

# Workplace Aggression

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**ABSTRACT**—*The vast majority of workplace aggression is perpetrated by members of the public, or organizational outsiders. Organizational employees (i.e., insiders) seldom kill or physically assault their colleagues. The most frequent manifestations of insider-initiated aggression involve less dramatic acts, such as shouting at and spreading rumors about colleagues. Both individual (e.g., alcohol consumption, hostile attributional bias) and organizational (e.g., overcontrolling supervision, perceived injustice) factors predict which individuals are most likely to engage in insider aggression. Research has shown that victims of insider-initiated aggression experience negative personal (e.g., emotional well-being and physical health) and organizational (e.g., work attitudes) outcomes. Despite increasing research on workplace aggression, significant gaps in our knowledge remain.*

**KEYWORDS**—*workplace violence; workplace aggression; employee characteristics; working conditions*

December 26, 2000, Wakefield, Massachusetts, United States: Michael McDermott, a 42-year-old employee of Edgewater Technology, shot dead seven of his coworkers; five of his victims worked in the accounting department. McDermott was apparently upset because the accounting department, at the request of the Internal Revenue Service, was preparing to garnish a portion of his wages.

Michael McDermott is not the “typical” workplace killer: Organizational members (i.e., insiders) seldom murder (Peek-Asa, Runyan, & Zwerling, 2001) or physically assault their colleagues (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999). The vast majority of workplace aggression is perpetrated by members of the public, or organizational outsiders. For example, in 1997, 860 Americans were murdered on the job, and in approximately 85% of the cases, the assailant was an outsider (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1998). In a 1995 study examining eight southern California cities, members of the public were responsible for more than 90% of nonfatal workplace assaults (see Peek-Asa et al., 2001).

Workplace aggression has been categorized into four major types based on the assailant's relationship to the victim. In the first type (Type I), the perpetrator has no legitimate relationship with the targeted organization or its employees and enters the work environment to commit a criminal act (e.g., robbery). More employees in America are murdered each year as a result of Type I aggression than from the

other three types combined (see Peek-Asa et al., 2001). Individuals who interact and exchange money with the public (e.g., taxicab drivers) are at highest risk of being victims of this type of workplace aggression.

In the second type (Type II), the assailant has a legitimate relationship with the organization and commits an act of violence while being served by the organization. Although perpetrators of Type II aggression rarely kill their victims (Peek-Asa et al., 2001), they are responsible for an estimated 60% of all nonfatal assaults at work (Peek-Asa & Howard, 1999). Employees who provide service, care, advice, or education (e.g., nurses, social workers, teachers) are at increased risk for Type II aggression, especially if their clients, customers, or patients are experiencing frustration, insecurity, or stress.

In the third type of workplace aggression (Type III), the offender is typically a current or former employee of the organization (i.e., an insider) who targets a coworker or supervisor for perceived wrongdoing. Unlike Type I and Type II aggression, Type III aggression does not appear to be more associated with certain occupations or industries than with others. Rather, insider-initiated aggression has been linked to both individual (e.g., alcohol consumption; Greenberg & Barling, 1999) and organizational (e.g., perceived injustice; Baron et al., 1999) factors.

In the fourth type of workplace aggression (Type IV), the perpetrator has an ongoing or previous legitimate relationship with an employee of the organization. This category includes violence by an intimate partner that takes place at work. In the United States in 1997, 5% of homicides on the job were the result of Type IV aggression (see Peek-Asa et al., 2001).

The focus of this article is on insider-initiated aggression. We focus on this category of workplace aggression for three reasons: First, there are myths surrounding insider-initiated aggression that warrant attention. Second, investigators in organizational psychology have conducted more research on insider-perpetrated aggression than on the other three types of workplace aggression. Third, organizations are more likely to be able to manage this type of workplace aggression, because it is often prompted by some factor in the organization itself (e.g., overcontrolling supervision).

## CONCEPTUALIZING WORKPLACE AGGRESSION

Workplace aggression includes a variety of behaviors, ranging from psychological acts (e.g., shouting) to physical assault (Dupré & Barling, 2003). Recently, Baron et al. (1999) proposed that aggressive workplace behaviors can be grouped into three different categories, *expressions of hostility* (i.e., hostile verbal or symbolic behaviors, such as “the silent treatment”), *obstructionism* (i.e., behaviors that are

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designed to hamper the target's performance, such as refusing to provide needed resources), and *overt aggression* (e.g., assaults, destruction of property). Investigators have demonstrated that the most frequent manifestations of insider-initiated aggression are not acts of overt aggression but less dramatic psychologically aggressive acts, such as spreading rumors about and giving dirty looks to colleagues (e.g., Baron et al., 1999).

