

Original article

Physical violence at the workplace: Consequences on health and measures of prevention

Violence physique sur le lieu de travail : conséquences sur la santé et mesures de prévention

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Abstract

Based on definitions and theoretical models of physical violence at the workplace, this paper presents scientific knowledge and working hypotheses regarding both, the causes and effects of physical violence on health, and pertinent preventive measures of intervention to be taken by enterprises. Four groups of determinants of violence are presented and discussed: determinants relative to the structure and the culture of the enterprise; the aggressor; the victim; and the socio-cultural environment. The theoretical model by Baron and Neumann [Public Admin Q 21 (1998) 446–64] is used to explain the complex origin of violent behavior at work based on these determinants. Moreover, the various and multiple consequences of a violent act are examined. In addition to the direct effects of such an act on the social, organizational and individual level, the indirect effects are also taken into consideration. In this analytical context, health problems are more particularly underlined, such as the psychological trauma suffered by victims of a violent act. Finally, two different areas of intervention will be distinguished: interventions on the physical environment and interventions on the level of company management or an organizational group which aims at changing the behavior of the members of the organization. Different scientific evaluations of action programs to reduce violent acts are presented. In conclusion, this paper calls for further research on physical violence in the workplace.

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Résumé

En se basant sur des définitions scientifiques et des modèles théoriques de la violence physique sur le lieu de travail, l'article présente les savoirs scientifiques et les hypothèses de référence quant aux causes, quant aux effets sur la santé et quant aux mesures d'intervention préventive pertinentes à prendre à l'égard de la violence physique dans les entreprises. Quatre groupes de déterminants sont présentés et discutés : déterminants relatifs à la structure et culture de l'entreprise, à l'agresseur, à la victime et à l'environnement socioculturel. Le modèle théorique de Baron et Neumann, J.H. [Public Admin Q 21 (1998) 446–64] sert de modèle de référence pour expliquer la genèse complexe des comportements violents sur le lieu de travail à partir de ces déterminants. Par ailleurs, les conséquences variées et multiples de l'acte violent sont examinées. Mis à part les effets directs – au niveau social, organisationnel et individuel – d'un tel acte, les effets indirects sont également à prendre en considération. Dans ce contexte d'analyse, les problèmes de santé sont plus particulièrement mis en exergue, comme, par exemple, le traumatisme psychique subi par les victimes d'un acte violent. Enfin, deux différents domaines d'intervention vont être distingués : les interventions sur l'environnement physique et les interventions auprès de la direction d'une entreprise ou d'une unité organisationnelle et qui ont pour objectif le changement du comportement des membres de l'organisation. Différentes évaluations scientifiques de programmes d'actions pour réduire les actes violents sont présentées. En conclusion de cet article, un appel à intensifier la recherche sur la violence physique sur le lieu de travail est lancé.

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Keywords: Physical violence; Occupational health; Theoretical models; Measures of intervention

Mots clés : Violence physique ; Santé au travail ; Modèles théoriques ; Mesures d'intervention

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It has become common to hear media reports of physical violence – extreme for the most part – at the workplace: ticket inspectors who are attacked by passengers in trains; members of the medical staff who mistreat their patients; security guards who are wounded or killed during robberies; even teachers who are attacked by students (Steffgen, 2004). In spite of the media coverage of physical violence in the workplace, the psychology of organizations has not made it a central subject of research.

It is well-known that in the professional environment (the workplace), psychological violence, in the form of verbal aggression, mobbing or (sexual) harassment, is recorded more often than are physical attacks (Chappell and DiMartino, 2000; Salminen, 1997; Tragno et al., 2007) and, therefore, it has attracted the scientific as well as the public interest more strongly in recent years (Rosen, 2001; Scezsny, 2004; Zapf, 2004). However, it has been established that numerous employees have been victims of physical attacks (Baron and Neumann, 1996) and that the frequency of acts of physical violence in the workplace is in progression (Flannery, 1996; Standing and Nicolini, 1997; Tobin, 2001; Warchol, 1998; Hoel et al., 2001).

