

# Expanding the Content Domain of Workplace Aggression: A Three-level Aggressor–target Taxonomy\*

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**Workplace aggression (WPA) has been largely considered to be a phenomenon involving individuals. However, higher-level entities, such as groups and organizations, can also be aggressors (and targets). This aspect of WPA has not been given much scholarly attention and, even in cases where it has been studied, it has not been considered to be part of the WPA stream. By considering aggressors and targets at all three levels of analysis, the author attempts simultaneously to expand and integrate the WPA stream, draw attention to WPA involving higher-level entities, and provide a more organization-oriented (rather than individual-oriented) perspective on WPA. This novel comprehensive perspective is provided through a taxonomy of nine aggressor–target combinations of WPA which can be grouped into three multilevel categories of WPA, i.e. lateral level WPA, upward level WPA, and downward level WPA. Implications for theory, research and practice of these conceptualizations are discussed.**

## Introduction

There has been a surge of interest in workplace aggression (WPA) and related topics in recent years (Aquino and Lamertz 2004), which has resulted in elaborate theoretical models (e.g. Aryee *et al.* 2007; Branch *et al.* 2012; Brees *et al.* 2013; Douglas *et al.* 2008; Jawahar 2002), multilevel empirical research (e.g. Dietz *et al.* 2003; Judge *et al.* 2006), meta-analyses (e.g. Bowling and Beehr 2006; Hershcovis *et al.* 2007), systematic reviews of the literature (e.g. Barling *et al.* 2009; Gibson and Callister 2010; Salin 2003; Tepper 2007), and conceptual reviews of the literature (e.g. Aquino and Thau 2009; Griffin and

Lopez 2005; O’Leary-Kelly *et al.* 2000; Raver and Barling 2008). However, this burgeoning research stream, perhaps owing to its roots in psychology, has largely considered WPA to be a phenomenon involving only individuals. Even multilevel theorizing and research by organizational scholars (e.g. Branch *et al.* 2012; Dietz *et al.* 2003) has only considered multiple levels of analysis with regard to antecedents, the aggression itself is carried out by an individual, and is typically targeted at another individual.

But aggression can also be carried out by higher-level entities such as groups and organizations. This aspect has not garnered much academic attention and, in some of the cases where it has, it has not been considered to be part of the WPA research stream. Further, aggressive acts can be targeted not only at individuals, but also at groups and organizations. This aspect has also not been systematically studied in the literature. The present paper addresses both these aspects and attempts to develop a unified, expanded WPA research stream by including aggressors and targets at all three levels of analysis.

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I am grateful to Denise Rousseau and the late Paul S. Goodman who were instrumental in planting and nurturing the seeds of this paper.

\*A free Teaching and Learning Guide to accompany this article is available at: [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1468-2370/homepage/teaching\\_\\_\\_learning\\_guides.htm](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1468-2370/homepage/teaching___learning_guides.htm)

That aggressors and targets at all three levels have not been systematically studied thus far is surprising, because levels of analysis are fundamental to organizational theorizing. According to Klein *et al.* (1994, p. 198), ‘by their very nature, organizations are multilevel’, and according to Rousseau (1985, p. 18), ‘the study of organizations inherently involves more than one level’. Developing a comprehensive framework that includes both aggressors and targets at all three levels of analysis would facilitate a more fine-grained analysis of aggressive phenomena in organizations by partitioning variance (Rousseau 2011), i.e. how much aggression is contributed by entities at each level of analysis. Also, it would help identify which aggressor–target combinations have been heavily studied and direct scholars’ attention away from them and toward combinations that have been studied less.

Further, the nine aggressor–target combinations of WPA can be grouped into three multilevel categories, i.e. lateral level WPA, upward level WPA and downward level WPA. This conceptualization would facilitate ‘thinking organizationally’ (Rousseau 2011), which implies attempting to understand human behavior in relation to the groups and organizations in which they are embedded and whose actions they shape. It would also facilitate research into the dynamics and permeation of aggression across organizational levels. This paper therefore answers the call of Raver and Barling (2008) who urge investigation of WPA with regard to both higher levels of analysis and cross-level relationships.

There is no established approach or methodology with regard to how one goes about expanding an existing, thriving research stream. Hence, drawing on relevant articles, I have attempted to develop as strong and comprehensive a methodology as possible. This methodology could serve both as a guide and as a benchmark for other scholars who endeavor to do something similar and is another contribution of this paper.

The paper is organized in the following manner. It begins by making the case in the section entitled ‘Why focus on higher-level aggressors and targets?’ Then, in ‘An expanded, integrated, WPA research stream’, I explain and conduct the approach to broaden the stream, which involved identifying 64 relevant constructs and mapping them onto eight dimensions. The next two sections introduce the new conceptualizations: ‘The three-level aggressor–target taxonomy of WPA’ and the ‘Lateral, upward, and downward levels WPA’. Finally, this paper’s con-

tributions and its implications for future research and for practice are discussed.

## Why focus on higher-level aggressors and targets?

Although aggression has a substantial intellectual heritage (Bandura 1973) and has been studied in several fields, its relevance and application to organizational work settings is relatively new (Barling *et al.* 2009; Griffin and Lopez 2005). Workplace aggression is manifested in a variety of forms and is bracketed by low-intensity behaviors such as workplace incivility (Andersson and Pearson 1999), at one end, and serious actions such as workplace violence (LeBlanc and Kelloway 2002), at the other. Once again, perhaps because of its roots in psychology, the original definitions of WPA were either explicitly or implicitly at the individual level. Neuman and Baron (1998, p. 395) defined it as ‘efforts by “individuals” to harm others with whom they work or have worked, or the organizations in which they are presently, or were previously employed’ (emphasis added). O’Leary-Kelly *et al.* (1996, p. 229) define organization-motivated aggression as ‘attempted injurious or destructive behavior initiated by either an organizational insider or outsider [implicitly individuals] that is instigated by some factor in the organizational context’. And workplace violence has been categorized (Cal/OSHA 1995) into four major types on the basis of the assailant’s relationship to the workplace, once again implying individual-level behaviors.

However, Neuman and Baron (2005) recently revised their seminal definition of WPA, in which they dropped the word ‘individuals’ and expanded the range of aggressors and targets. They now define WPA as ‘any form of behavior directed by one or more persons in a workplace toward the goal of harming one or more others in that workplace (or the entire organization) in ways the intended targets are motivated to avoid’ (Neuman and Baron 2005, p. 18). Although this definition does seem to suggest that WPA is not just an individual-level phenomenon, it does not go far enough for two reasons. First, although it implies (by the phrase ‘one or more persons’) that ‘groups’ can be aggressors, it does not explicitly include group-level aggressors. Second, although it explicitly includes ‘organization’ as a target, it neither implicitly nor explicitly includes the organization as an aggressor. Thus, although this

definition is a step in the right direction, it does not expand or re-frame the content domain of WPA, which is the objective of the present paper.

The vast majority of the literature on WPA and related constructs has been at the individual level, especially where both aggressor and target are individuals (O'Boyle *et al.* 2010; Spector *et al.* 2006). This approach treats the organization merely as a context in which individuals' counterproductive acts play out, but nowadays 'researchers are increasingly moving beyond the individual level of analysis in studying counterproductive work behaviors' (Kelloway *et al.* (2010, p. 18). However, even in cases of multilevel research, group-level (e.g. Glomb and Liao 2003) and organization-level (e.g. Dietz *et al.* 2003) factors have been considered as contextual antecedents for individual-level aggressive behavior. But groups and organizations are entities, and therefore could also be aggressors and targets, and including these would provide a more truly organization-oriented multilevel perspective on aggression.

I use the term 'group' both for generic intra-organizational groups such as teams, departments, hierarchical groups and for particular subsets of employees such as those created by unionization. Organizations are aggressors when it is the organization acting as a whole (e.g. dismissal of an employee) or when aggressive behaviors are so pervasive as to characterize the organization as a whole, or the organization is using aggressive or violent means to achieve its ends (e.g. activist organizations). Organizations are targets when the organization is targeted deliberately (e.g. by a competitor or activist organization), or when it is a case of displaced anger because, for instance, an individual does not want to risk being aggressive towards his or her boss and therefore resorts to sabotage.

