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Breaking the Cycle - Insights Into Violent and Aggressive Behavior

From Personality Traits to Social Movements

Edited by Jolita Vveinhardt

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Meet the editor

Prof. Dr. Jolita Vveinhardt is one of Lithuania's leading scholars in the study of workplace dynamics and organizational relationships. Her interdisciplinary work explores destructive patterns such as workplace bullying, favoritism, nepotism, social exclusion, and organizational dysfunction. She conducts in-depth commissioned studies, diagnoses harmful dynamics, and evaluates psychosocial risk factors to help organizations create healthier and more sustainable work environments. An acclaimed trainer, she delivers tailored seminars for employees and managers and trains consultants for professional practice. With extensive academic and hands-on experience, Prof. Vveinhardt bridges research and practice, guiding organizations through complex challenges and promoting psychologically safe, high-performing workplaces.

Contents

Preface

This book is an invitation and a challenge. The invitation to a deeper understanding of violence and aggression. The challenge to boldly revisit personality traits, institutional norms and collective behavior in order to break this seemingly endless cycle of violence. All this requires an interdisciplinary approach, cultural sensitivity, and critical reflection.

"Breaking the Cycle" is more than just a title – it is a scientific, professional and ethical task. Its solution requires combining perspectives from research in psychology, management, sociology, philosophy, media, and organisational ethics, presented by researchers from Australia, Romania, Serbia, Poland, Lithuania, Turkey, South Africa, and the USA. All of this allows us to look at the problem from different angles, revealing not only individual but also collective mechanisms of violence.

Even seemingly ordinary and everyday things like food can be important factors in identifying individuals prone to violence and in developing targeted prevention strategies. Therefore, the authors of the first chapter examine how certain taste preferences (for example, sweet or spicy food) can be related to difficulties in regulating emotions, which in turn can be linked to adolescents' tendency towards delinquent or aggressive behaviour. Drawing on the perspectives from neuropsychology, health sciences, and behavioural theories, researchers reveal how physiological, psychological, and cultural factors intertwine in unexpected ways, shaping trajectories of risky behaviour.

The second chapter examines aggressive behaviour through the interplay of personality traits, contextual environments, and situational factors. The authors explore how environmental and social factors, along with variations in individual traits, can either increase or decrease the likelihood of aggression. This not only helps to better understand what paves the way for violent behavior but also provides a solid foundation for future research and conceptual advances. Reflections on contextual factors can be particularly useful in developing practical prevention measures.

Based on the analyses of over 200 employees' compensation claims, the authors of the third chapter reveal how emotional abuse, mobbing, and discrimination damage mental health and erode trust in institutions. Complex questions about procedural fairness, leadership style and cultural biases are raised, and the findings of case studies reveal deep assumptions that make violence a kind of 'norm' and marginalise victims. All this urges us to rethink organisational policymaking and leadership models to ensure psychologically safe working conditions.

In the context of violence and leadership, a peculiar spiral of psychological and cultural processes emerges, involving structural pressure, loss of control and authoritarian practices that sustain a destructive and violence-tolerant organisational culture. As managers internalise systemic problems, they become not only tolerators of violence

but also their reproducers, and employees sink into a state of helplessness. Therefore, in the fourth chapter, the authors raise a question about the division of responsibility and the capability of organisations to reflect on their hierarchical relationships.

The fifth chapter further broadens the scope of analysis of violence, reminding readers that media content is not neutral. It can shape collective expectations, emotional responses and even social norms related to violence. Therefore, from the perspective of a "copycat crime", the authors examine a provocative topic, discussing the boundaries of journalistic ethics and highlighting cultural and psychological factors that influence the modeling of violent behaviour.

Violence often extends beyond the boundaries of narrow interpersonal relationships or organisations and takes on a broader political and societal scale. Violent protests in South Africa, the subject of the sixth chapter of this book, reveal how a lack of vital services, social inequality, and frustration can provoke collective discontent that escalates into violence. The authors highlight how recurrent outbreaks of collective violence pose a challenge to democracy and serve as an important indicator of the government's ability to address service delivery problems.

The insights presented in this book are not definitive answers. Instead, they raise new questions, call for rethinking common assumptions and invite to search for holistic, interdisciplinary solutions. Only by recognising the multifaceted nature of violence can we realistically hope to break its cycle. I would therefore like to express my sincere gratitude to all the authors, reviewers, and members of the editorial team whose insights, efforts, and collaboration have contributed to making this book a comprehensive interdisciplinary response to the complex challenges posed by violence and aggression.

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Chapter 1

Perspective Chapter: Taste of Aggression – Food Preferences and Emotional Dysregulation in Juvenile Delinquency

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Abstract

This chapter proposes a novel, embodied lens on juvenile delinquency, arguing that taste preferences—particularly for sweet and fatty foods—can function as subtle but powerful indicators of affective dysregulation. While traditional theories explain delinquent behavior through structural deficits or cognitive distortions, and newer models emphasize emotional trauma and poor self-regulation, few frameworks consider how the body itself encodes distress. Drawing on research from developmental psychopathology, neuropsychology, and the psychology of eating, we examine how food preferences intersect with impulsivity, emotional coping, and identity construction in delinquent youth. Empirical findings—including a comparative study of Romanian adolescents—highlight distinct taste patterns among youth on probation, suggesting both heightened craving for emotional comfort and, paradoxically, blunted reward sensitivity. Taste, we argue, is not merely a dietary choice but a behavioral fingerprint: it reveals how adolescents soothe, rebel, or assert control when language fails. By decoding these sensory signals, clinicians and forensic psychologists gain access to an overlooked layer of meaning—where what is craved, avoided, or ritualized becomes data. We explore how taste can inform risk assessment, identity work, and low-threshold interventions such as cooking-based rehabilitation. Ultimately, this chapter reframes taste not as trivia, but as testimony—an embodied narrative of how young people feel, cope, and fight to be seen.

Keywords: juvenile delinquency, emotional dysregulation, taste preferences, impulsivity, hedonic eating, reward sensitivity, embodied psychology, forensic assessment, adolescent behavior

1. Introduction

Juvenile delinquency is not a random behavioral outburst. It is the behavioral residue of chronic imbalance—where temperament, trauma, and environment meet and fracture. Over the past decades, research has outlined a dynamic interplay between

psychological vulnerabilities, relational breakdowns, and *structural deprivation*, all of which increase the probability of conduct problems in adolescence.

Psychologically, the core of delinquency is often poor affect regulation. Youth who show early signs of impulsivity, defiance, or aggression are statistically more likely to escalate toward criminal behavior [1, 2]. These traits are not just personality quirks—they reflect underdeveloped executive functioning and hyper-responsivity to immediate rewards, shaped by the still-maturing adolescent brain [3]. In short, emotional storms meet underpowered brakes.

Within families, patterns of neglect, coercion, or inconsistency act as accelerants. Insecure attachment, lack of monitoring, and parental psychopathology leave children with no reliable emotional anchor. Rather than learning to contain distress, they learn to externalize it [4]. The home becomes not a container but a trigger—making aggression feel safer than vulnerability.

Socioeconomic adversity adds structural weight to these dynamics. Youth raised in conditions of poverty, neighborhood violence, and institutional neglect face chronic stress and perceived futility. In such environments, rules may appear ornamental, and rebellion may feel like survival. Structural deprivation does not cause delinquency in isolation—but it strips away the buffers that might otherwise protect against it [5, 6]. When the social contract breaks, delinquency becomes a language of protest, agency, or identity.

Contemporary models emphasize *developmental cascades*—the compounding interaction of early vulnerabilities and adverse environments that shape maladaptive trajectories over time [7–9]. Delinquency, in this view, is not deviance for its own sake—it is a *maladapted strategy of regulation*: affective, cognitive, and social.

This chapter builds on that model, offering a perspective that integrates empirical data with theoretical developments from embodied and developmental psychopathology, aiming to reframe taste as an affective signal in forensic contexts. We suggest that beneath disruptive behavior lie signals—quiet, embodied, and often overlooked. *Taste preferences*, especially for sweet or fatty stimuli, may reflect how the adolescent body attempts to modulate emotional tension, seek comfort, or assert control. What the palate craves may mirror what the psyche cannot name.

2. Delinquency as emotional dysregulation

Classical theories of juvenile delinquency—such as strain theory [10], social learning theory [11], and social control theory [12]—have long framed youth deviance as a response to external disruption: economic hardship, lack of opportunity, fractured social bonds. These models help explain why some adolescents offend, especially in structurally deprived environments [5, 13].

But they rarely ask what these behaviors *feel like* from the inside. What tension is the behavior modulating? What unmet need does it symbolically express? In short, what is being regulated—poorly, impulsively, but with purpose?

Emerging frameworks from developmental psychopathology and affective neuroscience turn the lens inward. They conceptualize delinquency not as defiance in a vacuum but as an expression of uncontained affect, trauma, and failed regulation [14, 15]. Youth who steal, fight, or destroy often lack the capacity to name their emotional states—so they act them out. Conduct problems are reframed not as moral defects but as maladaptive strategies of emotional management [16, 17].

Yet even these models—rich in affect, development, and neurobiology—tend to overlook the *embodied signs* of dysregulation: the subtle, sensory-based micro-behaviors that foreshadow or accompany externalized distress. One such sign, we argue, is *taste*.

Taste is not trivial. Research shows that food preferences are shaped by personality traits [18], regulatory tendencies [19], and reward sensitivity [20]. A preference for sweet, fatty, or bitter flavors may seem like a matter of palate—but it can mirror patterns of impulsivity, aggression, or emotional avoidance.

If traditional theories explain delinquency by looking at structure and emerging ones by examining internal states, we propose a third lens: *embodied regulation*. Taste—what is craved, rejected, or overused—can serve as a behavioral fingerprint of a youth's emotional architecture. For example, adolescents with heightened impulsivity or low distress tolerance tend to overconsume sweet and fatty foods, using them as emotional anesthetics [19, 21]. In contrast, those exhibiting emotional detachment or anhedonia—often seen in internalizing profiles masked by externalizing behavior—may reject sweet flavors altogether, signaling a blunted reward system [22]. These divergent patterns are not random; they reflect underlying neuropsychological profiles and emotional coping styles, making taste a meaningful proxy for emotional regulation dynamics. It reveals how the nervous system seeks stability, where language and reflection fail.

What adolescents crave may reveal how they cope, how they break, and how they fight. Delinquency is rarely just about breaking rules—it's about regulating intensity. And in youth with limited tools for self-soothing, even taste becomes a strategy.

Adolescents eat to comfort, to rebel, to belong. They reject or pursue taste as a way to claim identity, regulate arousal, or push back against systems they cannot control. What seems like a snack may be a signal. What seems like appetite may be anxiety dressed in sugar.

2.1 Sweet taste, impulsivity, and behavioral disorders

Sweetness is not just a sensory preference—it is a behavioral signal that reflects how the adolescent nervous system responds to reward and stress. For instance, heightened preference for sweet flavors has been linked to increased impulsivity, reward sensitivity, and emotion-driven eating [19, 20]. Conversely, a rejection of sweetness in delinquent youth may indicate emotional numbing or blunted reward responsivity—markers often associated with trauma or depressive symptoms [22]. These patterns suggest that sweet taste functions not merely as hedonic choice, but as an affective indicator of underlying regulatory style. In other words, what the mouth craves may mirror what the mind cannot hold.

Experimental findings support this link. Weafer et al. [20] showed that individuals who reported higher pleasure in response to concentrated sucrose were also more likely to choose immediate over delayed rewards in delay-discounting tasks—a behavioral hallmark of impulsivity. Their results suggest a shared neurobiological sensitivity: individuals prone to impulsive behaviors may derive exaggerated hedonic value from sweet tastes, reinforcing a pattern of immediate gratification [20].

These preferences are not isolated quirks. The results of a systematic review showed that sweet taste liking correlates with stable personality traits, including high neuroticism and emotional instability. Interestingly, while sweet preferences were also associated with agreeableness—perhaps echoing cultural metaphors of kindness—they co-occurred with traits like urgency and poor affect modulation,

especially under stress [21]. It is known that personality traits influence eating styles and food choices and eating styles influence food choices [18, 23]. Across time and place, people have used 'foodways' to construct, express, and negotiate their identity [24]. Interactions of food components with human biology and with social and eating context give rise, in some predictable ways, to relatively stable individual food likes or taste preferences [22].

Clinical and developmental data reinforce the picture. Children with ADHD—who exhibit chronic impulsivity and dysregulation—consume significantly more sugar-dense foods than their neurotypical peers [22]. This consumption is not merely a lifestyle factor; it reflects a neurobehavioral feedback loop. Excessive sugar intake contributes to rapid glucose fluctuations and dopamine spikes, followed by crashes that impair self-regulation and increase irritability [20]. As a result, sweet consumption both reflects and fuels dysregulation.

Large-scale studies add further weight. Do et al. [19], examining European adolescents, found that those with high emotion-driven impulsivity ("negative urgency") reported greater tendencies toward emotional eating and a marked preference for sweet and fatty foods. Similarly, excessive sugar intake was found to be linked to multiple externalizing behaviors in teens across 26 countries, including aggression, bullying, and risk-taking [25].

In this light, sweet taste is more than indulgence. In emotionally vulnerable adolescents, it becomes both a *marker* of impulsive temperament and a *modulator* of behavioral volatility. It is consumed not just for pleasure but for relief—from tension, from under-regulated affect, from inner chaos.

2.2 Taste preferences and antisocial personality traits

Taste is rarely treated as data in psychological profiling. And yet, the flavors adolescents gravitate toward—or reject—may mirror deep affective configurations. Sweetness, in particular, is biologically rewarding [20, 26] and culturally coded to signal comfort, safety, and relational closeness [18, 27]. A preference for sweetness may thus reflect a high reward sensitivity—but also a craving for emotional soothing in emotionally vulnerable youth [19, 25]. Taste-related terms like bitter, spicy, sour, and sweet are used to describe behavior and individual differences. People invoke sweetness metaphors in the interpersonal context (e.g., nicknames for romantic partners "honey," "sugar," "sweetie," and "sweetheart") [22, 27]. Because sweet tastes are especially palatable and pleasant, the word sweet is often used to characterize a kind action, such as a compliment or the granting of a favor or it is used to describe a nice, friendly, and caring person [22].

Neuropsychological models suggest that individuals drawn to intense sweet sensations tend to score higher on impulsivity scales, displaying a heightened drive for immediate [20, 22] gratification. In some studies, these individuals also show elevated neuroticism and reduced agreeableness—traits linked to emotional volatility and poor interpersonal regulation [25]. In contrast, a preference for bitter flavors has been associated with antisocial traits such as manipulativeness, callousness, or even psychopathy [18]. These findings give empirical grounding to common metaphors: "sweet" people as kind and cooperative, "bitter" ones as emotionally hardened.

This dynamic is further supported by research showing that personality styles significantly modulate both conformity and rebellion in dietary choices—individuals may eat according, against, or above prevailing food norms, as a reflection of psychological adaptation or resistance [26].

But taste is not just a personality mirror—it is also a coping mechanism. In emotionally vulnerable youth, sweetness becomes strategy. Adolescents facing anxiety, anger, or emotional overload often turn to high-fat, high-sugar foods for comfort [25]. This pattern, known as emotional eating, has been linked to high negative emotion variability ("emodiversity") and poor affect modulation [28]. The logic is neurochemical: sugar-induced dopamine release brings short-term relief, followed by metabolic crashes that worsen mood and reduce self-control [20].

This cycle—soothing through sweetness, crashing into reactivity—can amplify preexisting behavioral vulnerabilities. The excessive sugar intake among adolescents predicted a range of risk behaviors, including aggression and bullying [25]. In this light, taste is both *symptom and amplifier*: it reflects affective dysregulation and feeds it in return.

Notably, a Romanian comparative study revealed that adolescents under probation exhibited significantly lower liking for sweet and sweet-fat flavors than their non-delinquent peers—a finding that complicates the usual association between delinquency and hedonic overconsumption [22] (the empirical data cited here were published previously as part of a comparative study on taste preferences in Romanian youth; see Petre and Atalay [22]). This pattern may point to *blunted reward sensitivity*, emotional detachment, or anhedonia—hallmarks of internalizing disturbance masked by externalizing behavior [22]. The rejection of sweetness, symbolically and literally, may express a refusal of vulnerability itself.

Taste, then, becomes part of identity work. Youth involved in delinquent behavior often reject what culture codes as soft, delicate, or nurturing. Sweetness is not just a taste—it is a metaphor for emotional openness. In certain peer subcultures, rejecting sweet flavors can help construct a "hard" persona, aligned with power, control, and social defiance. As Smoyer and Blankenship [24] observed in prison settings, food becomes performance: a medium for expressing status, defiance, or affiliation [24]. This chapter partially builds on a comparative empirical study conducted with 56 Romanian young men (21 on probation and 35 controls), using the internally validated *PrefQuest* questionnaire [29] to assess recalled taste preferences across four flavor profiles (sweet, fatty-sweet, salty, fatty-salty). Significant group differences were found for sweet and fatty-sweet preferences, suggesting that delinquent youth exhibit distinct sensory reward profiles [22].

Taken together, these findings suggest that taste preferences are more than dietary quirks. They are *embodied signals*, shaped by personality, affect regulation, and social identity. Reading them allows us to access a hidden layer of psychological life—one that speaks not in words, but in cravings, rejections, and silent negotiations with vulnerability.

2.3 Food preferences as emotional compensation and identity

Food does more than nourish—it narrates. For adolescents navigating instability, exclusion, or emotional turmoil, food becomes a way to assert identity, regulate affect, and reclaim control [23, 27]. In this context, what they eat—or refuse to eat—speaks volumes.

Taste is deeply symbolic. Within youth cultures, food choices often serve as markers of affiliation, resistance, or self-definition. The teen who rejects "dainty" sweet foods in favor of sour or spicy ones may be performing toughness, disavowing vulnerability coded as "sweetness." These embodied performances align with ethnographic findings in carceral contexts, where food becomes a medium for power, belonging, or emotional restoration [23].

But food is not just a symbolic tool—it is an emotional instrument. Offering a treat to make peace, reaching for sugar in sadness, bonding over snacks: these are socially learned rituals of regulation. Adolescents absorb them early. And when emotional scaffolding is weak—as is often the case in delinquent populations—food steps in as an accessible regulator [28]. The *emotional compensation model* posits that palatable food is used to fill affective voids left by unmet psychological needs [30]. The candy bar becomes not just a sweet but a self-soothing device.

Hedonic eating takes this further. It refers to consumption not driven by hunger but by the pursuit of pleasure and relief from emotional strain. High-sugar, high-fat foods activate dopaminergic pathways associated with reward and mood elevation [20, 22]. In emotionally dysregulated youth—particularly those with conduct issues—hedonic eating may serve as a strategy of *short-term emotional anesthesia*. But the physiological costs are high: blood glucose fluctuations and insulin dysregulation can worsen mood swings, impair attention, and reduce inhibitory control [19, 20].

Diet, in this sense, becomes both *mirror and modulator*: it reflects psychological distress and perpetuates it. Adolescents with high sugar intake report higher rates of aggression, bullying, and other externalizing behaviors [25]. These patterns suggest a feedback loop in which dysregulation leads to maladaptive eating, which in turn exacerbates impulsivity and behavioral reactivity.

Yet this insight opens a window for intervention. Petre and Atalay [22] argue that food can be leveraged not only diagnostically but therapeutically. If a delinquent adolescent finds genuine enjoyment and calm in preparing a smoothie—or receiving a balanced, pleasurable meal—that moment can offer symbolic repair. Programs that incorporate cooking, nutrition education, or structured meal sharing have been shown to enhance mood regulation, prosocial behavior, and autonomy [23, 27].

Food, then, is not trivial. It is affect made edible, and identity made visible. For delinquent youth, paying attention to what they eat may reveal how they feel—and how they hope to heal.

3. The body as data: Expanding forensic insight

Traditional forensic psychology privileges what can be verbalized or externally observed: behavioral reports, diagnostic criteria, and structured interviews. Yet adolescents, especially those involved in delinquent behavior, often communicate their distress *nonverbally*—through actions, postures, and sensory patterns that precede or bypass language. Taste preferences, often dismissed as trivial or irrelevant, may in fact function as *embodied affective signals*, revealing how young people regulate emotion, seek safety, or construct identity when verbal self-reflection is inaccessible [24, 31].

The adolescent body becomes a site of negotiation: between internal tension and external expectation, between emotional chaos and symbolic control. In this frame, food consumption—what is craved, ritualized, and avoided—acts as *data*, not noise. This aligns with embodied cognition models, which argue that psychological processing is not separate from the body but grounded in it [32, 33]. Cravings for sweetness, aversion to softness, and compulsive or chaotic eating styles may each index affective patterns—impulsivity, anhedonia, trauma-based hypervigilance—that do not always appear in clinical interviews.

In juvenile assessment, this shift is not cosmetic—it is critical. Adolescents with externalizing profiles may underreport distress or lack the insight to articulate

emotion–behavior links [17]. But their bodies speak. A youth who rejects sweet foods may not be making a dietary choice but enacting a relational stance: rejecting nurturance, performing resilience, and embodying control. Integrating this kind of behavioral decoding into forensic work allows clinicians to move beyond static risk categories and access *dynamic regulation profiles,* which are more predictive of treatment response [34, 35].

