Fight Fire with Fire? Workplace Aggression and How to Reduce Its Negative Effects

Can BİÇER*

Abstract

Workplace aggression, either openly or passive-aggressive, involves a variety of behaviors ranging from verbal actions (i.e., shouting at, reprimanding or insulting someone) to physical attacks (i.e., slapping, punching or pounding). Whether it is perpetrated by organizational outsiders (individuals of the public) or organizational insiders (organizational employees, bosses), it affects employees in a negative way and it can lead to a heavy hidden toll for the organization. It destructs the morale of the employees and decreases organizational commitment and effectiveness, it also damages the reputation of the organization itself and increases employee turnover. Workplace aggression often originates from passive-aggressive coworkers to aggressive bosses or customers and it might cause bullying, pounding and even death at workplace. In this conceptual study, workplace aggression will be enlightened and the solutions to reduce its negative effects will be offered.

Key Words: Aggression, Workplace Aggression, Passive-Aggressive.

Article Type: Research Article

Ateşe Ateşle mi Karşılık Verilir? İşyeri Saldırganlığı ve Olumsuz Etkileri Nasıl Azaltılır?

Öz

İşyeri saldırganlığı açıkça ya da pasif-agresif şeklinde olsa da, sözlü (Örn. Bağırmak, azarlamak veya birisine hakaret etmek) veya fiziksel eylemleri (Örn. tokatlama, yumruklama veya darp etme) içeren çeşitli davranışları kapsamaktadır. Örgüt dışındakiler (halktan birisi) veya örgüt içinden (çalışan veya yöneticiler) birisi tarafından işlenmiş olsa da, çalışanları olumsuz yönde etkilemektedir ve örgüte gözle görünmeyen çok yüklü maliyetlere neden olabilmektedir. Çalışanların moralini bozar ve örgütsel bağlılığı ve verimliliği azaltarak örgütün itibarını düşürür ve işgücü devrini artırır. İşyeri saldırganlığı sıklıkla pasif-agresif çalışanlardan tutun, saldırgan yöneticiler ve müşteriler tarafından başlatılır ve işyerinde zorbalığa, darba ve hatta ölüme bile yol açabilir. Bu çalışmada, örgütlerdeki işyeri saldırganlığına ışık tutularak, olumsuz etkilerini azaltmaya yönelik önerilerde bulunulacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Saldırganlık, İşyeri saldırganlığı, Pasif-Agresif.

Makale Türü: Araştırma Makalesi

* Öğr. Gör. Dr., Karabuk University, Safranbolu Vocational School, Karabük, Turkey, canbicer@karabuk.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-7270-7417

1. INTRODUCTION

Workplace aggression might sound too extreme when thinking of the possibility of encountering such a situation at workplace but it is the fact of life. Aggression seems to be an unwanted feature of humane but it's real and a natural characteristic of the human beings as well. Throughout history, aggressiveness has brought us to gain vital resources such as essential nutrients, food and favorable mates or to watch over ourselves from direct aggression from others. One may think that it is too wild or barbarous but anyone can expose to the aggression (i.e., pounding, biting, dark sarcasm etc.) in daily life, for instance, while waiting at the supermarket cash queue, during doing or watching sports, in the traffic jam (i.e., when another car cuts you off in traffic) or at workplace. Then, it can be maintained that under some certain conditions, we might prone to reactive aggressive behaviors and it is an aspect of our fundamental humane property. It's obvious that, human aggression can be witnessed even in most contemporary societies.

Let's face it or not, aggression is the dark side of human nature. It's the aggression; millions of people killed each other for thousands of years whatever its reason was. For instance, during the World War I and World War II, millions of people were killed. Hence, when it's time to sort out the news on TV, on the internet today, you will read lots of undesired events dealing with the aggression itself. On the other hand, we the people have aggressed against other people since it had allowed us to earn valuable resources, for example, food and desired companions or to protect ourselves from direct threats from others. Again, we can aggress by the time we think that our social or professional status is in danger. So, if aggression assists with either our individual survival or in the survival of our genes, therewith, the process of natural selection may well cause humans, as it would any other living things, to be aggressive at all. Thus, to define the aggressive behavior, it is unplanned and impulsive, and is often a retort to feelings of anger, fear, or a will to retaliate against anyone and it might be conceptualized as the visible manifestation of aggression, which is determined as every step especially meant to cause harm, pain, or injury in other individuals. Expression of aggression depends on three main factors such as biological (i.e., men more often engage in physical aggression than women), environmental (i.e., where and how you were raised can play a role) and physical factors (i.e., psychosis, epilepsy, addiction of alcohol and drug).