Cases where the 'group' or the 'organization' is the aggressor or the target or both, to the extent that they have been delineated in the literature, do not appear to be considered part of the WPA research stream, or any other research stream for that matter. This is surprising, because the notion that groups or organizations can be considered as entities capable of agency, or actors, is not new. According to Sears (1983, p. 235) 'all attitude objects can be conceptualized as representing different points on a "personhood" or "humanness" dimension' and 'a group, as an attitude object, is "more than the sum of its parts"', the implication being that groups (e.g. a sports team), aggregated people (e.g. 'the elderly')

and organizations should be perceived as intermediate (between individuals at one extreme and inanimate objects at the other) on the personhood dimension. Thus, groups and organizations may not be individuals, but are still 'persons'.

#### *Groups as actors*

According to Insko *et al.* (1990, p. 68), 'the apparent difference between individual and group behavior is one of the classic problems of social science'. In this regard, a well-established research stream in social psychology posits that groups are real (Campbell 1958), though they can vary in their reality (Moreland and McMinn 2004). Broadly, there have been two approaches to considering groups as real, i.e. entitativity (Campbell 1958) and social integration (Moreland and McMinn 2004). Campbell (1958, p. 17) defines entitativity as 'the degree of having the nature of an entity, of having real existence'. Drawing on Gestalt psychology, he proposed that groups would be perceived as more entitative based on characteristics such as proximity, similarity and common fate. 'Social integration is the degree to which a set of people acts, thinks, and feels like an individual' (Moreland and McMinn 2004, p. 421). These conceptualizations suggest that highly entitative groups or highly socially integrated groups could behave as one actor, and, if their actions or behaviors are aggressive, they could be considered as aggressors. Apart from these, there have been specific constructs such as 'groupthink' (Janis 1982) and 'team potency' (Howell and Shea 2006), which are defined as though the group were a single entity.

There has already been some work among Scandinavian scholars, in particular, on groups as aggressors. Some of the constructs in this regard include 'psychological terror' (Leymann 1990), 'scapegoating' (Thylefors 1987), 'victimization' (Olweus 1994) and 'mobbing' (Leymann 1996; Leymann and Gustafsson 1996). However, only 'mobbing' seems to have survived (Einarsen 2000; Olweus 1991) and is therefore the only one included in this review.

#### *Organizations as actors*

Treating organizations as individuals has a long history. According to Rousseau (1985, p. 24), 'organizations have a legal status which can be a defining attribute'. Despite the dangers of anthropomorphism, in that 'what begins as literary license in

time may establish itself as a theory' (Rousseau 1985, p. 12), there are several constructs and streams of research that treat organizations as human beings. For instance, the entire literature on organizational learning has extrapolated human cognition processes to the organization level, and constructs such as 'the learning organization' (Senge 1990), 'the thinking organization' (Gioia 1986), 'organizational narcissism' (Duchon and Burns 2005) and 'organizational silence' (Morrison and Milliken 2000), treat organizations as though they were individuals. Organizations in a legal or technical sense cannot learn, think, be narcissistic or keep silent, but individuals can. Extending this logic, if organizations can behave like individuals in the afore-mentioned ways, they could also do so with regard to aggression.

#### *Implications of this approach*

This approach would provide the multilevel 'bridge' (Rousseau 2011) that connects all three organizational levels. It would facilitate understanding of aggression in organizations from both 'embeddedness' and 'emergence' perspectives. The former is a top-down mechanism and 'refers to processes whereby lower level phenomena become aligned with higher level ones (Rousseau 2011, p. 5)'. It could help explain for instance, why an individual who was known to have an equanimous temperament becomes markedly more aggressive after joining a particular organization. The latter is a bottom-up process by which lower-level responses come to form higher-level, collective phenomena (Rousseau 2011; Weick 1995). It could explain, for instance, why aggressive behaviors among individual shop-floor workers could, over time, create aggressive groups and an aggressive organization.

### **An expanded, integrated, WPA research stream**

In order to develop a more integrated perspective on WPA, I looked to the literature on nomological networks (Cronbach and Meehl 1955), 'family of constructs' (Mowshowitz 1997), and 'family of approaches' (Briner *et al.* 2009). The term 'nomological network' was originated by Cronbach and Meehl (1955) to refer to the representation of the constructs of interest in a study, their observable manifestations and the interrelationships among and between these. However, it is also used more loosely

to refer to a group of constructs that are related to one another and conflated with the phrase 'family of constructs' (Mowshowitz 1997), such as a two-dimensional typology of extra-role behaviors (e.g. Van Dyne *et al.* 1995) or a three-dimensional model of entrepreneurial orientation (George and Marino 2011).

My goal is to do for WPA what Peterson and Zimmerman (2004) did for organizational empowerment, i.e. to expand the nomological network of the construct beyond the individual level. My approach to establishing an expanded WPA 'family of constructs' based on fundamental underlying dimensions is conceptually similar to that taken by George and Marino (2011) with regard to entrepreneurial orientation. It also has broad similarities to the facet theory approach to construct clarity advocated by Yaniv (2011, p. 590), wherein 'a facet is a set of attributes that belong together and represent underlying conceptual and semantic components of a content universe'.

I approach this task in three steps. First, I select the constructs that could potentially be a part of the expanded WPA stream. Second, I select the dimensions that would be used to map the selected constructs so as to establish that they belong to the same 'family of constructs'. Third, I map the selected constructs on the selected dimensions. My approach is similar to, but on a much larger scale than, that of O'Leary-Kelly *et al.* (2000), who also used fundamental, classic dimensions to examine the degree of similarity across four antisocial work behavior constructs.

#### *Step 1: Construct selection*

A two-fold strategy is adopted with regard to the selection of constructs. First, I have selected 30 out of 32 constructs that have been featured in other recent reviews.<sup>1</sup> The number of constructs included (30) from these reviews compares favorably with the number of constructs that each of them has included (ranging from 4 to 17, with 8.63 on average). Second, I have attempted to find new constructs in the traditional WPA research stream and have also made a conscious effort to find constructs at higher levels of

<sup>1</sup>The online version includes Table S1A, which provides a detailed view of the selection process. The two constructs from Table S1A that I have left out from the subsequent analysis are 'conflict' (Thomas 1992) and 'disruptive practitioner behavior' (Cawley n.d.) because they are not 'fully developed' (O'Leary-Kelly *et al.* 2000).

analysis, including from disciplines such as strategy and marketing, which are not naturally considered part of the WPA research stream. Thus, this selection strategy builds on the foundation of previous reviews of this literature, attempts to build a bridge between traditional individual-level WPA constructs and higher-level constructs, and also gathers similar constructs that are scattered across disciplines into one unified stream.

### *Step 2: Dimension selection*

Breaking down aggressive behaviors along a set of dimensions has a long history, dating back to Buss (1961). In this seminal work, Buss (1961) parsed aggression along three dichotomies or dimensions: (1) physical–verbal, (2) active–passive and (3) direct–indirect. This work has been referred to as a ‘classic work on human aggression’ (O’Leary-Kelly *et al.* 2000, p. 280), which offered ‘a classic framework for organizing the varied forms of aggressive behavior’ (Binning and Wagner 2002, p. 461). According to Neuman and Baron (2005, p. 18), ‘of all the taxonomies and typologies proposed for organizing and clarifying different forms of aggression, the most widely recognized was Buss (1961), and this has served as the basis for several studies of workplace aggression’ and is therefore a natural choice for this one. Further, Pruitt (2008) uses the Buss (1961) framework to illustrate types of workplace conflict escalation, which is particularly relevant to this review. Finally, using the Buss (1961) dimensions would help further the goal of integrating this work with the bulk of the existing WPA literature.

However, apart from the nature of aggressive behavior, scholars have used other dimensions to review the WPA literature. Based on previous reviews, I include eight dimensions, which compares well with the other reviews (which have covered from three to eight dimensions, and on average 5.33 dimensions).<sup>2</sup> Two of the dimensions, which are

<sup>2</sup>The online edition includes Table S1B, which provides a detailed view of the selection process. The two dimensions from Table S1B that I have not included are ‘violation of norms’ and ‘behavioral consequences’. ‘Violation of norms’ is a dimension more centrally related to ‘deviance’ constructs which overlap to some extent with WPA and, perhaps for that reason, it has not been used by many WPA researchers (only one out of six reviews in Table S1B uses this dimension). ‘Behavioral consequences’ has been used in two of the six reviews in Table S1B. However, one of these

unique to this review and speak to its focus on levels of analysis, are the nature of actor (individual, group, organization) and the nature of target (individual, group, organization). The lack of focus on the level of analysis is illustrated by Branch *et al.*’s (2012) dissection of the definition of ‘workplace bullying’, which covers dimensions such as duration, intention and balance of power, without commenting on the fact that the phrase ‘one or more persons’ is used to describe both aggressor/s and target/s.