### PREDICTORS OF INSIDER-INITIATED AGGRESSION

Research on insider-initiated aggression is complex because this phenomenon can have multiple sources, targets, and causes. Assaultants can be either employees or managers, aggression can be directed toward one or more of three different targets (i.e., current or former superiors, peers, and subordinates), and factors that predict aggression may vary depending on the target of aggression. For example, workplace surveillance increases the risk of employee aggression toward supervisors, but not subordinates or peers (Greenberg & Barling, 1999).

Both individual and workplace factors are important predictors of Type III aggression, and insider-initiated aggression is likely the result of a complex interaction between the two kinds of factors (Dupré & Barling, 2003). Although several individual (e.g., history of aggression, Type A behavior pattern) and organizational (e.g., downsizing and layoffs, surveillance, increased workplace diversity) variables have been linked to aggression at work, we focus on only two individual factors, alcohol consumption and hostile attributional bias,<sup>1</sup> and two organizational factors, perceptions of injustice and overcontrolling supervision. (For a more extensive review of the literature on predictors of insider-initiated aggression, see Dupré & Barling, 2003).

Recent evidence suggests that alcohol consumption contributes to aggression in organizational settings. Alcohol consumption interacts with employee perceptions of procedural injustice to predict aggression against coworkers and subordinates (Greenberg & Barling, 1999). In other words, when employees perceive that their organizations' procedures are unfair (i.e., perceptions of procedural injustice), amount of alcohol consumed is related to aggression against coworkers and subordinates. In contrast, amount of alcohol consumed is not related to such aggression when employees perceive their organizations' procedures to be fair. Alcohol consumption also interacts with job insecurity to predict aggression against subordinates (Greenberg & Barling, 1999). Simply put, amount of alcohol consumed is related to aggression against subordinates when employees' perceptions of job security are low, but not when perceptions of job security are high. Recent research also suggests that the relationship between alcohol abuse and aggression at work is amplified when employees have strong perceptions of being mistreated by others (Jockin, Arvey, & McGue, 2001).

Research has demonstrated that an individual's cognitive appraisal of an event may predict whether he or she becomes angry and aggressive. For example, Epps and Kendall (1995) found that perceptions of hostile intent, and not actual intent, are associated with subsequent aggressive behavior. Douglas and Martinko (2001) extended these findings to the work context. They asked employees to read hypothetical scenarios of negative workplace events (e.g., "You fail to receive a promotion that you wanted for a long time") and in-

terpret the causes of these events. Employees whose explanations for the events involved higher levels of hostile intent were more likely to report engaging in workplace aggression compared with employees who perceived lower levels of hostile intent.

Although individual factors clearly play a role in workplace aggression, some researchers argue that organizational factors are more important predictors of aggression (e.g., Dupré & Barling, 2003). In a study examining both individual (self-esteem, history of aggressive behavior) and organizational (perceptions of interpersonal injustice, abusive supervision) predictors of supervisor-targeted aggression among moonlighters (i.e., individuals who work two jobs with different supervisors), the organizational factors were found to be better predictors than the individual factors (Inness & Barling, 2002).

Organizational injustice is considered one of the most promising avenues in the study of workplace aggression. Although there are various forms of injustice, interpersonal injustice is considered particularly relevant to insider-initiated aggression. Interpersonal justice is the perception that employees are treated with politeness, dignity, and respect by authorities during the enactment of organizational procedures (e.g., performance evaluations). A recent study found that employee perceptions of interpersonally unfair treatment from supervisors were related to employee-initiated aggression against both supervisors and organizations (Inness & Barling, 2002).

Investigators have found that employees who feel overcontrolled by a supervisor have an increased tendency to engage in supervisor-targeted aggression (Day & Hamblin, 1964; Dupré & Barling, 2002). Use of surveillance methods to monitor employees' behavior (e.g., requiring that employees punch time cards) also predicts supervisor-targeted aggression (Greenberg & Barling, 1999).

There is sufficient evidence to conclude that both individual and organizational factors contribute to insider-initiated aggression. More research is needed, however, to understand the interaction between these two kinds of factors.

### OUTCOMES OF INSIDER-INITIATED AGGRESSION

To date, knowledge about the outcomes of workplace aggression derives almost exclusively from (a) studies of outsider-initiated aggression and (b) studies that did not differentiate between outsider- and insider-initiated aggression. It is clear from this literature that experiencing aggression at work can have negative consequences for victims and their organizations. However, it appears that victims of aggression experience differential consequences depending on the source of the aggression (i.e., a member of the public or an insider).

A recent study comparing outcomes of insider-perpetrated aggression and outcomes of outsider-initiated aggression (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002) demonstrated that victims of insider-initiated aggression tended to have reduced emotional and physical well-being, as well as low levels of organizational commitment; the latter predicted intentions to find another job. In contrast, victims of outsider-initiated aggression perceived the likelihood of future aggression to be higher than non-victims did, and this perception in turn was associated with fear of future aggression. Being a victim of outsider-initiated aggression was not related to emotional or physical health, although it did predict employee intent to find another job. The results of this study suggest that outsider-initiated aggression and insider-initiated aggression are associated with different outcomes for victims.