In sum, when aggressive behaviors happen, all we want to know what caused them, especially at work. In this article, workplace aggression will be defined and outlined in detail and the negative outcomes of the workplace aggression will be unveiled. In conclusion, the solutions for reducing the negative effects of the workplace aggression will be offered respectively.

2. AGGRESSION AT WORKPLACE

2.1. Aggression

According to Sigmund Freud and Konrad Lorenz, aggressive behavior is innate but, differently from this, other researchers have argued that it is a learnt behavior. Aggressive behavior largely depends on both genetic and environmental factors. However, the reasons of aggression mainly are social learning, modeling, family violence, child abuse, neglect, TV violence, structural and functional brain deviances, hormones (i.e., testosterone), and neurotransmitters (Liu, 2004: 694). Aggressive behaviors can be grouped within the concept of three different dichotomies:

- Verbal–physical,
- Direct–indirect,
- Active–passive.

Verbal forms of aggression cover giving harm to others through words rather than deeds, physical forms of aggression cover public extreme actions. Direct forms of aggression involve behaviors that are addressed directly to the victim, whereas indirect forms cover the actions of other individuals or through assaults on people or objects valued by the victim. Active aggression creates harm by performing the behavior, while passive aggression directs harm by withholding the behavior (Jaradat et al., 2016: 191). In addition, aggression is defined as a behavior that is intended to harm anybody who is motivated to avoid that harm and the harm might have various forms ranging from physical injury, hurt feelings, to pounding or punching even if it doesn't really succeed in causing harm or pain to anyone. In fact, the perpetrator has already thought and believed that the aggressive behavior will certainly harm the target and it's certain that the target is ready and motivated to avoid aggressive behavior and defense himself/herself. Then, it can be inferred that the main features of the aggressive behaviors are, it is an intentional act and it is directed toward any individual to harm or pain.

Therefore, it can be maintained that if the behavior accidentally causes harm or pain toward other people, then it is not aggression (Allen and Anderson, 2017: 1-2). Figure 1 (Hills, 2018: 608) displays the four significant indicators of aggressive behavior due to define whether a behavior is aggressive or not.

Figure 1. The Four Core Conditions of the Aggressive Behavior

Hills et al. (2015) maintained in their study that aggression is a common feature of human behavior and a compelling characteristic of modern society. Also, human aggression is essentially a social behavior and it depends on a social context in which some form of verbal and non-verbal (physical) reciprocal actions might take place between at least two people. It's been claimed that lots of people have both experienced and engaged in aggression at any place in a typical day. Plus, it's been underlined that the aggression might develop from rather mild, verbal expressions of displeasure, frustration or animosity through to highly extreme acts of violence on an individual level. Aggression might often be enforced to force, intimidate or bear down over other individuals. In addition, aggression can be conducted to coworkers/peers, authority figures, subordinates or complete strangers and it may even be directed toward wealthy or prestigious people, or toward lower people with

socioeconomic status and less fortunate, less capable of showing defense or deemed sufficiently different, for example, for their disability, gender, sexual preferences, nationality, race, ethnicity, person-related factors, customs or religion.

In conclusion, aggressive behavior is a hostile behavior with the intention of inflicting damage or giving harm toward the target. Although aggression is an undesirable behavior, it unfortunately happens at any time throughout the world. It might be either verbal or physical, indeed might come to an end like killing, and its results are often unwanted situations and regret often appears at the end.

2.2. Workplace Aggression

Workplace aggression is a highly significant problem for organizations throughout the world. The hidden cost of workplace aggression to organizations is huge and it affects the core business resulting in losses of millions of dollars each year. Workplace aggression also has deteriorating consequences on individuals, families and society as well (Johnson et al., 2018: 2). Workplace aggression takes various forms ranging from psychological acts to physical acts or assaults. Workplace aggression can be grouped into three categories as follows (LeBlanc and Barling, 2004: 9-10):

•Expressions of hostility (verbal; yelling, swearing or symbolic assaults, for example "the silent treatment"),

•Obstructionism (i.e. intentions to block the target's performance),

•Overt aggression (physical assaults).

