizational culture is focused on the inconsistencies of organizations and the subcultural forces which interfere with or shape the complex meanings in a workplace (Witmer, 1997, p. 325). One glaring issue with the VBCMC's WPV response strategy was the lack of a single code of conduct or an employee handbook. Responses showed that the centralization of organizational behavioral documents was not seen as a necessary move (Leahy, 2020). The City of Virginia Beach does not have a stand-alone Code of Conduct but relies, instead, upon a series of policies and protocols that address employee conduct, which makes it more difficult for employees to consistently meet and apply standards for behavior and communication (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 125).

There are demonstrated differences in the stated cornerstones of the organization and the espoused value systems which drive everyday operations. One of the significant Environment and Culture-related recommendations provided by the investigation firm to the VBCMC was to write a code of conduct for the organization to uphold alongside their organizational mission and values statements (Hilliard Heintze, 2019). The City's response was published six months later, stating that the "Mission, Values and Ethics provide a baseline for our expectations of City employees…these resources are available on [the company intranet] and have recently been consolidated to be more visible," ending with the claim that the recommendation was "already in place" and that they would consider *possible* additions to their code of ethics (Leahy, 2020, p.

24). The City elected to *not* publish a standalone Code of Ethics, despite the expert suggestion, and the fact that their last update to company values was more than a decade ago (City of Virginia Beach, 2018). This failure to acknowledge the significance of the recommendations from the investigative team is a demonstration of a low-reliability characteristic which is a failure to defer to experts and a lack of adequate cultural documents (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001)

The three main risk factors identified in the case of the May 31st shooter were relatively low ranking on a risk evaluation scale (WAVR-21). These risk factors include weapons skills/ access, recent job problems, and personal stressors (e.g., divorce, mental health). In the context of the professional work environment at the VBCMC, these risk factors blended in with the normal rigmarole of municipal work- and a lot of American citizens match this criterion (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, pp. 7-8). For this reason, the three clear risk factors were not strong enough to trigger a response from management, but they did trigger reports from other employees (Boyd, 2019; Miller, 2019; Ortiz, 2019). If the risk factors were observable and bothersome enough to create employee concerns and register as low-grade risks on a threat assessment scale, then management policies ought to be reconsidered to accommodate the reconceptualization of pre-attack behaviors in the context of bureaucratic organizations.

It was recommended that the City centralize its reporting system for documenting violence risk investigations by "establishing a single 'fusion' process to examine all potential sources of information," which the City responded would be unrealistic and inappropriate (Leahy, 2020, p. 30). The City's decision to remain impervious to the recommendation to update and centralize their cultural guides and violence records exhibits another low-reliability behavior of rigidity which likely contributed to the diminished sense of employee trust in their leaders, and response to early indicators.

Reliability of VBCMC Culture was Impacted by Problems with Organizational Trust & Identity

Trust is important for collective reality construction, sensemaking, and organizational processes and is foundational to reliability culture (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2013). Trust and mistrust are not opposites, but rather they exist on a spectrum of tensions that are linked to a variety of positive and negative outcomes within an organization. Trust violations in organizations can occur against the civil order or social identity. For City employees, a low expectation of organizational trust puts limits on the organization's sensitivity to member meanings because low trust inhibits shared meanings. In the VBCMC case, perceived conflicts of interest interfered with adequate sensemaking before and after the shooting.

In response to the mounting dissatisfaction with the City, multiple families of victims who died in the mass shooting at VBMC called for the city to start an independent investigation led by anyone other than the City's VBPD. "They're not being transparent. They are not being forthcoming," Hardy's sister Denise A. Smallwood said about the initial police report and City communications, "I just feel like something was going on that they're not telling us. We keep hearing that he had issues and that he was written up…but [leaders] are not coming forward and saying what actually happened, we're just left to guess." (Skelton, 2020). Families reveal that either they or their employee relatives struggled to trust the City leaders because of perceived dishonesty regarding various issues both leading up to and following the shooting.

In a later follow-up internal investigation committee, a VB City sheriff was removed after complaints that his presence on the investigation team was unscrupulous. The sheriff originally requested to join the state investigation committee against the knowledge that such involvement was forbidden by the statutes of the committee, and once the issue was resolved, administrators blamed the mistake on a clerical oversight (Skelton, 2020). What cannot be ignored in this

context is the invisible lines of power that can sneak past established meanings to maintain a hegemonic status quo. There are two general types of trust; That stems from social interactions and trust which comes from the organizational culture. A problem of cordial hypocrisy is apparent in the VBCMC data; employees learned to perform by rules of civility which were not authentic, but intentionally used to maintain face in the context of role uncertainty and inconsistent, sometimes authoritarian, leadership (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2013).

What was learned about the organization from leaders does not match the realities from employees. Supervisors mostly reported that they were aware of very few problems; inversely, employees attested that their supervisors seemed to lack awareness of their/ other's issues. Meaning systems related to monitoring internal risks, including WPV risks, were kept separate which meant no one in the organization had a full sense of what was going on before the attack.

There was also an issue with unity among leaders at the top. City Managers were not effective unifying leaders and did not have a good relationship with peer leaders within the City (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 64). Leadership was seen by employees as 'incompetent and malicious' (p. 126). A reliability consequence of the leadership behavior was that the organization was able to justify a dismissal of cultural survey results because the survey results did not match the public statements from community listening sessions, therefore delegitimizing not only the survey but also the voices of their stakeholders. Employees claimed they feared retaliation from management, which is why the public listening sessions reflected a much more accurate appraisal of the toxic and discriminatory workplace environment.