This paper aims at making a review of the subject by offering a general overview of the research related to the prevalence of physical violence in the workplace, the causes of this localized violence, the consequences for the victims – particularly on the level of health – as well as proposed preventive measures.

1. Definitions and forms

In the social sciences, the notion of violence is defined in a different and a heterogeneous way. The notion is often reduced to that of an aggression and this designates the more extreme forms of violence. Violence, as an individual behavior, refers mainly to serious forms of physical aggression with an orientation towards dominance (Berkowitz, 1993; Bierhoff and Wagner, 1998).

Baron and Richardson (1994) consider aggression as all behavior whose goal is to inflict injury and to harm another human being, respectively, and/or offend him, while the latter clearly intends to avoid the injury and/or the offense.

According to Bornewasser (1998), the terms violence and aggression group different forms of action, which have in common a harmful effect on the victim and which falls within the sphere of normative prohibition. According to this author, the term aggression refers to impulsive aggression (having an emotional cause), while the term violence refers to functional aggression (without emotions, with an aim).

In addition to the distinction between impulsive and functional aggression originally offered by Feshbach (1964), other categorizations of the act which is physically or psychologically damaging have been proposed. Buss (1961), for example, distinguishes between physical and verbal aggression, active and passive aggression, and direct and indirect aggression (see also Tarquinio et al., 2004a). According to these authors, aggressions are acts which cause both psychological and physical prejudice to the victim as well as to the aggressor.

The distinction between structural and personal violence will be made below.

Galtung (1975) has defined the concept of “structural violence” as a prejudice caused by a social structure that has the particularity of preventing/hindering the development of (some) individual potentials of its members. This encompasses unjust/unequal treatment rooted in the norms, laws, rules, arrangements or customs that are specific to a social environment, an institution or an enterprise.

“Personal violence” includes the actions of individual actors that are directed towards other persons. It can be categorized as physical violence, psychological violence, sexual violence or violence by neglect or shortcomings. “Personal” physical violence can be directed at other individuals (homicide, murder, rape, sexual violence) or at oneself (self-mutilation, suicide) (Violanti, 1996).

According to Jenkins (1996), the notion of physical violence does not only include concrete cases of physical injury, but also cases in which threats of physical violence are made.

Regarding “physical” violence towards objects (damaging objects, vandalism), it must be distinguished from other forms of physical violence.

The definitions of (physical) violence at the workplace are again differentiated according to the sense (broad or literal) that is given to the notion of the workplace (Bulatao and VandenBos, 1996). Baron and Neumann (1998) propose restricting the notion of violence linked to the work station (workplace violence) to direct corporal attacks which occur in the workplace itself or within an organization. O’Leary-Kelly et al. (1996) distinguish between workplace aggression motivated by the existence of an organizational structure from workplace aggression explained by factors which are external to the organization such as conjugal or familial violence. Other less restrictive definitions, such as those by Hoad (1993) and Jenkins (1996), also include theft, familial violence and acts of terrorism as violence linked to the context of work.

A more recent definition offered by Howard (2001) considers that there is violence in the workplace if a prohibited behavior reduces the real and perceived security of the employee, supervisor or organization. This definition also includes violent events which occur outside of the workplace and working hours, insofar as the behaviors relate to motives linked to the job.

Depending on the link which exists between the aggressor and the organization, it is possible to distinguish four forms of violence in the workplace (Braverman, 1999; Peek-Asa et al., 2001). Type 1: the aggressor has no relationship to the enterprise and he uses the organization/the work station uniquely with the intention of committing a criminal act (for example, he attacks a taxi driver to rob him). Type 2: the aggressor is a client of the employee whom he threatens or even physically attacks (for example, a patient who attacks a nurse). Type 3: The aggressor is, or was, a co-worker of his victim whom he “punishes” in the workplace because, for example, he behaved unfairly to him. Type 4 includes all the situations in which a personal relationship between the aggressor and the victim exists without there being a relationship between the organization and the aggressor.

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