In today's recent economic development, not only the organizations but also the employees and managers feel under high pressure. Beside some dangerous jobs, (i.e. police officers, firefighters, ambulance drivers, miners, military personnel, disaster, search and rescue teams) even ordinary jobs might be too stressful for the employees. Majority of the employees often complain about the too much responsibility and too little authority at work, discrimination, high workload, unfair labor practices, over-supervision, uncertainty for their career, inadequate job descriptions and uncivil behaviors from the coworkers or bosses. Moreover, the combination of night shifts, tight deadlines, sudden changes to duty and long hours at work are particular potentials for triggering workplace aggression as well. So, when the individuals at work feel too much stress and frustrated, then aggression might appear suddenly. For instance, Johnson et al. (2018) maintained in their study that 57% of healthcare employees in Australia experienced verbal abuse and 21% experienced physical violence. Again, it was stated in the study that workplace aggression resulted in 521 deaths and 570,000 nonfatal assaults in 1 year in the U.S.A. In addition, 569,000 notified incidents of aggression or violence at work in the U.K. Nart pointed out that (2014), due to the results of a survey conducted for searching the aggression at workplace in Turkey, 146 out of 213 individuals (68%) reported that they have experienced verbal, physical or psychological aggressive behaviors. In addition, 171 out of 213 individuals (80%) have stated that they have witnessed verbal, physical or psychological aggressive behaviors at workplace.

Furthermore, one of the most significant aspects of aggressive behavior at workplace is that it's an observable manifestation of aggression with the intention of giving harm toward the target (Liu et al., 2013: 2). That is to say, everyone at the scene can easily have a chance to see or hear the aggression session. Other coworkers can observe the forms of the aggression whether verbal or physical, and they might be heavily under the influence of the scene. On the other hand, since aggressive behavior is common among healthy, neurological normal individuals, when a victim of

aggressive behavior think that he/she has been hard done by the perpetrator of the aggression, then he/she begins to look forward revenge sooner or later. Therefore, "fight fire with fire", namely, the time comes for the tit-for-tat and it may either be in openly aggressive or passive-aggressive ways. Besides, when the aggression at workplace is overlooked, the tendency for directing aggressive behaviors toward other individuals might increase between employees.

However, some of the aggressive behaviors might not be observed easily. For instance, punching, kicking or insulting someone publicly can easily be regarded as active aggression whereas intentionally "forgetting" to invite a friend to a wedding party and intentionally withholding help from someone who is drowning can both be considered passive aggression (Allen and Anderson, 2017: 8). Passive aggressive individuals are so common at workplaces. Passive-aggressiveness is basically the tendency to enforce indirect expressions of hostility through subtle insults, stubbornness, surly behavior, slowdown the work or an intentional failure and is the most insidious and dangerous phenomenon at workplace. For that matter, passive-aggressive behavior -whether malicious or unintentional- causes a toxic environment at workplace. Passive- aggressive people usually convey their hostile, aggressive behaviors by means of passive ones. Figure 2 shows common passive aggressive behaviors (Johnson and Klee, 2007: 131):
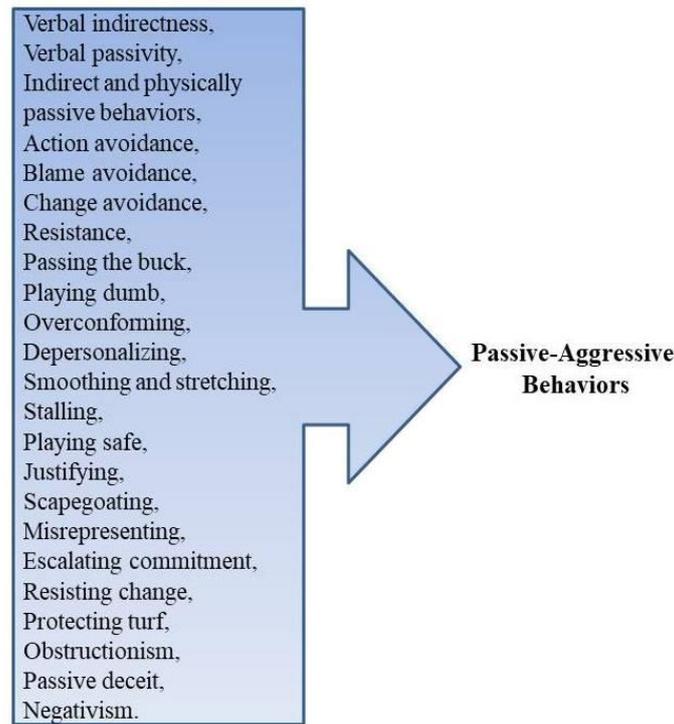

Figure 2. Major Passive-Aggressive Behaviors

In sum, most people or clients, from coworkers to managers experience passive-aggressive behaviors, from milder to extreme ones. Pretending not to hear, see or understand, sarcasm, the silent treatment and procrastination are major significant passive-aggressive behaviors and they simply sucking out victims' energy and sabotage employees' well-being and success, so it leads to planting seeds of hate at workplace.