### *Step 3: Construct mapping*

In Table S1C,<sup>3</sup> I present the definitions of 64 constructs and map them on eight dimensions, which include the same four attributes used by O’Leary-Kelly *et al.* (2000), i.e. actor, target, behavior (three dimensions) and motive, in addition to power balance and duration of behavior. The ‘actor’ and the ‘target’ have been mapped based on the level of analysis of each. The ‘behavior’ attribute is mapped onto the three Buss (1961) dimensions (physical–verbal, active–passive, direct–indirect). The ‘motive’ dimension considers whether the definition is based on the intention (Int.) of the actor or the perception (Per.) of the victim. Also, following Raver and Barling (2008), the definitions are mapped onto ‘power balance’, i.e. whether an actor–target power differential is required (Reqd.) or not (NReqd.), and ‘duration’ of the behavior, i.e. whether it is episodic (Epi.) or persistent (Prst.).

The mapping has been carried out in a similar manner to, and in consonance with, previous reviews (wherever the constructs and the dimensions overlap). In other cases, just as in the other reviews, the mapping has been carried out based on the construct definitions and empirical operationalizations. Where the construct definitions are ambiguous with regard to a particular dimension, I have indicated it by a ‘?’, which is similar to Griffin and Lopez’s (2005) use of the word ‘unclear’. The construct profusion and confusion in this research stream that other scholars (e.g. De Dreu and Gelfand 2008; Hershcovis 2011; O’Leary-Kelly *et al.* 2000) have pointed out is apparent in Table S1C. Apart from the

reviews parses it into two further dimensions and, in the other review, this dimension does not appear to show much variability across the ten constructs analyzed.

<sup>3</sup>Table S1C is too long to fit into the print edition and is therefore only available in the online edition.

substantive overlap between apparently distinct constructs, e.g. counterproductive work behavior, dysfunctional behavior (cf. ‘jangle fallacy’, Kelley 1927), there are also multiple and differing articulations of apparently the same construct (e.g. mobbing, workplace bullying, workplace victimization). According to Suddaby (2010), lack of construct clarity could adversely affect communication between scholars, reduce researchers’ ability to empirically explore phenomena, and constrain creativity and innovation in research.

In the following sub-sections, I provide a brief summary discussion of each of the eight dimensions: (a) ‘nature of behaviors’ (three of Buss’s (1961) dimensions); (b) ‘motive’; (c) ‘power balance’; (d) ‘duration of behavior’; and (e) ‘level of analysis of actor’/‘target’ (two dimensions).

*Nature of behaviors.* Considering the propensity of scholars in this research stream to use broad approaches to conceptualization (O’Leary-Kelly *et al.* 2000), it is not surprising that over 70% of the 64 constructs include both poles of the active–passive (72%) and direct–indirect (73%) Buss (1961) dimensions. However, only 44% of the constructs include both poles of the physical–verbal Buss (1961) dimension, but that is probably because, in an organizational context, physical aggression has a lower base-rate compared with verbal aggression, which only causes psychological harm (Aquino and Thau 2009; Barling *et al.* 2009). Further, physical acts of aggression, such as hitting a fellow employee, could result in serious punishment (including criminal prosecution or dismissal from the job) and prove more costly, and therefore would be engaged in less frequently (Aquino and Thau 2009).

*Motive.* ‘There has been some confusion (and honest disagreement) over the use of intentionality as a defining feature’ of WPA (Neuman and Baron 2005, p. 16). However, the vast majority (81%) of the constructs are defined based on intention of actor, rather than target’s perception of actor’s intention. Interestingly, the ‘workplace victimization’ construct, originally based on target perceptions (Aquino and Lamertz 2004), appears to have been revised and is now based on aggressor intentions (Aquino and Thau 2009). This suggests that it is the actual intent of the actor (rather perceived intent) that is winning out as the approach to operationalizing the motive dimension.

*Power balance.* Only around 22% of the 64 construct definitions specifically mention that the actor or aggressor is at a higher hierarchical level than the target. Most of these constructs are ones which deal with a leader behaving aggressively towards his or her subordinates, such as abusive supervision, leader bullying and petty tyranny. These cases of hierarchical power asymmetry could be complemented with more focus on aggression involving structural power asymmetry, i.e. where aggressors are at a higher level of analysis than the targets (narrowing WPA). Also, similar to Aquino and Thau (2009), I did not find any constructs that explicitly operationalized the victimization of higher-status targets by lower-status organizational members, apart from ‘upwards bullying’ (Branch *et al.* 2008), which is described later. This is presumably because upward aggression could incur punishment from the superior. However, targets who are in power-inferior positions *vis-à-vis* aggressors could retaliate indirectly by venting aggression on the organization in general.

*Duration of behavior.* Time is one of the three general categories of scope conditions (Suddaby 2010) and, in this context, refers to whether the aggression is ongoing (persistent) or a one-off (episodic). The 64 constructs are more evenly split with regard to whether they need to be persistent (52%) or episodic (47%), with one construct (‘workplace victimization’; Aquino and Lamertz 2004) explicitly including both aspects. Interestingly, ten of the thirteen constructs that require actor–target power differentials also specify that the aggressive behavior needs to be persistent rather than episodic. Presumably, this is because superiors may justifiably use some amount of harshness, episodically, when subordinate(s) performance is below par, but if it is persistent and across subordinates, it could be a case of unjustified aggression such as ‘emotional tyranny’ (Waldron 2009) or ‘generalized hierarchical abuse’ (Rospenda 2002).

*Level of analysis of actor/target.* According to Suddaby (2010, p. 349), ‘perhaps the most common omission in theory manuscripts is a failure to specify the level of analysis under which a proposed construct will apply’ (Rousseau 1985). Of the 64 constructs in Table S1C, 40 are clearly specified at a single level of analysis for both the aggressor and the target, and cover aggressors and targets at each of the three levels of analysis. That all nine cells in Figure 1 are populated strengthens the case for an expanded view of WPA.