The two lowest areas of perception based on the spring and fall 2019 culture surveys were Recognition and Leadership. The Public Works department newsletter includes several photos of employees being formally recognized by the department director. In contrast,

recognition survey responses attest that employees felt these practices of acknowledging hard work were inconsistent and not usually fair. Overall employee perceptions of the 'recognition' category scored second to lowest of all survey categories, just above leadership. The sense that employees felt displaced and invisible in the workplace may not be supported directly by the case data, but from the documents recovered from the attacker's record, inferences can be made about how the individual's experience with leadership and recognition might not have been a singular affect. From the shooter's recovered email drafts, the following passage was recovered regarding the individual's sense of unfair treatment:

> At one point I had [employee's name redacted] close my door and tell me that I was one of the best members of the staff and then I have almost no recognition. On the other hand, I see others receiving awards for volunteering for a few hours.… I feel like I'm taking on a lot of liability with no reward or even acknowledgment, I mean that in comparison with other engineers at my level. (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 52)

Although this grievance cannot be submitted as a causal link for the shooting, what can be interpreted based on the cultural approach is that it is highly unlikely that the disgruntled employee was the only one feeling short-changed by inconsistent practices and issues of perceived injustice in such a large organization (Bantz, 1993). Sensemaking can help clarify how these perceived mistreatments were tolerated or silenced in the organization. Cultural rules of expression are bound by the legitimizing communication features of the environment. Grievances about leadership and recognition become lumped into issues of nonresponse and frustration because emotional feedback is not valued in the highly bureaucratic VBCMC system of rules, regulation, and respect.

VBCMC Employees Overemphasized Instrumental Rationality

Group emotionality and rules for emotional sensemaking are features of reliability that are constrained by culture and power structure (Allen et al., 2013). Additional limits to

expression, acceptable modes of understanding as performed through interactions, appear with time, and the longer a member is with an organization, the more likely they are to intentionally adhere to or rebuke these rules of expression. The May 31st shooting is an example of an extreme rebuke of sensemaking patterns and emotional expression. Rules about civil conduct were relatively unspoken due to a lack of documentation and decentralized leadership.

Managers did not heed the complexities of employee relationships with their job and environment. Low sensitivity to operations is also enacted in the emotional listening behavior relative to environmental risk appraisal. Managers were relatively unattuned to how their employees' behavior was a product of the intersubjective demands of the job. What we see in the VBCMC case is that a high level of job-related distress became a normal, acceptable, reasonable set of expressions. Some symptoms of burnout are lauded as the markings of a dedicated employee (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2013). High levels of stress at work are conditions that line up with pre-attack behaviors, and it is a lack of mindfulness and values for emotionality which limits high-reliability ways of knowing at the VBCMC.

In June of 2019, another Building 2 employee, Jon, met with his supervisor in the IT department to discuss his options for work arrangements after it was announced that he was expected to return to work at the site of the shooting. In the meeting the employee became agitated and angry, he then began yelling and stormed out of the meeting (Marks, 2019). According to the employee, he felt uncomfortable working in Building 2 so soon after the shooting, saying "It's a nightmare. People lost their lives in there and right now I wasn't ready to get back in there and work" (Marks, 2019). Later that day, unbeknownst to Jon, his supervisors went to the magistrate's office and filed a warrant against Jon for public disturbance. Police arrested Jon the next day and he spent more than 24 hours in jail before being released and

placed on administrative leave. Jon said he just wanted help from someone in HR so he didn't have to work in Building 2, and when contacted, HR said they could help him find another position. The media outlet that covered Jon's story attempted to contact the supervisor who filed the charges who then responded, "Take it up with the City. Do not call me again" (Marks, 2019). The charges were dropped, and Jon says, "I just want to clear my name." A consulting attorney commented the warrant was ridiculous and contained no criminal behavior. In the aftermath of the shooting, Jon's emotions were criminalized by his supervisor- who was not even present for the outburst- and used against him.

Options for emotional feedback were limited, and the unspoken cultural norms of the VBCMC coded emotionality as the opposite of rationality; effectively paralyzing the lines of open honest, fail-averse communication (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; Weick, 2005). Lack of emotional harmony or feeling safe with their job status became conflated with a growing fear of retaliation and career-related paranoia. In the VBCMC case, emotional enactment rules were difficult to learn because internal communications were disjointed reflections of actual norms, and each department managed emotion resources differently. Jon's story of retaliative supervision is one link in the chain of problems between rules of expression and cultural modes of understanding in the VBCMC.

Difference Between Organizational and Departmental Appraisals of WPV Risk Created Reliability Lapses

The risk of WPV was not perceived as a risk to the whole organization, evident in the lack of dedicated prevention or awareness training. Risks were perceived as highly localized, managers did not perceive the 'pervasive' issues that employees claimed to have vocalized (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 168) Each manager supervisors their department's environment based on the norms of that department and not the organization. This local flexibility is a reliability

boost for the immediate department. However, In the case of WPV as an internal threat, this means that some departments are going to be more at risk than others.

The discrete triggers for each department to recognize a risk of WPV are not aligned with a central code for the whole organization. The investigation recommended the HR department centralize workplace violence training protocols across the organization to mitigate some of the detection gaps (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, pp. 11-12). The distance and difference between the culture of safety monitoring in the police department and the public works department is an example of how sub-cultures of WPV response vary within the same organization. The VBPD and EMT services are both parts of the City organization, but WPV risks are presented and identified by different standards of reliability within the Public Works, or Accounting departments because the demands of the everyday job are so different. Some risk behaviors in each department will be different because different jobs attract different types of employees and or/ develop different styles of character. Lessons learned about active shooter training, WPV, etc. ought to be distributed throughout the org so that the base level for detection is consistent across the organization, even if the work environments are different.

Leaders adapted to the cultural sensemaking style of selective attentiveness. Simply stated, some collective behaviors which may be warning signs in one department may be completely normal within another department. In the VBCMC case, it is generally clear from the organizational chart and the responsibilities of each function of the 35 departments that each area of leadership must be attuned to the specific communication demands of their team. The structural decision to decentralize leadership styles is beneficial for creating reflexive, intersubjective systems of meaning. The trouble with internal reliability measures of WPV risk

and differences in leadership among departments is that ‘red flags’ in one department might be completely decontextualized in another department due to the nature of work.

The cultural norms and group expectations related to safe and predictable conduct at work are locally derived from team interactivity and symbolic construction. The VBCMC is an archetypal hierarchical bureaucracy, made unique by its status as a multi-service organization that houses all City operations. In terms of monitoring organizational influences on potential WPV, this social structure of making sense of behavior at work means that some micro-cultures within the organization are going to be more or less likely to contribute to or react to early indicators of WPV risk. In the VBCMC, the ‘things to look out for are going to be different for employees depending on the City operations they support and the style of leadership and symbolic interaction that is normal for their immediate work environment. For example, the VBPD and Fire services groups have completely different sets of knowledge and habits for responding to internal risk indicators than those who work in Library services, the Budget office, or tragically, the Public Works department.

The Public Works department’s mission statement is that they provide “total life cycle management of the public infrastructure and key essential services. We succeed through the proper management of programs and resources to enhance the health, safety, and welfare of the residents, businesses, and visitors of the City of Virginia Beach (City of Virginia Beach, 2018). Public Works department newsletters paint a picture of the department from the perspective of the organization. Two Public Works newsletters from 2018 offer a starkly different image of the department than the description of the post-incident investigation and the testimonials from employees after the shooting. The content and formatting of the Public Works internal newsletter maintain a tone of levity, community, and appreciation for the employees. Each newsletter

includes several pages of photos of employees being recognized for retirement, softball games, successful projects, and growing families. The department head at the time, Mark A. Johnson, is pictured shaking hands with Administrative and Engineering employees who received service awards for going "Above and Beyond" (City of Virginia Beach, 2018, p. 20). Johnson, a 2018 appointee to the role, was selected by the unpopular City Manager, Hansen, and was a 33-year veteran of the City who served in the Public Utilities and Public Works departments (City of Virginia Beach, 2018). Despite the photos and smiling faces in the newsletter, the 2019 company surveys show that on questions related to opportunity advancement, equal treatment, respect, and inclusion, non-white employees (n=876) responded with a lower level of agreement than their white counterparts (n=1906) on all measures (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 226). The content and tone of the Public Works newsletters emphasize an important gap between employee and supervisor meanings and messages at the VBCMC which conceals employee frustrations about recognition, inclusion, and respect.

What we can discern from the VBCMC case is that the awareness of warning signs was based on the cultural rules within the Public Works department. The environmental factors which contributed to the responsiveness of the attacker's immediate colleagues were likely an outcome of organizational-wide *and* local forces unique to the Public Work's department. Overall, the challenges that VBCMC employees navigated as members of a huge, bureaucratic organization were not adequately reflected in the formal documents for the organization. This lack of alignment between departments contributed to cultural norms of disconnection, uncertainty, and diminished agency through an overload of information and a lack of central meaning.

The VBCMC faced a problem with reliability caused by a lack of clear meanings around WPV risks across various departments. The structure of the departments across the organization

led to the development of local meanings around risk detection that were not reflected across the organization. Some departments had cultures that were more prone to WPV risk or more capable of responding to early indicators because of their leaders, structure, and functions. Although there are central organizational policies aimed at preventing WPV, the translations of these central clues into the departments were constrained by the stronger lower-level cultural meanings as established by group sensemaking cycles. For the VBCMC, it seems that each department's capacity to respond to early indicators of risks was more informed by interpersonal sensemaking processes rather than central organizational texts.

Oversimplified Internal Communications Contributed to Reliability Gaps

In terms of communication as a source of reliability, Weick would call the VBCMC's listening problem an issue of requisite variety. Reliability is partially enabled by the extent to which an organization sustains systems that match the complexity of internal and external environments (Weick, 1979). The processes and policies for addressing problems must be adequately equipped and informed by the latest information and needs of the organization. The feedback processes common within VBCMC, however, were created based on a structural interest in cutting corners. The investigation made recommendations to the City's protocols around reporting WPV concerns, citing the need to centralize and emphasize training for employees to use various reporting channels about WPV, sexual harassment, integrity breaches, or EAP concerns (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 21). Again, to these suggestions, the City replied that these enhancements were underway or already in place but did not provide supporting evidence to dispute the cause for concern (Leahy, 2019, p. 14). A bias toward short-term results reduced the implied value of employee feedback and the sharpness of listening channels. The lack of structural employee reporting methods was both a product and a proponent of the diminished cultural value of employee input at the time of the attack.