3. WORKPLACE AGGRESSION AND ITS NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

Workplace aggression has risen over the past 25 years as a significant research topic in occupational health psychology throughout the world, and workplace aggression covers performing physical and nonphysical negative actions against an organization or its members, that give harm to employees (Yragui et al., 2017: 179). For example, each year, it has been forecasted that 41% of employees in the U.S.A experience psychological aggression and 6% of employees expose to physical aggression at their workplaces. Besides, 11% of employees perceive themselves as victims of bullying at work (Jaradat et al., 2016: 190). Workplace aggression is a broad concept that includes various interpersonal and harmful behaviors. As a matter of course, it is related with negative consequences like poor health, work-related illness and injury, work restrictions or modifications, role conflict and ambiguity, job dissatisfaction and absenteeism, as well as longer term effects on workforce participation decisions (Hassard et al., 2018: 7; Hills et al., 2018: 575).

Moreover, workplace aggression leads to hidden costs to organizations both in point of losses in productivity from poor morale, more absenteeism and turnover and costs related with grievances or human rights complaints. Indeed, employees who expose to workplace aggression systematically likely to experience psychological and physical outcomes like fear, anger, anxiety, depression, illnesses, emotional exhaustion, sleeping problems, difficulties in eating, concentration problems, less dedication, reduced self-confidence, and enthusiasm in their jobs (Ford et al., 2016: 1-2). Furthermore, Figure 3 (Hassard et al., 2018: 11) displays the cost of workplace aggression to society on the whole:
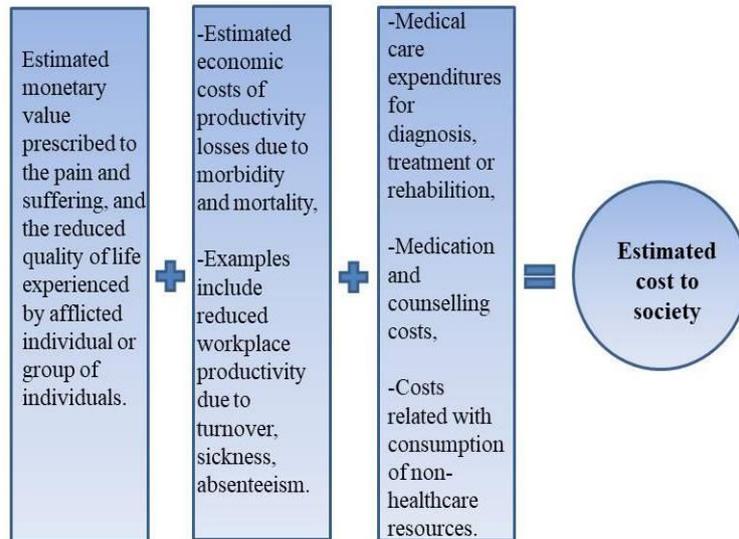
Figure 3. The Financial Burden of Workplace Aggression to Society

Anger is a strong and intense emotion and it can be described as a destructing emotion among individuals' relationships. And, whether it's originated from customers, peers or superiors, workplace aggression is a downward spiral that affects the organization and individuals in a negative way. When the victims confronted with a workplace aggression, most of them think about how they should respond, or even if they should respond at all. Then, they might follow the "fight fire with fire" strategy that it would result in heavy economic loss for organizations, and bystanders or observers of workplace aggression (both external and internal aggression) will suffer from negative consequences too.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to examine the workplace aggression, types of it, and its negative consequences and to give suggestions for preventing from it at workplaces. Workplace aggression is a prevalent phenomenon throughout the world, especially in underdeveloped or developing countries. Besides, it's obvious that workplace aggression is a key work health and safety, and public health concern.