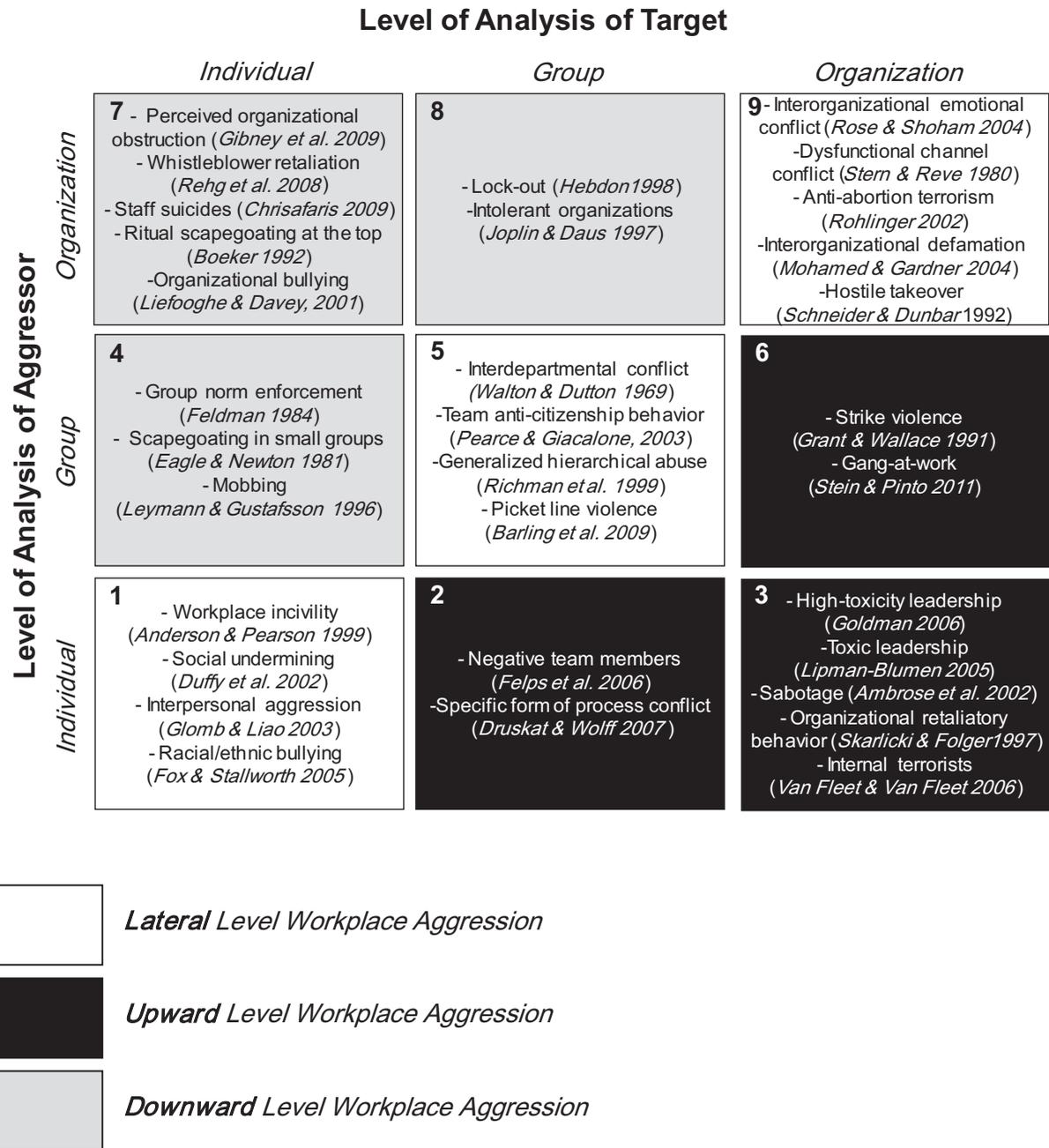


Figure 1. An aggressor–target level of analysis taxonomy of WPA

Another 16 constructs are specified at a single level of analysis (15 at the individual level and 1 at the group level) of the aggressor. Including aggressors at multiple levels (e.g. ‘workplace victimization’ (Aquino and Thau 2009) includes both individual-level and group-level aggressors) under the same construct definition could be problematic because it flouts the basic tenets of both social psy-

chology and organization behavior/theory. Social psychology holds that individuals and groups behave differently in general (Insko *et al.* 1990) and with regard to aggression in particular (Mikolic *et al.* 1997). Similarly, individuals may behave differently when they are part of an organization compared with when they are not (Brief *et al.* 2000).

Apart from the afore-mentioned 40 constructs, another six (five at the individual level and one at the group level) are clearly specified at a single level of analysis of the target. Including multiple targets at different levels of analysis within the same construct definition is also problematic. Glomb and Liao (2003) make the case that distinguishing between targets is important, since aggression directed at different targets (such as individual and organization) could have different correlates, and combining them may obfuscate the functioning of these relations. For instance, ‘destructive leadership behavior’ (Einarsen *et al.* 2007) is defined so as to include both group-level (i.e. subordinates) and organization-level targets, and this could make precise understanding of the phenomenon difficult.

Some notable examples of inconsistency of definitions with regard to level of analysis of actor/target, purportedly of the same construct, are ‘mobbing’ (Leymann 1996; Leymann and Gustafsson 1996) and ‘workplace bullying’ (Einarsen 1996; Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.* 2007; Namie and Namie 2000). In the former case, even though both definitions are by the same author, in the same publication, they are phrased differently, with the first clearly suggesting a group aggressor, whereas the second is ambiguous about it and is clarified only by reading the whole article in which the definition appears. In the latter case, two definitions of workplace bullying (i.e. Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.* 2007; Namie and Namie 2000) specify it as interpersonal behavior, whereas the third (Einarsen 1996) clearly specifies it as ‘negative acts towards one or more individual(s)’, thereby including both individuals and groups as targets.

Part of the issue with regard to the specification of the level of analysis of the aggressor and/or of the target, is that scholars have simply not considered the difference between individuals and groups while articulating the definitions. Therefore, they (e.g. ‘abusive supervision’ (Tepper 2007)) have used the plural forms (e.g. subordinates, supervisors), when in fact they meant it in a dyadic sense, i.e. one subordinate’s perception of his/her supervisor’s behavior. Thus, the abusive supervision (Tepper 2007) definition theoretically includes intergroup aggression (Cell #5, Figure 1), i.e. subordinates vs. supervisors, or individual–group (Cell #3, Figure 1), i.e. a group of subordinates’ perception of their common supervisor, apart from the way it is actually meant, i.e. interpersonal (Cell #1, Figure 1). Though it would be difficult, if not impossible, to re-articulate extant definitions for greater precision

with regard to level of analysis of aggressors and targets, it is hoped that this paper influences scholars to articulate organization-related aggression constructs more precisely in the future.

### Conclusion

There is no perceptible difference between the 30 traditional WPA constructs and the 34 newly added ones in terms of their definitions. All 64 constructs were mapped onto all eight well-established dimensions, suggesting that they belong to the same ‘family of constructs’, even though they have been drawn from a variety of disciplines such as marketing (e.g. ‘dysfunctional channel conflict process’), psychodynamics (e.g. ‘gang-at-work’), strategy (e.g. ‘ritual scapegoating at the top’) and industrial relations (e.g. ‘strike violence’), apart from the base organizational behavior and social psychology literatures. By developing an expanded, integrated stream I am helping WPA scholars ‘acknowledge the stream of logic on which they are drawing and to which they are contributing (Sutton and Staw 1995 p. 372)’.

## A three-level aggressor–target WPA taxonomy

The aggressor–target level of analysis taxonomy of WPA is a conceptually derived taxonomy<sup>4</sup> encompassing nine aggressor–target combinations and subsumes the traditional WPA and related research streams. The nine aggressor–target combinations of WPA can be grouped into three categories, i.e. ‘lateral-level WPA’ (both aggressor and target are at the same level of analysis), ‘upward-level WPA’ (aggressor is at a lower level of analysis than target) and ‘downward-level WPA’ (aggressor is at a higher level of analysis than target), as presented in Figure 1. The goal of this section is to show that this taxonomy is not merely a theoretical or conceptual exercise, but that there are existing constructs that fit into most, if not all, of the cells. This would be another step in the process of establishing an

<sup>4</sup>The term ‘taxonomy’ implies an empirically derived categorization (Short *et al.* 2008), as is the case with ‘workplace deviance’ (Fox and Spector 1999; Robinson and Bennett 1995). Even though my framework is conceptually derived, I use the term ‘taxonomy’, because it describes it best, and because it is based on a methodological, if not an empirical, aspect, i.e. the level of analysis.

expanded, integrated WPA stream. Accordingly, I explain the nine cells of the taxonomy, illustrating each with a few representative constructs that fit unambiguously into them.

#### *Aggressor at individual level*

As the bulk of the WPA literature is at this level, and since the goal of this review is to direct attention to constructs at higher levels of analysis, this subsection will be less detailed. Notwithstanding that caveat, I will attempt to add value by focusing on more recent constructs. This subsection comprises three aggressor–target combinations, i.e. individual–individual (Cell #1), individual–group (Cell #2), and individual–organization (Cell #3).

*Individual–individual, i.e. interpersonal (Cell #1).* Recent work has focused on aggression across the organizational boundary, whether directed at the customer, e.g. ‘customer aggression’ (Grandey *et al.* 2004) and ‘customer-directed sabotage’ (Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld and Walker 2008), or at the service-provider (Inness *et al.* 2008). Some of the other interesting recent constructs include ‘anger-reactionary defenses to territorial infringement’ (Brown and Robinson 2011), ‘aggressive humor’ or ‘put-down humor’ (Zillmann and Stocking 1976), which is a style of humor where the initiator makes the receiver the focus of the joke (Martin *et al.* 2003), and ‘sex-based harassment’ (Berdahl 2007), i.e. behavior that derogates an individual based on sex and includes both sexes as both aggressors and targets.

This cell includes supervisor aggression toward individual subordinates and constructs such as ‘petty tyranny’ (Ashforth 1994), ‘abusive supervision’ (Tepper 2007; Wu and Hu 2009), ‘downward bullying’ (Vandekerckhove and Commers 2003), ‘social’ or ‘supervisor undermining’ (Duffy *et al.* 2002) and ‘negative mentoring experiences’ (Eby *et al.* 2000). However, if these constructs are interpreted or operationalized such that the supervisor’s aggression is towards multiple subordinates or subordinates as a whole, then it would be included under the next section, i.e. individual–group aggression.

*Individual–group (Cell #2).* According to Sears (1983), ‘the more an attitude object resembles a whole individual human being, the more favorably it should be evaluated, because similarity promotes liking (Byrne 1971)’. Therefore, since groups are not as similar to individuals as other individuals, they

receive less of a ‘positivity bonus’, and this could be a distal cause of negative affect between individuals and groups. One manifestation of aggressive behavior in this domain is team-member aggression directed towards the team. Constructs in this regard include ‘negative team members’ (Felps *et al.* 2006) who are ‘interpersonal deviants’ (Robinson and Bennett 1995), and a ‘specific form of process conflict’ in teams (Druskat and Wolff 2007).