The VBCMC also demonstrated a lack of clarity in their post-incident communications. During one press conference, the City Manager stated, “To my knowledge, the perpetrator’s performance was satisfactory. There were no issues of discipline ongoing” (Miller, 2019). In contrast, a victim’s family member reported that months earlier, his wife had “written up” the soon-to-be shooter for poor work quality and disrespectful behavior (Miller, 2019). Not only that, but the shooter had been on a PIP since July 2017 that he had been contesting with supervisors for over a year and was issued a Written Reprimand in 2018 for “not exhibiting good judgment” (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 43). In his performance records, the subject was rated as “improvement required” in the categories of professional and management skills, working relationships, communication and coordination with other departments, and commitment to exceptional customer service (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 43). The fact that the City Manager was unobservant of the attacker’s job performance history in his public address is a symptom of a larger problem of the communication structure within the organization. The communication network for tracking, reporting, and monitoring risks of WPV at the VBCMC was constrained by the obstacles of bureaucratic organizing, therefore limiting the City’s capacity to promote reliability by being responsive to emerging indicators across the HR reporting channels.

Organizations provide the means for sensemaking upon which members can develop apply emergent interpretations (Rochlin, 1999). The VBCMC did not have a strategy for mandatory WPV training that might emphasize what risk indicators to look out for, and therefore indirectly enabled employees to ignore the warning signs due to mindlessness. Institutions must include their own structure and social relations in safety discourse because a reflexive and self-conscious approach is the only reliable way to match the moment-to-moment needs for realistically managing WPV risks. An increase in communication complexity will likely improve

the reactivity of the system, but in this application of HRO theory, increasing system complexity of internal org comm processes is unlikely to create a *more* error-prone system (Perrow, 1993; Rochlin, 1999). In the context of the VBCMC case, workplace shootings were not an unfamiliar concept to the members and leaders of the organization. When the VBCMC shooting occurred, it was the fifth mass shooting in 2019 out of 34 (FBI, 2014). There is an urgent need for more nuanced understandings of workplace violence issues and how they develop, what they are related to, and how to catch the warning signs, especially in large, bureaucratic organizations.

VBCMC Was Not Sensitive Enough to Internal Operations to Catch Early Indicators of WPV Risk

Part of the shared reality that was developed in the years leading up to the shooting for VBCMC employees included a sense that employee input was not of value to the organization. One of the survey points that was posed as a point of praise is that an area of 'high perception' was in the category of 'Work Environment & Communication' in the survey, scoring 4.0 out of 5.0 (Average 3.4), employees generally agreed with the statement that "I often initiate (begin) communication about my job with my immediate supervisor (Hillard Heintze, 2019, p. 5)." Such a score, however, does not suggest how these upward messages are interpreted and acted upon.

The first-ever cultural assessment survey was administered in 2012. Results revealed employee concerns that problems do not always get caught because people did not know where to report issues, felt that managers would not respond to 'minor problems', felt that managers did not always adequately respond and responses were not positive, or supervisors were not trained in WPV (City of Virginia Beach, 2012, 2018, 2019; Hilliard Heintze, 2019). As a result of poor feedback systems, employees learned to be less sensitive to warning signs because nonresponse is rewarded, and constructive feedback falls on deaf ears. Learned mindlessness was a normal

operative function at the VBCMC which allowed the City's management to rely on a reactive approach, instead of the recommended proactive (Hilliard Heintze, 2019).

The City's response to the issue of feedback channels and sensitivity to WPV risk came in 2021 with the R.E.S.P.E.C.T. portal; a 24/7 online and phone employee hotline to "Report Employee Situations Promptly to Enable Change Together" (Weatherton, 2021b). A human resources representative for the project stated "It's a best practice to provide multiple mechanisms for people to bring concerns. If they aren't comfortable going to their supervisor or walking into HR, that they have this as well." It was stated that the plans for this tool were in development as early as 2018, which is a good indication that the City was aware of this weakness in their management structure, The R.E.S.P.E.C.T Employee Portal is up and running as of January 2021, and Virginia Beach city employees can log on anytime, and " if they don't feel comfortable putting their name down, they can submit a concern anonymously."

The new R.E.S.P.E.C.T. portal is not yet compatible with the existing workplace culture at the VBCMC, which is still reeling and adjusting to the emerging post-shooting workplace. Although a refurbished system of anonymous feedback is a well-advised addition to the City's WPV management plan, a transition of espoused values is required to make the system useful. The issue of inadequate feedback is not as simple as a structural issue. Rather, the larger cultural forces that oppress employee voices are likely to continue affecting response rates until the long-term cultural change is actualized.

The reasons an employee might have for seeking help or submitting feedback to the City might still be obscured by the lingering forces of power and culture within the organization. In the larger context of how local government and city municipalities operate, the organizational actors are pressured by the interconnection between 'globalizing influences and 'personal

dispositions' (Giddens as cited in Witmer, 1997). This means that opening feedback channels at the VBCMC is a useful and important step for increasing reliability, but the cultural strategy should also be integrated to emphasize the value of employee input and encourage members to identify their individual meanings as legitimate in the organization.

Poorly Decentralized HR Processes Created Problems with Cultural Meanings and Reliability

