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Moving beyond the employee: The role of the organizational context in leader workplace aggression

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ABSTRACT

Management and psychology scholars are increasingly seeking to examine how organizational characteristics that contextualize leadership shape the occurrence, impact, and prevention of leader workplace aggression. However, a comprehensive review of this literature has not yet been conducted, so a systematic understanding is lacking regarding questions including: (1) when, why and how is such aggression more likely to occur; (2) how do contextual factors enable or constrain effects of these leader behaviors on employees; and (3) how can organizations proactively manage their internal dynamics to prevent or reduce such incidences? Drawing on Porter and McLaughlin's (2006) components of organizational context, I review existing leader aggression research that intersects with seven categories: (1) culture/climate; (2) goals/purposes; (3) people/composition; (4) processes; (5) state/condition; (6) structure; and (7) time. I then offer theoretical propositions for future work, which are grounded in the roles and responsibilities inherent to the nature of leadership and coupled with the changing nature of organizational life. As a result, I set the research agenda for the next decade of organizational context × leader workplace aggression studies.

Research on leadership continues to develop exponentially, and one area that has received increasing attention is aggressive behaviors by leaders in work settings. Surveys estimate that almost half of all U.S. workers regularly experience behaviors including verbal abuse, deliberate destruction of relationships with others, and bad-mouthing of their professional standing; and more than half have at least heard about these behaviors occurring in their organizations (Employment Law Alliance, 2007; Workplace Bullying Institute, 2014). Further, despite inconsistency in measurement and variability between nations (see Nielsen et al., 2009; Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010), “the prevalence of employees being exposed to workplace aggression has been estimated in Austria (8% to 26%), Belgium (3% to 20%), Denmark (2% to 27%), Finland (5% to 24%), France (8% to 10%), Ireland (23%), Norway (5% to 9%), Lithuania (23%), South Africa (20%), Sweden (4%), Turkey (55%), UK (11%) and US (10% to 41%)” (Eschleman, Bowling, Michel, & Burns, 2014: 362). In a meta-analytic review comparing the magnitude of effects of employee mistreatment by supervisors, co-workers, and outsiders in 66 samples, supervisor behaviors had the strongest impact on adverse attitudinal and behavioral outcomes for targeted employees¹ (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010).

A less well-understood, but critical, perspective regards the

intersection of leader workplace aggression and organizational characteristics that contextualize leadership. *Context* is defined as “situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables” (Johns, 2006: 386; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002). According to Rousseau and Fried (2001), the term context “comes from a Latin root meaning to ‘knit together’ or ‘to make a connection’” (2001: 1). Workplace aggression scholars have called for more research that integrates organizational characteristics, and a growing number of studies have emerged in recent years (cf. Tepper, 2007). However, a comprehensive review of this literature has not yet been conducted, so a systematic understanding is lacking regarding questions including: (1) due to what contextual factors is leader aggression more or less likely to occur in the workplace; (2) how does the organizational context enable or constrain effects of these leader behaviors on employees; and (3) how can organizations proactively manage their internal dynamics to prevent or reduce incidences? Accordingly, I synthesize the leader aggression × organizational characteristics literature, uncover several key issues pertaining to the above questions, and offer theoretically grounded propositions that set the agenda for the next decade of research (see Fig. 1).

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¹ As examples, targeted employees have lowered self-efficacy, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction; and increased somatic complaints, counterproductive work behaviors, withdrawal behaviors, and turnover intentions (Duffy et al., 2002; Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013; Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2017; Penney & Spector, 2005; Sakurai, Jex, & Gillespie, 2011; Tepper, 2007).

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PROPOSED THEORETICAL MODEL

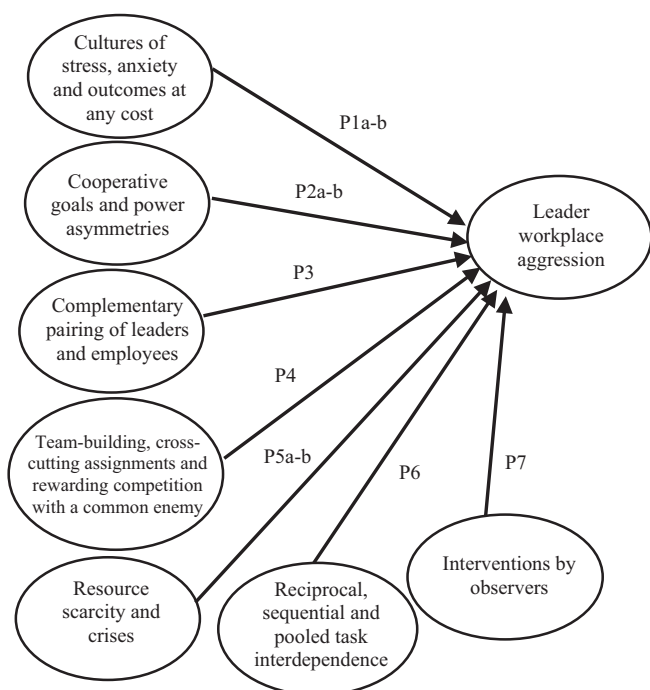


Fig. 1. Proposed theoretical model.