There are also clinical implications. Programs that incorporate *embodied regulation strategies*—such as mindful cooking, sensory-focused group meals, or even structured discussions about food rituals—can support adolescents in reconstructing their relationship with safety, reward, and relational trust [23, 27]. Digital tools may further enhance these efforts. Systematic reviews have shown that mobile- and internet-based interventions can effectively support emotional regulation and relapse prevention, particularly in vulnerable youth populations [36]. Embedding food-based practices within such frameworks could extend their reach and impact. These interventions are low-cost, culturally adaptable, and deeply humanizing. Recent studies suggest that structured interventions incorporating mindful cooking, sensory-based eating rituals, or group-based culinary activities can enhance emotional regulation and social connectedness among at-risk adolescents, offering low-threshold pathways to behavioral change and relational repair [22, 24, 30].

Expanding forensic insight means expanding what we are willing to read as meaningful. Taste, gesture, ritual—these are not peripheral. They are *primary data* when language falters. By tuning into the body, we do not abandon rigor—we deepen it. We learn to listen where youth are already speaking: not just in their words, but in what they reach for when they are alone, what they refuse when offered care, and what they consume when no one is watching.

4. Conclusion

Taste preferences—particularly for sweet and fatty foods—are more than palate-based habits. They are affective expressions shaped by personality, emotion regulation capacity, and developmental context. In adolescents, especially those at risk for delinquency, taste can act as both *symptom and signal*: a sweet tooth may reflect impulsivity or serve as an emotional crutch, while aversion to sweetness may reveal anhedonia, identity performance, or a rejection of vulnerability.

Far from trivial, these patterns offer clinically relevant insights. Validated instruments such as PrefQuest provide a structured way to assess taste preferences and detect subtle affective profiles that might otherwise remain hidden [27, 37]. Differences in preference between delinquent and non-delinquent youth support models where *hedonic eating* is a marker—and in some cases a modulator—of emotional dysregulation [21, 28].

Importantly, food consumption reflects *dynamic regulation*, not static traits. Longitudinal data show that adolescents experiencing mood instability or stress reactivity tend to increase their intake of sugary or fatty foods during emotional lows—illustrating a loop where emotion drives consumption and consumption, in turn, impairs regulation [19, 20]. These feedback cycles not only reinforce impulsivity but may entrench maladaptive behaviors over time.

This recognition opens the door to *practical, low-threshold interventions*. Addressing an adolescent's emotional diet—both literally, through nutrition, and figuratively, through meaningful sources of reward—can stabilize mood and reduce

aggression. Teaching young people to experience regulation through food differently—not as escape, but as presence—may complement broader rehabilitative strategies.

In short, taste is not a metaphor—it is information. When carefully decoded, it can reveal a great deal about how young people feel, cope, and act. Integrating this perspective into psychological and forensic assessment may allow for more nuanced prevention and treatment efforts—rooted not just in what youth say or do, but in what they crave, avoid, and ritualize at the most basic level of experience.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Chapter 2

Personality's Dark Side: Decoding the Traits That Fuel Violence and Aggression

Hakan Erkutlu and Jamel Chafra

Abstract

This chapter delves into the multifaceted relationship between personality, psychopathology, and violence and that an integrated model of violence perspective on the importance of individual differences in aggression explains violent behavior. It analyzes the Big Five personality traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—as fundamental components influencing behavioral tendencies. Next, it extends the discussion beyond the most commonly described Big Five personality dimensions to other constructs (e.g., impulsivity, cognitive biases, reactivity to emotion, and hostility), often a source of aggravation of aggression and an obstacle to understanding pathways to violence. The Dark Triad (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy) is an ensemble of maladaptive dispositions that are closely associated with antisocial and violent behaviors. This chapter considers the interactions among personality, contextual setting, and situational antecedents to understand how ecological and social factors, combined with individual variation, can increase or decrease the likelihood of aggression. It synthesizes the literature on personality, psychopathology, and context dynamics to overview the mechanisms shaping aggression. This study seeks to enhance theoretical understanding of the intricate factors influencing aggression, providing a solid basis for future research and conceptual advancement.

Keywords: personality, the Big Five personality traits, impulsivity, cognitive biases, emotional reactivity, hostility, the Dark Triad, narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, provocation, retaliation, social learning

1. Introduction

Aggressive and violent behavior remains a critical concern in contemporary society, with significant implications for public health, safety, and interpersonal relationships. From domestic abuse to school bullying and workplace violence, aggressive behavior poses a pervasive threat to individuals and communities [1]. According to recent studies, most violent incidents can be traced back to individuals with specific personality profiles, highlighting the need for a deeper exploration of this relationship [2, 3].

This chapter introduces a novel framework that integrates biological, psychological, and social factors to explain how personality traits interact with environmental triggers to produce aggressive and violent outcomes. Converging on the interactions between stability, cognitive and affective mechanisms, and situation provokers, we seek to illuminate the routes to aggressive and violent behavior and to contribute to understanding avenues of prevention and intervention of such behaviors.

Underlying this investigation are the Big Five personality dimensions of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, the basic components in characterizing individual differences. These traits offer a route to investigate the role of discrete innate factors in certain behaviors, for example, impulsivity/affect reactivity, in aggression. Apart from these fundamental dimensions, we also describe other important ones (impulsivity, cognitive biases, hostility, and emotional dysregulation), which in themselves frequently have increased aggression and thus can complicate the relationship between personality and violence as a whole.

In this chapter, we included the Dark Triad—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—a constellation of maladaptive traits about personality demonstrably associated with antisocial and aggressive behavior. These personality qualities, including scheming, callousness, and lack of empathy, exemplify how such maladaptive personality qualities can cause aggression. Yet, personality alone does not operate in isolation. Contextual risk factors, such as social context, cultural context, and immediate stimuli, interact with and increase or decrease violence risk. Understanding these exchanges to design effective prophylaxis and intervention strategies is also of special importance.

Aggressive and violent behavior represents a significant societal challenge with far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities. Despite decades of research, the precise role of personality in shaping such behavior remains incompletely understood [4]. While previous studies have identified broad traits like Big Five personality, impulsivity, and hostility as predictors of aggression, less attention has been paid to how these traits interact with situational and environmental factors [5]. This chapter addresses this gap by presenting a novel, integrative framework that combines insights from psychology, neuroscience, and criminology. Doing so not only advances our theoretical understanding of the personality-aggression link but also provides practical implications for reducing violence in various settings.

2. The Big Five: A framework for understanding aggressive personalities

The Big Five personality traits, or the Five Factor Model, constitute a prominent psychological framework for comprehending human personality, significantly influencing aggressive and violent actions. These traits are Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Each dimension is continuous; hence, people live somewhere within the dimensions of every trait. This psycholinguistic model rests on a vast number of years of research while forming the basis around which the meaning of personality can and does vary across cultures and situations. It is commonly applied in psychology, business, and personal growth to gain insights into behaviors, choices, and interpersonal relations [6].

Openness is the degree to which a person is susceptible to new experiences, thoughts, and beliefs. Those with high openness have been described as creative, curious, imaginative, and highly appreciative of art, excitement, and the unconventional [7]. They are also known to search for novels and enjoy speculating about abstract

concepts. In contrast, highly rigid individuals may be drawn to legibility, commonness, and practicality and lean toward traditionalism and concrete but not abstract concepts. Such a disposition is particularly relevant to creative and innovative fields such as arts, sciences, and entrepreneurship.

Conscientiousness is defined by self-mastery, organization, and high sense of responsibility. Individuals high in this trait are often found to be dependable, target-driven, and meticulous and are known to thrive in situations requiring planning and accuracy [8]. They are likely to stick to commitments and maintain high quality in their work and personal relations. On the other hand, people with low conscientiousness are likely to be spontaneous, yielding, and goal-free in a long-range view, which may cause disorganization or procrastination. This characteristic is commonly linked to academic and professional success.

Extraversion describes how much time a person has spent interacting with others, being sociable, and feeling energized by interaction. Extroverts shine in social environments, often searching for social situations and feeling comfortable being the center of attention. They are generally confident, talkative, and enthusiastic people who use external excitation to fuel themselves. In contrast, introverts are often quieter and solitary, prefer small groups, not massive parties, and may feel that social interactions are depleting [9]. Whereas extraversion is commonly described as a characteristic of leadership/networking skills, introversion is described as a characteristic of deep thinking/self-awareness.

Agreeableness reflects the extent to which an individual is compassionate, cooperative, and trusting in social encounters [10]. Individuals high in agreeableness tend to be empathic, friendly, and helpful, making great team members and mediators. They value harmony and are skilled at resolving conflicts. Individuals with low agreeableness tend to be competitive, skeptical, or assertive and will value their own needs more seriously than others. While high agreeableness fosters positive relationships, lower levels of this trait can be advantageous in situations that require tough decision-making or negotiation.

Neuroticism is the propensity for negative feelings, including anxiety, tristesse, and anger. Feelings of stress and emotional instability are more common in patients with high neuroticism, characterized by a tendency to react strongly to stressors or adversity. They may suffer from issues of self-sabotage and anxiety, which will manifest in their overall health. Conversely, those low in neuroticism are generally more emotionally stable, resilient, and able to maintain calm even in difficult situations [11]. The elucidation of this disposition is of great importance for tackling mental health issues and the development of coping mechanisms to manage stress and emotional difficulties efficiently.

The Big Five personality dimensions have the potential to shed light on the likelihood of violent and aggressive behavior in an individual [12]. Empirical studies have determined that low agreeableness and high neuroticism have a specific association with an increased propensity for aggression. Those with low agreeableness have less concern for harmonious interpersonal relations, exhibit less empathy, and become overbearing in behavior; such traits can, therefore, result in hostile and confrontational behavior in interpersonal relations. High neuroticism, with its concomitant emotionality and susceptibility to feelings of anger and frustration, can intensify aggressive behavior, with such persons tending to have poor emotion regulation skills. High conscientiousness and agreeableness, in contrast, have been universally linked with reduced aggression, with such traits creating interpersonal harmony, enhancing relational harmony, and allowing for friendly social relations to develop.

2.1 Agreeableness

Agreeableness is a powerful antidote to aggression. Characterized by empathy, compassion, collaboration, and harmonious tendencies, agreeableness lessens aggressive tendencies. More pleasant individuals are more likely to respect the opinions of others, show care for their well-being, and settle conflicts peacefully [13]. This compassionate and cooperative strategy reduces the likelihood of antagonistic interactions and lessens aggression.

Scholarly research has established a strong correlation between agreeableness and reduced aggression. Studies repeatedly show that less pleasant people are more likely to be aggressive, including relational, verbal, and physical aggression [14]. Individuals, characterized by low agreeableness, respond impulsively to provocations, perceive ambiguities threateningly, and react with retaliatory behavior. In contrast, high agreeableness is characterized by increased emotion regulation, prosocial behavior expression, and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relations, all of which work toward lessening aggressivity.

The impact of agreeableness in lessening aggressivity works through several channels. First, it generates empathic feelings and a state of perspective-taking, allowing an individual to understand and empathize with others' feelings and moods. Empathic awareness generates humane and less destructive behavior and lessens intentionally hurtful behavior toward others. Second, agreeableness promotes cooperation and prosocial behavior, generating beneficial consequences for involved parties, simultaneously lessening competition and hostile behavior and prioritizing group welfare over individual gain.

Third, agreeableness promotes trust and positive interpersonal relations, generating a social environment that disfavors hostile behavior. As long as persons perceive that they are respected, valued, and supported, they will less often use hostile behavior to obtain desired ends or vent frustrations. High social cohesion and a supportive community can effectively counteract hostility by providing alternative channels for expressing feelings and resolving conflicts.

2.2 Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness, a crucial aspect of the Big Five personality model, significantly regulates behavior and affects an individual's inclination toward violence. Conscientiousness, defined by self-discipline, responsibility, and deliberation, establishes a foundation for impulse control, essential in reducing aggression and averting violent behavior [15]. Individuals with high levels of conscientiousness are typically more reflective and intentional in their behaviors, weighing the repercussions before acting and demonstrating increased self-control when confronted with provocation. The capacity to regulate impulses safeguards against aggression, diminishing the probability of impulsive violent eruptions.

Conversely, low conscientiousness is frequently linked to impulsivity, characterized by the inclination to act without considering the potential repercussions. This deficiency in impulse regulation elevates the risk of violence manifested in different forms, ranging from imprudent driving to explosive aggression. Individuals with lower conscientiousness may be more easily triggered, more prone to anger, and less adept at managing their feelings when conflict or frustration arises, thereby increasing their propensity for violent actions [16].

A mounting corpus of research corroborates the connection between violence and conscientiousness deficiency. Studies have correlated low conscientiousness with a spectrum of aggressive actions, spanning criminal behavior, spousal abuse, and physical assaults [17]. Furthermore, findings indicate that diminished conscientiousness may amplify the impact of other variables that predispose individuals to violence, including substance dependence and antisocial behavior.

By examining how conscientiousness affects several important systems, we can comprehend how conscientiousness affects violence. Self-regulation skills are often superior in conscientious people, enabling them to control their impulses, regulate their emotions, and settle disputes amicably. They also respect others' rights and boundaries while adhering to social norms and laws. Respect for social order reduces the probability of acting antisocial or violent. Moreover, conscientious people are less prone to act impulsively in ways endangering their future since they are more goal-oriented and consider long-term consequences.

2.3 Neuroticism

Neuroticism is defined by a propensity for emotional instability, negative affectivity, and increased sensitivity to stress. Individuals with high neuroticism exhibit an increased susceptibility to a range of negative feelings, such as anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, and guilt [18]. Emotional volatility can manifest in mood fluctuations, irritability, and reduced stress tolerance. While neuroticism is not a destructive personality trait, its aggressiveness orientation deserves careful examination and consideration.

The neuroticism/aggressiveness relation stems from increased emotional reactivity, a feature of neuroticism. In general, high-neuroticism people have a reduced tolerance for dealing with negative feelings and can respond with increased intensity to perceived frustrations and threats. Greater sensitization to sources of stress can contribute to a rapid intensification of anger and an increased propensity for aggressivity [14].

Additionally, neuroticism can impair an individual's ability to control emotions effectively. People with high neuroticism scores may have difficulty controlling their anger under difficult circumstances, manifesting as impulsive and aggressive behaviors. This can be a barrier to their ability to reason, assess risks, and choose prosocial actions in situations of conflict.

Neuroticism has been linked to various forms of aggression in the literature, including verbal, physical, and relational aggression [19]. In addition, neuroticism may combine with other aggressors' risk factors, such as impulsivity and aggressive attribution bias, thereby increasing the chances of violent acts.

It is important to understand that not everyone with high neuroticism will act aggressively. A complex interplay of contextual stimuli, social learning, and personal experiences shapes how aggression manifests. However, by increasing emotional reactivity and compromising emotional regulation, neuroticism increases vulnerability to aggression.

2.4 Extraversion and openness

Although agreeableness and conscientiousness are often highlighted as the core personality traits contributing to aggression, two other aspects of the Big Five have

the most interesting and surprising links to aggression. Sides, usually relating to a desire for extraversion and novelty, can, contextually, play a part in aggression in a complex and nuanced manner.

Extraversion (sociability, enthusiasm, seeking stimulation) can express itself positively in prosocial and aggressive behaviors. Although commonly described as popular and easygoing, the characteristics of assertiveness and seeking dominance in extroverts can lead to certain conditions of aggression. If extroverted persons have their social standing threatened, they can fall back on aggressive approaches to preserve social standing [9].

The tendency to be stimulated and excited on the extraverted side of the spectrum can also elevate the risk of aggression, possibly leading to actions in risky situations. This tendency to sensation-seeking can be illustrated in countless ways, e.g., reckless driving and abuse of substances leading to impulsive and violent acts.

Aggression may appear to be driven by an unrealistic precipitant, the openness to experience phenom, a trait encompassing receptivity to novelty and unusual new experiences, creativity, and inquisitiveness. In certain contexts, it has been shown that aggression can be increased by the openness of a person's disposition. Persons with high openness are less restrictive in their adherence to conventional norms and willing to test expectations for societies or the [20] authorities. While often advantageous, this rebellious tendency can lead to conflict and aggression when it clashes with established regulations or societal norms.

3. Beyond the Big Five: Other traits that fan the flames of aggression

Beyond personality, several psychological factors have a significant impact on violent and aggressive behavior. Cognitive distortions, most notably hostile attribution bias, have a key role in that they cause an individual to perceive a neutral, even an ambiguous, act as a deliberately hostile act and, therefore, an act that triggers an attack [21]. In addition, emotion dysregulation is a strong catalyst for increased aggression; a failure to manage strong feelings such as anger or frustration effectively can cause an individual to respond impulsively and disproportionately to real or perceived affronts [22]. Hostility, an inbuilt state of resentfulness and suspiciousness toward others, often aggressively expresses itself, with hostile persons predisposed toward antagonistic and confrontational behavior [23]. Impulsivity, a lack of forethought, and a lack of self-control heighten such behavior in that impulsive persons act out violent impulses without regard for consequences [24].

3.1 Impulsivity

Aggression and violence often stem from impulsivity, which causes people to act without thinking about the results or effects. Impulsivity is not simple; it includes many parts, such as cognitive impulsivity (the ability to act without much thought) and behavior impulsivity (the habit of acting fast with little self-control). People with impulsive personalities are at a high risk of getting violent when they feel provoked or frustrated. They tend to ignore what might happen because of their actions.

Empirical studies in academic literature have supported a strong association between impulsivity and aggression in various studies [24]. High impulsivity has been linked with a high level of violent and aggressive behavior, including verbal and physical aggression as well as criminal behavior, in numerous studies [24]. Impulsivity

is a ubiquitous risk factor for violent behavior, and its association with aggressivity is supported by its long-term presence in a variety of demographics, including age, gender, and culture.

Many factors underlie the association between impulsivity and aggressivity. A prominent mechanism is deficient inhibitory control (defined as failure to self-regulate inappropriate and impulsive behavior). Impulsive control can be overreached, and, in turn, the impulsivity measures are controlled for by aggression, impulsivity thus leading to reactive and impulsive aggressive behavior [25]. Furthermore, impulsivity can be a bottleneck in decision-making in the sense that it causes an excessive weight to be given to immediate gratification of immediate reward relative to long-term consequences. This might make it more likely to present aggressive behavior even at the expense of negative outcomes.

3.2 Hostility

Hostility, a negative attitudinal disposition characterized by cynicism, mistrust, and an inclination to perceive others as malevolent and menacing, harms social interactions and increases the likelihood of aggression and violence. Individuals with high levels of hostility frequently see the environment suspiciously and antagonistically, quickly perceiving ambiguous social cues as hostile and responding with aggression even when a more benign reading is possible.

Scholarly research established a clear correlation between hostility and aggression. Individual, physical, and criminal aggression are behaviors more likely to be engaged in by people who demonstrate heightened hostility [26].

Several mechanisms influence the correlation between aggression and hostility. Biased information processing is a primary mechanism. Hostile individuals frequently exhibit a hostile attribution bias, seeing ambiguous social cues as purposefully antagonistic or menacing [27]. Individuals who are biased in this way may perceive hostility in others, react with aggression, and incite more hostility, intensifying conflict and increasing the likelihood of violence.

Hostility can also elicit resentment and anger. Hostile individuals are more irritable and resentful and tend to seek revenge [28]. This dormant anger can readily surface as aggressive behavior when challenged with perceived injustice or provocation.

The repercussions of aggression motivated by hostility can be significant. Persistent hostility can result in strained relationships, social isolation, and a reduced quality of life. Furthermore, hostile aggression can lead to legal complications, physical injury, and emotional turmoil for both the perpetrator and the victim, establishing a detrimental cycle wherein the repercussions of aggression exacerbate feelings of animosity and elevate the probability of subsequent aggression.

3.3 Cognitive biases

Cognitive biases, though complex in origin, often worsen aggression and violence in subtle yet significant ways. These biases, being a part of how humans process information, can skew our view of the world, leading to wrong judgments, a higher chance of aggressive and violent behavior, and misunderstanding of social signals [29].

The hostile attribution bias is one of the most prominent cognitive biases related to aggression. This bias predisposes individuals to interpret ambiguous social cues as hostile or threatening even when alternative interpretations are available [27]. For instance, a person might take an unplanned knock in a crowded corridor to be

intentional aggression, which elicits an aggressive response in that person. This bias can create a self-fulfilling cycle. Humans behave due to misinterpretations, leading to conflict with others and aggravation of the conflicts.

The fundamental attribution error is one of the main biases of overemphasizing dispositional reasons (personality traits) and underemphasizing situational reasons for explaining behavior in others [30]. This can lead to a tendency to ascribe negative events to the other person, even when such events are due to external factors. For example, if someone drives you into the back of the car, you might blame their actions on an absolute lack of politeness rather than think through potentially relevant situational predictors like whether they are late for a very important meeting. This bias can be exploitative and engender resentment, with a consequent increase in the likelihood of punitive counterpoising.

The self-serving bias contributes to aggression. This effect includes attributing our successes to internal (e.g., ability) and our failures to external (e.g., misfortune) causes [31], leading to a sense of entitlement and a tendency to place the blame for our own failures on other people and creating a climate favorable to conflict and violence. For example, when an individual loses a game, they may attribute their defeat to the referee or their opponent instead of recognizing their deficiencies in skill, resulting in frustration and possibly aggressive conduct.

Furthermore, confirmation bias (i.e., the tendency whereby humans seek out information confirming bias in beliefs) can make aggression worse by enhancing hostility-based stereotypes and prejudice [32]. This biased thinking makes rationalizing aggression toward particular communities easier. For example, a person with prejudiced beliefs about an ethnic group might only pay attention to information confirming their biases, disregarding anything that challenges them, hence, becoming more likely to act aggressively toward members of that group.