Finally, issues with the City's HR department have a common denominator of problematic decentralization. A substantial number of employees made comments specifically regarding the City's HR department, to which the most drastic structural changes were suggested (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 170). According to the case data, HR representatives were unable to adequately respond to risk indicators partially due to the decentralization of HR operations across the organization (p. 120). One main complaint from employees is that it was not clear whether the HR department for the VBCMC was more built to serve the residents of Virginia Beach *or* the City's employees (p. 122). The case suggests that the structure of the VBCMC HR functions led to the development of poor sensemaking habits related to symptoms of a WPV prone environment because there was limited HR presence among the departments. The central HR department for the City housed a standard array of four teams: Learning and development, staffing, health and safety, and employee relations (p. 120). Even though the City employed dozens of HR professionals, the City's HR was set up so that most HR-related interactions with employees were handled *without* contacting HR. Instead, the system relied on 'HR Liaisons', volunteer-status, untrained employees who were employees of various departments (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, pp. 12-13). The Liaisons were supposed to be a conduit between HR and employees, however, they reported to the manager of the department, not the HR director, which may have created "perceived conflicts of interest" at times (Hall & Fox, 2021). Problems arose

because the central HR department did not have regular contact with the Liaisons, and there was no sense of cohesion among them for managing the departments. The final investigation report suggests that this disconnect also created problems with HR professionals embedded in the departments, because the non-HR managers should not have been leading in HR-related decisions, but they were because central HR was not in regular contact with the Liaisons and/ or analysts. Hilliard Heintze (2019) recommended that the Employee Relations Managers for each department should be the central pipeline for HR inquiries from, instead of non-HR managers, to "curb internal gossip as well as facilitate information sharing from the departments to the City HR Department" (p. 23).

The hired investigation firm concluded that a certain level of decentralization is expected, particularly when addressing employee performance (p. 22). However, the way that the HR structure was decentralized did not have a strong enough central connection among HR representatives, including training, documentation, and HR communication campaigns. Employees, including managers and HR Liaisons, alleged to the investigation team that they did not feel supported by the City HR Department, felt that the Liaisons had "insufficient experience," and did not operate independently enough from local managers (p. 21). Additionally, the HR department did not keep a "centralized repository" of employee information, including a history of performance issues, or violent or prohibited behaviors (p. 22). Records were kept both on paper and in a digital database, but these records were not integrated, and "little coordination occurs regarding employees- even when employee concerns arise" (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 22). The resulting issue of the decentralization of HR representatives and documentation is that the organization has an incomplete view of the employees and limits

the ability for managers to "efficiently and effectively use skills, knowledge, and abilities of its workforce (p. 22).

A complete central database of HR records would also allow the City HR department to identify and develop protocols involving pre-attack warning signs and prohibited behaviors. The consequence of poor HR decentralization created enormous blind spots which concealed counterproductive workplace behavior and threats to WPV risk reduction. To these recommendations, the City had a contrarian response. The City claimed that the employee records database was already centralized on a digital platform, and the technology will be updated within three years as previously planned before the shooting (Leahy, 2019, p. 27). Also contrary to the investigation findings, the City argued that "Human Resources consults daily with department Liaisons, supervisors and managers to foster positive performance management techniques" (p. 25).

For such a complex organization with nearly 3,000 employees, the HR department at the time of the shooting only had 10 full-time HR representatives and offloaded the remaining HR communication work to approximately 15 volunteers, who were not compensated, supported, or trained to be responsible for sensitive HR operations (Hall & Fox, 2021; Hilliard Heintze, 2019). HR central was too disconnected from the decentralized Liaisons across the departments to effectively or consistently catch red flags. The problems with HR decentralization are a feature of the City's low sensitivity to internal operations, and that the organization was much too eager to simplify the cost and complexity of their HR department. The recommended solutions to the City's HR operations included hiring full-time HR employees, revising the City's performance management approach to be less disciplinarian and use an improvement-focused approach, and strengthen communication about the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The City again

responded in disagreement by stating “The City does not agree with the implication that the City does not utilize an improvement-centered approach to performance management,” but no contrary evidence was offered (Leahy, 2019, p. 26). The City’s response also says the recommendation to strengthen EAP resource communication was ‘already in place,’ claiming “The City has conducted EAP campaigns in the past and EAP resources are available on our benefits website” (p. 29). Note, the benefits website is not the same as the main company intranet. The argumentative nature of the City’s response to the HR-related recommendation is a clue that there are problems with the HR structure, leadership, and communications which enable red flags to slip through the cracks due to a failure to acknowledge operational weaknesses and defer to expert knowledge.

It is repeated throughout the documents of this case that the attacker exhibited no warning signs, that his communication before the attack did not include pre-incident risk factors, and that there was no indication that his personal risk factors would have escalated to homicidal rage. The decentralization of HR processes in the VBCMC case was like a Benadryl; soothed some irritating symptoms while ultimately causing a drowsy state of mind and limiting the ability to safely assess conditions of risk in the environment. Decentralization can be a tool to boost reliability when implemented from a strong central guiding point (Weick & Roberts, 2005). In this case, however, the use of poor-decentralization strategies for HR creates even more problems around WPV risk management because an inconsistent approach is not the same and does not carry the same advantage as an improvisational or flexible approach (Eisenberg, 1998; Rochlin, 1999).

> Employees said they did not know or understand that their internal HR Liaison was not the final arbiter of an issue, or that they could have taken the same issue to the City HR Department for possible resolution or further guidance. In addition to those who reported not knowing they had outside avenues of

> assistance, many vocal stakeholders stated that none of the current reporting structures were helpful and could not or would not address underlying HR-related issues regarding policy violations. (Hilliard Heintze, 2019, p. 168)

The displacement of HR functions also created a sensemaking problem for pointing fingers. The extremely anomalous nature of the attack contributed to the further individualization of the organization's focus. Because HR was not aware, not involved, or otherwise uncaring about employee relations issues which are conceptually linked to warning signs of pre-attack behavior created the opportunity for the organization to shuffle off any responsibility. Threat awareness is typically based on an employee's engagement in prohibited behaviors (Hilliard Heintze, 2019) Therefore, because the VBCMC HR group failed to acknowledge an accurate taxonomy of individual and group pre-attack behaviors, *and* they were not structurally equipped to respond to the risks, they perpetuate the low-reliability approach that individuals are the cause of WPV, and organizations are merely passive environments.