*Individual–organization (Cell #3).* This cell comprises two sub-categories of aggressive behaviors: (1) aggression by the leader of the organization (i.e. member of senior management or of the top management team) towards employees in general (i.e. the organization); (2) aggression by an employee toward the organization.

The former includes ‘dark side of leadership’ (Conger 1990) constructs that focus on organizational leaders (cf. ‘destructive executives’; Perryman *et al.* 2010) such as ‘high-toxicity leadership’ (Goldman 2006) and ‘toxic leadership’ (Lipman-Blumen 2005), whose articulations emphasize the severe adverse impact on the organization. Real-life examples include Jeff Skilling, whose tyrannical and foul-mouthed leadership style (Cruver 2002) contributed greatly to the interpersonally and financially aggressive culture at Enron, and Dick Fuld, former CEO and Chairman of Lehman Brothers, who was known as the ‘Bruiser of Wall Street’ (Bawden 2008) and ‘The Gorilla’ for his intimidating presence (Plumb and Wilchins 2008).

The latter includes ‘organizational retaliatory behavior’ (Skarlicki and Folger 1997) and ‘workplace sabotage’ (Ambrose *et al.* 2002; Crino 1994). More recent and inimical variants include ‘service sabotage’ (Harris and Ogbonna 2006), in which the employee’s (cf. ‘service brand saboteur’; Wallace and de Chernatony 2008) behaviors are intentionally designed to affect service and are likely to affect firm profitability and growth as well, ‘insider threat’ (Pfleeger *et al.* 2010), which refers to individuals with legitimate access to an organization’s computer systems and networks, who behave in ways that put data, systems, organizations and even business viability at risk, and ‘internal terrorists’ (Van Fleet and Van Fleet 2006).

#### *Aggressor at group level*

According to Wildschut *et al.* (2004), whether decent individuals are prone to behave indecently or

destructively when banded together in a group is one of the enduring questions in social science. Thus groups, even those within organizations, are potential aggressors. This subsection comprises three aggressor–target combinations, i.e. group–individual (Cell #4), group–group (Cell #5) and group–organization (Cell #6).

*Group–individual (Cell #4).* According to Hershcovis and Barling (2010, p. 28), ‘experiencing aggression from co-workers may send a signal to victims that they do not belong to the work group’. One of the earliest constructs in this regard is the ‘group enforcement of norms’ (cf. Hawthorne experiments) wherein, if individual group members exceeded the performance norms, other group members would taunt or ostracize them (Feldman 1984; McMahan and Wright 1993). The two ‘social ostracism’-related (Williams 2001) constructs also belong here, i.e. ‘workplace ostracism’ (Ferris *et al.* 2008), which is derived from social undermining, bullying and deviance, and ‘interpersonal workplace exclusion’ (Grosser *et al.* 2010).

Other constructs in this cell include ‘mobbing’ (Leymann 1996) and ‘scapegoating in small groups’ (Eagle and Newton 1981). The former derives from animal group behavior and refers to the phenomenon of a group of smaller animals attacking a single larger animal (Lorenz 1991). A strict adoption of this analogy would imply that a group of subordinates would unite to aggress upon their manager (cf. ‘upwards bullying’; Branch *et al.* 2008), but as is so often the case, the interdisciplinary migration has resulted somewhat in a change of meaning (Suddaby 2010). The key difference between scapegoating and mobbing is that the former is usually a single attack (brought on by some apparent precipitating act by the victim), whereas the latter persists for long periods.

*Group–group, i.e. intergroup (Cell #5).* As organizations become increasingly team based, this form of WPA could become increasingly important, especially since research finds that there is ‘always a strong tendency for inter-individual relations to be more cooperative or less competitive than intergroup relations, a basic effect that is referred to as a discontinuity effect’ (Insko *et al.* 1990, p. 68).

Generic intra-organizational groups (and the related constructs) include teams (cf. ‘team anti-citizenship behavior’; Pearce and Giacalone 2003), departments (‘interdepartmental conflict’; Walton and Dutton 1969; Walton *et al.* 1969) and hie-

rarchical levels (‘generalized hierarchical abuse’; Rospenda 2002), apart from particular ones, such as unions (cf. ‘picket line violence’ (Barling *et al.* 2009), in which unionized employees will try to prevent other individuals, e.g. dissident members, members of other unions and non-unionized workers, from working).

From a social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986) perspective, intergroup conflict develops by salient categorization into in-groups and out-groups, but recategorization of these into one common in-group reduces the tensions between these groups. However, Kessler and Mummendey (2001) found that recategorization is a double-edged sword, and although it reduces conflict at the subgroup level, it may initiate conflict at the common in-group level. This stream of research may be relevant for organizations that have ‘factional groups’ (Li and Hambrick 2005, p. 794), defined as those ‘in which members are representatives, or delegates, from a small number of (often just two) social entities and are aware of, and find salience in, their delegate status’ (e.g. a task force drawn from two departments, or an integration team in a post-merger entity comprising managers drawn from both former entities). Triggers such as differential treatment, different values, assimilation, insults or humiliating actions, and even simple contact could activate fault-lines and polarize groups (Chrobot-Mason *et al.* 2009). Future work could investigate whether the presence of factional groups results in intergroup aggression and whether recategorization by making the overarching entity salient (e.g. the task force mission or the merged entity) would reduce or eliminate it.

*Group–organization (Cell #6).* Although there is literature on groups of employees colluding to steal from or defraud the organization (e.g. Mars 1974), this is not necessarily a form of WPA. There are, however, two other literature streams that are relevant here: labor–management conflict and the psychodynamics literature on groups.

With regard to the former, there is a well-established literature stream on labor–management conflict that results in industrial violence (e.g. Grant and Wallace 1991; Snyder and Kelly 1976; Taft 1966). Over the years, scholars have found that strikes have turned violent, i.e. group attacking the organization, because of factors such as the presence of strike guards and private detectives (Taft 1966), large size, long duration and multiplicity of issues (Snyder and Kelly 1976), and the skill mix of striking

workers and the strategies used by both parties (Grant and Wallace 1991).

With regard to the latter, the psychodynamics literature contains constructs such as ‘regressive work groups’ (Diamond and Allcorn 1987) and ‘basic assumption groups’ (Shambaugh 1985), which have relevance for intra-organizational contexts as evidenced by the recent conceptualization of the ‘gang-at-work’ (Stein and Pinto 2011).

*Other group-level aggression constructs.* In addition to the aforementioned constructs, there are other constructs in which the group is clearly the aggressor, but the target could be an individual or a group of individuals. These constructs include ‘gherao’ (Jha 2012), a form of protest in India, in which workers prevent the employer(s) leaving a place of work until demands are met. This is similar to ‘bossnapping’ (Hayes 2012), which is a form of lock-in, where employees detain management in the workplace, often in protest against lay-offs and redundancies, and has been carried out especially in France.

#### *Aggressor at organization level*

In this subsection, I pull together four strands of literature to provide a unique, holistic perspective on organization-level aggression. The first strand, which is the most well established, anthropomorphizes the organization as the aggressor, usually as perceived by the individual victim. In the second strand, the organization is imputed to be the aggressor by the nature of the aggressive act (e.g. dismissal). In the third strand, the aggressive behaviors are enacted by individuals, but the sheer pervasiveness of these behaviors is so high (relative to the base-rate in other ‘normal’ organizations) that the aggression can be considered an organization-level phenomenon. Finally, there are (usually ideological) organizations who use aggressive (sometimes even violent) means to pursue their aims. This section comprises three aggressor–target combinations, i.e. organization–individual (Cell #6), organization–group (Cell #8) and organization–organization (Cell #9).

*Organization–individual (Cell #7).* Constructs such as the ‘uncivil organization’ (Andersson and Pearson 1999) or the ‘organization of corrupt individuals’ (Pinto *et al.* 2008) are essentially an aggregation of individual-level behaviors that have crossed a critical threshold to become an organization-level phenomenon. The logic is that the preponderance of these

behaviors in particular organizations compared with the base-rate in ‘normal’ organizations implies that it is an organization-level phenomenon. Therefore, although many organizations may have an individual employee commit suicide, if the number of suicides in a particular organization is unusually high, it is probably the result of organization aggression, and *prima facie* evidence indicates that this is the case. Recently, multiple employee suicides have been observed at France Telecom (20 suicides) (Chrisafaris 2009), Foxconn (10 suicides) (Cowell 2010) and Disneyland Paris (three suicides) (Campbell 2010). In all three cases, the organization’s actions, described by phrases such as tough conditions (Cowell 2010), ‘brutal’ working conditions (Campbell 2010), and job stress and misery at work (Chrisafaris 2009), appear to have been the triggers. In yet another example, Renault’s management, under stress to increase productivity, created a situation that led to a series of suicides at their Guyancourt Technocentre near Paris (Betts 2010).

