Role of communication climate in preventing workplace aggression in education sector

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Abstract---An organization's communication climate is crucial because it affects the efficiency and success of the business. The communication climate of an organization may influence the atmosphere in the organization which either encourages or hinders aggression among the employees. In this research, we explored the connections between an organizational communication environment and workplace aggression in education institutions 250 academics and professionals from leading Indian institutions were recruited for the study. The research established a moderate relationship among communication climate and workplace aggression. The research documents that Superior Subordinate Communication has the highest correlation to aggression.

Keywords---aggression, work environment, communication, workplace aggression, workplace violence.

Introduction

Aggression in the workplace may have far-reaching consequences, impacting not just the aggressor but also those directly involved and those who witness the incident. People at various positions often experience a feeling of hopelessness. It's not unusual for senior management to be caught between the need to increase productivity and the care for staff. In our organisations the ability to communicate between the most at-risk groups is severely limited or nonexistent (Boafo, 2016). Due to a lack of information, senior-level management typically chooses to disregard or downplay warning signs of a significant issue (Santanu Sarkar, 2015). While a lack of information sharing and open communication may be a major contributor to workplace stress and violence, they may significantly

mitigate these dangers by reducing tension and discontent among employees (Martino, 2003). To reduce workplace violence, better communication is crucial (Jakobsson et al., 2021).

Healthcare professionals' reported decline in anger and anguish and improvement in their overall psychological health after receiving an intervention to improve their communication skills (Swain & Gale, 2014). Inadequate communication has been connected to workplace aggression; however this correlation has not been well investigated. Communication has been studied in relation with various organizational factors like trust (Thomas et al., 2009) satisfaction (Pincus et al., 1989; Vermeir et al., 2018) , employee engagement (Roberts, 2013), organizational citizenship behavior (Chan & Lai, 2017; Kandlousi et al., 2010), stress prevention (Ganapathi, 2013) and conflict management (Nordin et al., 2014). None of the works has examined the linkage between organizational communication climate and workplace aggression.

By searching Scopus for the terms "workplace violence", "workplace aggression" and "communication," we were able to locate 338 scholarly articles published between 2000 and 2012 on the topic of workplace violence and aggression (WPV&A). Among these, several articles discussed the importance of effective communication during the times of crisis. Zeffane & Mcloughlin (2006) suggested that positive communication with managers (superiors) is strongly associated with the likelihood of stress. In another study it was established that a superior's verbally aggressive behavior and nonverbal immediacy behavior were perceived with lower level of competence, trustworthiness, and caring by their subordinates (Lybarger et al., 2017), Communication skills training program as an intervention has shown a decrease in perceived aggression in health care setting (Swain & Gale, 2014). It is also shown that through dialogic internal communication, employee safety behavior can be motivated (Lee, 2022) which shows that internal communication is a critical antecedent of a favorable employee–organization relationship. Communication satisfaction mediates the relationship between perceived justice and organizational citizenship behavior (Chan & Lai, 2017) which may be concluded as; when perception of justice is low, employees will rely on the communication they receive before they decide to invest in discretionary effort.

Founded on this conclusion the present study aims at exploring the relationship between organisation communication and workplace aggression. The association between these two constructs still remains an unexplored area in the organizational behavior literature. Lacking previous empirical research, this study aims to experimentally investigate the foundational connection between organization communication environment (OC) and workplace aggression (WPA). This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, the study broadens the application of OC and WPA concepts to capture previously uninvestigated effects. The findings enhance our comprehension of the antecedents of WPA which is crucial for organizational success. Secondly, this is the first study to investigate the OC-WPA relationship. Besides revealing empirical evidence on the importance and impact of OC necessary to understand the employees' attitudes and behavior, the results may provide scholars and practitioners with a deeper understanding of employees' behavior. The study adds to the communication and

aggression literature by demonstrating how OC affects WPA. Thus, practitioners/managers can gain insights to make better decisions concerning communication practices in the organization. Thirdly, by exploring the influence of the different factors of OC (Superior subordinate Communication, Quality of information, Superior openness, Opportunity for Upward Communication, Reliability) as antecedents, managers can effectively gain valuable insights to enhance the communication systems within the organization and devise strategies to affect certain perceptions which may otherwise lead to aggression; while the employees can concentrate on the aspects of communication that facilitate mutual understanding, enhance working relationships, and improve the workplace environment.