<sup>1</sup>Hostile attributional bias is the tendency for some individuals to infer that the actions of another person have a hostile intent even when social cues fail to provide a clear intent (i.e., when intent is ambiguous).

Tepper (2000) studied the effects of abusive supervision on employee and organizational outcomes. Abusive supervision was identified by measuring "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (p. 178). Compared with employees who did not feel their supervisors were abusive, those who did perceive their supervisors to be abusive were more likely to quit their jobs, and if they remained employed at their organizations, they reported lower life satisfaction, as well as greater psychological distress and conflict between the demands of work and family. Perceptions of abusive supervision were also related to lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, among the employees with abusive supervisors, those who perceived that they could find work if they quit their jobs experienced fewer negative outcomes than those who were less confident about their ability to find another job.

In summary, Type III aggression has negative consequences for victims and their organizations. Initial evidence suggests that co-worker-initiated aggression has negative effects on employees' emotional and physical well-being, as well as organizational outcomes (e.g., commitment). Clearly, more research on personal and organizational outcomes of Type III workplace aggression is warranted.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite increasing research on workplace aggression, significant gaps in knowledge remain. For example, it would be important to better understand how employees' reactions to workplace aggression vary depending on their source of the aggression (e.g., supervisors, peers, subordinates, members of the public). Insider-initiated aggression is related to employees' emotional and physical well-being, but outsider-initiated aggression is not (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002). Investigators need to determine why there are different reactions to aggression depending on the relationship between the perpetrator and victim. It is possible that individuals who work with the public expect to experience aggression (i.e., they view it as "part of the job"), and that this expectation influences their reactions to aggression. In contrast, employees are unlikely to expect to experience aggression from their colleagues, so insider-initiated aggression may break their trust and lead to feelings of betrayal. Examining aggression in romantic and marital relationships may prove useful in understanding employees' reactions to insider-initiated aggression.

Insider-initiated aggression also appears to lower employees' commitment to their organization, although aggression perpetrated by a member of the public does not (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002). Future research could investigate the reasons for this difference. Individuals may expect their organizations to protect them from their peers, subordinates, or supervisors and may hold their organizations accountable for insider-initiated aggression. Victims of outsider-initiated aggression may not perceive their aggressors' actions as being "under the control" of their organizations; hence, such victims may not hold their organizations responsible for the aggression. It is up to future researchers to examine these hypotheses.

Although being a victim of workplace aggression is associated with negative outcomes, few studies have examined the outcomes for witnesses of aggression. It is likely that more employees will witness aggression than fall victim to it. The following are potential questions that could be investigated: Do employees who witness insider-initiated aggression report the incidents? Do subordinates modify their percep-

tions of their supervisors if they witness them behaving aggressively toward other subordinates? When violence toward an intimate partner spills into an organization, how does this aggression impact the witnesses? Clearly, there are many questions concerning vicariously experienced aggression that could be investigated.

The prevention of workplace aggression warrants further investigation, as well. Many organizations have policies (e.g., zero tolerance for aggression, restrictions on carrying concealed weapons) and procedures (e.g., severe penalties, such as employee termination, for engaging in aggression) related to workplace aggression. To date, no studies have investigated whether these policies are effective. There is also little published data on whether sanctions against aggressive behavior are effective in preventing aggression. The effectiveness of organizational training programs aimed at preventing aggressive behaviors also needs to be determined. Researchers should also conduct studies to examine whether support (e.g., emotional support) from organizational insiders (e.g., peers, supervisors) and outsiders (e.g., family members, friends) might lessen the negative effects of workplace aggression on victims.

The predictors and consequences of workplace aggression among young workers also need to be investigated, because the vast majority of teenagers work part-time while still in school (see Loughlin & Barling, 2001). Further, many young people are employed in retail organizations, such as fast-food restaurants and convenience stores, which put them at risk for outsider-initiated aggression. How does being a victim of workplace aggression at a first job influence a young person's perceptions of future employment? Are the consequences of workplace aggression more severe for young workers than mature individuals? Do teenagers engage in workplace aggression for different reasons than do adults?

Workplace violence against intimate partners also needs to be investigated. To date, no published studies in organizational psychology have examined this phenomenon. Hence, there are many questions that need to be answered: Why do some individuals, but not others, decide to target their victims in the workplace? Are abusers more likely to target their victims at work if they no longer live together? Are individuals less likely to be targeted at work when they are employed at organizations with elaborate security systems (e.g., if identification cards are needed to enter buildings)? What are the outcomes for victims of Type IV aggression?

Although insider-initiated aggression rarely leads to physical injury or death, it occurs frequently and its effects can be devastating for victims. Research conducted to date shows that both individual and organizational factors contribute to this phenomenon. Given the increasing incidence of workplace aggression in today's organizations, researchers must continue to investigate this phenomenon.

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