
Understanding Violence In The Workplace: Social And Managerial Perspectives

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Abstract

This symposium examines the issue of workplace violence from social and managerial perspectives. While the social perspective refers to an understanding of the general characteristics and impact of American history, culture, and societal attitudes, the managerial perspective focuses on the identification of sources and causes of violence in modern organizations as well as the development of appropriate prevention strategies and management plans. The current introduction paper first addresses the importance of recognizing workplace violence as one of the top managerial issues. It then provides an overview of literatures on major issues related to the study of workplace violence. The paper concludes with a summary of findings presented in each symposium paper.

Introduction

Violence in the workplace has become one of the major issues emphasized in public and private organizations in the United States. Managers in these organizations have recognized the violence problem because it was estimated that in a recent one year period, one out of every four employees was either harassed, threatened, or attacked in their workplaces (Capozzoli and McVeg, 1996). The issue is even serious if we consider financial costs associated with the loss of life, the increase of medical cost, and the decline of productivity.

The growing problem of workplace violence has attracted attention from organization and management researchers (e.g., Allcorn, 1994; Bassman, 1992; Labig, 1995; Mantell and Albrecht, 1994; Williams, 1994). For these researchers, the issue of workplace violence is a complicated one, which involves studies of, but not limited to: changing of social structures and attitudes (e.g., family composition), influence of mass media (e.g., violence in films and music), employee job-related attitudinal issues (e.g., job stress), impact of new managerial philosophy, policies, and strategies

(e.g., organizational downsizing), and implications of legal challenges (e.g., sexual harassment).

The issue of workplace violence is especially important for public managers because, as estimated by the U.S. Department of Justice (1994), public employees represent almost 30 percent of victims of violence even though they only account for approximately 16 percent of the workforce. The concern for public employee safety relates to not only violent incidences that happened among public employees (e.g., U.S. Post Service) but also the growing public cynicism toward government. The attack on public organizations and employees has finally attracted national attention after the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Office Building in Oklahoma City. To address this problem, public management researchers have begun to study many policy and managerial related issues (e.g., *Barrett, 1997; Bowman and Zigmond, 1996; Johnson and Indivik, 1994; Nigro and Waugh, 1996*).

The purpose of this symposium is to examine major issues related to the workplace violence, especially from the perspective on public organizations and employees. The current symposium introduction consists of two sections. The first section provides a general review and understanding of violence in the workplace, while the second section summarizes major points and findings addressed in the symposium papers.

Understanding Workplace Violence

To understand the issue of workplace violence, this section provides an overview of major issues addressed in the literature. The section specifically addresses two issues: (1) the nature of workplace violence and (2) the general sources and causes of workplace violence. While the first issue includes introductions of categories and types of workplace violence, the second issue examines workplace violence from individual, organizational, and social perspectives.

First, we need to understand that violence in the workplace is divided into two main categories: internal and external. Internal violence in the workplace is violence between employees and employees, supervisors and employees, or those who are affiliated with the organization (public agencies or private companies). External violence in the workplace, on the other hand, consists of crimes committed by persons who are not affiliated

with the organization. While there are many cases of external violence in the workplace, especially in the cases against public agencies and employees, most of the reported workplace violence cases are generally considered as internal violence. In addition, the violence occurring in the workplace include three types: attacks, threats, and harassment (*Mantell and Albrecht, 1994*). Attack refers to the use of force against another in order to inflict harm. Threat is defined as an expression of one's intention to inflict injury. Harassment has to do with any behavior designed to trouble or worry the victim. Among the three types, it is the type of attack, especially associated with deaths of the victim, which attract media and public attention.

With regard to causes of workplace violence, we can identify three interrelated sources of causes: personal, organizational, and societal perspectives. The first source of violence relates to an individual employee's personal values, job attitudes and behavior, socialization in the organization, and interaction in the society. The issues addressed in this aspect consist of, for example, employee's type of personality and motivation, personal habits and problems, perceived anger and stress, and negative personal experience. Studies of the personal source of workplace violence focus on psychological aspects of understanding individual personality, traits, attitudes, and behavior (e.g., *Allcorn, 1994*).

The second source of violence refers to such work and organizational related factors as: organizational structure, administrative process, supervisor styles, job and task nature, managerial policies, organizational culture and environment. Closely related to the personal sources, the organizational aspect of workplace violence specifically focuses on the employee's perception (e.g., fairness) of various organizational issues (leadership styles, agency environment, managerial policies, structures, and culture) and attitudes toward changes of these issues. For example, one of the major organizational sources of workplace violence is employee's reaction to new managerial philosophy and strategy of downsizing. Studies of the organizational source of workplace violence emphasize many managerial issues and address the workplace violence from three areas of prevention, conflict resolution, and treatment (e.g., *Baron, 1993; Labig, 1995*).