The poorly decentralized structure of the VBCMC's HR operations was a significant point of weak reliability because of a lack of cohesive training, documentation, and communication among departments and employees. Structural HR problems were identified in the investigation, corroborated with employee interviews, and ultimately rejected by the City's follow-up response. The HR structure before the shooting created the perfect conditions for warning signs or prohibited behaviors to get lost in the bureaucratic layers of confusion and ambiguity about who to turn to for HR assistance, and who is responsible for intervening. Then, the City's post-incident dismissal of the expert recommendations to resolve these points of weak reliability is an example of how the organizational meanings about what HR does, who it is for, and the purpose it serves for the City is still not aligned with the exigence of workplace violence. The overall lack of cohesion between HR Liaisons and managers, department managers, and

employees contributed to the development of normalized slow or low responses to employee issues, including performance management, benefits, and potential warning signs.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

"Boy, I tell ya'...One of these days it's just going to be like [mimic cocking rifle and shooting rapid-fire sound effects]." (Judge, 1999, 0:08:28)

The 1999 corporate satirical comedy *Office Space* was released to U.S. audiences who were already growing numb to the phenomenon of disgruntled employee violence. The movie tells the story of a fictional workplace full of masochistic leadership, organizational indifference, and mounting employee frustrations which are eerily matched in the VBCMC case. Through a comedic lens, the movie is a composite narrative of an organization whose culture, structure, and larger socio-industrial factors create the latent conditions for a disgruntled employee to consider inciting violence against coworkers and supervisors. The case study offered here of the VBCMC is a grounded exploratory study of a similar measure. The findings outlined in the previous section set up additional conversations about the layers of the workplace environment and interactive processes which are related to possible WPV risk development and management.

How Findings Respond to Research Questions

The first research question posed at the beginning of the study is concerned with understanding what cultural features of the VBCMC workplace environment contributed to the escalation of WPV related conflicts instead of early intervention. The second research question framing the analysis is interested in the sensemaking communication processes among VBCMC employees which limited the organization's overall ability to catch or sufficiently appraise risks of workplace violence, especially risks associated with disgruntled employees. Together, the main findings of the analysis conducted here offer a layered response to the research questions. The primary concepts related to the research questions are reliability, culture, and sensemaking, and they are interpreted in this case as overlapping and interrelated.

The first main group of findings respond primarily to the second question regarding sensemaking as a process of reliability culture creation. The first key group of findings is focused on the poor sensemaking habits at the VBCMC created a communication culture that had a very high threshold for responding to early warning signs of WPV, and that sufficient responses to WPV risks were constrained by a pattern of learned inadequate meanings and actions. Patterns emerged from the data that indicate VBCMC employees assigned meanings to ambiguous risk cues in ways that enacted a less reliable environment.

The second and third sets of key findings are more related to the concept and impact of reliability, and the VBCMC members' patterns of communication that normalized inadequate responses to and appraisals of risks about WPV. The first question that framed the data analysis was concerned with the elements of workplace culture that constitute reliability, and how common patterns of workplace interactions lead to problems with catching risks. The structural and social boundaries of the workplace created a communication environment that was vulnerable to internal risk development. As the case evidence revealed, there were multiple overlapping and interacting forces acting within the VB City organization which made it more difficult for members to be sensitive to and to respond adequately to ongoing, low-level threats to internal operations.

Theoretical Implications

Extension of HRO Theory to Bureaucratic Organizations

The primary implication of this study for future research on workplace violence is the need for an exploratory application of HRO and reliability concepts to bureaucratic work settings. As established in previous research about WPV and mass shootings, there is not enough data to state the characteristics of a workplace that are more likely to create the latent conditions

for disgruntled employee violence. Although the results of this case study are not extendable for universal analysis of other workplace shooting events, there is enough evidence from this cultural-based analysis to suggest that organizations with more bureaucratic features will be more likely to experience increased risk factors for cultivating and not responding to early indicators. This assumption is based on the growing phenomenon of mass violence in semi-public settings, and the clearly emergent pattern of settings (e.g., manufacturing warehouses, distribution plants, schools, corporate offices, military bases).

The application of HRO/ reliability concepts to look at WPV risks in bureaucratic and traditionally low-reliability work environments is advisable because of the link suggested in the analysis between cultural norms and WPV outcomes. The VBCMC case reveals the common patterns of bureaucratic obstacles to reliability which are familiar in similar types of organizations. Organizations that are strictly organized under strict hierarchies, whose members adhere to formal, centralized rules, are at risk of missing or inadequately responding to internal risk indicators because the essence of the organization is inflexible rule-based fail-averse culture. The cornerstones of bureaucratic organizing are antithetical to HRO theory, and so it is the very nature of organizing in office spaces, warehouses, post offices, and schools that introduce the first risk factor of disgruntled member violence- bureaucracy.

Future studies must develop the theoretical understanding of WPV as an internal risk as opposed to external risk which is typically what HRO theory is applied to look at. Reliability studies outline a key set of cultural characteristics common among bureaucratic systems which may directly limit reactions to early indicators, such as low sensitivity to employee feedback, failure to heed expert recommendations, and lack of communication about issues as they emerge. To study WPV effectively, in a way that will benefit the cross-disciplinary body of literature

about rampage violence, HRO theory should be used to understand WPV as an issue of internal cultural reliability instead of as a foreign threat.