In doing so, my review offers two contributions. First, I shift focus from understanding relational (e.g., relationship quality) or social (e.g., power dynamics) contexts of employee-directed leader aggression (cf. Hershcovis & Reich, 2013) to the role of the *organizational* context. Extant theorizing and empirical evidence reflect how leadership is embedded in, and socially constructed from, context, and that context can both facilitate and impede individual behaviors (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Mowday & Sutton, 1993). The well-known formula that behavior is a function of both person and environment (Lewin, 1936) additionally highlights the importance of understanding situational factors in management phenomena. Yet the organizational context constitutes a lesser understood domain within leader workplace aggression dynamics, especially from an antecedent-based perspective, as consequences for individuals, dyads and groups are more often examined in studies (for reviews, see Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2014; Tepper, Simon, & Park, 2017). As a result, this review expands our understanding of the nomological network of leader workplace aggression by highlighting how organizational characteristics can shape the occurrence, impact, and prevention of such behaviors.

Second, and relatedly, I turn the spotlight on accountability at the organizational level of analysis for the quality of the work environment in which leaders and employees are situated (Crawford, 2001). The onus of responsibility for behaving in positive ways ultimately lies with leaders themselves, yet individual differences can exist that lower the likelihood that leaders will not mistreat their employees (cf. Krasikova, Green, & LeBreton, 2013; Tepper et al., 2017). Employees who are mistreated by their leaders are often powerless, for reasons such as resource dependency on their aggressors, so may struggle to manage situations on their own (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). Some mistreated employees will hold their organizations partly responsible for their leaders' aggressive behaviors, and engage in organizational-directed deviance as a result (see Bowling & Michel, 2011; Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2013; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008). This review therefore helps inform scholarly and practical understanding of those precipitating factors of leader workplace aggression which may lie

within an organization's control (including its culture, structure, human resource practices, and rewards systems).

Literature review and organizational context typology

To conduct a systematic literature review, I identified relevant studies in three ways: a manual scan of leading management and psychology journals, as well as journals in related fields²; a comprehensive web-based search of relevant terms (e.g., abusive supervision, social undermining, incivility, bullying, and destructive leadership, see Hershcovis, 2011) using several electronic databases (e.g., Business Source Premier, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Google Scholar); and, a scan of reference lists from the articles identified through these first two methods. While the phrase "abusive supervision" explicitly references the leader, I used the terms "leader," "manager," and/or "supervisor" in conjunction with other more generalized workplace aggression constructs (e.g., social undermining) to identify only those studies that focus on leader actions.

I then manually examined each article identified to determine if its content coincided with seven organizational context components used by Porter and McLaughlin (2006) in their review of the leadership literature from 1990 to 2005. Specifically, the authors examined the nature and extent of attention paid by scholars to the organizational context as a factor affecting leader behaviors and effectiveness. Their categories include: (1) culture/climate; (2) goals/purposes; (3) people/composition; (4) processes; (5) state/condition; (6) structure; and (7) time. When describing their selection process and inclusion criteria for research, importantly, Porter and McLaughlin explained: "organizational context variables do NOT include elements pertaining strictly to the individual such as personality traits, gender, intentions and attitudes" (2006: 561). Following this, and as illustrated by Table 1, my review focuses on approximately 35 conceptual papers and/or empirical studies.

The authors further noted that there is lack of consensus regarding what components or characteristics constitute organizational context. I draw upon their typology, however, and situate my agenda for future research in its categories, for several reasons. First, their work provides the most recent summary and synthesis of leadership \times context studies. Other taxonomies of situations exist but are less focused on leadership dynamics (for example—the Situational-Eight DIAMONDS, which assesses psychologically important and meaningful characteristics of situations: Duty, Intellect, Adversity, Mating, pOsitivity, Negativity, Deception and Sociality, see Rauthmann et al., 2014). Second, although Porter and McLaughlin (2006) incorporated findings regarding positive leader behaviors such as charismatic and transformational leadership, the leader workplace aggression literature has flourished in the last decade (cf. Tepper et al., 2017). Thus there is a conceptual imperative to now use their typology to summarize studies published since 2006. Third, they offer both breadth and depth of topics in their discussion, including by subsuming topics referred to in other organizational context frameworks (e.g., Osborn et al., 2002; Tosi, 1991). For example, scholars have previously identified the importance of situational strength, or "implicit or explicit cues provided by external entities

² Consistent with Porter and McLaughlin (2006), I conducted my literature search as follows. First, I searched for articles in domestic outlets of: *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Organization Science*, and *Personnel Psychology*. I then reviewed articles from international and sociological outlets of: *Journal of Management Studies*, *British Journal of Management*, *Work and Organizational Psychology*, *Organization Studies*, *Journal of International Business*, *Management International Review*, *Human Relations*, *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Science Quarterly*, and *Journal of Social Issues*. Finally, to be as expansive as possible, I also added outlets of: *Human Resource Management Review*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Business Psychology*, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, and *Work and Stress*. Altogether, my review spans 26 journals.

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