

# **WORKPLACE AGGRESSION: THE RIPPLE EFFECT ON GROUP PRODUCTIVITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates how workplace aggression has a negative ripple effect on organizational productivity, specifically on observing and non-observing group members. It is proposed that the proximity to the aggression affects the level of diminishing productivity which may explain why witnesses tend to be more affected by the behavior than non-observers. This paper expands the literature by proposing that incidents of workplace aggression will diminish productivity in both observers and non-observers, rather than the impact it has on the target alone. The model developed draws significantly on social learning, cross over and affective events theories, and concludes with ideas on how to empirically test this model in a university setting.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Workplace aggression is defined as any act in which an individual intentionally attempts to psychologically harm another organizational member [4]. This behavior has increasingly become an organizational concern that can be extremely damaging for the overall climate of the workplace. Although this topic has progressively sparked research attention, this study extends existing models by proposing that workplace aggression causes a negative ripple effect on group member engagement and productivity, both directly and indirectly. Literature on workplace aggression has demonstrated that it not only has an effect on the targeted victim, but also on other organizational members who directly witness this interaction or indirectly overhear through third party hearsay [10]. When exposed to this type of negative behavior, observing group members can become emotionally drained [10] as well as experience greater psychological and physical stress. Because both observing and non-observing group members share the same work environment, I argue that non-observing group members also experience these consequences through word-of-mouth and other ripple effects from third party interactions, or through observing actions and behaviors of the witnesses. These outcomes can lead to a decrease in work productivity from both groups, though it will probably have a stronger effect on observing members. The hypotheses presented in this paper are untested and until the data is collected, inferences will be presented as conclusions.

## **BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES**

### **Effects of Workplace Aggression on Group Members**

Interpersonal forms of workplace aggression affect other organizational members who either directly or indirectly witness the event(s). For our purposes, this paper will focus on the less extreme behaviors of this aggression (i.e. abusive supervision, bullying, incivility, social

undermining) rather than the high-level, extreme behaviors linked with workplace violence (i.e. physical assault and property damage). Although these constructs are a lesser form of aggression, these interactions can still negatively affect other organizational members who work in the same environment.

This paper draws on the theory of social learning, specifically observational learning. According to Bandura [2], new patterns of behavior can occur through the observation of other people's behavior and its consequences. The imaginal construct is involved in observational learning, which suggests that once an individual observes a specific behavior and its outcome, engaging in the same behavior will cause the person to experience imagery of its consequence. If the specific behavior results in punishment, observers are less likely to imitate the behavior.

The same processes can be applied to observing group members who share the same work environment as the targeted victim. Group members who witness the victim become a target to aggression, will associate the victim's behavior in the workplace with negative consequences. The victim's actions become highly coordinated with the act of aggressive behavior, thus engaging in the same actions as the victim could trigger imaginal representations of unwarranted workplace aggression, even if the target is not present. As a result, as group members witness the target subjected to workplace aggression, their own behaviors may change based on the unjustified consequences the target received for his/her actions. Therefore, if the victim was targeted with no root cause, others might believe they too can be exposed to such harassment, which can decrease the frequency of their own work productivity. This results in the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: Witnessing workplace aggression will lead to lower productivity of observers.*

### **Consequences on Non-Observing Group Members**

What are the factors that might explain how productivity of non-observing group members is affected by workplace aggression? This paper will consider two possible constructs; first, non-observing group members can be affected by witnesses expressing crossover in the form of emotional contagion, or by third party hearsay in the form of gossip and rumors [5] [10]. As a way to cope with the aggression, victims may tell other employees about the incident who did not observe it, rather than reporting it to the human resources [8]. On the same note, witness may also tell their non-observing peers about the negative interaction they've experienced because events in a shared work environment tend to be more significant [10].

Crossover is defined as a process by which "a psychological strain experienced by one person affects the level of strain of another person in the same social environment" [11, p. 769]. According to Barsade [3], emotional contagion is a form of crossover at the unconscious level; an individual's emotional state and behavioral attitudes are influenced by another person or group. Because unpleasant emotions tend to create more emotional contagion than pleasant emotions, individuals will have stronger and faster emotional and behavioral responses to the information received. If negative emotional contagion is sparked between two individuals, it can intensify between them, potentially putting the whole group at risk for this contagion [9]. Individuals also seem to place more weight on negative than positive information, so they

perceive negative events more relevant than positive events. Thus, non-observers can contract negative emotional contagion from witness accounts and hearsay, which can lead to less group cooperation, negotiation, and overall group productivity. These non-observers can spread the ripple effect further by telling more non-observers of the incident [8], which can ultimately decrease the productivity of the entire organization.