3.4 Emotional reactivity

Although causes of aggression and violence are complex and multidimensional, emotional reactivity is often a major trigger. This concerns the intensity and speed of an individual's emotional responses, particularly anger, frustration, and fear [33]. When presented with perceived provocations or threats, people with high emotional reactivity are prone to rapid and severe emotional arousal, which heightens their likelihood of engaging in violent and aggressive behaviors. An unstable internal condition that readily presents as this heightened sensitivity to emotional stimuli can cause external aggression.

Scholarly studies have established a strong link between emotional reactivity and aggression. Studies have consistently shown that individuals who experience stronger emotional reactions tend to be more prone to acting out violently and aggressively. This includes resorting to physical or verbal aggression and even engaging in criminal acts of violence [34].

Several factors affect how emotional reactions relate to aggression. One main factor is poor emotional control. People who react to emotions often struggle to manage their intense feelings, which can lead them to act without thinking in emotional situations [35]. You might see this trouble with emotional control in people who get angry, tend to lash out, or cannot calm down once they are upset.

Furthermore, emotional reactivity can influence people's perception and interpretation of social cues. Those with high emotional reactivity might be more likely to perceive unclear social cues as hostile or menacing, heightening their sense of danger

and making them more likely to react aggressively [27]. This can establish a self-reinforcing cycle wherein reactive aggression provokes hostility from others, intensifying emotional reactivity and heightening the likelihood of subsequent aggression.

When emotional reactivity leads to aggression, the consequences can be severe. Strong emotions can exacerbate conflicts, damage relationships, and have legal consequences if impulsive reactions are triggered. Additionally, behaviors that have long-lasting negative consequences for both the victim and the perpetrator may result from a lack of emotional regulation linked to increased emotional reactivity. Physical harm, emotional trauma, and ongoing psychological difficulties could be among the repercussions.

4. Delving into darkness: The dark triad and aggressive behavior

The Dark Triad comprises three separate yet interconnected personality characteristics: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. These characteristics are labeled "dark" due to their frequent association with socially undesirable actions. People who score high in these traits typically place their own wants and requirements ahead of others, often resorting to manipulation or exploitation of those close to them. Understanding that the Dark Triad is not an all-or-nothing proposition, exhibiting some of these traits does not automatically indicate a clinical personality disorder diagnosis. Let us briefly break down each of the components:

Narcissism is significantly linked to aggressive and violent actions, especially when individuals feel their self-esteem or superiority is threatened. Reactive aggression is frequently displayed by narcissistic individuals when facing criticism, rejection, or failure, as such experiences threaten their exaggerated self-image and provoke defensive aggression [28]. This is known as "threatened egotism," where narcissists are more prone to react aggressively when their inflated self-perception is challenged. Furthermore, narcissism is associated with proactive aggression, as individuals might employ intimidation or coercion to keep their dominance and control over others [36]. Studies show that narcissistic traits, such as a sense of entitlement and exploitativeness, predict both physical and relational aggression, particularly in competitive and interpersonal contexts [37].

Machiavellianism is about manipulation, strategic thinking, and a cynical view of others. It often goes hand-in-hand with aggressive and even violent behavior, especially when it helps someone get ahead. People high in Machiavellianism are prone to using instrumental aggression, which means they will use underhanded, manipulative tactics and even lie or exploit others to reach their goals [38]. Research shows that Machiavellianism is linked to direct aggression, like outright confrontations, and indirect aggression, like using social manipulation or sabotage to hurt others [39]. Moreover, someone with a strong Machiavellian streak might resort to violence if they see it as a way to stay in control or on top, particularly in situations where a lot is at stake or in a highly competitive environment [40]. Their violence, albeit frequently strategic rather than spontaneous, may be detrimental since they value self-interest over ethical considerations.

Due to its primary characteristics of emotional detachment, lack of empathy, and impulsivity, psychopathy, a major attribute of the Dark Triad, is one of the most robust predictors of aggressive and violent conduct. Individuals with high levels of psychopathy are more prone to engage in both reactive aggressiveness, induced by anger or frustration, and proactive violence, which is planned and goal-directed [41].

Their lack of regret and empathy enables them to cause harm to others without feeling guilty, rendering them especially dangerous in interpersonal and social circumstances [42]. Psychopathy has repeatedly been linked to a higher risk of criminal activity, physical violence, and instrumental aggressiveness since persons with this feature frequently employ force and intimidation to attain their goals [43]. Furthermore, their impulsivity and lack of behavioral control increase the likelihood of violent outbursts, particularly when they sense a danger or challenge [44].

5. Personality, context, and the path to violence

The study of violence provides a complicated arena for the age-old nature vs. nurture argument. It is crucial to understand that the road to violence is rarely, if ever, fully dictated by personality, even if certain individuals may have innate characteristics heightening their tendency for aggression. An individual's trajectory and chance of participating in violent action are significantly shaped by context, which includes a wide range of environmental, social, and situational elements.

The home environment, peer groups, social level, and cultural standards are just a few examples of the many variables that are considered contextual factors. It has been determined that exposure to domestic violence, abuse, and neglect throughout infancy are important risk factors for future violence [45]. These early events create vulnerability to aggression that may last into adulthood and impede health development. Similarly, exposure to violence in the community, whether by watching it or being its victim, might raise the risk of an individual committing violence themselves [46]. These environmental influences and individual personality features shape a person's worldview and behavioral decisions.

Understanding how context and personality interact is essential to understanding the road to violence. Individuals may be more prone to aggression if they possess certain personality traits, but their surroundings heavily influence how these traits appear. For example, someone with high levels of impulsivity would be more likely to resort to violence if they were raised in a culture that encourages and normalizes aggression. However, suppose the same person is raised in a nurturing, prosocial environment. Through learning coping mechanisms, they may be able to steer clear of the path to violence.

Recognizing that the path to violence is not straight or predestined is crucial. Throughout their lives, people may exhibit different patterns of aggression depending on how their personalities interact with the changing environments they encounter. Adolescence can be a time of increased impulsivity and peer pressure, but it can also be a time when some people resort to violence. However, as they become older and their social situations alter, they may stop using violence [47]. A mix of early hardship, personality qualities, and continuous exposure to violence in their surroundings may cause some to display a more persistent pattern of violence.

5.1 Personality in context: The interplay of traits and situations

Aggression and violent behaviors are not solely the result of stable personality traits; rather, they emerge from the complex interaction between individual dispositions and environmental factors [48]. While certain traits predispose individuals to aggression, situational triggers such as provocation, frustration, retaliation, and social norms are crucial in determining whether aggression manifests [49].

This person-situation interactionist approach helps explain why not all individuals with aggressive tendencies act violently in every circumstance and why some seemingly non-aggressive individuals can become violent under specific conditions [16].

5.1.1 Provocation and frustration: Triggering the aggressive response

Aggressive behavior is often the result of external triggers, with provocation and frustration being two of the most well-established antecedents of aggression [49]. These factors interact with personality traits, emotional regulation, and situational cues, leading to violent responses in certain individuals.

5.1.1.1 Provocation and its role in aggression

Provocation is a stimulus or situation that provokes an aggressive/violent reaction, usually in response to a perceived insult, provocation, or challenge [49]. Aggressive and violent behaviors remain a major behavioral issue. There is evidence that provocation is one of the most frequent stimuli causing aggression as it increases emotional arousal and, at the same time, decreases self-regulation and the likelihood of behaving impulsively [33, 49].

The neuropsychological and affective mechanisms of provocation and aggression have been well described. Someone challenging us will create anger, which impedes our ability to think straight and maintain composure. At that time, we selectively pay attention to a few items and become more aggressive. The General Aggression Model [49] explains the role of being provoked in causing us to aggress because it changes our feelings and beliefs. This model predicts that when provoked, we become angry, our thoughts and emotions change for this to occur, and we become disposed to act aggressively. Moreover, if we are continuously insulted, we could become less sensitive to provocation cues to account for increased aggression over time [33].

Social and environmental factors exert an important impact on the reaction of an individual to provocation. Persons who grew up in a violent or aggressive environment are also likely to become aggressive in response to provocation. Cultural values and social rules can also influence how individuals perceive and react to provocation. For example, in some cultures, responding to provocation with aggression may be seen as a legitimate way to restore honor or acquire power, whereas this behavior might be inappropriate in other cultural contexts [14].

5.1.1.2 Frustration and its role in aggression

Frustration, the emotional state arising from the obstruction or restraint of goal-directed goal pursuit, has long been considered an important mediator of aggression. The frustration-aggression hypothesis first described by [50] suggests that frustration always results in aggression, which is also a direct outcome of frustration. Although this hypothesis has evolved with time, the fundamental idea that frustration can provoke aggression is still one of the foundations for human aggression studies.

Frustration can lead to aggression through several psychological mechanisms. One key mechanism is the experience of negative affect. Frustration leads to the experience of anger, irritation, and annoyance, which may decrease the individual's line of resistance to aggression [51]. For example, a motorist may get increasingly enraged while trapped in traffic and, ultimately, take his/her anger out on innocent vehicles.

Another mechanism is the feeling of unfairness during a frustrating situation. If people perceive that their goals are being thwarted unfairly, they will become more likely to react aggressively [52]. For example, a student who perceives a teacher's grading as biased may react with hostility toward the teacher.

Furthermore, frustration not only breaks down the ability to self-regulate but also deteriorates the ability to control impulses. Frustration has been identified to deplete cognitive resources, impairing aggressive responses' control [16]. It is obvious in contexts where people are naturally disposed to aggression because of personality characteristics (e.g., high trait anger or low self-regulation).

5.2 Social learning and culture: Shaping the expression of aggression

Aggressive and violent behaviors are not solely determined by individual characteristics and biological elements; social learning and cultural frameworks play a significant role in their development. Albert Bandura's social learning theory posits that people acquire behaviors by observing and imitating others, particularly influential figures like parents, peers, and media personalities from television and radio. In such a theoretical model, one can learn to become aggressive through modeling, in which one emulates actions one observes that have been positively reinforced in one's environment. For example, kids who witness violent behavior in their communities and at home will emulate such actions, for such behavior will become an acceptable and effective tool for resolving conflicts [49, 53].

Cultural norms and values are critical in shaping how aggression and violence are expressed and perceived. Different cultures have varying attitudes toward aggression, with some viewing it as a necessary means of asserting dominance or defending honor, while others discourage it in favor of non-violent conflict resolution. For instance, in cultures where honor is highly valued, individuals may be more likely to respond aggressively to provocation to maintain their social standing. In contrast, in societies where harmony and collectivism are valued, acts of aggression may be stigmatized and, therefore, less common. These cultural disparities emphasize the need for societal context when studying aggression and violence [54].

Aggressive behaviors are acquired through social learning in major ways through mass media and technological progress. Levels of aggressive behavior due to the consumption of violent media content (such as movies, interactive gaming, and posting materials on social networking pages) are related to increased aggression, especially in children and adolescents. Research shows that repetitive exposure to violent media can reduce a person's revulsion to violence, normalize acts of aggression, and reduce empathy for victims. This phenomenon is especially concerning because the availability of violent media is ubiquitous in the contemporary digital age. The General Aggression Model [49] hypothesizes that media violence can predispose aggressive behavior by facilitating aggressive thoughts, increasing excitement of effect, and providing contexts for aggression.

Other important factors in the social acquisition of aggression are family dynamics and parenting styles. Children raised in environments where aggression is used as the dominant mode of communication and/or control are at greater risk of developing aggression. On the other hand, parents can help to minimize children/adolescents' engagement in aggressive behavior (e.g., by providing role models and using non-violent modes of conflict resolution). The quality of parent–child relationships (e.g., warmth, support, and communication) also plays an important role in the ways that children learn to regulate and communicate their feelings [55].

Peer pressure is strongly motivational in adolescents, while individuals try to get approval from their peer group. Adolescents with peer groups led by aggression or violence are more likely to turn to aggression or violence. This is partly a function of the motivation to be accepted and achieve a social position. Peer pressure can also exacerbate aggressive tendencies, particularly when aggression is seen as a way to gain respect or assert dominance. Schools and communities promoting positive peer interactions and providing alternatives to aggression can help mitigate these effects [56, 57].

6. A lifespan perspective to aggressive and violent behaviors

Based on the lifespan perspective on aggressive and violent behaviors, personality plays a significant role in why people are different from each other, and it really shapes how aggression develops as we grow up. When we are little, we grow and change incredibly fast, and this is when the building blocks of who we are and how we act around others are established. Our temperament, like the foundation of our personality, that we are born with can make some kids more likely to act aggressively. Kids with tough temperaments, who feel things intensely, get upset easily, and have difficulty controlling themselves, might get frustrated and angry more often, making them more likely to lash out [58]. But these early years are also super important for learning and figuring out how to be around others. If parents are supportive, set clear rules, and teach their kids how to handle disagreements, it can make a big difference, even if a child has a challenging temperament, and help them learn to act kindly and thoughtfully toward others.

During adolescence, personality traits solidify and exert a greater influence on behavior. Characteristics linked to heightened aggression encompass impulsivity, diminished agreeableness, and elevated neuroticism [59]. Adolescents exhibiting these traits may be predisposed to engage in hazardous behaviors, respond aggressively to provocation, and struggle with anger management. Nonetheless, the social context is also pivotal. Peer influence, social standing, and romantic affiliations can profoundly affect the manifestation of aggression in adolescence.

Adulthood introduces novel challenges and responsibilities that can influence the course of aggression. Although aggression generally diminishes in adulthood, personality traits persist in shaping its manifestation. Individuals exhibiting high levels of trait anger, hostility, and impulsivity may exhibit a greater propensity for aggression across diverse contexts, including the workplace, intimate relationships, and incidents of road rage [49]. Nonetheless, adulthood presents opportunities for personal growth and development. Numerous individuals acquire enhanced anger management techniques, cultivate conflict-resolution abilities, and discover constructive methods to direct their energy.

Aggression diminishes further in late adulthood, although specific personality traits and health conditions may elevate the risk. Individuals experiencing cognitive decline, such as dementia, may exhibit heightened irritability, frustration, and agitation, potentially resulting in verbal or physical aggression [60]. Personality traits characterized by rigidity, negativity, and suspiciousness may also foster aggression in older adults. Nonetheless, numerous older adults sustain positive social connections, participate in significant activities, and exhibit resilience when confronted with challenges, which can mitigate the risk of aggression.

6.1 Childhood and adolescence: Early signs and developmental trajectories of aggression

Aggression, frequently regarded as an issue of adulthood, typically originates in childhood and adolescence. The formative years are crucial for developing social, emotional, and behavioral patterns associated with aggression.

Early childhood, generally ages 2 to 6, is a swift social and emotional development phase. Although a degree of aggression is typical at this stage, as children learn to assert themselves and manage social interactions, specific behaviors may indicate potential issues. This encompasses recurrent temper outbursts, physical aggression directed at peers or caregivers, challenges in sharing or taking turns, and destructive conduct [61]. These initial indicators may signify underlying emotional regulation, impulse control, or challenges with social skills.

Aggression may present differently as children progress into middle childhood (ages 6 to 12). Relational aggression, in terms of social manipulation and social exclusion, is becoming increasingly common, most notably in girls [62]. Physical aggression can lessen, but verbal aggression, including name-calling and teasing, can become even more severe. Kids with persistent aggression, at this stage of development, can have academic problems, become peer-rejected and socially isolated.

Adolescence, ages 12 to 18, is a period of tremendous biological, psychological, and social transformation that can shape the path of violent behavior. Variability in hormones, brain maturation, and increased independence can amplify emotionality and impulsivity. Peer and dating-related social factors can have a similar impact on violent behavior. Teenagers with early delinquent behavior, use of drugs, and affiliations with delinquent peers have a high chance of developing persistent aggression and committing delinquent behavior [47].

A variety of factors contribute to developing aggression during early life and adolescence. Personal factors, including personality, genetic factors, and cognitive capabilities, can impact a child's violent behavior. Home life, including parental techniques, family discord, and family experiences with domestic violence, can have a significant impact [55]. Community factors, such as living in a poor environment, community violence, and access to community assets, amplify the severity of violent behavior.

However, it is crucial to recognize that not all children exhibiting early signs of aggression will develop persistent aggression. The capacity to regulate wrath, develop prosocial skills, and effectively confront social challenges is a skill that many children develop. Protective factors, such as favorable school experiences, robust social support, and constructive relationships with caregivers, can reduce the risk of aggression and promote positive development [63].

6.2 Adulthood: Personality maturity, the potential for change, and aggression

Adulthood, typically linked to stability and established routines, is an unexpectedly dynamic phase for personality development. Although the foundation of personality is established in childhood, adulthood presents numerous opportunities for development, maturation, and substantial transformation.

Although lacking a definitive description, personality maturity typically denotes the cultivation of adaptive characteristics that empower individuals to manage the intricacies of adult existence adeptly. These encompass conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, and a sense of purpose and meaning [64]. These attributes

correlate with enhanced self-regulation, empathy, and prosocial conduct, all diminishing aggression and promoting positive relationships.

While personality traits generally stabilize in early adulthood, research indicates that substantial change remains feasible. Longitudinal studies indicate that personality continues to develop throughout adulthood, though at a diminished rate compared to adolescence [65]. These modifications frequently indicate a progression toward enhanced maturity, characterized by heightened conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability, resulting in diminished aggressive inclinations.

Multiple factors influence personality transformation and the diminishment of aggression in adulthood. Life experiences, including stable relationships, rewarding careers, and personal challenges, can compel individuals to adapt and develop. Social roles and expectations can influence personality development. For instance, parenthood may cultivate increased patience and empathy, diminishing impulsive aggression. Moreover, deliberate endeavors aimed at personal development, such as therapy or mindfulness techniques, can result in substantial alterations in personality and enhanced anger regulation.

The notion of "maturity principles" posits that personality development in adulthood progresses positively, making individuals more responsible, emotionally stable, and agreeable [59]. The maturation process is believed to be influenced by the escalating demands and complexities of adult roles, necessitating the development of enhanced self-control, empathy, and social responsibility, all of which contribute to reducing aggression.

Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that personality development and aggression in adulthood are not invariably linear or foreseeable. Life events, including trauma, unemployment, or relationship dissolution, can hinder the maturation process and potentially elevate aggression. Variations in resilience, coping mechanisms, and social support can affect the course of personality development and the manifestation of aggression.

The capacity for personality transformation in adulthood substantially impacts managing and mitigating aggression. Enhanced personality maturity correlates with improved emotional regulation, conflict resolution abilities, and prosocial conduct, leading to diminished aggressive behavior [66]. Moreover, adapting and evolving in response to life experiences can enhance resilience and foster personal growth, diminishing the propensity for aggression in difficult circumstances.

6.3 Aging and aggression: The role of cognitive decline and personality shifts

The aging process involves numerous physical, cognitive, and emotional transformations. Aging, frequently linked to wisdom and tranquility, can also present challenges that affect the manifestation of aggression.

Cognitive decline, a prevalent aspect of aging, can substantially affect regulating emotions and behavior. Dementia and Alzheimer's disease can compromise judgment, impulse regulation, and social cognition, rendering individuals more vulnerable to frustration, agitation, and aggression [60]. Challenges in memory, communication, and the comprehension of social cues may result in misinterpretations, heightening the probability of conflict and aggressive incidents.

Although generally stable during adulthood, personality may experience nuanced changes with age. Heightened rigidity, negativity, and suspicion may exacerbate irritability and diminish frustration tolerance, potentially resulting in escalated aggression [67]. Conversely, certain individuals may exhibit heightened agreeableness

and emotional stability, reducing aggressive behaviors. Personality changes may be affected by numerous factors, such as health issues, life experiences, and social support.

The aging process may lead to heightened susceptibility and stress, inciting aggression. Physical deterioration, loss of autonomy, social seclusion, and financial anxieties can engender feelings of frustration and helplessness, thereby heightening the propensity for aggressive conduct. In addition, aging is not exclusively linked to heightened aggression. As people grow older, they often become less aggressive for various reasons. These could include improved quality of life, increased levels of emotional maturity, and improved ability to cope with challenges, deal with conflict, and stay in good relationships with others. If behaviors are based on a shared set of values and a journey for self-improvement, then the competition and conflict drive decrease, and consequently, the violent behaviors decrease.

Aggressive behavior of elderly individuals is significantly influenced by the social environment in which they live. Loneliness and a decrease in supportive presence can over-intensify negative emotions like feelings of dissatisfaction and insecurity, which may translate into greater aggression. On the other hand, close relationships, meaningful activity, and being valued can all play a part in overall well-being and help to reduce the propensity to be aggressive.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the complex and multifaceted relationship between personality, psychopathology, and aggression, shedding light on the key traits and psychological mechanisms contributing to violent behavior. The five-factor personality traits (agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness) provide a doorway to understanding individual differences in aggression, such that lower agreeableness and higher neuroticism are powerful predictors of aggression. Yet, violence is driven not only by these general traits but also by impulsivity, hostility, emotional reactivity, and cognitive biases, contributing significantly to the progression of aggressive behavior.

Although personality traits pertinent to the Dark Triad group (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) allow specific insight into the causal relationship between callous wit and manipulative, self-regarding, and exploitative behavior toward the victimization in question, they instigate the reactive and instrumental type of aggression. While personality traits predict aggression, contextual factors, including social environment, culture, situational triggers, and life experience, continuously and dynamically combine with personality traits and have behavioral effects. Developmentally, the view also notes that aggression is not an (absolute) phenotype but rather a process by which the influence of age, maturity, and surrounding environment can alter.

