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Anne M. O'Leary-Kelly; Ricky W. Griffin; David J. Glew

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ORGANIZATION-MOTIVATED AGGRESSION: A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

ANNE M. O'LEARY-KELLY

The University of Dayton

RICKY W. GRIFFIN

DAVID J. GLEW

Texas A&M University

Aggression and violence are of increasing concern to American employees and employers; however, these issues have received limited research attention in the management literature. We focus here on those aggressive actions and violent outcomes that are instigated by factors in the organization itself, labeled organization-motivated aggression (OMA) and organization-motivated violence (OMV). Specifically, we define the terms OMA and OMV, provide a social learning model of OMA, and present research propositions related to the model.

Violence is one of the most troubling issues facing American society today. Over 1.9 million violent offenses occurred in 1993, including more than 24,000 murders (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1993). The workplace is not immune to the effects of violence. Indeed, statistics indicate that violence has become a fundamental organizational problem. During 1992, the most recent year for which information is available, 1,004 Americans were murdered on the job (Rigdon, 1994). Homicide is currently the second leading cause of death in the workplace, behind transportation accidents (Filipczak, 1993; Rigdon, 1994). According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, homicide is the leading cause of workplace death for women, accounting for 42 percent of their on-the-job fatalities (Bensimon, 1994; Kedjidjian, 1993; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, [NIOSH] 1993). A recent American Management Association (AMA) survey of 311 organizations found that almost 25% indicated at least one employee had been attacked or killed on the job since 1990 (Rigdon, 1994). In fact, it has been suggested that workplace homicide is the fastest growing form of murder in the United States (Filipczak, 1993) and that violence directed against an employer or former employer,

During the time this research was conducted, Anne O'Leary-Kelly was a member of the Department of Management at Texas A&M University. The authors gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments of Lynda M. Kilbourne, Robert Albanese, and four anonymous reviewers on earlier drafts of this article.

which has doubled since 1989, is the fastest growing category of workplace violence (Bensimon, 1994).

Although homicide is the most extreme example, it is only one form of organizational violence. One survey estimated that during a one-year period, more than 2 million employees were physically attacked (physical assault with or without the use of a weapon), more than 6 million received threats (an expression of an intent to cause physical harm), and 16 million were the target of some form of harassment (unwelcome words, actions, or physical contact not resulting in physical harm) (Northwestern National Life Insurance Company, 1993). Within the United States Post Office alone there were 500 recorded cases of employee violence toward a supervisor and 200 cases of violence by a supervisor toward an employee during an 18-month period (Kurland, 1993). In addition, the AMA survey mentioned previously indicated that 31% of included organizations reported serious threats against employees. Clearly, then, the problem of organizational violence extends beyond the category of homicide.

This level of violence has tremendous costs for both employees and employers beyond the obvious direct consequences of injury or death. Although the costs for employees have not been examined thoroughly, research indicates that victims of violence experience two times the rate of stress-related conditions, are many times more likely to report decreased productivity (Braverman, 1993), and are more likely to have lost work time than are other employees (Kedjidjian, 1993). For employers, the costs are perhaps easier to quantify. The National Safe Workplace Institute estimates that lost productivity and legal expenses resulting from organizational violence amounted to \$4.2 billion for employers in 1992 (Bensimon, 1994). Another estimate of legal costs suggests an average jury verdict of \$2.2 million for a death and \$1.8 million for a rape occurring on business premises (Woo, 1993). Additional costs of violence include insurance losses, damage to and waste of property, tarnished reputations, public relations expenses, lost repeat business, weakened employee morale, workers compensation costs, health care costs, and increased turnover (Filipczak, 1993; Kurland, 1993; Slora, Joy, & Terris, 1991).

Despite the astounding nature of these statistics and the magnitude of potential costs, organizational violence has received very limited attention by researchers in the field of management. In fact, most of the information currently available on this topic is found in trade outlets, such as business periodicals and newspapers. Although a few empirical studies have considered aggressive behavior at work (e.g., Chen & Spector, 1992; Day & Hamblin, 1969; Perlow & Latham, 1993; Spector, 1975, 1978; Storms & Spector, 1987), such behavior has not been systematically examined. This is surprising, given that aggression may well be related to issues that have been extensively researched (e.g., employee stress, job dissatisfaction, conflict, justice perceptions). Currently, the management field has neither clear definitions nor any models or theories to structure and guide research on organizational violence.

The purpose of this article is to raise the issue of organizational violence as a meaningful area of study in the organization sciences. To accomplish this, we begin with a broad focus, establishing some basic definitions. We then narrow our focus to that subset of aggressive actions that are prompted by factors in the organization itself, and we provide a theoretical framework, a typology, and research propositions to structure future research in this area.

DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

Violence and aggression have been studied from various perspectives in a variety of disciplines, including criminal justice, mental health, genetics, sociology, and psychology (Roberts, Mock, & Johnstone, 1981). Despite this varied research attention (or perhaps because of it), little agreement exists on the definitions of these terms or on the differences between them (Roberts et al., 1981). Before organizational violence and aggression can be meaningfully discussed, this lack of precision in construct definition must be addressed. In this section we propose a distinction between *violence* and *aggression* and then discuss the complexities associated with defining these terms in an organizational context.

Violence Versus Aggression

Although there is no clear agreement among researchers on a theoretical definition of the term *violence* (Roberts et al., 1981), there are several well-established definitions of *aggression* in the social psychology literature (e.g., Bandura, 1973; Baron, 1977; Berkowitz, 1993). Distinctions among these definitions center on issues such as the nature of the aggressive act, its legality, and its intentionality (Roberts et al., 1981). One of the most widely accepted definitions is Bandura's (1973: 8), which described aggression as "injurious and destructive behavior that is socially defined as aggressive." Such behavior may be physical or verbal and may harm a person (physically or psychologically) or property.

Although Bandura (1973) did not differentiate between aggression and violence, such a distinction is useful in the organization sciences for several reasons. First, a careful definition of a construct and delineation of its relationships to other constructs is a critical step in construct validation (Nunnally, 1978; Schwab, 1980). Given the lack of previous attention to organizational violence and aggression, attention to definitional issues is imperative. Second, both terms are used in everyday language and have different meanings across individuals (Berkowitz, 1993), making a precise distinction even more critical. For example, some people view aggressive behavior by employees as equivalent to assertiveness, but others do not. For some individuals, injury resulting from actions such as verbal sexual harassment might be labeled *violence*, although others might reserve this term for only those outcomes involving bodily injury.