Liefooghe and Davey (2001) shift the perspective of bullying such that the organization is no longer merely a facilitator of interpersonal bullying, but is a bully (in what they term ‘organizational bullying’) in its own right. Gibney *et al.* (2009) operationalize their ‘Perceived Organizational Obstruction’ construct and scale as employees’ perceptions that the organization is the source of negative treatment they are experiencing. A particularly inimical form of organization-level aggression is ‘whistleblower retaliation’, because it compounds one negative behavior, i.e. aggression, on top of another, i.e. corruption (Rehg *et al.* 2008). Although not usually included in the nomological net of aggressive acts, when a leader is dismissed as a scapegoat for the poor organizational performance (cf. ‘ritual scapegoating theory’; Boeker 1992; Rowe *et al.* 2005), it can be interpreted as an aggressive act by the organization on the individual, especially if performance does not improve after the dismissal. A particularly vivid example of this phenomenon, albeit in a different context, is the case of Steve Bartman who, by attempting to catch a foul ball during Game 6 of the 2003 National Baseball League Championship, prevented the out. Although Bartman wasn’t the only fan reaching for the ball, and though his action didn’t cost the Cubs the game, or the lead, or even put a runner on first base, it was he who was showered with beer, curses and death threats, and had to be escorted in disguise from Wrigley field.

*Organization–group (Cell #8).* This includes management’s action against (usually unionized) employees, e.g. ‘lock-outs’ (Hebdon 1998). Although behaviors such as racial discrimination or sexual harassment may occur occasionally in all organizations, when these behaviors are widely prevalent in a particular organization, they could be construed as organization-level aggression against a particular group (cf. ‘intolerant organizations’; Joplin and Daus 1997).

*Organization–organization, i.e. inter-organizational (Cell #9).* There are two sub-categories of aggression in this cell: (1) ‘inter-organizational emotional conflict’, which typically occurs between organizations who are either in a highly competitive rivalry situation or highly interdependent (e.g. buyer–supplier relationship), and (2) ‘inter-organizational ideological conflict’, in which the organizations’ purposes or missions are in direct conflict.

The former includes ‘hostile takeovers’ (Schneider and Dunbar 1992), which frequently have an emotional component. Stern and Reve (1980) describe ‘dysfunctional conflict processes’ as those which could be triggered by the use of coercive power in distribution channels characterized by power imbalances. ‘Inter-organizational emotional conflict’ (Rose and Shoham 2004) operationalizes the group-level emotional conflict construct (Jehn 1994) at the inter-organizational level between manufacturers and their suppliers. This type of aggression could occur in hypercompetitive markets, particularly those in which there are two dominant players, e.g. Coca-Cola vs. Pepsi, or Microsoft vs. Apple, or Virgin Atlantic vs. British Airways (Mohamed and Gardner 2004). In these cases, the term ‘competitor’ is effectively supplanted by the term ‘enemy’, and the market dynamics are frequently referred to as ‘wars’, e.g. ‘cola wars’, ‘software wars’. These are also conditions that could engender ‘inter-organizational defamation’ (Mohamed and Gardner 2004).

The latter includes Greenpeace’s boarding of ships carrying genetically engineered soybeans and the Environmental Liberation Front’s destruction of Vail’s \$12 million mountaintop facility (Hendry 2006). Another example comes from the UK, where the presiding judge accused the six members of Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (who conducted a campaign of intimidation, violence and terror against a life sciences company) of operating beneath ‘a thin veneer’ of legitimacy, saying, ‘You needed that face to get donations from the public who believed you

were a legitimate organization’ (Radnege 2010, p. 5). Rohlinger (2002) describes how ideologically opposed social movement organizations, the National Organization for Women and Concerned Women for America, got media coverage during critical moments of the abortion debate through, among other means, ‘anti-abortion terrorism’. Even within US pro-life activist groups there are degrees of obstruction and aggression that are employed to achieve their ends. For instance, Operation Save America campaigns against abortion using various non-violent tactics, such as blocking access to clinics and displaying pictures of dead fetuses, whereas the Army of God is an organization ‘whose members have engaged in various terrorist activities to stop abortion, including clinic bombings and the attempted murder of at least one practitioner’ (Smith 2008, p. 56).

*Other organization-level aggression constructs.* Hogg (2004, p. 401) describes ‘totalist groups’ as ‘people who appear to identify uncompromisingly with an all-embracing ideology that narrowly prescribes their attitudes, feelings and practices. These ideologies are normative systems that define membership in groups that, to outsiders, appear relatively extremist . . .’. This construct is apparently conceptualized as a group-level aggressor, but appears to conflate both group and organization levels. Further, the target is not clearly specified. It is therefore hard to clearly categorize this construct in the WPA research stream.

Union and anti-union violence are also constructs that are hard to categorize. ‘Union violence’ (Guzman *et al.* 2012) generally refers to defensive measures carried out against guards or strikebreakers during attempts to undermine strikes and the violence ranges from isolated acts by individuals to wider campaigns of organized violence to further union goals within an industrial dispute. ‘Anti-union violence’ (Kovalik 2012) often involves multiple parties, including collusion of management, government authorities, private agencies or citizens’ groups in organizing violence against unions and their members. Thus, both constructs are too broad and encompass too many behaviors and parties to be clearly categorized in this taxonomy.

## **Lateral-, upward- and downward-level WPA**

An inevitable side-effect of having an organization-oriented perspective on aggression is that multiple

levels of analysis and cross-level dynamics come into play. As Tjosvold (2008 p. 451) puts it in a related context, 'one of the beauties of studying conflict in organizations is that an argument between two persons is very much a part of the wider intergroup and organizational contexts'. The motivation for this section is, in part, driven by Gelfand *et al.*'s (2012, p. 367) 'simple but challenging question: when does a conflict between two individuals spread to involve a multitude of others?' Like them, I am interested in the phenomenon of interpersonal conflicts becoming contagious and escalating into intergroup conflicts, but unlike them, I am also interested in the downward spiraling of conflict between higher-level aggressors to lower-level aggressors.

A notable example of intra-organizational aggression dynamics is the escalation of individual-level workplace incivility behaviors resulting in an organization-level phenomenon (cf. 'uncivil organization'; Andersson and Pearson 1999). Scholars typically use the terms 'escalation' or 'spirals' to refer to the increase in frequency and/or intensity of behaviors between the same parties (Andersson and Pearson 1999; Pruitt 2008). However, in keeping with an organization-oriented perspective on aggression, I focus on escalation to other parties that could result in multilevel dynamics and the three new conceptualizations, i.e. 'lateral-level WPA', 'upward-level WPA' and 'downward-level WPA'. I discuss each of these categories, focusing on two aspects in particular, i.e. isomorphism, which is major issue in multilevel research (Rousseau 1985), and power balance, which is a fundamental aspect of WPA (Hershcovis 2011; Hershcovis *et al.* 2012; Salin 2003).

#### *Lateral level WPA*

The three aggressor–target combinations in this category are symmetric with regard to level of analysis of the aggressor and the target. De Dreu and Gelfand (2008) theorize three root causes that could lead to conflict or aggression in all three combinations, which are: (1) competition for scarce resources and rewards; (2) attempts to maintain and promote a positive view of the self; and (3) cognitive consistency, social validation and socio-cognitive conflict. With regard to the first, it could be competition for promotion (interpersonal aggression) or competition for budgetary allocations (interdepartmental aggression) or competition for customers and market share (inter-organizational aggression). With regard to the

second root cause, participants could engage in value-related conflicts (De Dreu and Gelfand 2008), such as that between an accountant and her superior with regard to fudging the books (interpersonal), union–management conflict (intergroup) or activist terrorism (inter-organizational). Finally, socio-cognitive conflicts include a superior and subordinate arguing about the latter's performance evaluation (interpersonal), two departments having a conflict about the best process to be followed (intergroup), and contractual dispute-related aggression between buyer and supplier (inter-organizational).