Effective prevention measures for aggressive and violent behaviors must be tailored to different personality types, particularly considering the Big Five traits, the Dark Triad, and contextual risk factors. For those inclined to neuroticism, cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness techniques, and crisis intervention programs can be helpful. Training in conflict resolution, cognitive reframing, and structured leadership could help highly conscientious but driven people channel their efforts toward positive societal contributions. For those with poor agreeableness and great

impulsivity, training in behavioral self-control and encouraging empathy through social skills development programs is absolutely vital.

Those displaying Dark Triad characteristics should be very vigilant and intentional preventers. Those who lean Machiavellian should be under strict guidelines and close supervision and be answerable for their acts. While those with narcissistic features might gain from training in assertiveness and various sorts of validation, those with psychopathic inclinations need constant reinforcement of penalties and close surveillance. Being proactive in settings like businesses, schools, and social gatherings can help prevent negative behaviors before they become violent.

Aggression is highly influenced by social context—that is, social setting, situational demands, and violent exposure. Reducing violence calls for a variety of strategies, including changing exposure to violent media, supporting prosocial role models, and enforcing workplace policies against negative behavior. Essential are access to programs for dispute reconciliation, mental health care, and socioeconomic support networks.

An integrative model should be created for an exhaustive explanation of violent behavior, considering both the stable personality predispositions and the dynamic effects of the world around us. This knowledge is also significant in forming prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation methods, focusing on the imperative of individualized approaches that reflect personal risk factors and contextual influences. Continuing to explore (and using psychological insight to inform practice), it is possible to reduce violence and encourage healthier, more functional social relationships.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Chapter 3

Silent Wounds: Unmasking Emotional Abuse and Psychosocial Risks in Australian Organisations

Linda Shallcross and Summer Bland

Abstract

This chapter discusses the urgent imperative to address psychosocial risks within Australian workplaces by unmasking the intricate dynamics of emotional abuse and psychological violence. With detailed case studies and the examination of over 200 workers' compensation claims for psychological injury, the research highlights critical psychosocial hazards impacting workplace culture, including mobbing, bullying, and discriminatory practices. It delineates the typical experience of victims, highlighting the phases of mobbing that lead to psychological injury. The analysis demonstrates how inadequate leadership, and toxic organisational cultures exacerbate these issues. Emphasising the need for systemic reform, the chapter advocates for comprehensive strategies aimed at fostering healthier work environments that prioritise mental well-being and procedural fairness. By bringing to light the experiences of marginalised groups, especially First Nations people and other oppressed communities, the analysis calls for an urgent re-evaluation of organisational practices and policies, aiming to dismantle the systems that allow such detrimental behaviours to persist. Ultimately, this work strives to inspire a profound cultural change within Australian workplaces to eliminate emotional abuse and improve psychosocial safety.

Keywords: psychosocial, mobbing, bullying, fairness, investigations

1. Introduction

Emotional abuse and psychological violence at the workplace have become increasingly recognised as significant threats to employee mental health and organisational effectiveness. While discussions around workplace safety predominantly focus on physical hazards, the subtler forms of psychosocial risks, such as emotional abuse, mobbing and bullying are often overlooked although they can have devastating impacts on individuals and the overall workplace culture.

This chapter discusses the pressing need to confront these issues, aiming to unveil the latent emotional wounds emerging in toxic workplace environments. By examining the experiences of marginalised groups, including First Nations people and those of diverse cultural backgrounds, this analysis highlights the intersectionality of bias and the compounded effects of workplace violence. Furthermore, through the

analysis of over 200 workers' compensation claims, we provide empirical evidence of the harm caused by adverse psychosocial conditions.

As we navigate the complexities of psychological violence, we will first explore the specific damaging behaviours prevalent in organisations that contribute to ongoing trauma. In doing so, we underscore the urgency of developing effective intervention strategies designed to cultivate healthier, more resilient workplaces where every individual is valued and supported.

2. Exploring psychological violence in the workplace

This section examines the pervasive issue of psychological violence, emphasising its recognition as a critical concern by the International Labour Organisation [ILO], which includes emotional abuse, mobbing, and bullying as explicit examples of workplace violence [1]. Organisational behaviours such as discrimination based on gender, race, disability, age, or sexual orientation also contribute to psychological injury, leading to various forms of trauma, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD], major depression, anxiety disorders, and moral injury [2–5].

Despite existing human rights legislation [6] discriminatory attitudes persist, causing harm and psychological injury. When complaints arise, individual incidents are often investigated to assess their veracity. Unfortunately, our analysis highlights that this process tends to blame individual complainants while favouring the dominant group, usually the perpetrators. Investigations seldom uphold the complaints of those targeted, partly attributed to a lack of sufficient witnesses to support their claims.

For a meaningful response, it is crucial to have a proactive perspective that prioritises developing a framework addressing the underlying psychosocial risks. In the following section, we will identify key psychosocial risk hazards—such as the absence of procedural fairness, poorly managed relationships, and ineffective leadership—that significantly influence the prevalence of psychological injuries in organisations. By adopting this holistic view, we can advocate comprehensive strategies that seek not only justice for individual cases but also the cultivation of healthier organisational cultures.

3. Framework for analysing psychosocial risks in the workplace

In this section, we detail key psychosocial risk hazards contributing to psychological injury, including absence of procedural fairness, poorly managed relationships, and ineffective leadership.

Major progress has recently been made in Australia where psychosocial risks are increasingly recognised as workplace hazards [7]. This recognition has been facilitated with the introduction of a Model Code of Practice, Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work [8]. Hazards include:

- Excessive work demands [9] emotionally demanding work [10], emotional labour [11], work that contributes to moral injury [5].
- Low levels of control, including micromanagement and toxic leadership [12, 13].
- Inadequate support from supervisors and colleagues [14, 15].

- Lack of role clarity leading to role ambiguity [16].

- Poorly managed relationships or unresolved conflict including discrimination [17], bullying [18], sexual and gender based harassment [19], lateral violence [20, 21] and nepotism [22].

- Poor recognition and reward including leadership failure to recognise achievements or provide constructive feedback [23].

- Poorly managed change [24] including failure to consult [25].

- Lack of perceived organisational justice [26] and failure to provide procedural fairness [27].

With a clear understanding of psychosocial risks, we now proceed to outline the methodology used to investigate the risks and patterns of organisational behaviour that lead to psychological injury.

4. Methodology: Investigating psychological injury cases

This section describes the methodology used in analysing the cases of the 200 workers who sought compensation for psychological injuries. The analysis is based on extensive data sources and frameworks to identify patterns of organisational behaviour causing psychological harm.

The findings emerge from an analysis of psychiatric reports, investigation findings, witness statements, and judicial documents. In our analysis, the most effective framework for explaining these experiences has, in past years, been the five phased process of workplace mobbing [28–30]. However, it is anticipated that the emergence of new frameworks [7] will inform future work in this area.

Typically, injured workers are seeking financial compensation, under common law claims [31] for psychological injury. They are often harmed to the extent that they have been deemed permanently unfit to work with diagnoses including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD], major depression, severe anxiety, and adjustment disorder. While those seeking assistance are from various organisations and industries, in this analysis, the majority are from police, ambulance, hospitals, corrections and detention facilities. Government departments, for example, justice, education, health, and community services, aged care and disability services, local councils, and universities are also well represented.

Having outlined our methodology, we now present the findings of our analysis, demonstrating the adverse impact of emotional abuse and psychological violence on those seeking workers' compensation.

5. Understanding workplace mobbing: The five phases of psychological violence

To better understand how workplace mobbing manifests, it is essential to highlight the pattern of the five phases of mobbing and since referred to by several researchers [32–34].

In this analysis, the following mobbing pattern provides a useful framework for identifying psychosocial risk hazards that lead to psychological injury. The experience of each individual was assessed against the following five phases to assess the degrees of mobbing [33]:

Phase 1: an initial critical incident or unresolved conflict.

Phase 2: aggressive acts and psychological assaults.

Phase 3: detrimental involvement of management.

Phase 4: blame including false accusations.

Phase 5: forced exit as a consequence of targeted behaviours.

Mobbing is a complex process, often understood as damaging group behaviour towards those targeted. However, our current research highlights the importance of identifying the damaging organisational behaviour that commences during the 3rd phase when management deploys intervention strategies that typically blame the target. Psychological terror [28] commences when false or unfounded accusations are made that either lead to unfair dismissal [35], compulsory psychiatric assessment, or termination of employment on medical grounds.

This framework provides a structure for assessing degrees of mobbing and identifying psychosocial risk hazards that may lead to psychological injury. This becomes important when identifying exposure to psychosocial risk hazards [36] under Australian health and safety provisions.

6. Vulnerable populations: Identifying targets of emotional abuse

This section discusses the characteristics and demographics of individuals more likely to experience mobbing and psychological violence within organisations, with a particular emphasis on First Nations people and other marginalised groups.

The data indicates an equal number of men and women experience psychologically damaging behaviours. However, there is a higher percentage of First Nations people, and other oppressed groups including Muslims and Asians represented. Additionally, in this analysis, those who are different to the dominant work group, due to personal characteristics including gender, race, religion, accent, age, disability or mental health are also at increased risk of psychological injury. Other distinguishing characteristics include being young, being employed by a labour hire company. These groups, along with those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have been identified in the Australian context as being "at risk" groups for workplace jury injury [37].

Amongst First Nations people, lateral violence, which is known to occur in systematically oppressed groups [21] is commonly identified. This form of violence is also widely reported in the nursing profession [38, 39]. However, the behaviours are not always restricted to these groups and can occur wherever people tend to engage in malicious gossip [40].

Our analysis also identifies that those who raise health and safety concerns, or draw management attention to serious safety failures, for example, in the airline industry, risk termination of their employment due to accusations of whistleblowing [41] To avoid embarrassment, targets are often required to sign non-disclosure agreements.

We will now highlight specific case studies that exemplify the psychosocial risks and the pattern of mobbing behaviour to which those targeted are subjected.

7. Case studies: Examining psychosocial risks and instances of mobbing

Two de-identifed case studies are presented to demonstrate the pervasive nature of psychosocial risks and mobbing behaviours. Each case highlights the psychologically aggressive tactics deployed to undermine individuals based on their identity, ultimately pressuring them to resign or be dismissed for dubious reasons. The first case focuses on a First Nations woman dealing with discriminatory behaviours in a hospital setting. The second case centres on a Muslim man who confronted an Islamophobic culture within a Police Command. Both narratives draw on judicial documents, thereby spotlighting systemic prejudices, neglect in addressing legitimate grievances, and the detrimental effects of employer negligence concerning health, safety, and overall wellbeing.

7.1 Case study 1: Ms. Shaylee Gordon vs. hospital

The case study examines the experiences of Ms. Shaylee Gordon, a fictitious hospital nurse who faced discrimination due to her Aboriginal identity and age. The conflict begins during her orientation, where she encounters hostility and intimidation, transforming her workplace into a discriminatory environment.

7.1.1 Phase 1: Initial critical incident/unresolved conflict

Ms. Gordon was a nurse at a government hospital when she faced significant challenges linked to her Aboriginal identity and age. Reluctant to disclose her heritage out of fear of stigma, she encountered hostility and intimidation from her colleagues and supervisors, particularly during her orientation. Critiques were made regarding her perceived misunderstandings of medical terminology, which resulted in unreasonable expectations for performing her duties without proper training or supervision. Although she sought help, Ms. Gordon was socially isolated and responded to dismissively when expressing concerns about her deteriorating mental health. She was excluded from vital communications and assessments that could have supported her integration into the workplace.

7.1.2 Phase 2: Aggressive acts and psychological assaults

The challenges continued, as Phase 2 illustrates aggressive acts and psychological assaults that exacerbated Ms. Gordon's injury. Concerns about her ability to work autonomously and manage advanced clinical responsibilities were raised, with specific criticisms regarding her difficulties in interpreting handwritten medical instructions. Despite these tasks not being a requirement for her role as a nurse, a senior manager claimed that her struggles indicated learning and memory difficulties. This conclusion was reached without giving Ms. Gordon an opportunity to defend herself, as she only became aware of these allegations during an investigation related to her worker's compensation claim. Moreover, her suitability was questioned due to perceived "baseline anxiety" and her need for "constant reassurance," with implications made that she might possess an "underlying learning disability."

7.1.3 Phase 3: Detrimental involvement of management

In Phase 3, the narrative highlights management's detrimental involvement, which alienated Ms. Gordon further and initiated proceedings to terminate her employment.

Her intellectual capacity to fulfil her duties was questioned by senior management without prior discussions with her or her medical providers. Following a physical injury that necessitated her temporary leave, Ms. Gordon faced unfair accusations of laziness and poor attendance upon her gradual return to work, where her duties were restricted for over a month. Additionally, she was assigned an excessive patient load relative to her colleagues. When Ms. Gordon raised concerns about acts of physical intimidation and damaging behaviours, management was dismissive. Consequently, she began taking intermittent leave due to work-related stress.

7.1.4 Phase 4: Blame including false accusations

Phase 4 details the false accusations directed at Ms. Gordon, aimed at justifying her forced exit. She faced criticism during medication rounds for being slow and inconsistent in routine tasks. Further accusations involved dexterity issues stemming from her work-related physical injury. Even though she previously passed competency assessments, Ms. Gordon was branded incompetent due to alleged deficiencies in clinical knowledge and was pressured into authorising an intellectual capacity assessment by a medical specialist selected by her key perpetrators. This specialist ultimately reported her as cognitively defective to a degree that limited her employment opportunities significantly. The assessment neglected to account for Ms. Gordon's academic achievements and failed to take into consideration cultural factors that could lead to biased outcomes. The management dismissed contradicting evaluations by another psychiatrist, who attributed her issues to anxiety and depression stemming from damaging workplace behaviours.

7.1.5 Phase 5: Forced exit as a consequence of targeted behaviours

The case culminates in Phase 5, where the persistent harassment led to Ms. Gordon's termination. The Department issued a show cause notice, questioning why her employment should not be terminated. In her response, Ms. Gordon expressed humiliation and raised concerns surrounding the dismissal process and the damaging workplace culture. However, the findings from the cognitive assessment were upheld, resulting in her termination. Following this, she submitted a claim for worker's compensation due to psychological injuries. During the investigation, only her perpetrators were interviewed, while others providing positive feedback were excluded. Her key perpetrators denied the allegations of bullying, asserting that Ms. Gordon received sufficient support. Eventually, she was diagnosed with major depressive disorder arising from prolonged workplace trauma; however, her workers' compensation claim was rejected, justified by management's claims that reasonable actions were taken in response to her alleged poor performance.

The case study of Ms. Gordon underscores the psychological harm inflicted by discriminatory practices in the workplace, drawing attention to broader implications concerning worker rights and well-being within a toxic work environment.

The second case study will focus on the distressing experiences of Mr. Omar Hossain, a fictitious Muslim officer who faced consistent Islamophobia within a Police Command.

7.2 Case study 2 - Mr. Omar Hossain vs. police command

This case study explores the experience of Mr. Omar Hossain, a fictitious police officer who encountered hostility and discrimination within a Police Command.

The narrative illustrates the adverse impacts of a workplace culture that fails to prioritise diversity and respect.

7.2.1 Phase 1: Initial critical incident/unresolved conflict

Mr. Hossain, a Muslim officer, had a previously unblemished career until he was assigned to a Police Command characterised by Islamophobia. He faced numerous offensive comments, including:

- "Your religion is violent and full of terrorists."
- "I know inside you are cheering and celebrating these terrorist attacks."
- "I can see you are trying very hard to hide your smile."
- "These [the terrorists] are Omar's relatives and cousins."
- "Omar is an insider [a terrorist]."
- "You are a sleeper cell; I wonder when you will wake up and do something."
- "Here your brothers go again; they are all terrorists."
- He was often told that he "should not be working here."
- There were comments from a coworker that if "a backpack with wires sticking out of it were found near a mosque," he would "push the backpack inside and close the door and run."
- When incidents were reported, he was cautioned against filing official complaints, described as "minor jokes."
- Unfounded rumours were circulated by another supervisor that Mr. Hossain was a radical Muslim, which eventually led to his transfer to a different command.

7.2.2 Phase 2: Aggressive acts and psychological assaults

Phase 2 highlights an escalation in hostilities as Mr. Hossain's integrity comes under scrutiny amidst these adverse work dynamics. His attempts to report misconduct exacerbate the conflict, showcasing the vulnerabilities associated with opposing wrongful practices.

- Following his transfer, Mr. Hossain was subjected to further psychologically damaging behaviours, which ultimately led to the termination of his employment.
- In his new role, Mr. Hossain was tasked with reporting alleged misconduct and corrupt practices within the command to management. He reported:

- Manipulation of rosters to secure overtime while finishing shifts early and obtaining lucrative weekend work without approval.

- Complacency towards inappropriate conduct, including harassment of internal witnesses, the writing off of parking tickets for friends, and the use of whisky as bribes.

- Concerns about colleagues with extremist views, including anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic beliefs and sympathies towards Nazi ideologies.

- Despite expecting retaliation, Mr. Hossain was assured by his supervisor of support regarding proposed measures for increased accountability.

7.2.3 Phase 3: Detrimental involvement of management

In Phase 3, management's involvement exacerbates Mr. Hossain's situation, as his role is diminished, and baseless accusations are directed at him. There is a systematic attempt to terminate his employment for dubious reasons.

- Mr. Hossain was directed to email staff to schedule a meeting about the new accountability measures. However, before the meeting could occur, complaints were submitted by senior management.

- He was shocked to learn that his supervisor supported those complaints.

- Days later, he was informed of yet another transfer due to the complaints against him, without an opportunity to adequately respond as he was not informed of the accusers or the nature of the complaints.

- After the transfer, Mr. Hossain's duties were reduced, with instructions to perform menial tasks such as moving furniture and setting up equipment.

- He was ordered to surrender his firearm due to serious allegations against him.

- When he raised concerns regarding the intimidating behaviours he faced, management dismissed his claims.

- An investigation by three of his key perpetrators was initiated, in which Mr. Hossain was treated as though he were guilty, without being informed of the specific allegations against him.

- He later complained to management his experiences of workplace-related PTSD, stress, and anxiety.

7.2.4 Phase 4: Blame including false accusations

Phase 4 reveals the chilling reality of false allegations, which serve to marginalise Mr. Hossain further. These allegations starkly contrast the unaddressed misconduct within the command.

- One allegation later deemed untrue involved offensive remarks about the flag of another country.

- Another allegation arose from an incident where Mr. Hossain accompanied a fellow police officer to a church. When invited to partake in communion, he refused. Subsequently, the officer accused Mr. Hossain of racially vilifying him with comments about communion resembling cannibalism.

- Despite the problematic nature of this allegation, Mr. Hossain faced disproportionate disciplinary measures, including transfer out of the command.

- Meanwhile, serious allegations of misconduct and corruption reported by Mr. Hossain were ignored without further investigation.

7.2.5 Phase 5: Forced exit as a consequence of targeted behaviours

In the final phase, Mr. Hossain confronts a toxic work environment compounded by systemic resistance. His formal complaint and subsequent dismissal raise critical questions about the intersection of identity, systemic bias, and the employer's responsibility to uphold the psychological well-being and integrity of employees.

- Mr. Hossain submitted a formal complaint, which was returned 6 months' later to the key perpetrators for investigation.

- During his interview, he was treated as though he were guilty of serious misconduct.

- He raised concerns about the investigation process, including the solicitation of complaints against him.

- Mr. Hossain was notified that his complaints would not be addressed, and inexplicably, his access to the Police intranet system was revoked without notice.

- Additionally, a box of weapons, including an extendable baton, handcuffs, and capsicum spray, was delivered to his home without his knowledge, leading him to suspect that he was being framed for unlawful possession of prohibited items. He promptly reported the incident to the relevant agency.

- Ultimately, Mr. Hossain's employment was terminated with a non-reviewable decision regarding his transfer and a conduct management plan imposed for six months, along with the return of the confiscated weapons.

- Due to his deteriorating mental health, he was medically discharged after several weeks of leave, unable to return to his prior duties.

As we conclude the exploration of these case studies, it is evident that understanding and addressing psychosocial risks in the workplace is crucial. The insights gathered from these experiences emphasise the urgent necessity for systemic changes in organisational policies and practices to foster inclusivity and protect the mental health of all employees. Each phase of the case studies demonstrates the potential for

unchecked behaviours to escalate, reinforcing the importance of proactive measures by employers to cultivate a healthy and supportive workplace.

The focus will now shift to an examination of how leadership styles and organisational culture can significantly contribute to the perpetuation of psychological violence and the ongoing cycle of harm within workplace settings.

8. The role of leadership and organisational culture in perpetuating psychological violence

In this section, leadership styles and organisational culture that foster psychological violence are discussed. We explore how both authoritarian and distributed leadership models contribute to mobbing behaviours, highlighting the pervasive nature of these issues across various sectors, including non-profits and government agencies.

The case studies highlight the role of leadership and organisational culture in perpetuating psychological violence and mobbing behaviour where policy and procedures are weaponised. The damaging behaviours identified in this analysis occurred across organisations, not for profits and companies, regardless of culture and leadership styles. However, emotionally abusive behaviours were typically aligned with authoritarian leadership as identified by other researchers [42, 43].

While it can reasonably be argued that authoritarian leadership styles are necessary during emergency situations [44, 45], this analysis highlights that problems arise when authoritarian approaches permeate everyday management interactions. However, mobbing behaviours also occur in organisations with more distributed or facilitative leadership models [46] including not for profit charities and community services organisations.