However, workplace aggression has a weird feature that it's a spreadable highly contagious disease among individuals when it's once initiated at workplace. Because, when it's overlooked by the management and is directed toward other people, the victims are immediately looking forward to reprisal action or revenge at the first occasion, eventually the destruction is likely to begin just like the domino effect in the organization. Finally, it begins to threat healthy work environment and deteriorate the relationships and cooperation at work. Therefore, primary, in advance interventions and taking precautions aimed at reducing supervisor, coworker and customer-initiated aggression will certainly be reflected constructively in individuals well-being and contribute to safe and positive work environment. Therefore, first thinking about how to avoid the downward spiral of aggressiveness at workplace is very important, for example diagnosing the workplace aggression and looking for the ways of wiping out the antecedents and reasons before it flourishes is vital for the organizations.

In sum, from individual to organizational level, effective and more targeted regulations, rules, incentives, penalties and operationalized legislation should be reviewed and if necessary must be developed in order to prevent from aggressive behaviors at work or in case it happens, to minimize the negative consequences of workplace aggression. In conclusion, governments also must aware of the heavy financial burden that is caused by the workplace aggression to the economy on the whole and governments should review and make new laws to assure safe and healthful working conditions for both employers and employees; by authorizing enforcement of the standards defined under the updated acts plus by providing for research, information, education, and training within the concept of occupational safety and health. As a result, within the framework of this conceptual paper, here are some tips for preventing from workplace aggression and to reduce its negative consequences:

•From point of the constitutional order, governments should define standards or regulations assorted with the safety and health issues in the organizations, and they should create legal obligations that require employers or bosses to ensure their employees with a workplace free from workplace aggression that is causing or likely to cause serious physical harm or death. Since healthcare, security and social service employees encounter a highly risk of job-related aggression at work or on duty, new acts should be developed to prohibit violent and aggressive behaviors of their patients, clients or residents. New work regulations should be developed due to technological advances and social changes, and updated work regulations should cover training, instruction, information and supervision context for the organizations.

•From the organizational point of view, even before recruiting an individual, during the interview, HR should be conscious about choosing the right people for the position not only for their skills, abilities or achievements but also their mental health and positive psychological mood. For example, before hiring the right one, HR should be aware of whether the person has the traits of the dark triad, they have a history of challenging, or ingestion of drugs or alcohol, prone to adopt violent or aggressive behavior or not. After recruiting the individuals, management should provide clear instructions that can be verbal or written, new employees should be warned about curbing their prejudices about peoples' life preferences, people from different social-cultural backgrounds, and

people with different religious-religious sect or political views. In addition, new employees, apprentices or trainees should be informed about the organizational culture and identity well and they should be reminded for showing respect to the coworkers and clients at workplace. Finally, developing social interaction among employees, consulting employees by talking about failing equipment, understaffing in the organization, and caring for working conditions like office cleaning, air conditioning etc. would reduce the anxiety and excessive stress at workplace and it will make easier to reach the organizational goals.

•From the employers' point of view, employers have the responsibility to provide safe and healthy working environment and to protect employees and other people in the workplace from conflicts or situations that may cause physical and psychological injury or harm. Bosses or managers should form a fair and equitable basis in the organization especially when distributing organizational sources or promoting. Besides, the details of managers' and employees' responsibilities should be announced well and an aggression prevention program should be developed and education and training of employees should be provided to help them define potential risks and to manage aggression at work or on duty. In addition, employers should be ready with preemptive strikes for all the factors that contribute to work place aggression, they must develop and implement systematic controls to destroy or minimize workplace aggression or even a risk of workplace aggression. When the aggression happens, management should act at the very moment and respond appropriately to incidents and record them appropriately in the end. Finally, employers, bosses or managers should avoid writing nasty emails and notices, threats and threatening language at workplace. On the contrary, employers/bosses should provide and develop opportunities for social interaction among employees. Celebrating special events will develop the social ties among employees. Since we the people are social creatures, even giving breaks at work may reduce stress and increase work quality.

•From the employees' point of view, it might be too risky that if they are working directly with people who have a history of violence, addicted to drugs or alcohol, gang members, and relatives of customers. For example, prevalence of firearms, knives and other weapons among customers-coworkers and their families and friends may increase the chance for experiencing workplace aggression. Besides, if someone works with the public, he/she is potentially vulnerable to being verbally abused or threatened and rarely physically assaulted. Unfortunately, much of this aggression will go unrecorded and often unremarked because employees think that management won't have acted or that reporting might have made things worse for them. In addition, employees often think that reporting will not benefit them, or fear that employers might deem the aggression would be the result of their poor job performance. Victims won't be able to report the incident to the management or police because of the perception that aggressive behavior is tolerated. Therefore, helping victims of workplace aggression to know and defend their rights, help them through positive action to right the situation will help decrease the risk of reprisal or external individuals becoming involved in the situation. Plus, employees want to work with standards dealing with fair treatment, protecting their privacy and dignity and fair working conditions. They want to feel themselves secure when reporting even a minor incident of aggression to the management because they might need emotional help and support. It is important that employees should report all the incidents of aggression easily and understand why this is important. For instance, a growing number of minor incidents of aggression may suddenly rise to a major workplace aggression. Moreover, aggression from customers is usually regarded as organizational problem that should be solved so majority of the coworkers try to help willingly, however, dealing with an aggressive coworker is often regarded as victim's own business and results in terms of unfairness and isolation at workplace. Finally, employees might be too stressful