Another aspect of isomorphism is whether there is similarity or correspondence between constructs at various levels of analysis (Rousseau 1985). It appears that there are similarities between constructs that do not appear to be similar at first blush, and dissimilarities or lack of correspondence between constructs that appear to be similar. The adaptation of Jehn's (1994) group-level emotional conflict construct to the organization level (cf. 'inter-organizational emotional conflict'; Rose and Shoham 2004) is isomorphic across group and organization levels. Also, though not obvious from their names, 'social undermining' (Duffy *et al.* 2002) at the individual level is similar to 'inter-organizational defamation' (Mohamed and Gardner 2004) at the organization level.

However, there are also constructs that are not similar, even though they use similar labels. For instance, 'scapegoating in small groups' (Cell #4) and 'ritual scapegoating at the top' (Cell #7) are not isomorphic, because they have nothing in common apart from the similarity with regard to an individual being victimized. Also, sexual harassment has been conceptualized at the individual level, e.g. 'sex-based harassment' (Berdahl 2007) and 'gender harassment' (Raver and Nishii 2010), but is not isomorphic to higher-level constructs such as 'selective incivility' (Cortina 2008) and 'intolerant organizations' (Joplin and Daus 1997).

Although the parties in 'lateral-level WPA' could be power symmetric (e.g. two peer-level colleagues, two departments), they could also be power asymmetric (e.g. superior–subordinate, purchasing organization vs. supplier). In the former case, the aggression could simmer for an extended period of time with low-intensity aggressive behaviors from each party (e.g. the Cold War between the US and the USSR). In the latter case, if the aggression persists, it could have severe effects on the power-inferior target and probably lead to the termination of the

relationship. Finally, when comparing interpersonal aggression with intergroup aggression, Mikolic *et al.* (1997) found that groups used more escalated (i.e. harsher) tactics compared with individuals.

#### *Upward-level WPA*

These are instances of ‘positive loops’ (Goodman 2000), or ‘secondary spirals’ (Andersson and Pearson 1999; Pruitt 2008). The term ‘upward’ suggests that the aggressive act emanates from a smaller entity (individual or group) to a larger entity (group or organization), and by so doing impacts or infects a larger part of the organization. An isomorphic root cause in all three ‘upward-level WPA’ cells would be abuse of power, such as a team leader (individual–group, Cell #2), or CEO (individual–organization, Cell #3), or senior management team (group–organization, Cell #6) illegitimately behaving aggressively towards the group or the organization, as the case may be. All three situations are cases of top-down aggression, likely to be found in bureaucratic command-and-control cultures, and could lead to aggression permeation as subordinates might mimic their leader’s behaviors with their own subordinates and peers in the organization.

However, not all the aggression in this category need be top-down and power asymmetric. It could be lateral and power symmetric as well, for instance, if a negative team-member’s aggressive behaviors toward the group (Cell #2) are not checked, his or her behavior could not only be reciprocated in a tit-for-tat manner, but also be responsible for establishing more aggressive behaviors as a norm. Further, it could also be bottom-up, for instance in cases where an individual employee behaves aggressively towards the organization by sabotaging equipment or damaging property.

#### *Downward-level WPA*

Prima facie, this multilevel WPA category may not cause aggression permeation because it describes aggression from a larger collective entity (organization or group) to smaller entity (group or individual). However, it could indirectly lead to escalation of conflict. For instance, if the victimized individual is a member of a group (e.g. minority or union) and the aggressors are members of the out-group (e.g. non-minorities or management, respectively), then members of the victim’s group could engage in ‘vicarious retribution’ (Lickel *et al.* 2006) and take

revenge by attacking members of the out-group, even if they were not part of the original set of aggressors.

It is the only form of WPA in which the aggressor is always a collective entity. A plausible isomorphic root cause of aggression is ‘punishment’ for deviation from the norm, either because of demographic factors (e.g. race, gender) or because of situational factors (e.g. exceeding performance norms, whistle-blowing). Thus, this category of WPA could be found in strong organizational cultures in which deviant individuals and groups are not tolerated. The structural power asymmetry in these cases would result in the aggression having particularly severe effects on the targets, as they are outnumbered by the aggressors. For instance, mobbing (group–individual, Cell #4) has serious mental and psychosomatic health consequences with post-traumatic stress disorder as the plausible diagnosis (Leymann and Gustafsson 1996). Also, retaliation by organizations (organization–individual, Cell #7) can leave whistleblowers with feelings of isolation, anxiety and shame (Alford 2001; Ewing 1983). A summary of the key features of each of the three categories is presented in Table 1.

## **Contribution and discussion**

The present paper has attempted to expand the implicitly held notion of ‘workplace aggression’ as being largely an individual-level phenomenon (even in recent multi-foci studies; e.g. Chang and Lyons 2012; Hershcovis and Barling 2010) and embed it more explicitly and strongly within an organizational context by considering aggressors and targets at all three organizational levels of analysis. By developing a nine-cell, three-level aggressor–target taxonomy, it consolidates research that is currently fragmented across a number of domains and disciplines (including sociology, social psychology, psychodynamics, marketing, information systems, healthcare and political science) into an integrated, comprehensive perspective on WPA. It thereby answers Carnevale’s call Carnevale 2008 p. 439 in a related context: ‘we lack taxonomic work of conflict, basic types and forms . . . good taxonomic work is needed . . . prior to the analysis of functional relations’. And in keeping with this quotation, this framework would facilitate a better understanding of aggression in an organizational context.

This paper’s aggressor–target level of analysis perspective is unique, and it has uniquely mapped the

Table 1. Comparison of bilateral, upward and downward level WPA

No.	Attributes	Number of ORA forms		
		3 Bilateral LeWPA	3 Upward LeWPA	3 Downward LeWPA
1	Level of analysis of aggressor	Both individual and collective (group, organization)	Both individual and collective (group, organization)	Only collective (group, organization)
2	Level of analysis of target	Both individual and collective (group, organization)	Only collective (group, organization)	Both individual and collective (group, organization)
3	Actor–target level of analysis symmetry?	Yes	No	No
4	Actor–target power symmetry?	Possible	Not possible	Not possible
5	Direction	Mostly lateral (top-down/bottom-up in case of superior–subordinate relationship in interpersonal aggression)	Mostly top-down, i.e. leader to subordinates/ organization (but could be lateral as well in case of negative team-members)	Could be both top-down, i.e. organization retaliating against whistle-blower, and bottom-up, i.e. subordinates ganging up on leader
6	Isomorphic causes	Competition for scarce resources, maintain/promote a positive view of the self, socio-cognitive conflict	Abuse of power	Deviation from the collective norm (group, or organizational)
7	Organizational cultures that facilitate	Culture of competition	Bureaucratic cultures	Strong cultures
8	If behaviors are persistent . . .	Could lead to ongoing low intensity hostility	Could lead to creation of a dysfunctional organizational culture	Could lead to severe consequences for the victimized individual/group

level of analysis of aggressor and target implicit or explicit in 64 WPA-related constructs. By also mapping another six well-established dimensions to these 64 constructs, it makes the case that they belong to the same ‘family of constructs’. To the best of my knowledge, this is the most comprehensive mapping of constructs in this domain in terms of both number of constructs and number of dimensions mapped. It thus makes an important contribution to the literature in terms of both its breadth and its unique focus.

This paper also develops three new conceptualizations that capture multilevel dynamics, i.e. ‘lateral-’, ‘upward-’ and ‘downward-level WPA’, which facilitate organizational linkage analysis (Goodman 2000). These conceptualizations also cue the time dimension and movement of behaviors from one level to another, thereby answering the call of Robinson and Greenberg (1998 p. 22), who noted that, ‘current conceptualizations of workplace deviance are static in nature’. Current static empirical models of WPA could be complemented with longitudinal process-oriented research to investi-

gate the relationships among the nine aggressor–target combinations and the three multilevel categories.

#### *Lessons from the conceptual review*

Although the issue of construct confusion and definitional imprecision have been discussed in previous reviews, the scale of this review has highlighted the magnitude of the problem. If anything, the problem appears to be more acute with regard to the traditional WPA constructs, because they have received much more attention (and consequently more inconsistent treatment) than some of the newly added ones that have been studied less. It appears that imprecision with regard to the level of analysis of the actor and the target is particularly pervasive and problematic, as scholars have not considered the difference between an individual and a group of individuals while articulating their definitions. Considering the magnitude of work that has already been conducted with these imprecise conceptualizations and definitions, it may be difficult to fix this issue with existing

constructs but, in future work, this important aspect could be taken into account.