The Transition from Psychological to Cultural Focus

The second most significant theoretical implication from the VBCMC case study is the transition of the scholarly basis from mostly psychological to an organizational communication approach. Even if an individual has personal risk factors (e.g., history of violence, financial or personal relationship stress, mental health problems), more research is needed around how organizations fail to catch these personal or environmental risks and contribute to the activation of violent individuals. This case study sets up the basis for future research to deepen the conceptual links between research on mass shootings, school shootings, and shooter typology, and organizational research on culture, sensemaking, and reliability. The use of reliability and sensemaking concepts in this case study is an introduction to larger conversations about how social environments foster the conditions for inter-member violence, and how the norms of said culture can limit responsiveness to risks. The important shift then is that threat assessment teams (TAT) and scholars who are studying the mass shooting pandemic are faced with the urgent need to analyze rampage violence as interpersonally, collectively, and structurally influenced.

Using the VBCMC case here, I attempt to reconceptualize WPV as a collective or cultural problem, not a criminal, individual, psychological issue. It is both, but scholars can integrate an organizational communication approach to understand the role of the organization and the potential for monitoring/ managing risks via internal communication. Due to the, unfortunately, increasing frequency of gun violence, including mass shootings and workplace shootings, it is important that scholars adapt their theoretical approaches to understanding how an organization misses warning signs, not just how they are presented by the individual perpetrator(s).

The tension of blame is then introduced in this conversation of organizational influence on WPV. To resolve the guilt, instead of denying motives and dehumanizing shooters, research should apply critical theory to pull apart the relationships of culture and power that enable, constrain, and benefit from the lack of organizational responsibility. Typically, all guilt is loaded on the attacker, which rhetorically absolves the institution of responsibility for the crisis, and perpetuates the idea that these attacks are unpreventable, unrelated to the organization, unprovoked, a result of mental illness or hyper-emotionality. There is an important space around organizational responses to WPV which should be studied using rhetorical lenses to understand the lines of power and member oppression in the context of disgruntled employee violence. In the context of WPV in bureaucratic organizations, this case study also points to an important clue about why and how violence is used in the workplace as an act of retaliative vocalization.

Violence as Voice; WPV as Last-Resort Communication

An application of Voice theory in future studies is sure to produce significant interpretations about violence as communication. In this case study, the cultural approach identified problems with the use of employee feedback, organizational listening behavior, and leader responsiveness which implicates a gap in the research around understanding WPV as an alternate type of employee voice. In theory, the act of violence against a peer or the organization is a type of destructive communication about the member's perceived status, satisfaction, and symbolic reality.

Mass violence is not typically enacted without a build-up of frustration and multiple failed attempts to be acknowledged. Rampage violence as a result of feeling undervalued or mistreated at work is usually invoked as a final act of voice. Violence is an 'exit' when it occurs in an organization. For many disgruntled employees, the use of violence appears to be an act of final

revenge, getting the last word, or having the final say. Violence is a method of workplace communication that is learned either at home, at work, or in the news. Mass shootings are highly publicized events that have resulted in the common cultural awareness of the ‘manifesto’, or a document of declared intent, usually some dark, disassociated suicidal philosophy. With each new mass shooting that appears and is dismissed as unpredictable, unprovoked, or unpreventable, the next disgruntled employee becomes more reassured in their disillusioned justification to use violence as a way to seek acknowledgment.

Practical Implications

Increase Discussions of Organizational Influences During WPV Awareness Training

Related to the first theoretical implication, the VBCMC case study implicates a significant need for practical conversations about WPV to pay more attention to the role of the organization leading up to and after a violent crisis. Managers and organizational leaders should receive more in-depth and more frequent exposure to WPV awareness training. In practice, two separate conversations should be mandatory for leaders, safety and evacuation response training, and awareness training to more effectively point out and strategically react to ambiguous warning signs. In the VBCMC case, the majority of the expert recommendations pointed to a need for increased training around all aspects of WPV, including awareness, preparedness, reporting, and prevention.

WPV training should be an ongoing conversation in bureaucratic organizations that have multiple environmental risks. For example, a manager at a family restaurant or a grocery store will need a less complex education around WPV than bureaucratic managers in a factory, government office, or airport. It is important that organizations assume a proactive approach to WPV, and continue to talk about the topic as the issue becomes more prevalent in the U.S.

In this suggested approach, communication about WPV is not only about crisis management, but crisis prevention, detection, and de-escalation. The prevalence and difficulty of predicting WPV mean that it is even more significant for managers to be aligned with the demands of the work environment and that the structure of the organization is not too rigid to adapt to the complex meanings of the internal system.

Organizations Must Provide the Tools for Making Sense Before and After WPV

The most important indicators of potential WPV risk will be witnessed by coworkers and managers. These people must be equipped with a sensemaking toolbox that will allow them to adequately assess emergent risk factors or behaviors and report them back to the organization. To limit the bypassing effect of important safety cues being lost in translation, organizations must proactively assign a WPV vocabulary, so that members of the organization already have the means of thinking about warning signs when they appear (Witmer, 1997).

Indicators for WPV will appear as a mix of universal and local signals. In a large organization, folks that work in the warehouse versus the sales office are going to need different ways of talking about, labeling, noticing, and reporting or responding to indicators of risk, pre-attack behaviors or cultural conditions, etc. Those risks that are bound to the organizational culture are going to require a local set of meanings to be adequately labeled and retained for future sensemaking. When organizations mandate WPV training, the training materials must be aligned with the communication tools and meanings in the organization. Similarly, communication and training in bureaucratic organizations must take care to acknowledge the innate reliability and cultural obstacles to effective WPV risk responsiveness. In the VBCMC case, there were unproductive meanings around WPV which circulated from the City Manager's office as well as throughout the departments. This was a reliability weakness for the VBCMC, and in addition to enhancing training sessions and WPV education, the leaders and managers

must enact and sustain the language and symbols that will help employees prepare to respond to risks earlier.