In order to distinguish between the two constructs, we propose that

aggression be used to describe the potentially destructive act (the process) and *violence* be used to describe the consequence of the act (the outcome). The actions of an individual who attempts to physically injure a coworker, therefore, would be labeled as aggression, and the resulting injury to the coworker would be defined as violence. Our distinction corresponds to Berkowitz's (1993) suggestion that "violence" be defined as situations of aggression that involve the most serious negative outcomes.

Organizational Aggression and Organizational Violence

It is important not only to distinguish between violence and aggression, but also to consider what is meant by *organizational* violence and aggression. In other words, how does interpreting these constructs within the work context influence our definitions? At the most general level, the definitions could be inclusive of all situations that have consequences for the organization. That is, any injurious or destructive actions that affect organizational employees, property, or relationships could be labeled organizational aggression, with the outcomes of such actions denoted as organizational violence.

However, these definitions are problematic from a theoretical standpoint because of the wide range of actions that could be included. For example, the broad definition of organizational aggression would include both the actions of an individual who robs a convenience store and those of an employee who assaults a supervisor. It seems probable, however, that the antecedents and theoretical explanations of these two actions may be quite different. In the former situation, factors such as subcultural influences and socioeconomic status may be critical, whereas factors in the organization's culture and in the employee-supervisor relationship may be important to explaining the latter situation.

Because it is improbable that one theoretical framework will be useful for explaining all actions and outcomes encompassed by the broad definitions of organizational aggression and violence, more restricted definitions are necessary. Therefore, we limit our focus to the subset of injurious actions and events that are prompted by some factor in the organization itself (e.g., its policies, procedures, culture). We expect that managers will be most interested in research on this subset of actions and outcomes because it implies some degree of organizational control. That is, if some factor in an organization's culture triggers aggressive behavior, this aggressive behavior should be open to some degree of organizational influence.

For example, many violent episodes involve organizational insiders (current or former employees) whose aggression is triggered by actions of the organization itself. One of the most well-publicized scenarios involves a recently terminated employee returning to the workplace and injuring other organizational members (Bensimon, 1994; Mantell, 1994; Stuart, 1992; Thornburg, 1993; Toufexis, 1994). Presumably, the employee's termination prompted this aggressive behavior. If the termination had not

occurred, or perhaps if it had been handled differently, the aggressive action may have been avoided. That is, factors in the organization itself (e.g., downsizing, termination procedures) acted as triggers for the aggression.

Factors in the organization also may prompt aggression by outsiders (customers, clients, members of the public). The customer who takes aggressive action against a waiter because of a long delay prior to being served is reacting to conditions created by the organization (i.e., a poor service environment). Similarly, members of the public who vandalize an organization's property because it is closing a plant in a needy community are responding to the decision to terminate local operations.

Clearly, an organization may prompt aggressive behavior without any explicit intention to do so. The suggestion that factors in the organization trigger aggression does not presuppose inappropriate action by the organization. A firm may take many precautions to mitigate the negative effects of downsizing, for example, and still have an employee who responds aggressively. Suggesting that factors in an organization can trigger aggression is simply a recognition that individuals will react strongly to aspects of their relationships with an organization, not an assignment of "blame" to a company.

We propose that the subset of actions in which aggression is motivated by some factor in the organization should be labeled *organization-motivated aggression (OMA)* and the outcomes of such actions as *organization-motivated violence (OMV)*. Further, we propose that these terms should be defined as follows:

Organization-motivated aggression: attempted injurious or destructive behavior initiated by either an organizational insider or outsider that is instigated by some factor in the organizational context.

Organization-motivated violence: significant negative effects on person or property that occur as a result of organization-motivated aggression.

It is important to note that OMA and OMV are not always concurrent. An individual can attempt to exhibit destructive behavior but be circumvented before this behavior is fully executed (i.e., before it has serious negative consequences). For example, an employee may attempt to damage company property by taking a swing at machinery with a metal pipe, but serious negative consequences may not result if a coworker grabs the pipe before contact is made. If neither the coworker nor the machinery is harmed, violence has not occurred. In contrast, it is possible for aggression to result in violence, even if the aggression is not fully executed. For example, an employee who approaches a disliked supervisor with a weapon in hand may psychologically traumatize that supervisor, even if the weapon is confiscated before it is used. These arguments suggest that aggression and violence can be mitigated in two ways: (α) by preventing

destructive actions from occurring (i.e., preventing aggression) or (b) by preventing the attempted destructive actions from being fully executed, thereby minimizing negative consequences (i.e., mitigating the violence that results).

Given this definitional scheme, in the next section we use social-learning theory (Bandura, 1973) as a framework for a model of OMA. Our primary focus will be on aggression, rather than violence, because an understanding of the act is fundamental to an explanation of the outcome. After discussing the social-learning perspective and presenting our model, we develop propositions related to one aspect of the model, the influence of the organizational environment on OMA.

A SOCIAL-LEARNING MODEL OF ORGANIZATION-MOTIVATED AGGRESSION

Human aggression has been conceived in various ways throughout the history of social psychology research. It has been depicted as a drive that results from frustration (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939), an instinct that results from internal excitation (Lorenz, 1966), learned social behavior (Bandura, 1973), and part drive-based, part learned behavior (Berkowitz, 1993; Goldstein, 1983). (For discussions of these perspectives, see Lefkowitz, Eron, Walden, & Huesman, 1977; Megargee, 1969; Roberts et al., 1981; Schuster, 1978; Turner, Fenn, & Cole, 1981.)

Currently, one of the most accepted views is the social-learning perspective, which suggests that aggression is prompted by external factors (situational cues and reinforcers), rather than internal factors such as instincts and drives (Bandura, 1973). According to this view, aggressive behavior is learned in the same way as other behavior, via direct experience and imitation (i.e., observational learning, symbolic modeling) (Bandura, 1973). Thereby, the social learning perspective highlights both factors in the individual's experience and factors in the environment as contributors to aggressive behavior. We briefly discuss each of these types of factors and then connect them to the OMA model.

Individual Contributions to Aggression

Social-learning theory suggests that individuals who receive positive outcomes for aggressive action learn to exhibit aggressive behavior (Bandura, 1973). This direct experience may originate from a variety of sources, including family, school, peer groups, and other important subcultures. In fact, even socially legitimized experiences, such as military service, may serve as reinforced practice for aggression (Bandura, 1973).

Observational learning also may contribute to the acquisition of aggressive tendencies. Individuals who operate in environments in which models are rewarded for aggressive behavior are more likely to engage in aggression themselves (Bandura, 1973; Wolfgang & Ferracutti, 1967).

