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Voices carry: Effects of verbal and physical aggression on injuries and accident reporting

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed a staggeringly high number of workplace aggressive behaviors as well as employee accidents and injuries. Exposure to workplace aggression is associated with a host of negative psychological, emotional, and physiological outcomes, yet research relating workplace aggression to employee safety outcomes is lacking. This study aims to examine the association between exposure to workplace physical and verbal aggression with workplace injuries and underreporting of accidents and near misses. Furthermore, deriving from social exchange theory, we attempt to reveal an underlying mechanism in the association between workplace aggression and underreporting of accidents and near misses. Finally, borrowing from aggression research on intimate relationships, we compare the relative importance of exposure to physical and verbal aggression on workplace injuries and underreporting. Using survey data from 364 public transportation personnel, we found that both verbal and physical aggression significantly predict workplace injuries as well as underreporting. Moreover, mediation analyses found that the relationship between verbal and physical aggression and underreporting was largely explained by an increase in negative reporting attitudes (rather than decreases in safety knowledge or motivation). Compared to exposure to physical aggression, exposure to verbal aggression best predicted employee underreporting of accidents and near misses. However, physical aggression was a better predictor of injuries than verbal aggression. Given these findings, organizational leaders should strive to foster a safe working environment by minimizing interpersonal mistreatment and increasing employee attitudes for reporting accidents.

1. Introduction

According to the [International Labor Organization \(2016\)](#), every 15 s around the globe, 153 workers experience a work-related accident and one worker dies from their job-related injury or disease. Within the U.S. alone, the Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illness reveals that there were nearly three million nonfatal workplace injuries and over 4600 fatal work injuries reported in 2014 ([Bureau of Labor Statistics; BLS, 2015](#)). Unfortunately, an official audit of workplace injuries from the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration shows that up to two-thirds of all workplace injuries and illness go unreported ([U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009](#)). Consistent with this report, a multi-organization survey found that employees from five different industry sectors failed to report 71% of work-related injuries to their organization ([Probst and Estrada, 2010](#)). Consequently, researchers and surveillance agencies acknowledge that the cited statistics from

international and national surveillance methods only represent the tip of the proverbial iceberg since actual workplace injuries may be far greater than indicated by existing injury records. Thus, there is a need to better understand causes of not only workplace injuries, but also underreporting of such incidents and associated near misses. To this end, our study focuses on the relationships between exposure to physical and verbal forms of workplace aggression and employee safety-related outcomes at work, including injuries and underreporting of accidents and near misses.

Research indicates that the number of victims of workplace aggressive behaviors is staggeringly high; moreover, workplace aggression is considered one of the most prevalent forms of interpersonal mistreatment ([Herschcovis and Barling, 2010](#)). For example, two million American workers report having been exposed to workplace violence each year ([NIOSH, 1996](#)). The incidence of verbal aggression is even higher (~ 16 million incidents in the U.S.; [VandenBos and Bulatao,](#)

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1996) with a prevalence rate of 69% seen among Canadian public-sector employees (Pizzino, 2000). More recently, a national survey of U.S. employees found that 41% employees were victims of verbal aggression and 6% were victims of physical aggression during the preceding year (Schat et al., 2006).

Not surprisingly, exposure to workplace aggression is associated with a host of negative psychological, emotional, and physiological outcomes (see Aquino and Thau, 2009 and Herscovis and Barling, 2010 for reviews). However, much less attention has been given to the impact of exposure to workplace aggression on employee safety outcomes. Nevertheless, national statistical records have implied an association between workplace aggression and employee safety outcomes. For example, BLS (2013) found that one out of every six fatal work injuries that occurred in 2013 was due to workplace assaults and violent acts. Indeed, workplace aggression is an occupational hazard in a variety of sectors including healthcare, education, and corrections, and the most extreme acts of workplace aggression (e.g., violence, injuries by persons or animals) accounted for 16% of fatal occupational accidents in 2013 (BLS, 2015). However, we argue that aggression not only can cause direct injuries (through physical assault, for example), but also can lead to worsened safety outcomes via a variety of mediating mechanisms including reduced safety knowledge and motivation, as well as more negative safety-related reporting attitudes.