that cause aggression because of the private, personal or family matters, low wages, unrealistic deadlines, long hours, workload and/or physical and the social working conditions. Most of the organizations ignore the hygiene factors, clean offices, air conditioning, lighting, decoration and furnishings, noise, for example, banging doors at workplace. Small actions can decrease the risk of aggression and conflict at workplace, so employees feel less anxious, irritable, or depressed. Working environment that presents job safety to workers, job security, good relations with co-workers, recognition for high performance, motivation for performing well and opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their own jobs would make employees satisfied and happier and the reasons that cause aggression will decrease at all. It must be remembered that the happier and healthier the work force, the happier and healthier the organization is.

REFERENCES

Allen, J. J., and Anderson, C. A. (2017). Aggression and Violence: Definitions and Distinctions. *The Wiley Handbook of Violence and Aggression*, 1-14.

Ford, D. P., Myrden, S. E., and Kelloway, E. K. (2016). Workplace Aggression Targets' Vulnerability Factor: Job Engagement. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 9(2), 202-220.

Hassard, J., Teoh, K. R., Visockaite, G., Dewe, P., and Cox, T. (2018). The Financial Burden of Psychosocial Workplace Aggression: A Systematic Review of Cost-of-Illness Studies. *Work & Stress*, 32(1), 6-32.

Hills, D., Lam, L., and Hills, S. (2018). Workplace Aggression Experiences and Responses of Victorian Nurses, Midwives and Care Personnel. *Collegian,* 25(6), 575-582.

Hills, D. J. (2018). Defining and Classifying Aggression and Violence in Health Care Work. *Collegian*, 25(6), 607-612.

Hills, D. J., Ross, H. M., Pich, J., Hill, A. T., Dalsbø, T. K., Riahi, S. and Martínez-Jarreta, B. (2015). Education and Training for Preventing and Minimizing Workplace Aggression Directed Toward Healthcare Workers.

Jaradat, Y., Nielsen, M. B., Kristensen, P., Nijem, K., Bjertness, E., Stigum, H., and Bast-Pettersen, R. (2016). Workplace Aggression, Psychological Distress, and Job Satisfaction Among Palestinian nurses: A Cross-Sectional Study. *Applied Nursing Research,* 32, 190-198.

Johnson, A., Nguyen, H., Groth, M., and White, L. (2018). Workplace Aggression and Organisational Effectiveness: The Mediating Role of Employee Engagement. *Australian Journal of Management*, 43(4), 614-631.

Johnson, N. J., and Klee, T. (2007). Passive-Aggressive Behavior and Leadership Styles in Organizations. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies,* 14(2), 130-142.

Liu, J., Lewis, G., and Evans, L. (2013). Understanding Aggressive Behaviour Across the Lifespan. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing,* 20(2), 156-168.

Liu, J. (2004). Concept Analysis: Aggression. Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 25(7), 693-714.

Mireille LeBlanc, M., and Barling, J. (2004). Workplace Aggression. *Current Directions in Psychological Science,* 13(1), 9-12.

Biçer, C. (2019). Fight Fire with Fire? Workplace Aggression and How to Reduce Its Negative Effects. *KMÜ Sosyal ve Ekonomik Araştırmalar Dergisi,* 21(37), 37-46.

Nart, S. (2014). İş Ortamında Şiddet, Tükenmişlik ve İş Tatmini İlişkileri: Sağlık Çalışanları Üzerinde Bir Araştırma. *Yönetim ve Ekonomi Araştırmaları Dergisi,* 23, 248-268.

Yragui, N. L., Demsky, C. A., Hammer, L. B., Van Dyck, S., and Neradilek, M. B. (2017). Linking Workplace Aggression to Employee Well-Being and Work: The Moderating Role of Family-Supportive Supervisor Behaviors (FSSB). *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 32(2), 179-196.