Internal Communication Complexity Has to Match That of The Organization

Finally, the closing practical implication from this case study is that organizations must structure their internal communication strategies to match the complexity of the system. For bureaucratic organizations, this need for complexity should not be translated as a need to convolute already inefficient operations or increase documentation vortexes. Instead, the need for requisite variety in bureaucratic organizational communication systems would improve the ability to listen and respond to ambiguous warning signs in ways that fit with operational scope and constraints. For the VBCMC, there was a lack of connectivity among the various parts of the organization enabled by a system of internal communication that was simply too limited for an organization of such size and complexity. Improving the complexity of the organizational communication processes is important for WPV reporting, but also all the other levels of reporting channels that are necessary to monitor the work environment for at-risk individuals or groups.

Gathering employee feedback through formal listening channels is central to WPV preparedness and communication planning. Organizations should have the capacity to listen *and* respond to employees based on the needs of the environment, not just universal recommendations which may not fit the culture. WPV awareness is not just about reporting issues, but also about making employee voices feel heard and validated. Even if they are not happy, an employee who can use a constructive or dissenting voice will likely have a lower perception of mistreatment or marginalization and be less likely to resort to violence.

Increasing the complexity of a communication environment to overcome issues of bureaucracy will include encouraging employee use of voice, honest interaction with managers, and increasing availability of HR documents, representatives, and formal and informal feedback channels. Communication cultural change will need to be enacted from the bottom up to avoid important WPV meanings being dissolved by out-of-touch messages from higher-ups, like City Managers, council members, or department heads. To ensure that employee voices are integrated into the system, organizational leaders should practice building multiple channels of communication and touchpoints into everyday operations. To combat the limitations of bureaucratic redundancy in communication, it should also be common practice to implement mixed-platform and mixed-media communication methods to maximize reach.

Organizational trust and member identity are also vulnerable points in bureaucratic systems. Communication with employees about how their feedback is used, their value to the system, and what impact their opinions have on the organization can help eliminate some stressful job-related ambiguity or tension that usually precipitates CWB. The complicated relationship between an organization and its members also calls for these communication touchpoints with leaders to be more humanistic and focused on the intersubjectivity of the employee. Similarly, management of communication about WPV risks and warning sign responsiveness should also be more nuanced to reflect the complex nature of the risks and all the features of the organization that are affected by such risks. This means that pre-attack indicators, when they appear, should be appraised as symptomatic of both the individual and their work environment and network (e.g., team, leader, workspace, HR representative). Touchpoints with employees should be consistent enough to maintain a base level of communication that will inform WPV strategy, and thorough enough to understand new or changing ‘red flags’ as they

develop in the culture. Meanings aside, if the communication network is not designed to 'catch' warning signs, and these gaps are built into the network, then they will continue to go unnoticed.

Conclusion

The value of the VBCMC case comes from the familiar pattern of how the events occurred, and the findings from the data are that much more significant because of their resonance among other highly bureaucratic organizational cultures. It is not the shooters that need to be profiled, it is the environment in which they attack that must be understood as a collection of influences on individual meaning and action. In the case of the VBCMC shooting and many other incidents of WPV, it is not that the organization was completely submissive to the threat of employee violence, rather, it was their patterns of collective action and culture that unintendedly created the necessary conditions for such behavior to become possible.

The interpreted findings from the analysis together create a backdrop for understanding, in a new way, how the VBCMC's risk of disgruntled employee violence was abetted by bureaucratic cultural forces and how employees perceived the development of this type of risk in a way that diminished the likelihood of responding sooner. An organizational cultural communication approach was used to interpret themes from the case that support the practical value of understanding WPV in the context of cultural reliability and sensemaking.

The scholarly value of the VBCMC case is the space it provides for considering how an organization's culture, the invisible, implicit ways of knowing and doing, correlate with the risk of workplace violence. From interpreting the data using existing HRO and sensemaking theory and unveiling new themes related to bureaucratic organizing, this case helps support a new approach to analyzing the phenomenon of workplace rampage attacks as an outcome of more than just individual violent proclivities. Themes were identified in the data using reliability and

sensemaking as lenses for understanding how everyday workplace norms, assumptions, language sets, and stories, can act as symptoms or triggers for an increased risk of disgruntled employee violence.

This study combines what is known about workplace culture, reliability and meaning-making in low-risk settings, and the patterns of employee-employee and mass public violence to create a new lens for understanding which cultural characteristics put organizations at risk of employee rampage attacks. Research on predicting and preventing active shooter incidents has largely been preoccupied with individual factors such as mental health or a history of domestic issues. This case study presents a new understanding of the relationship between workplace environment, including culture, structure, space, agency, etc., and workplace violence. This study addresses the dearth of critical intersectional and cultural research around WPV and IRAs.

Workplace homicides carried out by disgruntled employees are contextually bound to the reality of increasing mass gun violence in the U.S. Building on cross-disciplinary literature about risk, safety, and workplace culture and communication, I offer this qualitative iterative case analysis of the VBCMC shooting of 2019 to seek a deeper understanding of how disgruntled employee violence developed without triggering organizational response systems. Using a mixed critical cultural approach to organizing and risk, the analysis includes claims about which types of cultural workplace habits indicate proneness to disgruntled employee violence, and how common U.S. practices of bureaucratic organizing contribute to the risk.

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