Next, we will explore the concerning gaps between the principles of procedural fairness and the actual experiences of injured workers. Our analysis demonstrates that workplace investigations frequently fall short of widely accepted standards, resulting in unjust outcomes that can exacerbate existing workplace harm.

9. Structural failures: The violation of procedural fairness

In this section, we examine the concerning gaps between the principles of procedural fairness and the actual experiences of those injured workers undertaken for our analysis. Our analysis highlights that workplace investigations often fail to meet widely accepted standards, resulting in unjust outcomes.

Of the 200 cases analysed, over half involved at least one investigation. In this process, unsuspecting targets assume that the legal principles of procedural fairness [47] will prevail. Under Australian law, fair and objective decision making requires the right to be heard with impartial decision makers and without the appearance of bias. This principle is reinforced in good practice complaint handling guidelines and is often detailed in workplace policies and procedures [48].

However, these notions are antithetical to reality as demonstrated in this analysis. While described as independent, unfair practices include decisions being made by the key perpetrators, where those targeted are not informed of the allegations against them. When ultimately revealed, allegations are nonsensical and relatively trivial. This finding confirms earlier research where those targeted are discredited and demonised to the extent that they fall outside the "boundary of fairness" and become deserving targets [30].

Even when allegations against those targeted cannot be substantiated, those targeted are still unfairly accused of wrongdoing and are blamed as the one at fault. Meanwhile, the behaviours of the perpetrators are considered fair and reasonable. In Australia, management behaviour, although found to be psychologically damaging, can be dismissed on the legal basis of "reasonable management action" [49]. The benchmark is low, meaning that management actions do not need to be good practice, they only need to be reasonable. It is only through lengthy legal processes that targets can gain redress, and this comes at a considerable financial and emotional cost over many years.

Following our discussion of structural failures, we now highlight investigative processes that, while intended to uphold fairness and justice, often fail in practice. This section will uncover how systems designed to protect workers can become tools of oppression, with biased decision-making undermining the rights of those involved.

10. Flawed investigative practices: The impact of witness testimonies on complaints of workplace bullying

This section sheds light on the investigative processes that are meant to uphold fairness and justice, yet often fail in practice. We uncover how those systems designed to protect workers can become tools of oppression, with biased decision-making undermining the rights of those involved.

Regardless of legal and policy requirements for procedural fairness in decision making, in practice, this is antithetical to the behaviour to which the majority of participants in our analysis were subjected. Euphemistically described as independent investigations, unfair practices include decisions being made by the key perpetrators. Additionally, targets are not adequately informed of the allegations against them. When allegations are ultimately revealed they tend to be nonsensical and relatively trivial and involve matters not previously raised with them. Confirming earlier research [50] those targeted are often discredited and demonised to the extent that they fall outside the boundary of fairness and are perceived to be deserving targets.

Finally, we discuss the collection of witness statements when testing the veracity of complaints. This essential part of the investigation process often resembles criminal investigations; while ignoring the organisational context. This approach downplays serious harmful behaviours and ignores underlying psychosocial risks. In our discussion of these shortcomings, we will highlight how individuals who file complaints may unwittingly become targets for additional psychological harm.

11. Investigative biases and the impact of psychiatric assessments on workplace injury claims

An important concern identified in this analysis is the aggravation of the initial psychological injury during investigations. The process often involves the gathering of witness statements to determine whether complaints can be substantiated. This approach resembles a criminal investigation, as it aims to prove or disprove specific incidents of alleged wrongdoing through interviews with colleagues. However, decisions are often influenced by the number of witnesses rather than the substance of the claims [51, 52]. In our analysis, this approach has been shown to lead to biased outcomes, when only perpetrators or those with antagonistic views towards those targeted, are interviewed.

This reductionist approach fails to consider the organisational context in which incidents occur, and often trivialise the harmful behaviours and ignoring the psychosocial risks embedded within the workplace culture. As a result, individual complaints frequently go unsubstantiated, leaving the situation unchanged. The individuals making these complaints are often blamed and accused of being overly sensitive, with their concerns dismissed as mere interpersonal conflicts. In some cases, both parties may be equally blamed, resulting in disciplinary actions against the victim as well as the perpetrator. Additionally, the analysis reveals that formal complaints often expose targets to victimisation and further psychological harm.

In parallel, the process of seeking compensation for psychological injuries often requires workers to undergo psychiatric assessments by those who may have vested interests or biases [53]. In this analysis, the majority of assessments favour the employer's perspective, frequently attributing the injured worker's condition to historical issues or "reasonable management action." In response, workers often seek counter assessments to substantiate their claims. This process of contracting medical professionals gives the impression that assessment is biased and designed to align with the interests of funding entities. Consequently, confirming earlier research [50] psychiatrists involved in these assessments are sometimes metaphorically labelled as "hired guns" [30].

Furthermore, hostile witness statements from key perpetrators are typically given undue weight, while the broader psychological risks are overlooked. This focus results in the discrediting and dismissal of claims made by injured workers. During investigations, examinations, and assessments, considerable effort is devoted to scrutinising the target, and blaming injury on previous health history, while ignoring the psychosocial risks embedded in the organisational culture.

Together, these patterns raise serious questions about the objectivity and integrity of investigative processes in the context of workplace claims regarding psychological injury. They highlight systemic failures that not only undermine the rights and dignity of injured workers but also perpetuate a culture of abuse and silence within organisations.

12. Conclusion: Addressing silent wounds in the workplace

Our examination of psychosocial risks, emotional abuse, and workplace mobbing has illuminated the serious impact these issues have on Australian organisations. The evidence underscored an urgent need for organisations to recognise and rectify structural failures, especially those pertaining to procedural fairness that compromise workplace investigations.

The analysis of 200 cases revealed that many investigations not only failed to meet established standards but also perpetuated harmful practices, allowing key perpetrators to undermine the integrity of the process. Workers often expect fairness to be upheld, yet ingrained biases frequently erode their fundamental rights. When objective evaluations are lacking, allegations are trivialised, discrediting those who seek justice and reinforcing a culture of oppression. These systemic failures not only condone abusive behaviours but also protect perpetrators from accountability.

To foster a culture of support, resilience, and respect, organisations must decisively address these silent wounds. A transformative approach is essential to effectively tackle psychosocial risks and workplace violence. Implementing comprehensive strategies that prioritise fairness and accountability during investigations is crucial.

Moreover, leadership must safeguard the mental health and dignity of all employees while actively confronting discriminatory practices.

The case studies discussed in this chapter reinforce the necessity for systemic change that emphasises mental well-being and promotes an inclusive culture. They illustrate the multifaceted nature of psychological abuse and the importance of proactive workplace policies that foster cultural change.

In moving forward, it is imperative that organisations adopt strategies informed by the frameworks discussed in our analysis, particularly emphasising the need for procedural fairness in addressing complaints. By doing so, they can reshape their cultures to prioritise psychological well-being and mitigate harmful behaviours. This chapter advocates for a cohesive approach to create healthier work environments—one that addresses existing issues while proactively preventing future incidents of psychological abuse.

The journey towards meaningful change begins with recognising the complexities of psychological abuse and implementing measures that establish more supportive and equitable workplaces.

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Chapter 4

Abuse at the Lowest Positions in Manufacturing: Psychological Processes of Abused Operators and Their Supervisors

Sanja Stankov

Abstract

This chapter examines the phenomenon of workplace abuse in low-level production positions, with a particular focus on Serbia. Utilizing existing research and a unique approach, it analyzes key challenges and psychophysical processes encountered by manufacturing operators, including shift work and work-life balance, prolonged standing, work-related pressure, stress, and strategic abuse. Additionally, the role of direct supervisors as perpetrators of abuse is explored, emphasizing the importance of operators in the production process. The chapter critically discusses why researcher proposals, despite their theoretical and practical excellence, remain unimplemented in Serbia, with some exceptions of good practice. Finally, achieving meaningful change requires a deeper analysis of economic and cultural factors, a systematic approach, and active engagement from institutions and industries in creating healthier working conditions.

Keywords: workplace abuse, manufacturing, supervisors, operators, work-related pressure, work-life balance, prolonged standing, Serbia

1. Introduction

Industrialization has brought significant changes and challenges for workers, particularly those in lower positions. Countries are investing in industrialization to meet the growing demand for products and services, thus encouraging the transition from traditional to mass production [1]. This revolution requires workers to adapt to modern working processes and machines. As industrialization grows, the need for workspaces, machines, and tools according to anthropomorphic principles becomes increasingly pressing [1, 2].

However, when market competitiveness and profit-making become the primary objectives, many states adapt legislation to the interests of large companies. To attract foreign investors, governments offer tax breaks, overlook environmental concerns, and provide subsidies for each workplace [3]. This practice is particularly pronounced in Serbia. These companies are given the freedom to exploit workers, further violating

their rights [3]. Under such circumstances, production operators become a particularly vulnerable category of workers. They are exposed daily to high work demands, physical and mental strain, limited breaks, and shift work. These factors contribute to an increased risk of psychological pressure and workplace abuse, making these workers especially susceptible.

Workplace abuse is a serious issue that extends beyond typical job-related pressures, such as meeting deadlines or efficiency targets [4]. While work challenges are an integral part of the professional environment, abuse refers to systematic and prolonged hostile behavior that can have severe consequences for employees' well-being. Although this phenomenon has been widely studied, its conceptualization varies depending on the specific characteristics that scientists include in their analyzes [5]. It encompasses emotional abuse, including humiliation, professional discrediting, and the undermining of employees' professional roles, further compromising their job security and psychological well-being [6].

This study integrates various aspects of the problem through a systemic approach, developing a holistic research perspective on abuse in the manufacturing sector. By focusing on the mechanisms of abuse at the grassroots level, it analyzes how the working environment affects operators' psychological state, how psychological pressure manifests, and its impact on workers' well-being. Additionally, it examines the conditions under which superiors become instigators of abuse, determining whether their behavior is driven by systemic pressures or personal characteristics. Although work-life balance is a widely researched phenomenon [7], this study explores it in the context of psychological pressures, the specific working conditions of production operators, and possible forms of workplace abuse, which highlights the uniqueness of this research.

2. Work in shifts and balancing with private life

Production organizations often operate according to the model of an "ideal worker," who can work long hours without the burden of family obligations [8]. However, shift work can have significant negative consequences on workers' health, partly due to the desynchronization between working hours and circadian rhythms [9, 10]. This mode of operation affects problems with sleep and digestion, causes fatigue, and increases the risk of labor accidents. Shift work, especially when it involves night shifts, weekend work, or shift rotation, can adversely affect the family and social life of workers [9, 10]. It was also found that shift workers have worse health and safety compared to employees who do not work in shift mode [11]. In addition, additional physical challenges, such as prolonged standing at work with certain breaks for rest, can have a significant impact on the health of workers. These factors will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

The conflict between work schedule and time organization of family, friends, and community often leads to problems in family relationships, marital relationships, parenting, and participation in social activities [9].

However, in certain personal circumstances, working on a schedule that differs from conventional working hours (Monday to Friday) can bring certain benefits, such as increased leisure time during the day, which allows more time for young children [9]. A better-organized schedule can make it easier for parents to take their children out of school, take care of them, prepare meals, and take them to the doctor and social activities.

In this area, the perspectives of workers are most often used. The researchers conducted a study involving 12 child workers with non-standard work schedules, aged between 14 and 20 years [10]. The results showed negative impacts on family time, communication, school, and extracurricular activities, as well as on the organization and functioning of family life [10]. Also, the participants highlighted the health problems of workers, such as fatigue and sleep problems. According to children, conventional working hours would be more beneficial for family and social life, as well as for the health of workers [10].

Conflict between work and family significantly affects stress levels and well-being, and managing this relationship is more challenging for women due to gender expectations [8]. Many women around the world still spend a significant part of their time doing housework, while at the same time, they are engaged in paid work, which creates a double burden of responsibility and contributes to stress [8]. Women more often than men report physical and emotional exhaustion due to paid work [12].

The male-dominated manufacturing industry is a particularly challenging environment for women [8]. Women are expected to deliver consistently high levels of performance and to always be emotionally and physically engaged, despite disproportionately large family responsibilities [13, 14]. Deeply rooted gender stereotypes in the manufacturing industry, inflexible work environments, and a lack of support make balancing work and family especially complex for women [15].

The implication of the study [8] is that, despite efforts to encourage greater diversity, the manufacturing industry in South Africa will continue to lose women to the benefit of less demanding and more favorable professions and work environments. Women who face gender expectations within family roles usually try to cope with these challenges on their own, despite the overload [8].

A gender-dominated environment, such as manufacturing, induces an additional layer of stress for the least represented sex [16]. The approach of the ideal worker, where longer working hours are considered an indicator of commitment, often puts women at a disadvantage due to deeply rooted cultural attitudes that recognize family care as primarily a female responsibility [17].

Requirements in the work environment can significantly affect the family life of employees [11]. Conflict between work and family arises when there are conflicting expectations related to work and family obligations. A study in the ready-made clothing industry in Bangladesh investigated the connection between work-family conflict (WFC) (e.g. work-related family life disorder) and financial problems (e.g. debts, savings, financial obligations) with workers' health [18]. The results showed low levels of conflict, but low savings, moderate debts, and large financial liabilities. More than 40% of workers were in debt, and the conflict between work and family was linked to poorer health, while financial support was linked to better health.

Financial pressure is associated with poor health [19], poor mental health, and poor sleep [20], due to the inability to manage income which includes stress, anxiety, and feeling helpless. Bangladesh's ready-to-wear industry workers worry that they will not make enough money to support their families and are often stressed by the need to keep a job to finance family members or pay off debts [18]. Almost all workers in the ready-made clothing industry in Bangladesh are stressed by their salaries [18].

Financial pressure is one of the main stressors in adulthood. The concept of financial pressure helps to understand poverty, by analyzing how well families manage to meet their basic needs [19]. The prevalence of financial pressure varies significantly among European countries, with differences depending on the support provided by the state to citizens. However, financial pressure is not only a matter of salary but

also overall resources and household needs [19]. This means that the total income of households and their needs should be taken into account. In addition, factors such as age, immigration status, employment, and household characteristics also affect the level of financial pressure. The gender division of labor affects the frequency of financial pressure, so the relationship between financial pressure and health can be different for men and women [19].

3. Prolonged standing at work

Prolonged standing at work can cause significant health consequences. These topics are considered to describe the daily working day of the operator, looking at a wide range of psychophysical health impacts. Additionally, if there is abuse in the workplace, it can exacerbate existing health problems. When workers already suffer from physical discomforts due to prolonged standing and other working conditions, psychological stress and anxiety caused by abuse can further endanger their general health. The combination of physical and mental stress can lead to more serious health problems and reduced productivity.

Prolonged standing is defined as the working environment in which employees are required to spend most of their shifts in a standing position, often more than half of their working hours [21]. While standing is not a specific health risk, prolonged standing, especially in industry, has a significant impact on health and plays a key role in many health problems [1].

Ergonomics in the workplace significantly improves the efficiency of workers and saves time and energy, which directly affects productivity [1]. Although manufacturing jobs are often ergonomically adapted, long standing can lead to occupational musculoskeletal disorders (WMSD), which occur due to repeated efforts and/or inadequate ergonomic working conditions [22]. In this way, the risk of developing work-related musculoskeletal diseases (RWMSD) in workers increases [21].

Work-related musculoskeletal disorders are considered a serious health problem that reduces productivity and working ability in the working population [21].

These conditions include a wide range of inflammatory and degenerative problems that cause discomfort and functional damage in the neck, shoulder, elbow, hand, lumbar (lower back), and legs. These conditions cause pain, discomfort, swelling, and numbness [2, 21].

Risks associated with repetitive movements, poor posture, pushing and carrying heavy loads, carrying large objects, and bending are experienced by workers in various industries and occupations [21]. The main causes are uncomfortable working positions and repetitive tasks. Workers are prone to fatigue and injury since their occupations require the use of the same muscles and tendons several times during the day. Repeated movements can be dangerous when the same joints and muscle groups are used repeatedly, quickly, and over longer periods [21].

Industrial workers often feel pain, which reduces their productivity. Studies have dealt with the problem of workers in manufacturing jobs who have to stand for a long time [2]. Production requires a lot of standing, which can cause health problems such as stiff neck and shoulders, lower back pain, muscle exhaustion, varicose veins, foot pain, and leg swelling [2]. Also, long-standing effects problems in pregnancy, premature birth, spontaneous abortion, and carotid atherosclerosis [1].

Maintaining the correct position of the body during standing is important for the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders and fatigue, as this requires proper muscle

function and stability of the trunk and pelvis [23]. Long standing can cause non-specific low back pain (LBP) [24, 25], and studies have shown that 71% of respondents had pain after standing for 2 hours [26], while the incidence of LBP was twice as high in workers who had to stand in a restricted position [27].

A survey of subjects with no prior history of lower back injuries or LBP treatment showed that 41% reported pain after 15 minutes of standing, while this percentage rose to 71% after 45 minutes [25].

A study investigating risk factors for foot and ankle problems associated with prolonged standing and walking in assembly line workers found a link between a higher risk of foot and ankle disease and variables such as higher pressure on the metatarsal bones while walking [28].

In addition to the mentioned health problems, studies have shown an increased incidence of varicose veins reported by the workers themselves [29, 30]. Also, a strong and statistically significant relationship was established between prolonged standing or walking at work and hospital treatment for varicose veins, both in men and women [31].

Prolonged standing leads to both physical and psychological exhaustion of workers. It is important to consider both aspects in order to improve the health and productivity of employees [32].

3.1 Rest management during daily work

There are lighter manufacturing jobs where workers generally sit, but occasionally have to move. We will focus on operators who spend most of their working day standing up. Assume that they work 8 hours with a 30-minute break, which means at least 7.5 hours on their feet. The organization of these breaks can pose significant stress to operators.

The law allows for flexible distribution of breaks, so employers can organize breaks in a way that best suits the specifics of the workplace. Thus, operators can have breaks of 20 + 10 minutes, 15 + 10 + 5 minutes or 5 + 20 + 5 minutes. A longer break is usually used for a meal, while a shorter break is used for possibly going to the toilet. The operator must not be late when returning from the break, because the time is carefully recorded, and the machine or line must be started exactly at a minute.

The second and third variants of breaks (15 + 10 + 5 minutes and 5 + 20 + 5 minutes) leave operators with very little time to take advantage of them, as they are forced to quickly solve their needs. Given the arrangement of toilets and changing rooms in production, a 5-minute break is almost insufficient if the operator needs to go to the toilet and return in time. If the toilets are crowded, this can be impossible.

Unfortunately, superiors sometimes do not look favorably on using the toilet outside of scheduled breaks and often monitor the time spent away. However, the production is organized so that there is always someone available to replace the operator during breaks. Unlike white-collar workers, who can get up, walk, or refresh themselves during work hours, manufacturing workers do not have this option and may risk disciplinary action if they take short rest breaks.

Although breaks are essential for the physical and psychological recovery of operators, the pressure of strict operating norms often limits their effectiveness. In this context, Chapter 4 will look at how work norms, time pressures, and vacation management affect work dynamics, where stress becomes an inevitable consequence of daily work.

4. Working norms and pressure

Today's workforce often faces high levels of time pressure, which can simultaneously cause increased motivation, but also tension [33]. This time pressure often leads to work fatigue, which can be defined as the worker's physical and psychological response to prolonged physical and mental activity and lack of sleep [34]. Working fatigue states can be categorized as physical, emotional, and cognitive fatigue [35].

Labor fatigue impacts include a decrease in the level of labor productivity [36, 37]. This decline in productivity can have serious consequences for the organization, as workers become less efficient and less able to cope with their work tasks.

In the capitalist labor market, employers often require a high volume of work in a short period of time to maximize profits, which can result in time pressure and overload of work as a form of abuse. Workers are more likely to face these problems than harassment, violence, or discrimination, making time pressure and overwork significant factors of abuse [38]. Research suggests that the weight of the work increases the risk of abuse almost six times. This supports the thesis that the characteristics of the capitalist labor market, aimed at maximizing profits, contribute significantly to these phenomena [39].

Further, the study suggests that time pressure and overwork should be included in the definition of abuse [38]. Analysis of the components of abuse shows that time pressure or overwork is a significant part of behaviors that are considered abuse, followed by violence, discrimination, threats of violence, and harassment [38]. It has also been found that heavy work postures, heavy load handling, and exposure to chemicals, dust, smoke, gases, noise, and vibrations increase the likelihood of a worker becoming a victim of abuse. The findings support the thesis that organizational factors, primarily problems in the organization of work, cause abuse [38].

One of the key factors of the company's success in production is the ability of management to constantly raise performance standards at all levels of the organization [40]. Maintaining a continuous focus on production performance is crucial, as how employees carry out their tasks is directly linked to the overall perception of the organization [41].

Effective setting of work norms and maintaining high performance is crucial for the organization, as it enables the selection and retention of the most qualified workers, creating a work environment that promotes high standards [42]. Performance of workers in production is defined as efficiency in performing assigned tasks, where the key is quality and speed of execution [43, 44].

Work efficiency is influenced by factors such as ability, skill, and effort, as well as the working pressure that occurs when norms are set too high. Yet, like any management practice, setting labor standards can be abused if not applied ethically and transparently, which can lead to excessive stress and burden on workers.

4.1 Working stress

Working stress is defined as a negative physiological and psychological reaction of an individual when abilities, resources, and requirements are not in line with the requirements of the workplace [40]. Research shows that work stress in the industrial sector can lead to a high rate of worker fluctuation due to frustrations caused by superior pressure [45].