The last source of violence has to do with many issues in the modern society, including traditional culture, public attitudes, family composition, social values, economic conditions, political philosophy, public policies,

technology development, and mass media. Closely related to the other two sources, the social sources of workplace violence deal with not only the influence of society on employees (especially the employee's perceived social injustice) but also the interaction between social issues and modern organizations. The social aspect of workplace violence especially addresses the impact of changing social issues on employees and organizations. One good example of the social source of violence is the increasing public cynicism about government (i.e., anti-government) and many assaults against public agencies and employees resulting from the change of political philosophy and the influence of many unethical conducts among political officials and public employees.

Finally, this brief literature review indicates that workplace violence is a complicated issue and involves studies from many disciplines at various levels. The purpose of this symposium is to understand the issue of workplace violence from organizational and social aspects. The interest in the organizational aspect of workplace violence is based on the consideration of the cost of violence to organizations and the contribution of managing violence to both employees and organizations. The concern of the social aspect of workplace violence focuses on the issue of assault on government and public employees because of the past neglect on this issue and the common background of symposium contributors.

Summary of Symposium Issues

This symposium consists of five papers examining various social and managerial issues related to the workplace violence. The first two papers address the workplace violence issue from a social and cultural perspective and provide good review of literatures related to the issue. The next two papers provide case studies on workplace violence from an empirical survey of local government officials' perceptions and an observation of the gendered perspective on women in military service. The last paper analyzes the topic issue by focusing on prevention and management strategies. The specific issues identified in each paper are summarized as follows.

Gregory G. Brunk, C. Kenneth Meyer, and Laura Ann Wilson-Gentry, in their paper of "A Theoretical Perspective on Violence Against Governmental Authority," provide an overview of major literatures on factors associated with attacks on governmental authority figures. After

reviewing the historical data of violence against police officers, Brunk and his colleagues offer discussions about sources of anti-authority violence from the following perspectives: the legitimacy of violence, the issue of capital punishment, the debate over the use of force, the three American political cultures, and the response to the modern organization of society. The authors conclude with a list of items that are related to individual and group violence, and factors that affect the probability of triggering violence.

In her paper of "Breaking the Habit of Violence," Willa Bruce first explains definitions of violence and discusses societal attitudes about violence from such aspects as American traditional culture, labor history, and modern work place. Recognizing violence as the habit in our society, Bruce suggests two closely related approaches to change the society and the workplace: (1) the dependence on the wisdom of religious traditions and (2) the application of a twelve step recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous. While the former approach emphasizes social values such as honesty, service, and care; the latter approach offers methods to change attitudes and behavior.

William L. Waugh and Lloyd G. Nigro, in their paper of "Dealing with Workplace Violence in Georgia's Cities and Counties," examine public employees' responses to the threat of external and internal violence by surveying government officials in Georgia local governments. Waugh and Nigro first explain the importance of workplace violence in public organizations and review the literature on the threat of workplace violence. Based on the survey of 23 local governments, the authors report findings of issues about workplace violence policy and program. They notice that few government officials in Georgia feel that workplace violence is a serious problem and few governments have adopted policies and implemented programs to address the issue. But, the officials also indicate that they expect more violence against government organizations and they feel that public employees are at greater risk than private sector employees.

Meredith A. Newman, in her paper of "A Work Force Under Siege," analyzes the issue of workplace violence from a gendered perspective on women in military service. Newman first develops a conceptual framework of a continuum of violence, from incivility, to sexual harassment and sexual abuse, to fatal violence. She then illustrates her arguments of gender power by examining the case of women in the military. The author concludes that workplace violence is emerging as a prominent local, state and national

issue, and that the dynamics of gender power are central to a better understanding of this issue.

Finally, D.S. Chauhan, in his paper of "Preventing Violence in the Workplace," examines the issue of workplace violence by focusing on practical managerial activities. He first provides a brief explanation about the development of workplace violence and the sources of violence in terms of personal causes, organization and work-related causes, and societal causes. Emphasizing the importance of assessing threats and identifying warning signs, Chauhan further discusses major issues related to employer responsibilities and obligations, violence prevention and intervention strategies, and especially workplace violence management plan. The author argues that an effective workplace violence management plan must include 11 components, ranging from organizational commitment to administrative procedures, and to organizational recovery and victim support management.

In sum, the symposium papers provide valuable information about understanding workplace violence in general and violence against public employees in specific. A better understanding both theoretical and practical issues helps public managers to identify strategies to managing the issue of workplace violence in their organizations and provide ideas for researchers to develop additional plans to enhance our knowledge on this important issue.

Note

The editor thanks symposium contributors for their patience in submitting and revising their papers and appreciates the valuable comments from three anonymous reviewers.

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