Modeling may be an especially important mechanism in the acquisition of aggression, because of the high cost of trial-and-error learning of these behaviors (Bandura, 1973). Although potentially any model may be relevant, family influences are critical. A review of 52 studies on domestic violence shows that men who are abusive to their partners are much more likely to have been exposed to violence during their childhoods, either witnessing aggression or having themselves been targets (Hotelling & Sugarman, 1986). Symbolic modeling also may contribute to the acquisition of aggression. Research evidence indicates that media violence can influence viewer aggression. For example, a recent review of 28 studies found that observation of violent films was significantly associated with aggressive action in approximately 70% of the studies (Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991).

Regardless of how aggressive tendencies are acquired, there is clear evidence that some individuals are more prone to violence than others (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1993). A review of studies of the aggression patterns of male subjects indicates a correlation of approximately .40 between aggression in childhood and aggression shown 20 years later (Olweus, 1979). Some individuals, labeled *emotionally reactive*, are highly sensitive to insults, are easily offended, and tend to experience threats in seemingly innocent exchanges (Berkowitz, 1993).

Environmental Contributions to Aggression

A social-learning perspective also suggests that aggression, like other behavior, is regulated by environmental cues (Bandura & Walters, 1959). That is, people learn to respond to certain stimuli with aggressive action. Stimulus control of aggressive action occurs through either paired experiences or response consequences (Bandura, 1973). In paired experiences, a previously neutral stimulus, when repeatedly associated with aggressive action, begins itself to trigger aggression. For example, employees from different functional areas within a firm often have competing goals (e.g., manufacturing and marketing employees; Shapiro, 1977). If attempts to interact with a coworker from a different functional area often are followed by aggressive arguments, eventually the mere presence of the coworker may elicit aggressive impulses.

A second process by which stimulus control is established is through the consequences that follow particular responses (Bandura, 1973). Individuals learn that aggression may be rewarded or punished, depending on the setting and timing of the aggression and upon the chosen target. As mentioned previously, within the United States Post Office there have been cases of aggressive action by both supervisors and employees (Kurland, 1993). This aggression may be a result of the culture that exists within this organization, which has been identified as particularly contentious (Bensimon, 1994; Report of Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, 1992), and a lack of strong sanctions for such aggressive actions.

Although the specific stimuli that trigger aggression vary for different

individuals, social-learning research identified several common instigators (Bandura, 1973): modeling, aversive treatment, incentive inducements, and factors in the physical environment.

Modeling. Modeling not only influences whether individuals will exhibit aggressive behaviors, it affects whether they will acquire such behaviors (Bandura, 1973). That is, watching others being aggressive can trigger aggression in the observer. This effect occurs for several reasons (Bandura, 1973; Krebs & Miller, 1985). First, observers' inhibitions regarding aggression may be lessened after seeing an aggressive model. Watching aggression also can stimulate an observer's emotional arousal, and emotional arousal itself can lead to aggression (Berkowitz, 1993). Finally, observation of a model can focus the observer's attention on objects that might be used aggressively. For example, hostile environment sexual harassment (which in its severe forms should be considered aggressive action; O'Leary-Kelly, Paetzold, & Griffin, 1995) might be explained by modeling influences. The individual who watches coworkers repeatedly sexually harass a colleague may experience increased emotional arousal, feel decreased inhibitions toward engaging in such actions personally, and focus on this same colleague as an appropriate outlet for aggressive behavior.

Aversive treatment. A second trigger to aggressive action is aversive treatment, which may include direct conditions such as physical assaults and verbal threats, or more indirect conditions such as thwarting of goals and adverse decreases in reinforcement (Bandura, 1973). The most reliable way to provoke aggression is to assault or threaten (Bandura, 1973); previous research establishes that such actions are typically associated with an aggressive response (Berkowitz, 1965; Berkowitz & LePage, 1967; Geen, 1968; Pisano & Taylor, 1971; Toch, 1969). However, although not as reliably associated with aggression, individuals who have learned to behave aggressively also may be incited to aggression by the removal of rewards or interference with goals (Bandura, 1973).

Organizations are well situated to introduce individuals to conditions that might be perceived as aversive. For employees, organizations often make decisions that affect valued outcomes (e.g., promotions, compensation, job assignments). For customers, who enter a relationship with an organization in order to acquire something of value (e.g., a product or service), the organization also provides goal-affecting consequences.

Incentive inducements. A third trigger to aggressive action involves incentive inducements. Individuals are expected to behave more aggressively if there are factors in the environment that provide rewards for such behavior (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1993). For example, the organization that promotes an employee who succeeded by manipulating and psychologically harming colleagues, or one that provides service first to the customer who behaves in a hostile manner toward a store clerk, is providing incentives for aggression. When individuals behave aggressively

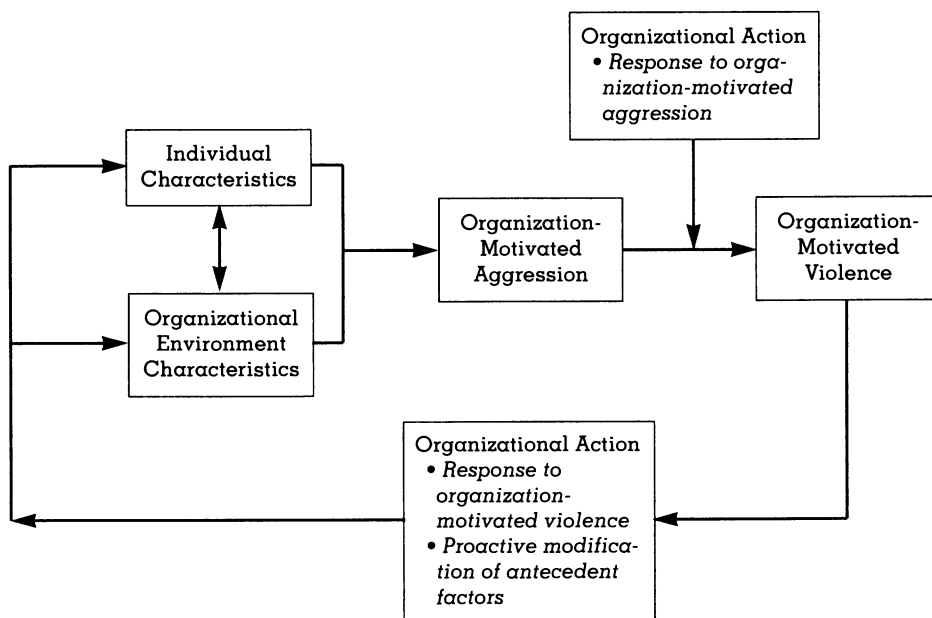
in such situations and are positively reinforced, they are likely to take similar actions in the future.