The approach to stressors at work, known as the challenge-obstacle framework [46], distinguishes between stressors of challenges and stressors of obstacles.

Challenge stressors are associated with time pressure and accountability, while obstacle stressors include role ambiguities and bureaucracy [33]. High levels of stressors often lead to tension, exhaustion, and burnout [47]. Operators in production often feel the pressure of high norms and a fast pace of work.

The positive aspect of stressor challenges can encourage motivation and skills development such as better work organization and efficient time allocation [47, 48]. However, workers react differently to stress, some perceive it as pressure, while others use it as a motivator [49]. Stress can be categorized as eustress (positive) and distress (negative).

Stages of the body's reaction to stress [49]:

1. Alarm phase: The body prepares for a "fight or flight" reaction. For example, an operator who is constantly subjected to verbal harassment by a superior may experience this stage when the superior initiates another attack.

2. Resistance phase: The body seeks to adapt and reduce the consequences of stress. An operator facing constant pressure and abuse can try to adjust, thinking about ways to avoid conflict or how to deal with the situation.

3. Exhaustion phase: The body is no longer able to cope with stress, which leads to health problems and a decrease in work efficiency. After a prolonged period of abuse, the operator may experience emotional and physical exhaustion, feeling completely exhausted and unable to cope with work tasks.

The accumulation of stressors can weigh on the ability to solve problems, leading to negative health consequences, including deterioration of mental health, burning, and increased exposure to abuse in the workplace [50].

5. Workplace abuse

Abuse is psychological harassment in the workplace, which is repeated. So it is a prolonged process, not an individual incident [51]. It should not be forgotten that abuse occurs and takes place in organizations that support such a culture. This may remain a hidden problem, but it can be accepted or encouraged in organizations that allow or reward such behavior [52]. Accordingly, the opinion is that it is important to keep in mind that the abuse does not begin with the victim, but with the attacker, so without them, there would be no abuse [53]. Cultures where violence tends to thrive create "toxic jobs." Such jobs increase dysfunction, fear, and shame, and intimidate those who dare to speak out [54].

Negative actions are usually grouped into three components [55]: personality-directed abuse, work-directed abuse, and physical intimidation. Personality-focused abuse includes humiliation, ridicule, spreading rumors, intimidation, and ignoring opinions. Labor-directed abuse includes impossible deadlines, vague instructions, contract manipulation, withholding information, blocking promotion, and excessive oversight. Physical intimidation includes threats of violence and violation of personal space. Although physical conflicts are rare [56], verbal violence is more common [57]. In addition to physical intimidation, social isolation has also been identified, the goal of which is to expel workers from the organization, which often leads to termination of employment or dismissal [58].

So far, several studies have been conducted in Serbia dealing with the phenomenon of abuse in the workplace [59, 60] and it has been established that 52% of respondents had experience with abuse at work, either as victims at the time of the research, or as former victims or witnesses [61]. It also showed that transactional leadership, high power distance, and unrealistic pressure to achieve top results increase the chances of workplace abuse. High-performance expectations have a greater impact on work-related abuse, while power distancing affects personal abuse [62]. The survey found that low employee salaries create conditions for workplace abuse, as job dissatisfaction, unfair reward and punishment, and promotions, as well as threats, blackmail, and intimidation, become more common [63].

A special form of abuse also occurs due to nepotism, where priority is given to family members or acquaintances when hiring while the working ability for a certain function does not play a crucial role. In Serbia, this phenomenon is not regulated by any law that would control it. Another provision observed, which is not legally regulated but has been mentioned in several rulings, is strategic abuse, considered one of the most common, costly, and harmful forms of abuse for workers and society as a whole [64].

5.1 Strategic abuse

An alarming increase in the negative effects of harassment and occupational stress in workplaces has been observed in many enterprises around the world, especially in manufacturing firms [65–67].

Production sites in Serbia are no exception to these trends and are often faced with pressures, strict norms, stressful conditions, machine failures, and strict delivery deadlines. Every second is crucial, which makes these conditions even more challenging in terms of promoting workers' well-being.

Among the various forms of vertical abuse, strategic abuse [68] stands out for its sociological significance and its use by leaders to attain both personal and organizational objectives. Strategic abuse is driven by economic and political interests. In cases of economic interest, the goal is for the worker to voluntarily leave the organization, thereby relieving the employer of the responsibility to initiate dismissal. In contrast, political interest is characteristic of the state and public sectors, where the employer seeks to remove political dissidents [64].

Workplace abuse can be a form of social conflict between the world of work and the world of capital, with power often determined by political position [69]. In environments where selection and promotion at work depend more on political than professional criteria, a specific form of mobbing emerges where the "eligible" abuse the capable or the corrupt abuse honest workers [69]. In this way, abuse becomes a means of preserving or acquiring positions and authority [69]. This negative behavior is recurring and has harmful social consequences, as it has contributed to negative selection in the public and state sectors for decades [64].

Organizations, i.e. top management, due to unfavorable changes (technological, economic, or organizational), decide to remove "undesirable workers," i.e. surplus labor, from the workplace, using constant remarks, humiliations, or punishments as means for which they would decide to leave the organization. The factories of the industrial revolution were known for their cruel exploitation.

Most of the literature on workplace stress focuses on workers or individual impacts [70], while the stress experienced by managers in the context of production receives relatively little attention [71]. The role of a manager can be described as "being in the

pressure cooker" due to the need to encourage performance, dedicate long hours to executing their roles, and be the first to be compromised if the goals are not met [72]. Despite this pressure, the role of managers in high-performance, competitive production environments is not sufficiently researched, which indicates the need for further research on this topic [8]. Balancing the pressure "from the top" can be extremely challenging for executives, especially when they are instructed to commit strategic abuse. How much they can resist or mitigate the negative effects on workers, without jeopardizing their position, depends on their personality and specific circumstances, which will be discussed more in Chapter 6. Additionally, the degree to which they can be open with workers and explain the situation without breaching confidentiality presents both an ethical dilemma and a potential risk to their position. In these situations, executives can be considered victims who are forced to become perpetrators, and they pay for their salaries and positions at that price.

An example of strategic abuse involves situations where direct executives are required to get rid of a certain percentage or number of workers. In order not to be suspicious of the public and the state, strategic tactics are being implemented. Operators are subjected to pressure, and their mistakes are deliberately sought out and sabotaged to force them to resign due to the intense pressure. In this way, companies can get rid of operators who are permanently employed. To mask these actions, they create new jobs for operators, creating the impression that the company is not only laying off workers but also hiring them.

6. Attackers: When the power reveals the true character

One of the motives of the abuse is certainly the satisfaction of the psychopathological need of the perpetrator for abuse, which is most easily realized at a job where he has power [64]. The motives of emotional abuse can be envy, which arises from a feeling of inferiority compared to the victim, and jealousy, which occurs in individuals who are considered to be of lower worth than the victim but have achieved greater business success and progressed further [64].

If we observe the behavior of persons who carry out violence, although they may suffer from personality disorders, they behave violently only when their organizational culture allows it or even rewards them [52]. As many as 95% of respondents claimed that violence is caused by the fact that people who carry out violence can get away with it, and victims are too afraid to report it [73]. The leadership position is a favorable means to achieve the goal of abuse, while the primary and "essential" purpose of abuse is that the person who perpetrates violence feels good when causing harm to others [74].

In organizations with a high power distance, the organizational hierarchy is obvious, therefore, it is expected that most of the perpetrators will be in a position of authority [68].

The sources of power in the perpetrator that can be separated from the victim can be: a higher hierarchical position, better access to resources in the organization, belonging to a privileged group of workers, and the possibility of using other people as "performers" of abuse [75]. Differences in power, for example, may be related to traditional gender roles and minority status and thus influence the emergence of violence, as it can be assumed that women and minorities have less power and status [76]. Therefore, conflicts between parties possessing equal power are not considered abuse [76]. Abuse is not solely confined to vertical aggression by superiors toward

subordinates, as subordinates acting collectively can, in some cases, accumulate enough power to mistreat a superior [76].

Given these power dynamics, it is crucial to understand the personality traits that may exacerbate such behavior. This brings us to the concept of the "dark triad" of personality traits associated with "dark" leadership. There seem to be a number of personality traits associated with "dark" leadership. However, there are three traits that are consistent in most studies and are referred to as the "dark triad" [77, 78]: narcissism, psychopathy, and machiavellianism.

Psychopathy and narcissism originate from clinical personality disorders [79]. Individuals with high levels of psychopathy and narcissism share a common core of manipulation, lack of empathy, and a sense of superiority over others [80]. Individuals with narcissistic personalities often demonstrate leadership qualities during employment interviews or, if already engaged, are selected to work in leadership positions [81].

Corporate psychopaths use abusive behaviors because they enjoy hurting people [82]. They also use tactics to humiliate subordinates [83] and intimidate others into fearing them, thus allowing themselves greater freedom of conduct [84].

People with a high level of machiavellianism are characterized by a cynical view of the world and the achievement of their own goals by all possible means. These people give high priority to money and power, lie for long-term goals, and manipulate and unethically behave at work [85]. Machiavellianism is characterized by the desire to acquire personal power.

In the production environment, superiors often use shouting as a form of communication, which may result from stress induced by tight deadlines or technical problems. This behavior can become a form of abuse, especially if it is frequent and is aimed at humiliating workers. It may also indicate a lack of skills and abilities to effectively manage teams and stressful situations.

Promoted workers may face the temptation to use their newfound power to retaliate against former colleagues, now subordinates. Power can reveal the true characteristics of an individual, especially in those with a tendency to personality disorders.

One serious example of an outpouring of anger by managers in the production environment in Serbia included an incident in which the manager threw a chair at two workers with a medical certificate of disability because it bothered him that they were sitting [86]. This manager has previously engaged in harassment of workers, including spitting on one manager and destroying her phone. In another factory, according to the union, inappropriate behavior by superiors toward workers, such as throwing food into the waste bin and kicking crates, occurs frequently [87].

Research conducted by the Center for Security Research [88] indicates that a significant number of workers in factories owned by foreign investors in southern Serbia experience verbal and physical abuse, as well as threats of job loss. In the survey, which included 55% of women and 45% of men, 45% of respondents stated that they had experienced insults from the boss, while 27% witnessed such actions. Physical security was compromised in 25% of cases, while 21% of respondents stated that it was directly compromised by the boss. Due to distrust in institutions, 35% did not report violence, and 14% were dissatisfied with the outcome of the report. Threats of dismissal were experienced by 53% of respondents, and no participant believes that the job has a positive impact on their health. Also, 56% believe that stress negatively affects their health, while 22% believe that physical exertion is the main cause of poor health. As many as 75% of respondents believe that they are underpaid for their work.

7. Operators: The easiest target at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder or the backbone of the company?

Anyone can become a victim of abuse, but on condition that the individual has less power than the attacker [53]. People who seem less powerful, that is, weaker and more vulnerable groups, become easier targets for perpetrators [89].

One of the reasons a victim has fewer defenses in the workplace is usually of a hierarchical-organizational nature, for example, when a person in a higher position harasses a subordinate or when a group of workers wants to get rid of one competitor [90].

Some authors suggest that there is no difference between victims and non-victims and that the question of who will become a victim of abuse at work is completely a matter of chance and unfortunate circumstances [81]. This perspective is especially relevant for production operators, as they cannot know in advance whether they will be assigned to a group with a competent or incompetent superior, which further underlines the element of chance.

Although operators are often found on the lowest hierarchical scale, this does not mean that they have the lowest level of education. In Serbia, it is common for many operators to have higher or even university education, hoping for advancement within the company. It has been shown that workers with a university degree have a higher risk of abuse compared to those with secondary education [33]. This phenomenon is often interpreted as a result of a greater awareness of educated workers about their rights, while less educated workers may consider irregularities normal or do not have the opportunity to fight them.

When looking at this aspect from a manufacturing perspective, direct executives with high school education may feel threatened by operators with higher education, which can lead to attempts to impede their advancement and even abuse to preserve their authority or status in the organization. In modern practice, especially in large companies in Serbia, the concept of abuse is known to workers, because along with signing employment contracts comes the signing of a document on the prohibition of abuse in the workplace. Posters with information about prohibited abuse are placed in visible places, and anonymous reports are made possible, which companies often do out of legal obligation to show that they are taking steps to prevent abuse.

When it comes to higher education operators working in the lowest positions, this can be explained from two aspects: the possibility of promotion and financial security. The term "start from scratch" refers to workers who start from the lowest positions to acquire skills and knowledge useful for a higher position. Whether in quality control, engineering, logistics, or other fields, operators who have experience working on machines know better their capabilities, breakdowns, and potential product defects. Workers with operational experience can more easily identify technical problems and propose effective solutions because they are already familiar with the daily operation of machines. These experiences are invaluable both for the individual in professional development and for the organization. However, in toxic organizations, operators are often maximized because they are considered "interchangeable." In this negative scenario, they remain in low positions, not realizing their full potential.

Another important aspect relates to better salaries and financial security brought by this kind of work. Many large companies in Serbia provide regular income, registration, health insurance, and organized transportation, which is an additional motivation for people to accept jobs with lower professional requirements. Many people with

higher education opt for jobs below the level of their expertise, as this allows them to have a stable salary and other benefits until they find a better option. In Serbia, where it is not easy to find another job, this is a common practice, and many people with university degrees work with secondary education. Given the key role of operators in production, in the next chapter, we will approach critically the challenges that lead to abuse persisting, despite legislative measures and proposals to improve working conditions.

8. Implementation challenges and critical review of the proposals so far

Proposals for combating workplace abuse in Serbia often remain unapplied, especially in toxic organizational cultures. We assume that the issue arises from the fact that top management and human resources teams often lack the time or motivation to review and implement research recommendations, either due to being overwhelmed with their responsibilities or because the topic does not align with their interests.

The idea that top management should apply an ethical style of business may seem obvious, but the question is whether it is realistic to expect it from managers who are already aware of these proposals, but simply ignore them. Furthermore, a critical approach to the problem is necessary, as it could provide valuable insights for further research. While good business practices, such as ethical behavior and monitoring interactions between workers with the enforcement of sanctions for aggressive behavior, are often suggested, these methods frequently fail in practice. Additionally, researchers often propose strategies for organizations to implement, such as training for workers and support strategies to improve the overall work environment.

Changes within production organizations at the global level, aimed at adopting a more human-oriented approach toward workers, have not significantly taken hold in Serbia. Researchers' recommendations for employers to introduce a culture that includes a stress prevention plan and prioritizes workers' health and safety are key, but workers' health and safety policies remain fragmented in most developing countries [11], including Serbia.

Globally, there have been changes within manufacturing organizations toward adopting a more human-oriented approach to workers [91], and many operational production management systems emphasize workers' empowerment and development [92].

Although toxic companies are portrayed as interested in the welfare of workers, in practice, it is shown that this is just a cover. Top management and human resources seem to work primarily in the interests of the company and profits, not in the interests of workers' welfare.

Most workers employed in factories in Serbia express dissatisfaction with their status. Apart from mutual talks, they do not have the strength, will, or resources to fight for better working conditions [93]. They do not trust the unions, because they believe that they do not represent their interests, but that they work for the benefit of the employer. On the other hand, representatives of companies deny these claims, emphasizing that they operate under the current legislation [93]. Although there are procedural rules for applying, workers are afraid of the consequences, subtle retaliations, and pressures from superiors, which makes it difficult to apply. Additional fear stems from the possibility that reporting abuse could leave the family without a single source of income, potentially making it difficult to secure employment in other companies later.

Another type of insecurity occurs when the state subsidizes the employment of workers in foreign factories, and then mass layoffs occur, which endangers the existence of workers and their families [94]. Research shows that job insecurity, especially in periods of economic instability, can have serious consequences for the health and quality of life of employees, including elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and mental fatigue [95], and in some cases cause more stress than job loss itself [95].

Therefore, the existence of the families of all these workers is becoming endangered, and this is an issue that must be resolved at the level of the city and the state [94]. The city has the responsibility to set itself up as an intermediary and take care of its fellow citizens, because it has provided benefits to the factories operating in its area, and even gave land to some [94].

It follows from the above that the problem of implementation of proposals and existing laws requires resolution at the organizational, institutional, and political levels.

9. Conclusion

Subsidizing foreign investors reduced unemployment, but led to problems with workers' rights. Although Serbia has attracted foreign companies, it has become a country of cheap labor, which requires stronger protection of workers' rights and greater transparency in the use of public funds.

To maximize profits, production organizations expect operators to operate on the principle of "ideal workers," those who can work long hours and achieve a high level of performance in a short period of time, without the burden of family obligations and without going on sick leave. The study concludes that, when looking at the wider psychophysical impacts on the operator's job, such as shift work, standing position, with limited breaks for rest, high work norms, and overload with work, there are significant negative consequences for the health of the worker and the overall well-being of his work, family, and social life.

The low hierarchical position of workers and the lack of power allow superiors to see them as "replaceable," which makes them vulnerable to abuse. This pressure is compounded by financial problems, family care, and job insecurity, due to which operators comply with poor conditions. Uncertainty of employment in production is often the result of strategic abuse, where workers are deliberately hampered by work, looking for mistakes and writing disciplinary penalties to force them to quit. These practices are delegated to immediate executives, who face the risk of losing their position if they oppose or support their team. At the same time, individuals who gain more power in the hierarchy often manifest behavioral patterns that reflect their real values and attitudes.

One of the main limitations of this study is that it is based solely on the analysis of existing literature, and not on empirical research. Future research should focus on identifying the most vulnerable industries and key determinants of labor exploitation and abuse. To this end, it is necessary to increase the number of relevant publications to put pressure on companies to recognize and adequately solve these problems. It is important that this issue is not seen as a temporary challenge, but rather becomes a permanent part of public discussion because the rights and well-being of citizens are a priority. Institutions, the industrial sector, local communities, and the state must recognize their responsibility and make efforts to ensure healthier and fairer working conditions for all workers.

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Chapter 5

Media, Violence, and Mimicry: Critical Analysis of the Copycat Effect

Katie Kelley and Andreas Miles-Novelo

Abstract

In 2023, the FBI found that national violent crime rates decreased by three percent. Yet research consistently finds that mass murder shootings and serial killer murders have either increased and/or remain resistant to this overall trend in violent crime. Some social scientists have suggested that increased media coverage has led to increased "copycat" crimes - such as mimicking school shootings or serial killers. Others posit that access to media increases the saliency and potential self-efficacy of individuals engaging in specific types of crimes. In this chapter, we critically examine the literature on the "copycat effect" and the question of whether media influence has helped make serial killings and mass shootings particularly resistant to overall decreases in violent crime. We also consider the relevancy of cross-cultural perspectives, new lines of academic questioning around crime and violence, and gaps in current understanding.

Keywords: copycat crime, copycat criminal, mirroring, contagion effect, Werther effect, contagion suicide, contagion murder, edge-sitter, violence, violent, mass media, media influence, murder, homicide

1. Introduction

From August to November 1888 in White Chapel, London, a notorious serial killer known as Jack the Ripper terrorized the community, murdering six alleged prostitutes. One hundred and twenty years later, Jack the Rippers' copycat killer, Derek Brown—so fascinated by The Ripper—emulated the crimes by killing two women who were both abducted from White Chapel [1]. Brown, a 48-year-old father of seven at the time of his arrest, reportedly told friends that he wanted to be famous and held a fascination with Jack the Ripper, even checking out a book from his local library titled, "Killers: The Most Barbaric Murderers of Our Time" [1].

A copycat crime is a criminal act that is modeled after or inspired by a previous crime, typically homicide or violent assault, but can also range to rioting and robbery [2]. It notably occurs after exposure to media content depicting said crimes and/or a live criminal model [3]. Some of the first examples of such copycat crimes were several incidents speculated as similar to Jack the Ripper's due to heightened media coverage of the unsolved case.

Overall trends in violence are notably increasing when it comes to mass murders and serial killers, while other violent offenses are decreasing [4, 5]. Among social scientists, an explanation of these "copycat" crimes are likely due to increased media exposure [6]. While some argue that access to media enhances the prominence and perceived self-efficacy of individuals involved in certain types of crime [3]. As with Brown, he noted to confidants the direct influence of the infamous Ripper case media coverage infamy in his reasoning for committing the murders [1].

Copycat crime is a social phenomenon that persists and is prevalent enough to impact the criminal landscape, primarily by influencing criminal tactics instead of criminal motives or the emergence of criminal traits [6]. Several potential triggers, ranging from media exposure to popular culture, may impact an individual's decision to commit a copycat crime. Additionally, these risks are amplified by other factors that are known to influence aggressive and violent thoughts and behaviors, such as poverty, high reactivity, and limited access to education [7].

There are many parallels between copycat crimes and other forms of extremely violent behavior, such as mass shootings and terrorism. For example, Surrette noted a link between media portrayal and an impetus of criminal behavior [8]. Surrette details that more research is needed to enhance the comprehension of copycat crime holistically but that it is not without its limitations given that only a perpetrator of a copycat crime can provide rationale for emulating such behavior. However, Surrette does note that studies have found that copycat crimes tend to develop early within an individual's criminal career [9]. In the latter study, it was found that media is a laudable influence on the criminogenic journey of a juvenile or novice offender [9].