Also, negative crossover can create a productivity gap between observers and non-observers, specifically if these individuals work in the same team or department. Employees tend to respond more to co-workers who they see and interact with frequently [7]. For example, when a more productive employee begins work, the rest of the employees within that immediate group also increase their productivity in order not to prompt resentment from peers. Thus, I argue that this explanation can also have an inverse effect; when a low performing employee enters her workgroup, the rest of the team might decrease their overall productivity due to the negative emotional contagion from the unproductive employee. This type of negative emotional contagion can also be explained through the social learning theory; learning a new behavior is caused by directly experiencing another person's behavior and its consequences [2] [13]. As non-observers watch observers become less and less productive, they too begin to mimic that behavior through modeling. Drawing on hypotheses one, workplace aggression will decrease productivity in observing group members because these individuals will associate work behavior with unwarranted aggression. When these witnesses re-enter their workgroup, non-observers will notice the decrease in performance and lack of immediate consequences, possibly decreasing their own productivity as a result. Based on the information presented, I propose the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: A crossover effect resulting from observers witnessing aggression will lead to reduced productivity of non-observers.*

### **Ripple Effect on both Observing and Non-Observing Group Members**

The theoretical model proposed in this paper suggests a link between negative emotional contagion from crossover (non-observers contract negative moods from observing group members) and its ripple effect across the organization. This model includes mechanisms by which the group members within the targeted victim's work environment (first degree ripple) will be most negatively impacted by the workplace aggression versus group members who do not directly work in that environment (second and third degree ripples). Although the productivity of these non-observing group members is still negatively impacted, the degree to which it is influenced is significantly less than witness productivity (see Figure 1).

The affective events theory [12] states that events which arise at work cause immediate affective reactions in employees in regards to their moods and emotions. Because these events trigger individuals to have mood changes or emotional reactions, they have a high level of personal significance and can stem from either the nature of their work or from interpersonal interactions with others in the same environment. If the interpersonal interaction is negative (i.e. passive aggressive behavior from a superior), it will create a negative affective event which tends to have more of an impact on the individual than a positive affective event. Due to the shared work

environment, negative interpersonal events will also affect observing group members even though they are not directly involved; observing the emotional reaction of the victim will cause witnesses to experience mood changes or emotional reactions [6] since both parties work in such close proximity. Thus, when group members witness negative interpersonal events, they are likely to also contract negative emotional contagion due to crossover from the victim to these individuals. Because these events were witnessed firsthand, they will have a stronger effect on the observer's mood than on employees who did not see the interactions directly. Non-observers can still contract negative emotional contagion through the negative interpersonal interaction of the witness, but the degree of intensity will be less since they did not directly observe the emotional reaction of the victim.