Applying the framework indicates that certain aggressor–target combinations have been investigated more than others; and this review throws light on those relatively neglected, such as individual–group (Cell #2), group–organization (Cell #6) and organization–group (Cell #8), which can be investigated in future research. Interestingly, all these under-researched cells involve the group level, either as aggressor or target. This raises questions such as, is group-related aggression understudied compared with its prevalence? And if so, is it because it is harder to conduct research on aggressive groups? Or is it justifiable because it is simply a lower base-rate phenomenon than either individual-level aggression or organization-level aggression? In any event, this is an important lacuna that future scholarly work should address, particularly because ‘most models of the “organization of the future”, such as networked, clustered, or horizontal forms, are implicitly or explicitly based on teams as the central organizing unit’ (Felps *et al.* 2006, p. 176).

The review found that there are some WPA constructs such as mobbing (Leymann and Gustafsson 1996) and territorial infringement (Brown *et al.* 2005; Brown and Robinson 2011) that have been developed by borrowing from animal behavior studies. Notwithstanding Zillmann’s (1979) cautions with regard to applying theories from subhuman species to humans, these constructs, particularly mobbing, appear to have been successfully introduced into the literature. This approach could be explored more fully, since animals that live in groups could perhaps provide insights into group- or organization-level aggression.

#### *Future research*

A future research agenda is presented based on the two major new contributions of this paper, i.e. the taxonomy of ‘nine aggressor–target combinations’ and the ‘three multilevel categories’, in the next two subsections.

*Nine aggressor–target combinations.* Future research could investigate the presence and base-rates of each of these nine combinations. An Expanded Workplace Aggression (EWA) Scale could be developed. This scale would systematically ask respondents to report on aggressive behaviors from

aggressors at each level of analysis to targets at each level of analysis and, by gathering data on all nine forms and three categories of WPA, would yield an organizational EWA profile. It could also be administered across industries to identify whether different industries have different EWA profiles. And finally, it could also be used in cross-cultural research to identify EWA profiles of different countries.

With regard to organizational research, sometimes a large number of combinations could manifest themselves simultaneously in an organization. For instance, Enron (Beenen and Pinto 2009; Stein and Pinto 2011) manifested at least six of the nine combinations, including interpersonal aggression between Jeff Skilling and Rebecca Marks (Cell #1), individual–group aggression, e.g. Andy Fastow sexually harassing women (Cell #2), individual–organization aggression, e.g. Jeff Skilling’s tyrannical leadership (Cell #3), intergroup aggression between Enron’s ‘asset-heavy’ and ‘asset-light’ divisions (Cell #5), group–organization aggression, i.e. the gang-at-work that destroyed Enron (Cell #6), and organization–individual aggression when Enron punished attempted whistleblowers such as Vince Kaminski (Cell #7). By administering the EWA Scale regularly senior management could monitor the level of aggression in the organization and nip potential Enrons in the bud.

Longitudinal process research could also uncover how WPA morphs from one form to another, and what organizational factors facilitate or inhibit this movement. Identifying such pathways among forms of WPA at different levels of analysis would be an example of ‘organizational linkage analysis’ (Goodman 2000). For instance, ‘destructive leadership’ (Cell #3) could lead to unionization, and in turn, ‘picket line violence’ (Cell #5), which could then result in ‘adversarial interpersonal relations’ between individual unionized members and non-unionized members or members of the management team (Cell #1). Similarly, labor union-related aggression and violence could take one of three different forms, depending on time and other factors. If there are multiple unions or a mix of unionized and non-unionized employees, there could be intergroup aggression (Cell #5), or if the union not only strikes, but also damages the organization’s property, it could be group–organization aggression (Cell #6), or if negotiations between the management and the unions break down and the former could lock out the employees, it could be organization–group aggression (Cell #8).

Another aspect that can be explored in future research is the relationship between the nine combinations and the WPA dimensions. For instance, how does the choice of overt or passive aggression (Frost *et al.* 2007) differ for aggressors at different levels of analysis. Although *prima facie* one might expect organization-level aggression to be skewed toward passive-aggressive (Binning and Wagner 2002) and obstructionism (Neuman and Baron 1998) behaviors compared with individual-level aggression (which could be more active and overt), this could be investigated in future research.

*Three multilevel categories.* Notwithstanding Bettencourt and Kernahan's (1997 p. 447) meta-analysis, which found that 'when they are exposed to both violent cues and aversive provocation, men and women are equally aggressive', traditional empirical WPA research has found that males tend to be more aggressive and violent than females (Barling *et al.* 2009). Whereas that may be true of interpersonal aggression, i.e. 'lateral-level WPA', females may avoid that, but choose to retaliate indirectly against the organization (i.e. 'upward-level WPA'). Also, females, being more communal in nature (Rosner 1990; Werner and LaRussa 1985), may adopt more collective forms of aggression (i.e. 'downward-level WPA') compared with males. These relationships between gender and the level WPA categories could be tested in future research.

Research has found that employees who are minorities, e.g. 'non-white' ethnic groups (Hoel and Cooper 2000), show higher victimization rates (Salin 2003). Based on this, future research could investigate whether organizations that have more demographically balanced workforces manifest more 'lateral-level WPA', and whether those that have more demographically lop-sided workforces manifest more 'downward-level WPA'. In terms of cross-cultural research, one could investigate whether organizations in high power distance societies (Hofstede 1980; Tepper 2007) would tend to engage in more collectivistic aggression (i.e. 'downward-level WPA') compared with organizations in more low power distance societies.

Labor relations research has found that skilled-craft workers are less likely to view relations with employers as inherently antagonistic compared with unskilled workers (Grant and Wallace 1991). However, traditional WPA research finds a minimal but significant negative correlation between income ('but not education') and aggression (Barling *et al.*

2009), implying that there is perhaps no relationship between skills or education and interpersonal aggression (emphasis added). Could it be that in organizations with low-skilled workforces group-level aggression is higher and is substituting for interpersonal aggression, thereby explaining these findings? This is a question that could be investigated in the future.

A major area of future research would be to study the impact of the increasing geographical dispersion of work, particularly with regard to the three multilevel categories. As organizations become more 'virtual', would WPA merely change in form (e.g. flaming emails) rather than in person, or would it result in shifts of behavior from one category to another? For instance, would working in more geographically distributed clusters engender more group-level aggressors compared with traditional organizations? Also, would the former manifest more 'upward-level WPA' (as telecommuting individual employees behave aggressively towards their group or organization) compared with more 'lateral-level WPA' (more interpersonal and intergroup aggression due to colocation) in the latter?

Finally, there could be interesting relationships between the three categories themselves. For instance, there could be a reciprocal relationship between 'upward-level WPA' and 'downward-level WPA'. If a leader has a 'destructive leadership style' (Einarsen *et al.* 2007), which is a form of 'upward-level WPA', then his or her subordinates could collectively band together and retaliate against him or her, which would be form of 'downward-level WPA' (group-individual).

#### *Implications for practice*

This expanded framework would give practitioners a comprehensive perspective on intra-organizational aggression dynamics and alert them to the repercussions of their actions and decisions. For instance, characterizing their main competitor as 'the enemy' and using powerful graphic aggressive language could fire up the troops, but realizing that it could result in a more aggressive and dysfunctional organizational culture could dissuade them from this approach. Similarly, creating strong internal competition among teams or departments to reduce complacency or to spark creativity could engender unhealthy intergroup aggression as an unintended consequence.

Management could have an independent consultant administer the EWA Scale to their employees, which would be analogous to using a CT scan to detect cancer. It would help identify the aggression hotspots in their organization and nip them in the bud. In large multi-locational organizations, the EWA Scale could identify differences in WPA across locations and divisions. The EWA Scale could also be administered in conjunction with climate survey instruments to identify the relationship if any, between organizational culture and WPA. For instance, whether organizations with competitive cultures are characterized by ‘lateral-level WPA’, or whether organizations in which the leadership adopts a destructive or tyrannical leadership style engender ‘upward-level WPA’, or whether organizations that have strong cultures in which outliers are not tolerated create largely collectivistic aggression, i.e. ‘downward-level WPA’.

The relationship between organization structure and WPA could also be investigated. Bureaucratic organizations may have more individual-level aggressors, whereas professional service organizations with team-based structures may have more group-level aggressors, and matrix organizations in highly competitive markets may have more organization-level aggressors. Finally, if the EWA Scale was administered by an independent agency across organizations and published (like, for instance, the ‘Great place to work’ survey), it would be a valuable indicator for prospective employees, and would force organizational leaders and managers to address the issue and make organizations less aggressive and more congenial environments.

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## Supporting information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

**Table S1A.** Selection strategy for traditional workplace aggression constructs.

**Table S1B.** Selection strategy for workplace aggression dimensions.

**Table S1C.** Aggression-related constructs mapped onto well-established dimensions.