Factors in the physical environment. A final trigger to aggressive action relates to the physical environment. There is evidence from previous research that factors such as crowding, uncomfortable temperatures, poor air quality, and noise can play a role in aggressive action (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1993; Goldstein, 1983; Jones & Bogat, 1978; Zillman, Baron, & Tamborini, 1981). Given that organizations often provide the physical context for interactions with both organizational insiders and outsiders, environmental factors are likely to be important to OMA.

Individual and Organizational Environment Characteristics and OMA

The contributions of both individual and environmental factors to aggression suggests that, as with other areas of human behavior (Bowers, 1973; Carson, 1989; Kenrick & Funder, 1988; Rowe, 1987), an interactional perspective in which aggression is accounted for by both characteristics of the person and the situation (Stuart, 1981) is likely to provide the most useful framework. In our model of OMA (see Figure 1) we recognize the importance of both types of factors. Regarding individual characteristics, those who enter a relationship with the organization believing that aggressive behavior will lead to desired outcomes may pose an increased threat to the organization and its employees. Such individuals seem more

FIGURE 1
A Model of Organization-Motivated Aggression



likely than others to react aggressively if the organization takes some action that the individual opposes. For example, we would expect an employee with aggressive tendencies who encounters a highly critical performance review to respond more aggressively, other things being equal, compared to an employee who has not learned that aggression is rewarded. Similarly, the aggression-prone customer who is angry about long waiting lines seems more likely to act aggressively than one who does not expect aggression to lead to desired outcomes.

However, individual learning indicates only a "readiness" to aggression; characteristics of the organizational environment that activate aggression in a specific context also must be present (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1993). We expect that individuals who encounter, within the organizational context, aggressive models, aversive treatment, incentives for aggressive behavior, and/or uncomfortable conditions in the physical environment will be more likely, other things being equal, to engage in aggressive actions.

The individual and the organizational environment do not operate in isolation of each other (as depicted by the arrow between these factors in Figure 1). Individuals who enter the organization with aggressive tendencies may exert a significant influence on the organizational environment. For example, a top level manager who has learned that "aggression pays" may inspire aggressive behavior on the part of other managers (e.g., through modeling). This individual thus influences the organization's culture regarding the appropriateness of aggression as a managerial behavior.

The organizational environment also can influence the individual. Even if individuals do not enter with aggressive tendencies, they may acquire these tendencies as a result of post-entry experiences. Aggressive behavior should be anticipated when an organization's prescriptive standards (i.e., norms, values, laws, and sanctioned conduct; Krebs & Miller, 1985) encourage it, given that aggressive actions are as sensitive to reinforcement as are other behaviors (Bandura, 1973; Krebs & Miller, 1985). In fact, positive reinforcement can be expected to affect both the frequency of the specific aggressive action that is rewarded as well as other aggressive behaviors (Krebs & Miller, 1985). Even if aggressive behavior is sanctioned for only some organizational members (e.g., top management), others may imitate this behavior, given the importance of modeling (Bandura, 1973).

Organizational Action and OMA

Once OMA is initiated, it may result in OMV. There are two points at which an organization might act to mitigate violence (see Figure 1). First, it may intervene before aggressive action leads to violent outcomes. For example, a former employee who attempts to enter the organization in order to harm his or her supervisor might be prevented from doing so because of the organization's security measures. The hostile customer

who intends to harm a store clerk might be stopped by a physical barrier (e.g., a counter, a plexiglass enclosure) between the two.

Organizational interventions between OMA and OMV will most likely involve security and other control mechanisms. Although organizations should secure the work environment and monitor individual behavior in order to prevent violent outcomes (Franklin, 1991; Kedjidjian, 1993; Toufexis, 1994; Overman, 1993), it is unlikely that such actions alone will be effective in eliminating violence. Security and control mechanisms can never be complete enough to ensure that intervention will occur before an attempted destructive behavior has negative outcomes. Many companies hire security guards as protection, for example, yet it is not uncommon for vandals to damage organizational property.

A second way in which an organization might mitigate violence is to alter either individual or organizational environment characteristics that prompt aggressive behavior. In some cases, an organization may anticipate and change factors that act as antecedents to aggression (i.e., the organization is proactive). In other cases, alteration of such factors may occur only after violence has been attempted or has erupted (i.e., the organization is reactive). Either scenario can be explained by the OMA model, although the starting points of the model (Organizational Action in the former, Individual and Organizational Environment Characteristics in the latter) may differ across them.

Organizations desiring to alter individual and organizational environment characteristics may be assisted by social-learning principles. In regard to individual factors, if individuals behave aggressively because they have learned that such actions are appropriate in certain contexts and with certain targets, then the organization wishing to prevent aggression might model and reward other, more appropriate behaviors (Bandura, 1973). The consequences an individual receives for aggressive behavior (Bandura, 1973) also might be changed. The organization that adopts this approach could, for example, consistently and severely punish for incidents of even mildly aggressive behavior. Individual factors also can be addressed via selection methods. An organization might use selection tools, such as background checks or psychological tests, that screen out individuals with aggressive tendencies. This method, of course, is potentially more effective for controlling aggression instigated by insiders (e.g., employees) than outsiders (e.g., customers).

Another way for an organization to decrease future aggression is through the manipulation of environmental instigators (aversive treatment, modeling influences, incentive inducements, factors in the physical environment). For example, given both research on aggression (Bandura, 1973) and research on procedural justice (Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Leventhal, 1980; Thibault & Walker, 1975), it seems likely that employers who ensure fair treatment will have more satisfied and less aggressive employees. Similarly, because modeling can influence not only acquisition of aggression, but also its instigation, organizations must pay

close attention to the types of models provided for employees. Companies also may control the instigation of aggression via incentive inducements. An organizational culture that inadvertently provides positive rewards for aggressive behavior is encouraging future aggression. Finally, an organization might assess whether there are conditions in the physical environment that instigate aggression. Especially high rates of aggression in certain physical locations or during certain time periods, for example, may indicate to the employer that it should undertake environmental changes in order to prevent future violence.

Of course, an organization also might respond to an incident of violence with no overt action. In fact, many organizations appear to ignore aggressive behavior, especially when the outcomes are not perceived to be highly serious. For example, recordkeeping of aggressive incidents appears to be relatively inconsistent and infrequent (Hill, 1988). Ignoring an incident of aggression will, according to the tenets of social-learning theory (Bandura, 1973), encourage future aggression. Because the organization provides no negative outcomes, it does not change the learning of the perpetrator. Further, if the perpetrator perceives that there was personal gain from the incident, he or she learns that there are incentives for behaving aggressively in this context, and it is possible that this person may then become a role model for aggression for others within the organization.

Summary

To this point, we have used the social-learning perspective to develop a general model of OMA. This model is useful as a framework for structuring research on OMA, its antecedents (individual and organizational environment characteristics), consequences (OMV), and prevention (organizational action). Although the general model is useful as a foundation, more specificity in regard to testable research propositions is desirable. In the remainder of this article, we present propositions related to one aspect of the model, the organizational environment-OMA relationship.

We narrow our focus to one aspect of the model because a detailed discussion of all facets would not be possible in one article. We emphasize an antecedent factor (i.e., the organizational environment) rather than consequences or prevention, because antecedents are fundamental to consequences and prevention. We focus on organizational environment antecedents rather than individual antecedents because, as the term *organization-motivated aggression* indicates, we are most concerned with that subset of actions that are instigated by some factor in the organization, making the organizational environment a critical issue.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND ORGANIZATION-MOTIVATED AGGRESSION

Figure 2 presents a typology of OMA. The basic structure of the typology includes three dimensions: the type of perpetrator (organizational

FIGURE 2
A Typology of Organization-Motivated Aggression and
Research Propositions

		TARGET			
		WITHIN ORGANIZATION		OUTSIDE ORGANIZATION	
		Specific	Nonspecific	Specific	Nonspecific
ORGANIZATIONAL INSIDER	P1: More commonly initiate OMA	P5a: More common when tight controls exist for behavior directed outside the organization	P6b: Instigated by factors in the physical environment	P5b: More common when tight controls exist for behavior directed inside the organization	P6b: Instigated by factors in the physical environment
	P2a: Triggered by aversive treatment, incentive inducements, modeling influences, and/or factors in the physical environment				
	P3: More severe organizational consequences				
	P4: More control by organization				
ORGANIZATIONAL OUTSIDER	P1: Less commonly initiate OMA	P5a: More common when tight controls exist for behavior directed outside the organization	P6b: Instigated by factors in the physical environment	P5b: More common when tight controls exist for behavior directed inside the organization	P6b: Instigated by factors in the physical environment
	P2b: Triggered by aversive treatment and/or factors in the physical environment				
	P3: Less severe organizational consequences				
	P4: Less control by organization				

PERPETRATOR

insider or outsider), the type of target (within or outside the organization), and the specificity of the target (specific versus nonspecific). We first explain these dimensions and then discuss research propositions that distinguish among different categories of OMA.

As mentioned previously, OMA can be perpetrated by either organizational insiders (e.g., current or former employees) or outsiders (e.g., customers, clients, members of the public). Factors in the organization can trigger aggressive action by both types of individuals. For example, OMA would include both the actions of an employee who physically assaults his or her supervisor after a negative performance appraisal and those of a member of the public who vandalizes organizational property because he or she was not selected for a job.

OMA can be targeted either within or outside the organization. Targets within the organization include employees and the property and processes of the firm. For example, an employee who damages production equipment is choosing a target within the organization itself, as is a member of the public who threatens physical injury to the human resource manager who turns down his or her employment application. Targets outside the organization include customers, clients, and members of the public. An overworked employee who behaves aggressively toward a customer has chosen a target outside the organization; a customer who strikes his or her child because of frustration over long lines in the supermarket is also targeting aggression outside the organization.

The distinction between targets within and outside the organization often are blurred. Incidents of employee contamination of company products provide an example. The employee who deliberately poisons food products as an act of revenge against the organization is certainly targeting the organization (i.e., there may be lost sales and negative publicity). However, members of the public who consume this product will be the most direct victims of this aggressive action. As Bandura (1973: 9) suggested, the causality between a perpetrator's behavior and the injury felt by the intended target can often be "remote, circuitous, and impersonal."

In such cases, consideration of the motives of the perpetrator is critical. If the primary motivation was to retaliate against the organization because of perceived negative treatment, then the organization is the target of these actions. However, if the sole intention was to create chaos and gain notoriety (i.e., there was no factor in the organization that instigated the behavior), then this event would not be an example of OMA.

The structure outlined in Figure 2 also distinguishes between specific and nonspecific targets. At times, individuals carefully aim their aggression toward a particular object. For example, research shows that individuals who have been insulted often counterattack (Berkowitz, 1965; Geen, 1968); in an organizational context, we might expect an employee who has been ridiculed by a coworker to behave aggressively toward that specific coworker.

At other times, however, aggression appears to be more free floating. Berkowitz (1993) suggested that *emotionally reactive* individuals, when confronted with aversive stimuli, experience negative feelings and aggressive inclinations without much cognitive processing. These individuals have learned that aggression is an effective release for their negative feelings (i.e., that it has a cathartic effect). In such cases, aggressors might be viewed as negative emotion in search of a target (Berkowitz, 1993). Displacement of hostility can easily occur if the aggressor encounters any objects that have negative meaning, or even objects that are simply highly visible. Many of the highly publicized cases of homicide in the workplace appear to involve nonspecific targets. For example, in December 1994, a member of the public who opposed abortion killed two, apparently randomly chosen, employees at two family-planning clinics (Daly, 1994).

The three dimensions of the typology allow for the categorization of different types of OMA. For example, an insider may act against a specific target within the organization, or an outsider may aggress toward a general target outside the organization; both of these behaviors, and others captured within the typology, would be cases of OMA (assuming that some factor in the organization triggered the aggression). We now turn to specific research propositions that distinguish between categories in the typology, using the social-learning framework presented earlier. These propositions are grouped as addressing the type of perpetrator, the type of target, and the specificity of the target, and they are summarized within the cells in Figure 2.

Type of Perpetrator (Organizational Insider or Outsider)

Although OMA includes actions perpetrated by both insiders and outsiders, it seems likely that insiders will more often initiate OMA. Organizations contribute an important social system for insiders, providing them "a distinct way of life complete with its own rhythms, rewards, relationships, demands, and potentials" (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979: 210). In other words, insiders are expected to have both more frequent and more consequential contact with the organization than do outsiders.

More frequent contact with the organization is likely because insiders interact regularly with organizational policies and procedures and with other insiders. Even employees who work part-time are likely to have some form of interaction, even if only psychological, with the employer on an almost daily basis. These individuals may connect with other employees, may call to check their work schedules, or may simply reflect on the organization and its effect on their lives. Outsiders, however, seem unlikely to experience this constant connection. If insiders have more frequent contact with the organization, they have increased opportunity to encounter factors in the organization that may instigate an aggressive response.

Insiders also seem likely to have more substantive interactions with

the organization than do outsiders, again leading to a greater potential for OMA. Organizations typically have control over a greater number of outcomes for insiders and provide them with a greater number of people to whom social comparisons can be made (Cropanzano & Randall, 1993). Equity theory (Adams, 1965), relative deprivation research (Crosby, 1976), procedural justice research (Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Leventhal, 1980; Thibault & Walker, 1975), research on interactional justice (Bies & Moag, 1986), and referent cognitions theory (Folger, 1986) all suggest the importance of outcomes and comparisons to perceptions of fairness. Social-learning theory predicts that those who feel unfairly (aversively) treated are more likely to behave aggressively. Taken together, these arguments suggest that insiders have greater opportunity to encounter factors in the organization that may lead to perceived unfairness and, thereby, trigger an aggressive response. Therefore, we propose

Proposition 1: Organizational insiders initiate more organization-motivated aggression than do organizational outsiders.

This proposition does not imply that outsiders are less aggressive than insiders. It is clear, for example, that more homicides are committed by outsiders in the course of robberies than by organizational insiders (Larson, 1994; Mantell, 1994). However, as defined previously, many actions by outsiders do not fit within our definition of OMA in that factors in the organization were not the primary instigators of the aggression.

Given the broad influence that organizations have over employees' lives, insider-perpetrated aggression may be instigated by all of the factors discussed in social-learning theory. Organizations that control the rewards and opportunities that insiders have available to them, as well as the policies under which they must operate, may at times take actions that are perceived as aversive by employees (aversive treatment). In addition, employers provide, through the socialization process, important information on the types of employee behaviors that are acceptable and will be rewarded (Fisher, 1986; Louis, 1980; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) (incentive inducements). During and after the socialization process, organizations also provide important models that influence the types of behaviors that insiders exhibit (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992) (modeling influences). Finally, the organization provides the physical environment within which most employees work on a daily basis (physical environment). Given this broad influence, we propose

Proposition 2a: Aversive treatment, incentive inducements, modeling influences, and factors in the physical environment act as triggers to insider-initiated organization-motivated aggression.

For organizational outsiders, the factors that instigate aggression are likely to be more limited. Certainly, organizations can influence the behavior of customers and clients, and even members of the public, but their

degree of influence is more restricted than with insiders. Because employers have greater ability to socialize insiders than outsiders, the latter will be less directly bound by the organization's values, rules of behavior, norms, and expectations. In addition, outsiders are less dependent on the organization for pay, benefits, career opportunities, training, and other valued outcomes. Therefore, the interactions of outsiders with the organization tend to be of shorter duration and less binding than those that occur with insiders.

Although modeling influences within the organization may have a significant influence on the likelihood of insiders exhibiting aggressive behavior, we would expect such influences to only infrequently act as triggers of the OMA initiated by outsiders. Given the organization's more limited ability to socialize clients, customers, and members of the public (i.e., to prescribe their values, norms, and standards of behavior), models within the organization's culture are likely to have less impact on these individuals. In addition, although it is possible that an individual within the organization's culture might be perceived as a role model, the outsider typically will have more readily accessible and relevant models within other important subcultures (e.g., his or her own workplace).

It also seems unlikely that the organization will provide incentives for aggressive behavior to outsiders. With insiders, there is some potential gain to the organization from encouraging highly competitive behavior. In fact, many U.S. organizations greatly value personal achievement and strenuous competition and consider this a cornerstone of their cultures (Trice & Beyer, 1993). It is probably these values that lead to many of the perceived incentives for aggressive actions by insiders. These values become problematic when an individual's extreme emphasis on personal success leads to a blurring of the line between appropriate (i.e., competitive) and aggressive behavior. For outsiders, however, there seems little incentive for organizational cultures to encourage actions that even approach aggression.

We would expect, however, that organizations often may trigger aggression on the part of outsiders through aversive treatment and the physical environment. Given that equity theory and other justice theories (Adams, 1965; Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Leventhal, 1980; Thibault & Walker, 1975) suggest that fairness perceptions are important in any exchange relationship, customers, clients, and members of the public are likely to undertake fairness assessments. If individuals perceive that they have been unfairly treated, the social learning perspective suggests that one viable response is aggressive action (Bandura, 1973). There is no reason to expect that the individual's status as an outsider would either prevent fairness assessments or would lead him or her to respond differently to perceived unfairness.

In regard to the physical environment, organizations provide the physical context within which many outsider-organization relationships occur. As described previously, other research suggests that uncomfort-

able environmental conditions can be associated with aggressive action (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1993; Goldstein, 1983; Jones & Bogat, 1978; Zillman et al., 1981) and, therefore, such conditions may act as triggers to outsider aggression. For example, uncomfortable temperatures and crowding within a customer waiting area could be associated with increased aggressive action on the part of outsiders. Based on this, we propose

Proposition 2b: Aversive treatment and factors in the physical environment act as triggers to outsider-initiated organization-motivated aggression.

As we described, organizations incur various costs when OMA occurs, including those associated with legal expenses, employee injury or damaged property, decreased productivity, and weakened employee morale (Bensimon, 1994; Braverman, 1993; Filipczak, 1993; Kurland, 1993; Slora et al., 1991). Although any OMA is likely to have negative consequences, we expect the severity of consequences for the organization to be greater when the perpetrator is an organizational insider.

Given that OMA is, by definition, triggered by some factor in the organization itself, and that there is a more binding relationship between the organization and an insider (compared to an outsider), organizations are likely to incur greater legal liability for an insider's actions. Therefore, when an insider initiates OMA, it is likely that the organization will assume the costs of any resulting injury or property damage to the target. In addition, the employer incurs expenses associated with any personal injury to the perpetrator. When outsiders initiate OMA, however, accountability for injury or damage generally will belong to the perpetrator personally or to his or her employer.

It also seems probable that insider-initiated OMA will have greater indirect costs for an employer. Certainly, outsider OMA may have a negative influence on employee productivity and morale; however, insider-initiated aggression is likely to have an even greater influence. Insider OMA will involve lost productivity not only for those targets who are injured, but also for the perpetrators themselves. Further, when harm is caused by someone who is accepted as a member of the organization, trust in coworkers, or perhaps in the organization itself, may be damaged to a greater extent than if the injury was caused by someone viewed as an outsider.

Finally, organizations incur human resource (HR) management costs for insiders that are not relevant for outsiders. With insiders, HR personnel must determine and implement appropriate disciplinary actions, yet with outsiders this is a responsibility assumed by the perpetrator's own employer or, perhaps, by the judicial system. Given these differences between insider- and outsider-initiated OMA, we propose

Proposition 3: Insider-initiated organization-motivated aggression will result in more severe negative conse-

quences for the organization than that initiated by outsiders.