2. Mass media influence

The role of media on aggressive and violent behavior has been one of the most studied questions in social science. Consistently, research has found that increased exposure to violent media is a stable and independent risk factor for increased aggression [7, 10]. This has been demonstrated in short-term experimental effects, self-report surveys, and longitudinal modeling, suggesting a compounding and lifelong developmental risk factor. It's important to note that exposure to media violence is neither the most significant risk factor for future aggressive behavior (which is a history of aggression) nor the strongest predictor of gun violence (which is access to a firearm) [6]. Still, there is a consistent and independent small-to-medium effect present for both. On the question of mass murders and copycat killings, this research on media violence sets the foundation for our theoretical conceptualization of why mass killings and copycat killings may be resistant to overall decreases in crime since access to mass media has simultaneously increased over the last century. This leads to theorization as to how and why we see this resistant effect of mass and copycat killings, despite the decrease in overall violent crime, due to the increase of access to mass media reports about mass killings.

The General Aggression Model (GAM; see **Figure 1**) is often cited as a theoretical model of the media's role in increasing the likelihood of aggressive cognition and behavior. It emphasizes the intersecting role of both individual biological and personality factors and external influences to shape the cognition that influences the decision to engage in aggressive behavior at any given moment. This process of cognitively evaluating behaviors and thoughts in a specific moment is known as "appraisal," and external factors can heavily sway how this appraisal process works. The GAM helps

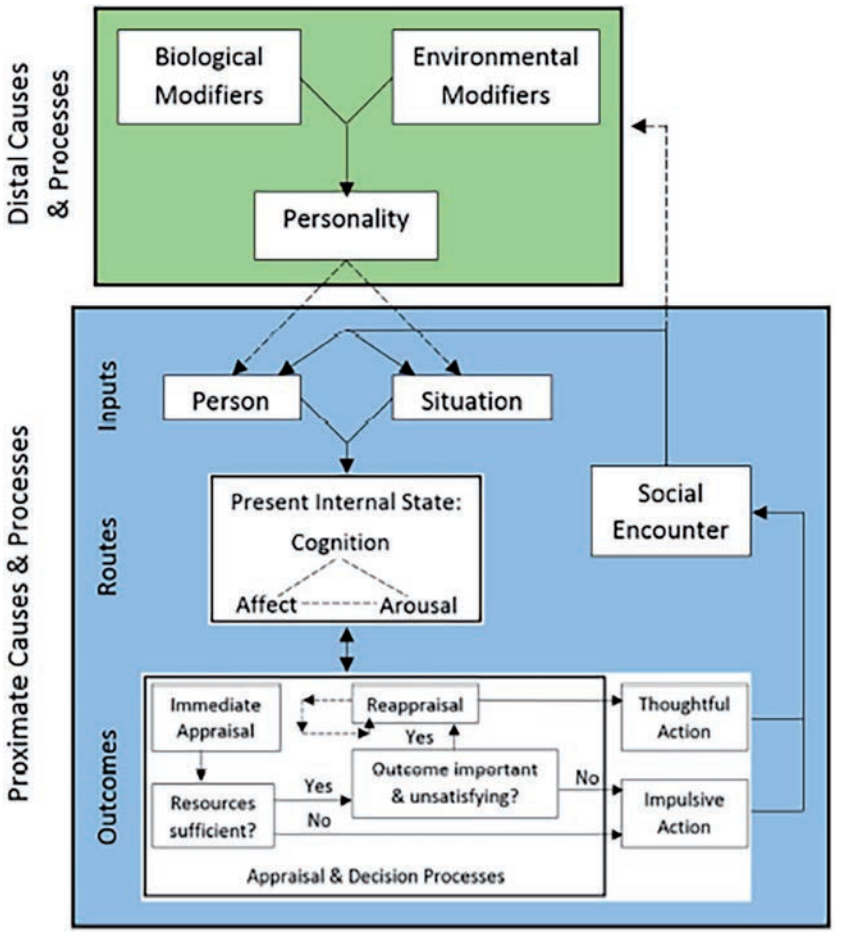

Figure 1.
The general aggression model (GAM): Proximate and distal causes and processes. Adapted from Anderson and Bushman [11] and Anderson and Carnagey [12].

researchers visualize where media influence enters this appraisal cycle, as media offers a "model" for how and why aggressive behaviors may be acceptable in a given moment, especially if they lead to a desired outcome. In the case of mass killings and copycat murders, it is theorized that the media exposure of other aggressive behavior demonstrates to individuals that desired outcomes can be achieved if they "mimic" the behaviors of those who committed these behaviors before them. Furthermore, repeated exposure to similar killings can create a "script" that makes copying the behaviors more accessible and more salient for the individual evaluating if they think this is an action they should take. The GAM shows how environmental factors like heat, media effects, and other external causes can interrupt and/or influence this appraisal process, making impulsive, reactionary, and aggressive behavior more likely.

In the case of mass killings and copycat murders, it is theorized that the media exposure of other aggressive behavior demonstrates to individuals that desired outcomes can be achieved if they "mimic" the behaviors of those who committed these behaviors before them [4, 5]. Thus, looking at the GAM, we can see how this

external exposure to mass killings may alter one's internal state or perceptions of the consequences of engaging in such behavior, making it more likely that one may decide that it is a desirable course of action to take. Additionally, by offering a "script," one's internal efficacy may be raised - making them more likely to engage in the behavior because they feel confident that they will reach their end desire, whether that's a sense of belonging, social recognition, the elimination of people they dislike, or any other of the multitude of internal motivations mass killings have. An experiment on using shooting simulators in virtual reality and video gaming found that simply having players engage in a realistic shooting-range simulation 2 to 3 times a week for around a month would raise internal efficacy about handling a firearm. Furthermore, respondents indicated they were more likely to feel confident and willing to use a gun in real life after being in the experiment [13]. Thus, the influence of media on events such as mass shootings is multifaceted. Not only does the presence of a media report make the idea more salient and, therefore, more likely to happen, but other media consumption habits may contribute to increasing the likelihood of engaging in a mass killing, especially if access to a firearm is readily available and easy to navigate [14].

Here lays an issue for current scholars interested in mass killings, serial killings, and copycat crimes. The distinguishment between a true "copycat" and an act of violence that was merely "inspired" or "influenced" by media showing these types of crime is hard to conceptualize, and to date, no researchers have attempted to offer a more robust conversation on these operationalizations. For this chapter, we will discuss more overt "copycat" killings, that is, those with overtly stated expressed or observational features that make the crime a "copy" of another previous crime. However, on a deeper level, one could extend much of this thinking into the more generalizable influence of media on mass killings. We hope to expand on this in the conclusion. Additionally, we will highlight several features that are prominent in them and offer a careful critique and review of these ideas. Notably, we will look at the phenomenon of "mirroring" (copying elements of a famous crime), the "contagion" behavior of copycats (a "patient zero" and a "spreading"), as well as several motivating factors such as the desire for admiration, the influence of popular culture, and social alienation ("edge-sitters").

We begin by looking at mass media and the example of Heriberto "Eddie" Seda who was known as the New York City copycat Zodiac Killer [15]. The original Zodiac Killer was a murderer who terrorized the San Francisco Bay Area with seemingly random murders for which he then sent taunting and demanding ciphers to the San Francisco Chronicle, furthering his media presence. The case, to this day, remains unsolved as per the FBI. The original Zodiac Killer in San Francisco killed five individuals and often targeted couples. He was dubbed the nickname Zodiac due to the fact that he was determined to kill someone from each astrological sign. Seda was captivated by the astrological signs of his victims, even going so far as to ask one of them, just before pulling the trigger, what his sign was. Interestingly, while he was intrigued by serial killer Ted Bundy, it was the Zodiac Killer who ultimately held his attention, largely due to his skill in evading capture.

2.1 Mirroring

There was a clear media influence on the copycat violence of Seda, who maintained a fascination with the infamy of the Zodiac Killer, and mimicked the unsolved killers' known acts of violence on New York City inhabitants from 1989 through 1993. While Seda was also familiar with another famed serial killer David Berkowitz, he was

most influenced by the immense media coverage that accompanied and followed the unsolved Zodiac case. From films to books as well as a group of retired law enforcement officers who continue to investigate and keep the topic relevant in mass media.

This act is known as "mirroring." Mirroring is the imitation of highly publicized crime, and in this case, Seda imitated the Zodiac. He mirrored the Zodiac in his tactics to shoot random individuals but did so to know their celestial zodiac astrological signs [15, 16]. However, Seda had a history of aggressive behavior before the killings he committed in the late '80s and early '90s. His half-sister, whom he shot but survived, noted that Seda would often beat and hurt her throughout their relationship as siblings.

However, a copycat will rarely be influenced by a crime from multiple years prior. According to a recent study, approximately 80 percent of copycat mass shootings occurred within one year of the original crime, with an average occurring eight years after the initial incident [17]. The study also found that the copycat criminal mirrored several demographical aspects such as race, age, country, sex, and even offender outcome from the original.

2.2 Contagion and Werther effect

The contagion suicide effect, also known as the Werther Effect, occurs when a highly media-sensationalized suicide of an individual occurs and acts as a trigger for other suicides. The case of Scott Paul Beierle, also known as the Tallahassee hot yoga studio shooter, was triggered by Elliot Rodger's broadly depicted act of not only killing six individuals and injuring 14 others in Isla Vista, California but also taking his own life as well. Rodger was part of a broader indoctrinated group of men known as incels, short for involuntary celibate. Their shared contempt of women capitalized into murder and suicide. Rodger, who was held in regard as a martyr for the incel movement, was dubbed "The Supreme Gentleman" after death by those who exalted him. Rodger and Beierle were both part of a broader misogynistic manosphere fueled by hateful rhetoric. Before Beierle attacked the hot yoga studio on Nov. 2, 2018, he cited Rodger's pomposity in a video.

Social scientists often consider this influence to be the "spread" of a contagion. The act that is publicized then creates the conditions for others to conceive of the possibility that they could engage in the same behavior, though they were not able to conceptualize or imagine themselves doing that behavior before. Compounding this, social psychologists have noted that we are more likely to mimic those we find identify with and that we are more likely to do so subconsciously when we experience social isolation [18]. Additionally, like other "contagions," the best way to prevent spread is by proactive measures to contain it, which leads to the recommendations from many social scientists to limit the amount of information spread by the media after a violent crime, especially when details are not fully verified [19, 20]. However, it is important to note that the conceptualization of crime as a contagion is simply an approximation to help guide policymakers and scholars, not necessarily a literal equivalent. One study found little evidence to support a statistical model for a "contagion" spread in crime [21] and that the best predictor of crime was still commonly cited risk factors such as poverty, racial segregation, and neighborhood crime rates. However, a follow-up demonstrated a contagion-like pattern from media stories within neighborhoods already high in crime rates [19]. Finally, as discussed earlier, the influence of media on acts of crime is most notable in younger and novice criminals. Together, these findings suggest a social-behavioral framework is necessary to understand copycat crime. One such prominent social influence is fame or admiration.

2.2.1 Notoriety and admiration

Following the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado with perpetrators Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold having fatally shot 13 individuals and injured two dozen others, there have been at least 74 purported plots emulating Harris and Klebold [22]. Many of these are due to the notoriety of Harris and Klebold in mass media coverage over the past few decades, often giving very personal depictions of the shooters, their lives, and coverage over what factors may or may not have influenced their decision to commit the school shooting.

Admiration and notoriety, both potential triggers among copycat criminals' thoroughfare, have led to a fandom of the two shooters since their act and subsequent deaths on April 20, 1999. To this day, 25 years later, one can find videos, bombs, and shooting plans with minute details of reenacting the terror Harris and Klebold left behind on the internet. It is known that both Seung-Hui Cho, of the 2007 Virginia Tech school shooting, and Adam Lanza, of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, studied and admired Harris and Klebold [22]. While admiration of a criminal is not likely to push most people over the edge to commit violent acts, these high-profile cases can serve as models for those already predisposed toward violence and who are already considering the possibility of engaging in these behaviors. Just like in the video game example, simply seeing others execute these actions makes the possibility of doing something similar more salient and mentally accessible. It also important to consider that it is not simply media coverage that may make this impression but also *how* these cases and the people involved are covered. Additionally, it is not only real criminals who can act as the model for copycats. Fictional characters and stories have also inspired crimes, such as the mass shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, whose shooter was rumored to be inspired by the Joker from the Batman film *The Dark Knight* [23].

3. Popular culture impact

The example of the Aurora, Colorado shooting shows not only the influence of popular culture and media sensationalism on potentially providing models for copycats but also the social conditions where such a belief may persevere. Bosch and Kort-Butler note that new research into how these events take place served as the motivation for an increased discourse on the potential impacts of a new *Joker* film on acts of mass violence, particularly as perpetrated by "incels" [23]. This role of media serving to placate violent extremism has been a growing body of research [24, 25].

But returning to violent copycat crimes, two additional cases of a fictionalized character influencing severe crimes were in the mimicry crimes influenced by the Showtime drama miniseries *Dexter*. In the television series, Dexter Morgan, played by actor Michael C. Hall, plays a sociopathic forensic specialist for the Miami Police Department specifically in blood spatter analysis. The highly viewed TV series gained notoriety as *Dexter* often focused his violent killings on vigilantism of heinous criminals who slipped through the system. Unfortunately, not only one copycat criminal occurred, but two. The first was by Mark Andrew Twitchell, a Canadian filmmaker, who turned his garage into an emulation of the fictional character Dexter's kill room. He lured a victim pretending to be a female on Plenty of Fish on Oct. 10, 2008. John Brian Altinger, a 38-year-old British Columbia resident who previously worked as an

oilfield equipment manufacturer, was lured by Twitchell where he was bludgeoned, stabbed, and dismembered—similar to the Dexter killer who often dismembered his victims before dumping them off of the Miami ocean cost. This crime, among others, lends itself to the Entertainment Education Theory conceptualized by Sabido [26]. The theory posits that when individuals are exposed to various media content, they may begin to emulate the characteristics and behaviors of the fictional character. The theory also has a foothold in Albert Bandura's social learning theory, in which individuals often observe and learn from the behaviors of others and emulate these behaviors in their individual lives.

On Jan. 24, 2014, a then 16-year-old Steven Miles strangled, stabbed, and dismembered his 17-year-old girlfriend in Oxted, Surrey. Both Twitchell and Miles had unhealthy fixations and obsessions with the fictional character of Dexter. Twitchell and Miles, likely fascinated by the behaviors and characteristics of the Dexter killer were compelled to leverage his actions into their real lives. Typically, however, the Entertainment Education Theory is based on more positive role models rather than a fictionalized sociopathic serial killer.

One of the most interesting cases where the Entertainment Education Theory saw much copycat replication is that of the film *Natural Born Killers*. In the movie Following the movie, director Oliver Stone was quoted as stating: "The most pacifistic people in the world said they came out of this movie and wanted to kill somebody" [27]. After the film was released in August 1994 and gained notoriety, several copycat sprees began, including that of two teenagers from Oklahoma City who engaged in drug consumption while viewing the film on loop before lighting off in their vehicle to kill one and paralyze another convenience store clerk [28]. Since that time at least eight copycat sprees have transpired. However, the actual amount is likely larger, but no one resource offers a legitimate number of the associated copycat sprees in the 30 years since its release. However, the fascination and general public outpouring generated by the film continues to remain a prevalent foothold in society as well as a gripping research tool when it comes to copycat crimes.

These copycat killings display strong relationships with the media and may have influenced the behavior of these two individuals. Surrette [2, 2013, p. 52] developed a three-path model to copycat crimes that includes "Path 1 (central systematic processing where all relevant and available information is assessed before making a decision where the individual actively scrutinizes all available information); Path 2 (heuristic peripheral where decisions are made with incomplete information and only readily available information is accessed and used); and Path 3 (narrative persuasion) where media information is simply absorbed reflecting entertainment education theory and research on the impact of media communicated stories." With Surrette's model, we can deduce how an individual's exposure to a crime may influence their reenacting of the original crime. There are several factors primed for copycat crimes including media exposure with the Surrette model, which serves as the link to the original crime and the copycat crime.

4. Risk factors for perpetration

Risk factors for copycat violence may stem from environmental or familial triggers but could also be linked with depression, anxiety, and bullying. What influences someone to take the leap from behavioral norms to crossing the proverbial line that we, as humans, understand to be immoral is likely dependent on each circumstance.

What is known, however, is that copycat criminals are continuing to increase, and these derive from what are likely edge-sitters.

As mentioned earlier, one particular area of concern is how media depictions of violence may influence disenfranchised groups, such as incels and far-right groups [23, 25]. Edge-sitters are those sitting on the edge of normality and engaging in criminal behavior [29]. Edge-sitters may be provoked to commit a crime due to over-exposure to news media harrowing that of violent criminal offenses. For example, New York City experienced a wave of subway violent crimes between December 2014 and February 2015. The subway slashings seemingly were separate in nature and did not involve a gang or one individual subject, yet the 21 slashings that occurred generated much media attention. While the police maintained that the continued attacks were not connected, the concept of a copycat crime due to the intense media headlines produced is what experts hail as the continued perpetuation of the crimes, which is an important example of how individuals may have seen news media articles of the subway slashings pushing them over the edge also to copycat the crimes [30]. From popular culture to exposure to violence in the media, edge-sitters are susceptible to viewing violence in the media and then emulating it by learning from others how to execute a crime. Potential edge-sitters could have felt compelled by the media coverage to copycat the crimes, but there are limitations in knowing the exactness of this theory with so many unknown factors. Additionally, as discussed earlier, new media technology may provide avenues to rehearse the skills necessary to carry out a mass-crime, much like the Columbine Shooters "practiced" their plan via the video game *Doom* [13, 31].

5. Generalization and critical reflection of copycat crimes

However, we should be careful not to overemphasize the role of media as a causal factor of crime and violence. While it is apparent from the literature on violent media effects on aggression, as well as research on copycat crimes, that media exposure to violence and severe crimes can influence the likelihood one may engage in perepetrating a violent crime, it is also clear that there are far more salient material and social factors that are at play in creating the conditions for violence. As studies such as Fagen et al. demonstrate, while socio-economic factors such as material inequity, percieved inequality, and racial segregation are overwhelmingly the biggest predictors for violent crime, media influence still acts as an intersecting influence that may exacterbate the likelihood that someone may engage in a violent crime [22].

This highlights the need for further research and conceptualization, particularly among scholars across disciplines, to create a more robust understanding of the role of media in influencing crime and violence. One key under researched factor is cross-cultural effects of media influence. While general media effects have been found across global demographics [10, 32] there needs to be a more nuanced understanding among critical scholarship to better understand the interaction of socio-economic factors and media exposure, primarily since media exposure can only occur with access to media. Additionally, since crime and violence is not depicted in media equitibally (i.e., some demographics are depicted as "more likely" to be criminals, etc.), the potential for any media depcition to influence an individual is most likely filtered through social-psychological factors such as identification. More research needs to be done to better critically understand the nature of the psychological, economic, and social factors at play in copycat crime.

6. Discussion

The implications of full comprehension of copycat crimes must be further studied. It can be difficult to truly ascertain whether a criminal was fully inspired by that of another criminal without asking the offender and, even then, it must be taken as face value of the offender's word. As mentioned earlier, it is also challening from a psychological perspective to distinguish the difference between a true "copycat" and crime that is only influenced by the exposure to media violence. Finally, better cross-cultural theorization can help lead to more critical inquries of the intersection of socio-economic factors with media influence on crime.

Future studies would benefit from replicating that of the 2024 empirical study on copycat mass shooters and their role models [17]. Delving into further empirical evidence can lend itself to enhanced comprehension of statistically sound data, which may be beneficial for preventative measures. However, copycat crime studies should be broadened significantly, regardless of research methodology, to best understand how to dissuade copycats. Understanding if there is a way to frame the narrative from a media lens to provide less focus on a perpetrator to decrease any potential glorification would be beneficial to long-term public safety.

To address a point made earlier in the chapter, one fact remains that mass killings and copycat crimes are understood to remain resistant to the overall decrease in violent crime observed in government and law-enforcment data. We might understand this to be an artifcact of the increased exposure to media, making this particular type of influence on aggressive behavior more resistant to the efforts to reduce crimes in other ways. However, there is not much empirical evidence to test this hypothesis, and more work needs to be done to better understand the underlying psychological and social factors at play to help scientists better forumalate theoretical models, hypotheses, and tests to understand these effects.

7. Conclusion

We hope that this review offers a place for scholars interested in mass killings and serial murders to begin a more robust conversation about the psychological elements that underlie these crimes. Most notably, we hope that by articulating the psychological foundation for why we understand media violence exposure to influence aggressive behavior, we can begin to offer more empirically-based theorization on how and why copycat crimes continue to persist. Additionally, we hope that this chapter provides a place to synergize the work on mass killings and copycat murders, as we postulate that the resistance of mass killings to decrease in time overall crime reduction is partly due to media exposure.

The reason for this is that media exposure both creates a "script" that makes mass killings more accessible and salient, as well as has short-to-long-term effects of changing one's cognitive patterns that make engaging in aggressive behavior more likely. What this demonstrates is the need for more nuanced dialog around intervention strategies regarding mass killings, as the "solution" to help prevent and make these types of crimes less frequent requires a complex interaction of social, psychological, and material policies and actions that must work in tandem. First, we must recognize the global risk factors for violence and leverage governmental policies to help intervene, such as limiting access to firearms to those with previous histories of violent and reactionary behavior (such as domestic violence). Additionally, we need to create

holistic strategies that mitigate the harm of violent content portrayed on the news and in mass commercial media, such as designing and implementing more coherent systems of content ratings for children and families. Finally, there is a severe need to create more sustainable mental health systems that can help identify and support individuals most at risk for committing acts of mass violence before they consider doing so. Overall, scientists should continue to support policies that help alleviate material inequality and help create more equitable access to needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, and education. Without a coordinated and concentrated effort across all these domains, we will likely continue to see copycat and mass killings resist general trends of decreasing crime.

