

# Identity threat and antisocial behavior in organizations: The moderating effects of individual differences, aggressive modeling, and hierarchical status

Karl Aquino<sup>a,\*</sup> and Scott Douglas<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Business Administration, College of Business and Economics, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, USA

<sup>b</sup> Binghamton University, PO Box 6000, Binghamton, NY 13902, USA

## Abstract

This study examines whether the experience of identity threat predicts antisocial behavior directed towards other employees. A social interactionist model is used as a theoretical framework for predicting that employees who are frequent recipients of actions that challenge or diminish their sense of competence, dignity, or self-worth will engage in higher levels of antisocial behavior. However, it is predicted that the strength of this relation will be moderated by individual (gender, age, and attitudes toward revenge) and situational (aggressive modeling, hierarchical status) factors. Data from 308 employees from three organizations supported moderating effects of age, revenge attitudes, and hierarchical status. A three-way interaction was also found showing that identity threat was more strongly related to antisocial behavior for low as compared to high status employees, but only when they were exposed to low levels of aggressive modeling.

© 2003 Elsevier Science (USA). All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Harmful, injurious, and destructive behaviors directed by one employee against another are common occurrences in today's workplace. One study of Finnish workers found that 32% had observed one or more co-workers being exposed to verbally harassing behavior at work (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994). In another study, a survey of American human resource managers found that 20% reported that their organizations had experienced workplace violence since 1990 (Romano, 1994). As a final example, a survey of 327 first-line American workers showed that half reported acts of mistreatment at work within a three-year time frame (Ehrlich & Larcom, 1994). Some writers refer to these acts, and others like them, as antisocial workplace behavior (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998).

Antisocial workplace behavior has been defined as actions directed towards other employees or the organization that have the potential for producing physical,

economic, psychological, or emotional harm (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). The study of these behaviors has attracted considerable interest in recent years and several theoretical models have been advanced to explain their occurrence. One model proposed by O'Leary-Kelly and her colleagues (O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996) emphasizes situational determinants like decisions that affect valued outcomes, incentive inducements that reward aggressive behavior, and aversive physical environments. Other models focus on individual-level variables like perceptions of injustice (Aquino, Lewis, & Bradfield, 1999; Greenberg & Alge, 1998; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), cognitive appraisal processes (Martinko & Zellars, 1998), emotional reactivity (Berkowitz, 1993), and negative affectivity (Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999). Finally, more dynamic models describe how antisocial behavior results from an ongoing process of repeated interpersonal exchanges where one party perceives a threat to his or her self-identity and retaliates against the perceived source of threat. This explanation underlies social interactionist theories of aggression (e.g., Felson, 1992; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994) and models of conflict escalation (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Folger &

\* Corresponding author. Fax: 1-302-831-4196.

E-mail address: [aquinok@be.udel.edu](mailto:aquinok@be.udel.edu) (K. Aquino).

Skarlicki, 1998) and revenge in organizations (e.g., Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997).

This study draws from each of the theoretical perspectives cited above to test a model in which identity-threatening events experienced by an employee are hypothesized to predict antisocial behaviors performed by that employee. We view identity-threatening events as a subclass of the broader category of antisocial behavior. However, in contrast to most studies of antisocial behavior, we conceptualize and measure identity threats as actions directed against an employee by one or more co-workers. We then assume that these experiences can provoke the threat-recipient to respond by engaging in other forms of antisocial behavior. The proposed relationship between identity threat and an aggressive counter-response follows directly from dynamic models of conflict escalation and revenge (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Bies et al., 1997; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998) and is empirically well established (e.g., Felson, 1992; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Hence, we treat it as a building block for more complex hypotheses. Rather than simply replicating previous work, our study makes several unique contributions to the literature. First, this is the only study to our knowledge that directly tests the relationship between identity threatening events and antisocial behavior. Second, we go beyond looking at the main effect of identity threat by examining individual-level and contextual variables as moderators of this relationship. Finally, we combine the individual and contextual variables into a higher-order interaction that adds new theoretical complexity to existing models of antisocial behavior.

We investigate two categories of individual-level variables as possible moderators: demographic characteristics and attitudes toward revenge (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). Guided by O'Leary-Kelly et al.'s (1996) model of organization-motivated aggression, we examine whether the presence of aggressive role models in the workplace strengthens the relation between identity threat and antisocial behavior. Lastly, we investigate the relatively understudied question of whether this relation is moderated by the threat-recipient's hierarchical status.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

A person's self-identity consists of a combination of personal attributes (e.g., capable, competent) and the social identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity) that he or she seeks to present in a given situation (Erez & Early, 1993). Most people strive to maintain positive self (Bies, 1999; Brockner, 1988; Steele, 1988) and social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and so they are highly motivated to defend themselves against acts that

threaten these identities (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Felson & Steadman, 1983). The treatment a person receives from others is an important source of identity validation (e.g., Darwin, 1872; Goffman, 1967; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Sennett & Cobb, 1973; Steele, 1988). Consequently, being treated poorly by one's co-workers can threaten one's personal identity as a moral being deserving of fairness, consideration, and respect (Bies, 1999; Lind & Tyler, 1988) as well as his or her social identity as a valued organizational member (Lind, 1997).

We define an identity threat as any overt action by another party that challenges, calls into question, or diminishes a person's sense of competence, dignity, or self-worth (Bies, 1999; Steele, 1988). Examples include ethnic or religious slurs, harsh criticism of one's abilities, deceit, or public humiliation (Bies, 1999). We focus on these behaviors, because it is the less intense forms of interpersonal mistreatment, rather than the more highly publicized forms like physical assault or homicide, that occur most frequently in organizations (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Baron & Neuman, 1996). As mentioned earlier, identity threats can provoke antisocial behavior. Oftentimes these behaviors will be retaliatory responses directed by the threat-recipient (the target) against the perceived source of threat (the perpetrator). Some of these responses are likely to qualify as antisocial because they have the potential to harm the perpetrator.

The motives for retaliation are numerous. They can include the targets' need to reaffirm a damaged identity, to restore justice, or to deter future identity threats (Baumeister et al., 1996; Felson, 1992; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Gilligan, 1996; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). But the threat-recipient may also direct antisocial behavior against non-perpetrators. A recent meta-analysis showed that displaced aggression in response to various triggering provocations is a robust and valid phenomenon (Marcus-Newhall, Pederson, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). In such cases, antisocial behavior in the form of displaced aggression may serve a value-expressive function by allowing the threat-recipient to vent negative emotions (e.g., anger, shame, or resentment) against a convenient, available, or powerless target (Bies et al., 1997; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Thomas, 1992). Whether directed against the perpetrator or someone else, there are theoretical grounds for predicting a relationship between identity threat and antisocial behavior; hence, we test the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Identity threats experienced by an employee are positively related to antisocial behaviors performed by that employee.

As noted earlier, Hypothesis 1 is a building block to our subsequent predictions. Our primary aim in this study is to test whether individual level variables, social

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات