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# The experience of aggression by female teachers in the workplace

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## ABSTRACT

South Africa is a country with exceptionally high levels of frustration and trauma. Research shows that a third of all people in South Africa are exposed to some kind of violence. This causes insecurity and fear, which creates high levels of stress. High stress levels fuels aggression in the workplace. It was observed that female teachers often experience aggression in the workplace. This has a negative effect on their overall sense of well-being as well as their mental health. A purposive sample was selected through two private schools in Gauteng, South Africa, and consisted of eight female teachers. Data was collected by means of in-depth phenomenological interviews, field notes, naive sketches and observation. One central question was posed to the purposefully selected participants: *What is your experience of aggression in your workplace?* Thematic coding was used to analyse the data. Three themes were identified: different perceptions influenced female teachers' experience of aggression; the pressure in the school system formed an integral part of the experience of aggression and the experienced effect of aggression on the female teachers.

## OPSOMMING

Suid-Afrika is 'n land met hoë vlakke van frustrasie en trauma. Navorsing toon aan dat een derde van alle persone in Suid-Afrika al aan die een of ander vorm van geweld blootgestel was. Die gevolge hiervan is onsekerheid en vrees wat lei tot hoë vlakke van stres. Hoë vlakke van stres bevorder dikwels aggressie in die werkplek. Dit is waargeneem dat vroulike onderwysers aggressie in die werkplek beleef. Dit het 'n negatiewe uitwerking op hulle algemene welsyn asook hulle geestesgesondheid. 'n Doelgerigte steekproef is getrek uit twee privaatskole in Gauteng, Suid-Afrika en het bestaan uit agt vroulike onderwysers. Data is met behulp van indiepte fenomenologiese onderhoude, veldnotas, naïewe sketse en waarneming ingesamel. Een sentrale vraag is aan die doelgerig-gekose deelnemers gestel: *Wat is jou ervaring van aggressie in jou werkplek?*

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Tematiese kodering is gebruik om die data te analiseer. Drie temas is geïdentifiseer: verskillende persepsies het vroulike onderwysers se belewing van aggressie beïnvloed, die druk in die skoolstelsel het 'n integrale deel van die belewing van aggressie gevorm en die beleefde uitwerking van aggressie op die vroulike onderwysers.

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## 1. Introduction and background

Aggression is embedded in the culture of society. It is internalised in childhood and adolescence and manifests in a variety of situations throughout life (Tehrani, 2001:7; Venter, Poggenpoel, & Myburgh, 2005:312). Aggression is not a new phenomenon in society. Aggression in the workplace is not a new challenge (Vega & Comer, 2005: 101). Aggression possibly started when one person started working for another person (Van Waltsleven, 2007:6). Behaviour in the workplace that was tolerated in the past is no longer acceptable (Peyton, 2003:3). The actuality of this challenge is stressed by the existence of websites, like the Workplace Bullying Institute (Jefferson, 2008:50). According to Björkqvist (2001:439), the phenomenon of aggression in the workplace is not only related to a specific culture, but is a universal problem.

Like every country, South Africa has its own challenges. Baron and Byrne (2004:437) state that aggressiveness results from increased levels of frustration arising from environmental challenges such as poverty and unemployment. South Africa is a country with exceptionally high levels of frustration and trauma (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003:212). Aggression in the form of house robberies, rapes, xenophobia, hijackings, road rage and murder is everyday news. Research shows that a high percentage of all people are exposed to some form of violence (Carstens, 2009:23). Aggression, frustration and stress levels run high.

Schooling in South Africa takes place in public schools, former model C schools, private schools and alternative learning schools (ExpatArrivals, 2014: 1–3). The public schooling system is entirely dependent on the government for funding and supplies. Overall with a serious lack of financing and monitoring from the government, many children receive low standards of education, a lack of qualified teachers and sometimes an outright absence of equipment in the classroom. The former model C schools, as government schools partially administrated and funded by parents and a governing body. Private schools in South Africa have an excellent reputation and offer internationally recognised exams. Children from these schools have excellent acceptance rates into tertiary education worldwide. Alternative and art schools, are becoming increasingly popular with expat parents with younger children.

The research reported in this article refers to a group of private schools within a corporation. Previous research on female teacher's experience of their own aggression (Evangeledis, 2007:96) took place in a secondary school that was part of this corporation of private schools that was managed by a central head office. Participants in the research (Evangeledis, 2007:95–129) identified several

challenges in the private school setting including that the staff at head office were viewed as business oriented, insensitive to female teachers' personal needs and did not take cognisance as how schools in general operate. Female educators also experienced that there were some teachers who were incompetent as well as a lack of solidarity under teachers. The participants also voiced that there was a lack of communication between stakeholders, the school and head office. Female teachers experienced that balancing their chosen careers with that of looking after their families challenged them as individuals. They found it difficult to maintain a healthy equilibrium between the two demands. The female teachers also experienced time restraints and an unceasing workload that impacted negatively on their mental health.

It is not always easy to identify aggression. According to Peyton (2003:5), if people do communicate that they experience aggression, they usually only speak to family or friends about it. Normally they do not tell anybody and just leave their jobs. The results of aggression in the workplace are negative: the staff is unmotivated with a loss of spontaneity and enthusiasm, high incidence of sick leave, high staff exchange and the threat of a potential court case (Peyton, 2003:5). Often the morale of the staff is low, and all the negative feelings create a toxic atmosphere.

Aggression in the workplace gives the employer a bad reputation. A bad reputation makes it very difficult for an employer to recruit good employees. The best solution is to handle and dissolve the aggression when it takes place and not to postpone it (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002: 36).

## 2. Problem statement and objective

Venter, Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2005:312) as well as Feldman (2001:325) identify frustration as a psycho-social factor that encourages aggressive behaviour. Baron and Byrne (2004:437) state that aggressiveness often results due to the high frustration levels present in environmental problematic situations such as poverty and unemployment. South Africa is a country with unusually high levels of frustration and trauma at all levels (Einarsen et al., 2003:23). The insecurity and uncertainty about the present and the future create stress. High stress levels can promote aggression in the workplace such as the school environment (Einarsen et al., 2003:15).

Female teachers' daily workload is difficult to handle and they struggle to achieve the standard of work that is expected of them, as well as the goals that they set for themselves. Female teachers experience the target group

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