Although the violence inflicted by insiders may result in the most severe consequences for the organization, this is also the type of aggression over which the organization is likely to have the most control. Employers regulate the physical conditions within which most employees work (the physical environment). They also create an organizational culture that determines employee beliefs regarding both the type of behavior that is appropriate and the type that will be rewarded (incentive inducements). Within this culture, organizational role models further shape the insiders' beliefs and behavior (modeling influences). Finally, the organization's policies and culture greatly influence the way individuals are treated and their perceptions of fairness (aversive treatment).

In contrast, the organization has a more limited ability to influence these factors for outsiders. As argued previously, the modeling influences and incentives for outsiders within an organization's culture will often be less relevant than those provided by other more important influences (e.g., their own employers, their families, other subcultures). Although organizations certainly have control over some of the opportunities and goals of outsiders (e.g., whether a customer will receive an order on time, whether a customer has to wait for service), their influence is more limited than with insiders. In addition, although the organization may often provide the physical environment within which the outsider operates, insiders generally will spend more time within the organizational environment than do outsiders. Based on these differences, we propose

Proposition 4: The organization has greater ability to control the organization-motivated aggression of insiders compared to outsiders.

Type of Target (Within-Organization or Outside-Organization)

Organizational cultures communicate values, beliefs, and standards of behavior that help individuals cope with uncertainty regarding how to function in a given context (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Potentially, both insiders and outsiders may be influenced by the standards of behavior established by an organization. Given that aggressive behavior is subject to reinforcement control (Bandura, 1973), we expect that aggression will be targeted within the organization when there are tighter controls on behavior directed outside the organization than on behavior directed within it. Controls may include, among other factors, punishment standards, close monitoring that prevents expression of aggression, and physical barriers.

For example, severe forms of sexual harassment (those involving severe psychological or physical injury) are examples of aggressive behavior (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1995). A firm may have very serious sanctions against an employee who sexually harasses a client, because of the re-

sulting lost business and diminished public image. However, this same firm might have more lenient standards of behavior in regard to treatment of coworkers. We would then expect individuals who have acquired sexually harassing tendencies to select targets within the firm rather than outside it, given that the organization has introduced more severe punishments in one context than the other.

Proposition 5a: When there are tighter controls on behavior directed outside the organization versus inside the organization, OMA is likely to be directed within the organization.

On the other hand, if there are tight controls on behavior directed within the organization, we would expect aggression to be targeted outside. For example, although an organization has limited control over the behavior of outsiders, it may shape the direction in which aggression is expressed. A firm that restricts the physical contact between its sales clerks and members of the public through the use of glass enclosures, for example, has placed tight control on the outsider's ability to target aggression within the organization (at the clerk). If a customer became angry over the actions of the clerk, he or she would be unable to directly harm the clerk. Given that individuals who are emotionally aroused to aggression often experience a need to release their negative affect (Berkowitz, 1993), this individual might be motivated to displace aggression to another customer instead. Based on this, we propose

Proposition 5b: When there are tighter controls on behavior directed within the organization versus outside the organization, OMA is likely to be directed outside the organization.

Specificity of Target (Specific or Nonspecific)

As shown in the typology, perpetrators who exhibit aggressive behavior either within or outside the organization may target a specific or nonspecific object, and the social-learning perspective is useful in determining which will be chosen. In many cases, individuals behave aggressively toward the particular person who caused them to become emotionally aroused (Berkowitz, 1993). That is, their intention is to harm the individual they perceive to be responsible for their negative outcomes. This perspective is consistent with previous research on the affective consequences of causal attributions. According to Weiner's cognition-emotion model, in achievement situations, individuals who experience failure and attribute this outcome to others will feel anger, hostility, and vindictiveness (Harvey & Weary, 1984; Weiner, 1985; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978, 1979). In other words, these individuals experience negative emotion directed toward those to whom they attribute their failure.

Based on this research, it is likely that aggressive behavior triggered by aversive treatment will be directed against the specific target who is

believed to be responsible for the negative outcome. For example, if an insider is told by a supervisor that he or she is not going to receive a desired promotion, aggression against this supervisor is likely if the supervisor is perceived to be responsible for this undesirable outcome. Similarly, a customer who does not receive the results he or she desires from an exchange with a sales clerk may target the clerk for aggression because this was the person most directly related to the aversive treatment. Based on these arguments, we propose

Proposition 6a: When organization-motivated aggression is instigated by aversive treatment, it is more likely to be directed against specific (versus nonspecific) targets.

In other cases, however, individuals feel emotionally aroused and take aggressive action against any target that is convenient and perceived to be appropriate (Berkowitz, 1993). That is, the aggressor is more interested in releasing pent-up negative emotion than in harming a specific person (Berkowitz, 1993). We expect that factors in the physical environment may often be associated with nonspecific targets. Insiders and outsiders who operate in uncomfortable environments may have difficulty determining who, specifically, is causing this discomfort. That is, they will have greater difficulty attributing blame to a specific source. Therefore, they may target any object that is available and perceived to be appropriate. Previous social learning will likely influence who they believe to be an appropriate target, but their intention may not be to harm this specific individual so much as to simply express their aggressive feelings.

Proposition 6b: When organization-motivated aggression is instigated by factors in the physical environment, it is more likely to be directed against nonspecific (versus specific) targets.

Summary of Typology and Propositions

These research propositions are preliminary and require empirical verification. However, given that they are based on a body of research on general human aggression, they provide some insight into several critical issues related to OMA. Specifically, as shown in Figure 2, the typology and propositions are useful for preliminary assessments of the most common type of perpetrator, the severity of consequences for the organization, the type of OMA over which the organization will have the greatest control, how different types of OMA are triggered, when aggression will be targeted within the organization, and whether the target will be specific or general.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS

This article sets the groundwork for future research on the issue of OMA by addressing definitional issues, introducing a theoretical frame-

work, and presenting research propositions. As discussed next, in the future, researchers should emphasize measurement issues, empirical tests of the OMA model, and the broader issues related to organizational aggression and violence.

Measurement of OMA

Perhaps the most pressing research need relates to the measurement of OMA. Although a thorough discussion of measurement issues is not possible here, we do offer some preliminary thoughts. Measurement of OMA will require that two points be established. First, an attempted action must be injurious or destructive and, second, it must be instigated by some factor in the organizational context. Establishing that the target of aggression was, in fact, injured may be complicated, especially when the target is another person, versus property, and when the damage is psychological, rather than physical. The most obvious way to determine injury is to ask the target whether he or she was harmed; however, there are difficulties associated with this subjective measurement. Individual targets may be highly sensitive and report injury when none occurred, or they may be insensitive to actions that might be harmful to most others.

Given these difficulties, measurement of OMA also could include an objective element. That is, the extent to which the attempted act would be perceived as injurious by most people in a similar situation could be assessed. The U.S. courts use both subjective and objective elements in determining whether hostile environment sexual harassment, another often ambiguous type of behavior, has occurred (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1995; Paetzold & O'Leary-Kelly, 1994).

The second component of the OMA definition that complicates measurement is establishing that the organization instigated the aggressive behavior. Perpetrator self-reports of the factor(s) that triggered their aggression will be critical to this component. Self-reports rely, however, on the perpetrator's ability to identify the trigger, and this at times may be difficult to determine. For example, an individual who has an outburst of aggression following extended periods in physically uncomfortable environmental conditions may be unaware of the reason for his or her aggression. In such cases, self-reports may not be useful, and researchers might identify instigating factors by researching consistent patterns of aggressive behavior across individuals exposed to similar stimuli (e.g., an uncomfortable physical environment).

Empirical Tests of the OMA Model

A second issue requiring research attention is testing of the OMA model. We presented specific propositions that should be empirically examined. However, other aspects of the model not discussed in detail here are deserving of further attention, particularly individual characteristics. Although the number of individual difference variables related to aggression is potentially limitless, several seem particularly promising.

Dispositional variables such as negative affectivity (Watson & Clark, 1984), locus of control (Perlow & Latham, 1993; Spector, 1982), and impulse control (Breiner, 1992) may prove to be valid predictors of OMA. In addition, information-processing differences (e.g., tolerance for ambiguity, equity sensitivity) and attitudinal variables, such as attitudes toward revenge (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992) and organizational frustration (Storms & Spector, 1987), might be examined as antecedents of OMA.

Regarding individual-difference variables, it is important to note that research in criminal psychology and criminal justice suggests that predictions of individual violence tend to be greatly overestimated (Cocozza & Steadman, 1976; Ennis & Litwack, 1974; Fraboni, Cooper, Reed, & Saltstone, 1990; Megargee, 1981; Mesnikoff & Lauterbach, 1975; Monahan, 1975, 1978, 1981; Stuart, 1981), with false positive rates ranging from 55 to 99% (Monahan, 1978). Higher validities may be obtained in the workplace (Slora, Joy, Jones, & Terris, 1991; Slora, Joy, & Terris, 1991) because a broader set of aggressive actions, not just criminal behavior, is being predicted. In addition, the selection ratio will influence the usefulness of any predictor (Cascio, 1995). However, given the shrinking labor force in the United States (Johnston & Packer, 1987), selection tools that result in false positive errors even approaching these levels are not feasible. A further complication is that some of the best predictors of criminal violence are demographic variables like sex, age (Mefferd, Lennon, & Dawson, 1981; Rappaport & Holden, 1981; Steadman, 1986), and previous aggression (Stuart, 1981), which companies clearly are not free to use given Title VII and state laws that limit inquiries into a job candidate's criminal history (Petersen & Massengill, 1989/1990). Therefore, although we do recommend research on individual-difference variables, we believe that an exclusive focus on these antecedent factors is misguided.

Other Types of Organizational Aggression

Our definition of organizational aggression is restricted to those destructive acts prompted by factors in the organization itself. Clearly, this definition excludes many types of aggression with which organizations are concerned. For example, robberies represent a prominent homicide threat to employees, particularly those in occupations that involve interaction with the public (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1993; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993), yet they often are triggered by factors extraneous to the organization.

Our OMA model also addresses only *individual* perpetrators of aggression. However, incidents like the recent World Trade Center bombing (*New York Times*, 1993) illustrate violence committed by a political group against people in the workplace. Similarly, much of the union violence throughout American history (Jeffreys-Jones, 1974) has involved collectively perpetrated aggression. In fact, organizations themselves may be perpetrators of aggression; the recent lawsuits initiated by the states of Mississippi and Florida against companies in the tobacco industry

(Janofsky, 1994; Nickens, 1994) charge these firms with injurious actions against the public.

Although we recognize these additional types of aggression, we were unable to address them in this article. Further research, both conceptual and empirical, that specifically examines these types of organizational aggression would be useful.

Practical Implications

Although this article mainly focuses on theoretical issues related to OMA, it does contribute some preliminary practical information. The framework presented here provides organizations with a starting point for assessing factors in their cultures that may contribute to OMA (aversive treatment, modeling, incentive inducements, the physical environment). When combined with existing management literature on related topics, this information becomes even more useful. For example, if aversive (i.e., unfair) treatment leads to aggressive action, then organizations trying to prevent aggression must be particularly careful regarding employees' perceptions of procedural fairness on issues like layoffs (Brockner & Greenberg, 1990), performance appraisal (Folger, Konovsky, & Cropanzano, 1992), and conflict resolution (Brett, Goldberg, & Ury, 1990).

In addition, the OMA model differentiates between two types of organizational actions to prevent violence and aggression. Actions may emphasize control and monitoring, thereby seeking to prevent attempted injurious actions from being fully executed. Alternatively, organizations may focus on the root causes of OMA: individual characteristics and organizational environment factors. Interventions based on this second approach might involve careful selection of employees and frequent audits of the organizational culture.

Finally, our focus on organizational environment variables is meaningful because it encourages firms to be introspective about the antecedents of aggression. We expect that there may be a natural tendency for organizations to focus prevention efforts on individual, rather than environmental, antecedents. This strategy might be labeled a *person-blame* approach (Rappaport & Holden, 1981) because it locates the source of aggression in the individual alone and does not require the organization to consider its own potential contributions. Our focus here on environmental antecedents and *organization-motivated* aggression may counteract this preference for exclusively person-based explanations of aggressive behavior at work.

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Anne M. O'Leary-Kelly is an associate professor of management at The University of Dayton. She received her Ph.D. from Michigan State University. Her current research interests include aggressive workplace behavior and motivation within the group context.

Ricky W. Griffin received his Ph.D. from the University of Houston. He is currently professor of management, the Lawrence E. Fouraker Professor of Business Administration, and Director of the Center for Human Resource Management at Texas A&M University. His research interests include employee participation and workplace violence.

David J. Glew is a doctoral student in the Department of Management, Graduate School of Business, Texas A&M University. He is pursuing a degree in organizational behavior. His research interests include unified action and the development of common beliefs in work groups.