Taken together, this study has three main aims, each contributing to the extant literature in a unique way. The first aim was to provide an empirical examination of the *relationship* of physical and verbal forms of workplace aggression with workplace injuries as well as underreporting of experienced accidents and near misses. Although previous research has documented the harmful outcomes of workplace aggression, including attitudinal (e.g., job satisfaction), behavioral (e.g., work performance), and health-related (e.g., emotional exhaustion) outcomes, employee safety outcomes have rarely been examined in previous work. This is a significant omission because safety is a major concern of organizations in that direct (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2008) and indirect costs (Pearce, 2002) can be substantial when workplace injuries and accidents occur. Thus, it is essential to identify triggers of workplace injuries, as well as underreporting of such events. It is particularly crucial to minimize the discrepancy between experienced accidents and reported accidents (i.e., underreporting of accidents and near misses) because “what goes unreported goes unfixed” (Probst and Graso, 2013 p. 586). Our study tests whether experiencing physical and verbal forms of aggression is related to more experienced injuries and a greater reluctance to report such safety-related events.

The second aim was to explore the *underlying mechanisms* of the association between workplace aggression and underreporting of accidents and near misses. Building on social exchange theory, we test possible mediating mechanisms linking exposure to workplace aggression and employee reporting behaviors by determining whether safety knowledge, safety motivation and/or reporting attitudes account for these relationships (see Fig. 1 for our overarching conceptual model). Thus, we not only identify additional triggers of underreporting, but also deepen our understanding as to why there is an association

between exposure to aggression and underreporting. Revealing potential mediators in the linkage between exposure to workplace aggression and underreporting of accidents may help organizations to develop effective interventions targeting the mediator when it is difficult to prevent the occurrence of workplace aggression (especially customer aggression).

The third aim was to clarify the *relative influence* of exposure to physical and verbal aggression in the workplace. Borrowing from the aggression literature in intimate relationships, we develop predictions regarding the relative effect of physical and verbal aggression with respect to workplace injuries and underreporting of accidents and near misses. This will allow us to pinpoint the primary trigger of these events and potentially recommend more effective interventions that target different forms of workplace aggressive behaviors in an attempt to promote better safety outcomes and a more positive work environment.

1.1. Physical and verbal aggression

Consistent with previous research (Jenkins, 1996; LeBlanc and Kelloway, 2002), we define physical aggression (sometimes termed “violence”, Barling et al., 1987; Greenberg and Barling, 1999) as *physical assaults and threats of assault directed toward targeted employees* (e.g., hitting, beating, kicking) and verbal aggression (sometimes termed “psychological aggression” and “nonphysical aggression”, Barling et al., 1987; Greenberg and Barling, 1999; Yang et al., 2014) as *nonphysical aggression toward targeted employees* (e.g., yelling, swearing).

According to Barling (1996) and Rogers and Kelloway (1997), the traditional work stress framework can be used to explain the consequences of workplace physical and verbal aggression (Pratt and Barling, 1988). Specifically, physical and verbal aggression at work are stressors, i.e. objective environmental characteristics or events that can trigger harmful reactions from the targeted employees. The existing literature has revealed potential adverse consequences of exposure to physical and verbal aggression (e.g., Dupré and Barling, 2003; Walsh and Clarke, 2003). For example, using meta-analysis, Herscovis and Barling (2010) found that workplace aggression from supervisors, coworkers, and/or customers is associated with a host of harmful outcomes, including a reduction in job satisfaction, affective commitment, job performance, and physical well-being, as well as an increase in turnover intentions, interpersonal and organizational deviance, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Taken together, workplace aggression has detrimental impacts on both employees and their organizations.

1.2. Aggression and workplace safety

While workplace aggression has been linked to a number of damaging employee and organizational outcomes (e.g., Herscovis and Barling, 2010), much less is known about the potential effects of workplace aggression on employee safety outcomes. As aforementioned, workplace aggression can be categorized as workplace stressors and workplace stressors have been found to decrease workplace safety (e.g., more accidents and injuries; Goldenhar et al., 2003). Specifically,

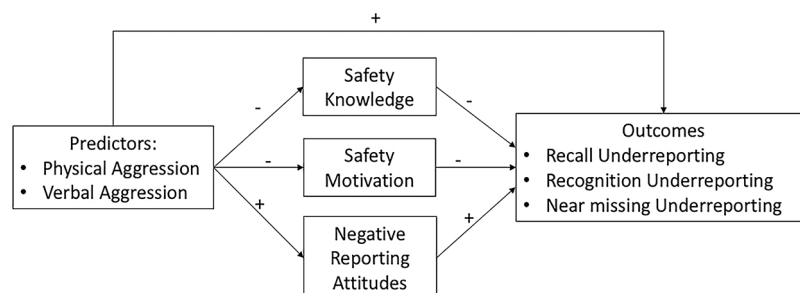


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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