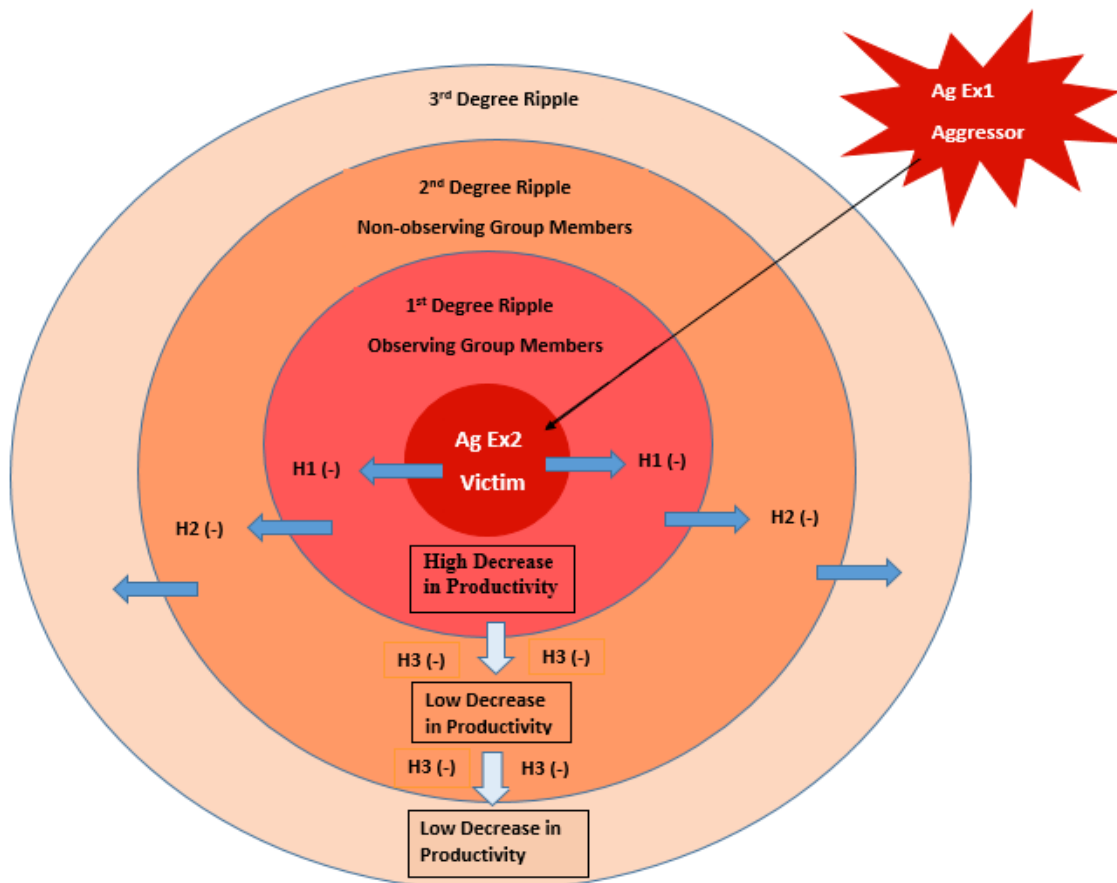


Figure 1. Proposed theoretical model of workplace aggression and its ripple effect on observing and non-observing group members.

Because observers directly witness the emotional reaction of the targeted victim, their emotional contagion is stronger than of those who did not see the event firsthand. This means that observers are more likely to have a greater decrease in work productivity than non-observers, since their negative emotional contagion is stronger. According to Figure 1, non-observers are located in the second and third degree ripples, meaning they are less susceptible to viewing the aggression that cause immediate negative affective reactions. Built on the information presented, I propose this final hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 3:* The reduction in productivity will be greater for observers than for non-observers.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants and Procedures**

Forty-five thousand four hundred and sixty faculty and staff who work in the California State University system will have an option to complete an online survey that measures the level of abusive conduct in their workplace by determining if the individual has been the target of workplace aggression or has witnessed it. Participants are asked if they have personally experienced certain aspects of abusive conduct (i.e. angry behaviors, facial expression and tone of voice) in the past two years from people in different job positions (i.e. deans, supervisors or staff) along with how many times the incident happened, their response to experiencing the behavior, and if they reported it. The same set of questions are then asked again but this time related to witnessing the aggression (i.e. who were the targets of the aggression).

By benchmarking the level of workplace aggression, the university system can determine how extreme the abusive conduct is in the workplace and how often these incidents occur. This information can be used to take preliminary steps towards addressing the issue of workplace aggression on all twenty-three campuses.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **Key contributions and research implications**

This paper extends on Andersson and Pearson's [1] incivility spiral by investigating a new construct in workplace aggression research - the ripple effect on group productivity. Consistent with Andersson and Pearson's findings on secondary spirals [1]; I predict that witnesses will associate the victim's behavior in the workplace with harmful consequences, thus responding negatively as a result. Non-observers will model this unproductive behavior, causing a second ripple (rather than a spiral) in the organization. However, there are also distinct differences between the incivility spiral and the ripple effect on group productivity; Andersson and Pearson discuss how employees who observe workplace incivility will retaliate with their own aggressive behaviors, and possibly create new spirals that can infiltrate the organization. The ripple effect on the other hand states that employees who witness workplace aggression will reduce their own work productivity as a response rather than retaliate. The ripple effect is perpetuated through a decrease in productivity rather than an increase of aggressive behavior. Overall, the impact these negative interactions have on the organization does not just stop at the targeted victim; observers will also have emotional reactions when witnessing the act and can pass these emotions to non-observers through emotional contagion. Thus, although this paper aligns with current research on the topic of workplace aggression, I focus on the impact this aggression has on observing and non-observing group members rather than emphasizing the effect this action has on the target. Group behavior modification has a much more reaching impact on the organization because there are more people affected at one time (either through observing the act itself or through observing the actions of the witnesses). This paper's perspective takes a unique stance, it begins with the individual-level and expands to the group-level.

## Possible directions for future research

Once the online survey is distributed, more information will be known about the impact of workplace aggression on CSU faculty and staff. When analyzing the results from the survey, future research should consider the different perspectives of the individuals involved in the aggressive act(s) (target, aggressor, observer or non-observer). Other than testing the propositions, I hope this article will motivate further research on the concept of how the productivity of observing and non-observing group members is affected by workplace aggression. The model does not describe how workplace aggression can manifest in a work environment nor have I addressed how this ripple effect can influence other plausible organizational outcomes. Finally, group member reaction to workplace aggression will probably differ among cultures and industries, especially if there are different workplace norms and customs.

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