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Chapter 6

The Ripple Effect of Violent Service Delivery Protests in South Africa: Causes and Implications

Nsizwazonke E. Yende

Abstract

In South Africa, violent protests have become a common response to frustrations over service delivery failures, such as inadequate housing, insufficient sanitation, and limited access to clean water. These unmet needs reveal underlying socioeconomic disparities and fuel tensions between communities and local governments. Notably, service delivery protests have increased in the democratic era, despite policies and programs aimed at addressing these gaps. The literature reveals that these protests often leave affected areas in a state of devastation, with damaged infrastructure, injuries, and sometimes loss of life, further eroding trust between communities and authorities and complicating efforts toward sustainable service delivery. This chapter investigates the ripple effect of violent service delivery protests in South Africa's local municipalities, analyzing their root causes and broader consequences. Using secondary research and case studies, the chapter explores how these protests impact social, economic, and political stability. The relative deprivation theory serves as a framework to interpret findings, highlighting how perceived inequalities drive public discontent. Ultimately, the chapter concludes that South Africa's recurring violent protests stem largely from the government's inability to address service delivery disparities, triggering a cycle of unrest that disrupts stability and hinders development.

Keywords: relative deprivation theory, ripple effect, service delivery, South Africa, violent protests

1. Introduction

In the democratically elected and nonracial government in South Africa, the provision of basic but essential services such as clean running water, housing, and proper sanitation continues to be a dilemma, this is more prevalent in rural areas and townships [1–3]. This is because, the literature reviewed highlights that the service delivery disparities and discrepancies in post-1994 South Africa have deep roots in the apartheid era, a period between 1948 and 1994 [4, 5]. Accordingly, this period of the inhumane segregation and alienation system was marked by policies that systematically and purposefully promoted unequal provision and access to essential services based on racial category (Black, Colored, Indian, and White) and space [5]. The apartheid

government, through legislation like the Group Areas Act No 41 of 1950 and Basic Amenities Act of No 49 of 1953 impacted Black, Colored, and Indian communities disproportionately [4, 6, 7]. Furthermore, these among other acts ensured that certain communities and areas, primarily those designated for non-White South Africans were intentionally deprived of basic services such as clean water, electricity, quality healthcare, and adequate housing [7]. For example, these laws and policies enforced strict segregation and alienation, with Black South Africans relegated to under-resourced areas (such as rural areas and townships) and further depriving them of basic services like clean water, proper sanitation, etc. [8]. Accordingly, these deeply entrenched service delivery disparities left a legacy and footprint that persists even today, posing significant challenges for the post-apartheid government as it works to address historical inequities and meet the demands for equitable service delivery, currently [6, 7].

The post-1994 democratically elected government has established and adopted numerous policies (Free Basic Services Policy), programs (Expanded Public Works Programme) and legislation (Municipal Systems Act) designed to mandate and guide the government in progressively ensuring access to essential services [7, 9]. The framework such as Batho Pele (People First); Integrated Development Plan, National Development Plan, etc mandate the government to take all necessary actions and measures to meet citizens' basic needs, despite improvements, poor service provision continues to be an issue in South Africa, and this is more visible in local municipalities [9–11]. For example, the literature review highlights that in 1996 only 7.2 million households in South Africa had clean running water, but this has increased to 59.7% of households with access to piped water inside their dwellings [12]. While 22.7% of households have piped (tap) water inside the yard [12, 13]. Also, approximately 10% of households still lack access to piped water entirely, indicating a critical gap in essential services for nearly one-tenth of the population [14, 15]. In terms of proper sanitation, the literature highlights that 70.8% of South African households have access to flush toilets, while a significant number still rely on less sanitary options: 21.9% use pit toilets, 2.6% use chemical toilets, and 2.1% depend on bucket toilets [14–16]. Additionally, 1.6% of households lack any toilet facility, which continues to highlight critical sanitation gaps [13, 15–18]. In terms of housing, 88.5% live in formal housing, signifying considerable progress in housing provision [14, 17]. However, 8.1% of households reside in informal dwellings, and 3.1% in traditional structures, highlighting ongoing housing and infrastructure challenges [12, 17, 18]. These disparities underscore ongoing challenges in achieving equitable access to safe sanitation, reflecting broader public health and infrastructure concerns [19].

Accordingly, it is from these service provision discrepancies that violent protests emanate, highlighting the government's struggles with effectively addressing the demands of its constituencies [11]. Furthermore, the literature highlights that these violent protests related to inadequate service provision reflect deeper socio-economic and political challenges in the country [10]. Subsequently, studies have been conducted on the causes of violent service delivery protests in South African municipalities (see [8–11, 14, 16–18]). However, there is still a gap in the literature on studies that adopt relative deprivation theory to explore the ripple effect of violent service delivery protests. By applying this theoretical framework, researchers can better understand how perceived inequalities and unmet expectations among communities drive collective action and influence other areas. Therefore, exploring these dynamics is crucial for comprehensively understanding the interconnected nature of violent service delivery protests in South Africa. From this background, the chapter explores the ripple effect of violent service delivery protests in South African local

municipalities, examining their root causes and far-reaching implications. Following this introduction, the chapter outlines the secondary research design employed to gather relevant data. Thereafter, the chapter explains the theoretical framework, namely, relative deprivation theory that was adopted as a lens to interpret the findings. The chapter continues with a literature review centered on two key themes, namely, (i) the causes of violent service delivery protests, and (ii) the ripple implications of violent service delivery. Following the literature review, the chapter then discusses the findings from the literature. It concludes with a concise summary that encapsulates the primary arguments presented throughout the text, emphasizing the need for targeted policy interventions to address the issues highlighted.

2. Approach

The chapter adopted a secondary qualitative analysis (QSA) to explore the ripple effect of violent service delivery protests in South African local municipalities. Accordingly, a QSA is described as a research method that focuses on re-examining, re-using, and re-cling existing and available qualitative data initially collected for different research purposes to derive new insights and interpretations [20–22]. The literature indicates that this QSA is rich in its nature because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of previously gathered data, enabling the identification of patterns and themes related to the phenomenon under study. Within the context of this chapter, it was adopted to enhance a critical understanding of the ripple effect of violent service delivery protests, looking specifically at the causes and implications [21]. Furthermore, QSA was used because it provides a cost-effective and time-efficient approach to research [22]. This method was not haphazardly executed but followed the three systematic steps or phases as discussed by Hox and Boeije [20]. First, based on the purpose of the chapter, we began by locating the data and information related to violent service delivery protests in South African local municipalities. Thereafter, the data was accessed and retrieved from different search engines including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Research Gate, etc. Then, the data was evaluated to assess its appropriateness and quality, rigorously assessing each source against the main purpose of the chapter to analyze both the root causes and the wide-reaching consequences of violent service delivery protests in South Africa. The chapter included data that was deemed appropriate and not older than 10 years. Accordingly, this step was fundamental in this chapter because it ensured that the data selected was both relevant and reliable for addressing the chapter's objectives.

3. Theoretical framework

The chapter adopts the relative deprivation theory, founded by a team led by Samuel Stouffer in the 1950s [23]. Later, in the 1970s, Ted Gurr expanded the theory in his seminal work, "Why Men Rebel" [23]. Accordingly, the theory acknowledges that people who feel deprived because of perceived discrepancies between their expectations and actual conditions lead to frustration, resentment, and ultimately social riots [24, 25]. The disparity between individuals' expectations and their actual reality generates anger, which subsequently serves as a powerful motivator and driving force behind aggressive behavior [25]. In essence, the center of this theory is both expectations and actual reality, such that the larger the gap between these two

dimensions determines the greater the magnitude of aggression and violence [24, 26]. Generally, this theory is particularly capable of providing an understanding of collective actions, and is more relevant, especially in explaining how unmet communal expectations can amplify feelings of deprivation and drive groups toward protest and dissent [23]. Therefore, within the context of this chapter, relative deprivation theory is particularly relevant because it provides a theoretical lens toward understating how unmet expectations around basic but essential services (clean running water, proper sanitation, housing, stable electricity, etc.) fuel frustration and lead to violent protests [26–28]. Therefore, by examining the gap between citizens' anticipated access to these essential services and the reality of limited or inadequate provision, the theory explains the root causes of collective dissatisfaction [23]. This theoretical lens further helps analyze the ripple effect of these violent protests, showing how perceived inequalities intensify community tensions, which can spill over into different areas, perpetuating cycles of violence and instability. Building on this foundation, this chapter adopts relative deprivation theory as its guiding framework.

4. Literature review

4.1 Contextual history of violent service delivery protests in South Africa

Generally, the occurrence of violent protests in South Africa is not entirely new; rather, it is deeply rooted in the country's historical struggle against apartheid and its oppressive policies [5–8, 11, 29]. For example, the literature reviewed highlights that during this period the Black majority constantly mobilized to resist this unjust system, while at the same time demanding equal rights and an end to systemic and institutional discrimination [29–31]. Furthermore, these resistance efforts included organizing protests, strikes, and demonstrations, which were met with police brutality [11]. For example, the famous Soweto Uprising on June 16, 1976, saw a massive student boycott against the enforcement of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, leading to widespread violence and casualties that led to the destruction of property and the loss of lives [32, 33]. This event not only illustrates the rejection of apartheid policies but also demonstrates the intensity of unrest and the extreme lengths of brutality or violence employed by the apartheid government to enforce its rules [32]. In 1960, the Sharpeville Massacre, where protesters rallied against "pass laws" (required Black people to carry a passbook, restricting their stay in urban areas to 72 hours), highlighted the intensity of resistance against apartheid-era restrictions [34]. These among other incidents illustrate how violent resistance emerged as a response to the repressive conditions imposed by the apartheid system [33]. Hence, the literature highlights that the apartheid was a violent system in its nature [34]. This is because the system relied on brutal methods such as physical torture and psychological coercion to maintain racial segregation and systematic inequality [31]. Thus, this history of violent resistance has left a legacy that continues to influence the nature of protests in South Africa today [35, 36].

Despite a hopeful transition into democracy, violence has continued to persist in South Africa [35]. For example, Breakfast et al. [36] highlight that since the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa has continued to grapple with various forms of violence, including political violence, gender-based violence, and an increase in levels of both police and subaltern violence. Additionally, the widespread and frequent occurrence of violent protests has remained prominent phenomenon throughout the

democratic dispensation [11]. The occurrence of these protests stems from different issues including unceasing university fee increments, poor working conditions, deteriorating salaries, and inadequate service delivery [10, 35]. Unlike the apartheid system, the South African Constitution of 1996 in the democratic dispensation upholds the right to peaceful protest across various sectors of society; however, it is violent protests that have become more prevalent [37]. Hence, it is from this background that the post-1994 democratic South Africa has earned the reputation of being the "protest capital of the world," with over 80% of these demonstrations escalating into violence [30, 35–39]. The reviewed literature indicates that this climate and the context of pervasive violence have created fertile ground for service delivery protests to escalate into violent confrontations [38], which are subsequently called violent service delivery protests. These are demonstrations normally led by local community members or concern groups to express their discontent and frustration over inadequate or absent public services such as water, electricity, proper sanitation, and lack of housing, which frequently escalate into acts of violence [11]. This violent protesting manifests in different forms including, barricading roads with burning tires, property destruction, looting, and clashes with law enforcement [30]. Accordingly, since the year 2000s violent service delivery protests have been a common occurrence in South Africa [11].

The continuous occurrence of these violent protests reflects the broader frustration with unmet socioeconomic needs and persistent inequalities in democratic dispensation [35]. Furthermore, the literature claims that violent service delivery protests are often triggered by different factors including poor infrastructure, inadequate access to basic services, high unemployment rates, and a sense of disillusionment with incapable leadership, especially in the local sphere of government [39]. According to Yende [40], since 2020, South Africa has experienced an average of approximately 10 violent service delivery protests per day. This frequency illustrates the deep-seated grievances within communities and the urgent need for effective governance and responsive service delivery [41]. Furthermore, this has been further exacerbated by the African National Congress' (ANC) adoption of neoliberal policies widening the existing inequalities, and service delivery discrepancy gap between the rich and the poor [35]. This has led to heightened frustration and disillusionment among marginalized communities, contributing to the escalating frequency and intensity of violent protests [38]. Furthermore, factors such as maladministration, corrupt practices, and lack of community participation have been identified in the literature as some of the key drivers behind the escalation of violent service delivery protests in South Africa [40]. This is because these issues erode social capital between local communities and their local government authorities, developing a sense of powerlessness among citizens, and creating frustration over the perceived discrepancies in service delivery [41]. Accordingly, when people feel ignored and underserved, protests can quickly turn violent as a means of drawing attention to their grievances and demanding accountability [35].

4.2 The effects of violent service delivery protests in South Africa

Generally, the ripple effects of violent protest in South Africa have been conspicuous, especially in the post-1994 democratic dispensation [11, 30, 34–42]. These protests often spread rapidly from one region to another and from one societal sector to another, further intensifying instability. For example, one of the most striking examples of this ripple effect of the violent protests in South Africa's democratic

history was the spatial widespread unrest and anarchy of July 2021 [43]. Accordingly, this dark period emanated as an isolated incident of protest associated with the incarceration of the former President of South Africa Jacob Zuma [44]. After this incident, Hesea et al. [45] stipulate that such violence and destruction spread like wildfire – from Tongaat and Nkandla right up to the national road in Mooi River in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) [45]. These protests quickly escalated into 8 days of intense rioting, looting, and violence, initially concentrated in KZN before spreading rapidly to different parts of Mpumalanga and Gauteng provinces [45–47]. Hence, different scholarly writers such as Makonye stipulate that what started as #ZumaUnrest spread and quickly turned into #UnrestSA [46]. Vhumbunu emphasizes that the unrest was driven by structural violence, socioeconomic frustrations, political tensions, and entrenched inequalities [43]. These among other underlying factors revealed how quickly discontent in one town or city could spark similar reactions elsewhere, ultimately leading to widespread instability across the nation – spreading like an uncontrollable virus.

The events of the 8 days in July 2021 highlight the fragility of South Africa's social fabric and demonstrate how unresolved issues in one region can ripple outward, impacting communities nationwide [48]. The literature highlights that the ripple effect of the 8 days of unrest in July 2021 had profound and far-reaching consequences for South Africa's economy, infrastructure, and social fabric [49]. Economically, the riots resulted in severe financial losses, with widespread looting and disruption to businesses causing significant job losses, estimated at approximately 2 million [45]. The overall economic impact was immense, with an estimated R50 Billion ($105 133,40) ($3.4 billion) lost from the national economy and damages in KwaZulu-Natal alone reaching approximately R20 billion ($1.4 billion) [45]. Furthermore, during this period infrastructure, including roads, shopping centers, and essential service facilities, was extensively damaged, disrupting local communities and requiring costly repairs [49]. Tragically, the human toll was profound, with more than more than 300 people losing their lives due to the violence and chaos of the riots [44]. The loss of human lives was exacerbated by the racial tensions that intensified during the unrest, particularly between Black and Indian communities, further indicating the social vulnerabilities within South Africa's diverse society [49]. This period serves as a stark illustration of the ripple and snowball effects of violent protests beyond just spatial spread but to multiple levels of South African society, emphasizing the interconnected nature of economic stability, community relations, and public safety [43].

Similarly, violent service delivery protests in South African local municipalities often spread geographically, gaining momentum and intensity as they move from one community to another [10, 11, 40]. Accordingly, when one community's protest achieves the desired results, other communities with similar grievances are likely to adopt the same violent tactics, as these actions seem to be more effective in capturing the government's attention than peaceful approaches [39]. For instance, the literature notes that violent protests in the Free State have, in some cases, led to immediate responses from authorities, while non-violent demonstrations were ignored, reinforcing the perception that violence is the only effective way to demand action [36]. This pattern creates a self-perpetuating cycle in which communities rely on violent protests to address their needs, leading to an intensification of dissent across local municipalities [50]. The rapid spatial spread of violent service delivery protests across South African municipalities is largely attributed to the widespread, shared service delivery challenges these communities face. This fosters a conducive environment for protest mobilization, as communities observing similar actions in other areas may feel

encouraged to adopt similar tactics [51]. Consequently, the uniformity of these issues across municipalities facilitates the spread of protests, as communities resonate with and are inspired by the demands and frustrations expressed in protests elsewhere [41]. This has been further worsened by the rise of social media enabling communities to become instantly aware of protests in other areas and observe the outcomes achieved through violent actions [37]. This visibility encourages neighboring communities to mobilize in similar ways, amplifying grievances nationwide [45].

Beyond their spatial spread, violent service delivery protests have also generated ripple effects impacting other sectors of society [50]. For example, the literature stipulates violent service delivery protests, as they spread, intensify, and negatively affect socioeconomic development, impacting people's ability to address prevailing socioeconomic issues [45–47]. Furthermore, Khambule et al. [51] illustrate that violent service delivery protests in eMandani, KwaZulu Natal led to the burning of manufacturing factories leaving more than 2000 people out of work. Such incidents are common in South Africa, and they create deeper economic instability further exacerbating poverty, as the destruction of local industries limits employment opportunities and stifles economic growth [10]. Similarly, in Piet Retief in 2009, service delivery protests led to the burning of essential community facilities, including a community library, community health clinic, community hall, and even the homes of ward councilors [52]. Thus, the destruction of infrastructure not only disrupts daily life but also hampers access to critical services like healthcare and education, which are essential for community well-being and development [10]. The continuous loss of life at the hands of police brutality has also become a frequent occurrence during these violent protests, further highlighting the intensity of grievances, needs, and an act of desperation felt by local communities when seeking governmental attention [52]. The widespread destruction of crucial infrastructure, as communities demand basic services, has placed an additional strain on local governments already challenged by limited resources, especially financial and human capital [46]. As such, these ripple effects demonstrate a cycle of instability, where the demand for improved services results in destructive outcomes that ultimately deepen socioeconomic issues and perpetuate the same grievances that sparked the protests initially, hindering sustainable development and social cohesion [45–48].

5. Discussion

This chapter explores the ripple effect of violent service delivery protests in South African municipalities, focusing on their causes and extensive impact. The findings reveal that these protests are not isolated incidents but rather have widespread consequences, disrupting various sectors and exposing the deep interconnectedness between communities facing similar socioeconomic challenges and service delivery gaps [40]. Frustrations over unmet needs and perceived government neglect fuel the escalation and spread of protests, affecting political dynamics, straining local economies, and disrupting social services. These protests highlight systemic issues, reflecting the broader implications of unresolved grievances that deepen social instability and drain government resources [50]. South Africa continues to grapple with both structural and institutional violence, which perpetuates adverse conditions like poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Institutional violence, driven by the inability of government bodies, including municipalities, to effectively address service delivery challenges, reinforces inequality and marginalization. These dynamics compound

the effects of relative deprivation—the frustration and resentment that arise when communities feel deprived of basic rights compared to others. As unresolved service issues—such as inconsistent access to clean water, stable electricity, and proper sanitation—persist, individuals and communities increasingly resort to protests as expressions of grievance, some of which turn violent. The intersection of structural and institutional violence thus creates a feedback loop that fuels social and economic instability. These protests create ripple and snowball effects across economic, social, and political spheres; for instance, the July unrest had significant economic impacts, highlighting how violent protests disrupt local businesses, discourage investment, and exacerbate unemployment. These issues are compounded as resources are diverted from essential services to manage unrest, eroding trust in public institutions and normalizing violence as a response. Without comprehensive reforms, this cycle of inequality, protest, and instability will continue to undermine South Africa's socioeconomic progress.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the chapter reaffirms that violent protests and those related to service provision in South Africa are common occurrences. These protests are not relatively new but can be traced to the inhumane apartheid system that subjected the Black majority to poverty, inequality, and poor standard of living. Despite different policies by the government to address prevailing service delivery discrepancies, such issues remain and continue to be at the center of violent service delivery protests. As a result, has contributed to an environment in which protests become a form of expression and a means of holding institutions accountable. Moreover, the chapter highlights how institutional and structural violence perpetuates these cycles of violent demonstrations. Institutional violence is more prevalent when governance failures disproportionately impact marginalized groups, reinforcing inequality and sustaining the conditions that drive people to violent protest. The implications of these protests are the ripple and snowball effect on South Africa's economy, diverting much-needed resources from essential services and discouraging investment. Furthermore, communities experience a normalization of violent unrest, which erodes trust in public institutions. Politically, persistent protests undermine government legitimacy and contribute to instability. Ultimately, the chapter emphasizes a need for meaningful reforms within South Africa's institutional frameworks and a proactive approach to addressing socioeconomic inequalities. Only through genuine transformation can the cycle of violent service delivery protests and social instability be effectively mitigated.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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This book offers an interdisciplinary examination of violence and aggression, encompassing a broad range of interactions between individual traits and organisational, cultural, and societal phenomena. The reader is invited to reconsider conventional approaches to destructive behaviour in various contexts and to explore how deep-seated psychological mechanisms, emotion regulation, institutional norms, and collective reactions contribute to a complex cycle of violence. Analysing topics such as food choices, workplace violence, leadership, media impact and the dynamics of mass protests, this collection opens up a broad field of theoretical and practical insights. The strength of this book lies in its culturally sensitive and contextual approach, which combines perspectives from neuropsychology, physiology, management, sociology, media studies, and ethics. The book is relevant not only to the scientific community but also to human resource professionals and policymakers, all of whom care about the prevention of individual and group violence. The reader will find not only intriguing research findings but also an impetus to take a holistic approach to the issue of violence.

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