Literature review

Communication Climate

Communication climate includes not just how workers feel about the organization's interconnection and the quality of its communication, but also how they feel about their own participation and influence within that environment (Goldhaber, 1993). The term "communication climate" is used to describe the general tone of an organization's culture in terms of its employees' ability to talk to one another and be heard (Arif, Zubair, & Manzoor, 2012). It's possible that productivity and employee retention are both influenced by the standard of communication in the workplace (Salin, 2003). To add to that, if the employees feel more connected to the organisation via the dissemination of positive news, they may be more inclined to work together to achieve organizational objectives (Smidts, Pruyn, & Riel, 2001). When it comes to internal communications, the "communication climate" of an organisation is defined as the general attitude and reaction of its personnel as a whole, as described by (Dennis, 1975). Dennis' communication climate survey consists of five factors (O'Connell, 1979): superior-subordinate communication, quality of information, superior openness/candor, opportunities for upward communication, and reliability of information. Determining the communication climate at an organization will provide insight into the employee's perceptions about the communication they receive, the quality and reliability of the message, and the transparency of their workplace. Superior-subordinate communication shows expressions of constructive dialogue between an employee and his/her supervisor since it focuses on words of praise, appreciation, and fair treatment being shared between the two parties. Quality of communication shows workers who are satisfied with the sources the management utilized to communicate, the incentives they got, and their comprehension of the organization's aims and their own roles within it. Superior openness is related mostly to high-level management or excellent functioning. This component indicates how the subordinate perceives the honesty and openness of the information provided by the supervisors. Opportunities for upward communication express how workers really feel about having their input considered and used in the workplace. Reliability of communication shows how workers feel about the credibility of information coming from their superiors and peers. This research will use Dennis' variables of communication environment to investigate how each one relates to and affects workplace aggression

Workplace aggression

Despite the fact that many employees exhibit pleasant and cooperative demeanor, human hostility seems to flourish in the workplace. Some aggressive workplace behaviours, although not as severe as workplace murder or the maintenance of social, economic or moral issues, still undermine a respected and productive workplace and create inefficiency and personal discomfort. Any action taken with the aim to harm another person or organisation is considered aggressive in the workplace (Baron & Neuman, 1996). This research will assess both physical and non-physical forms of aggression in the workplace since the former is more common than the latter (L. Greenberg & Barling, 1999). Screaming and cussing are two common instances of this. The emergence of aggressive behaviour is influenced by a wide range of personal, social, and environmental variables (Neuman & Baron, 1998). Aggression in the past (Barling, 1996), alcohol use (LeBlanc & Barling, 2003), personality features (Aquino et al., 1999), and dissatisfaction with one's job (Greenidge & Coyne, 2014) are all factors that have been connected to workplace violence (STORMS & SPECTOR, 1987). It has been demonstrated that organizational factors are better predictors of violent behaviour than personal characteristics in hostile work contexts (Dupré & Barling, 2003). Therefore, this study aims at investigating the possibility that hostile work environment is influenced by the internal culture of communication.

Relationship between Communication Climate and Workplace Aggression

Aggression (Pincus & Acharya, 1989) According to the "Employee Crisis Reaction Model," workers' cognitive abilities may be considerably hampered by the stress of crises, making it harder for them to take in new information and decide between available options. Workplace aggression and inefficiency are both highly associated with stress(Chen & Spector, 1992; Greenidge & Coyne, 2014). Maintaining an open channel of communication between management and employees may help reduce stress in the workplace. Free and honest discussion can solve most difficulties at work at little or no expense (Ganapathi, 2013). Aggressive behaviour in the workplace is likely to stem from an inaccurate assessment of the communication culture in the company, which in turn increases stress levels. However, it is thought that one's main and secondary assessment processes in a stressful context are what really drive the connection between one's communication environment and participating in violent behavior; cognitive appraisal theory; (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If an employee perceives an inadequate and unsupportive organizational communication environment during the second phase of assessment, when they assess the resources or specialized abilities they feel they have to cope with the problem, the employee is more likely to respond aggressively. With an emphasis on cost-cutting, job (in)security, and societal upheavals as examples of some of the factors of organizational change, Baron and Neuman in 1998 established a relationship between organizational change and antagonism. Communication between superiors and subordinates, information quality, superior openness/candor, upward communication opportunities, and information dependability are the five factors that Dennis considers in his 1974 study of the communication environment. To gain a sense of the company's culture of communication, you

may take opinion poll for employees on their perceptions of the company's openness, dependability, and the quality of the communications they receive.

For the purpose of identifying relationship between dependent and independent variables, five null hypotheses have been drawn in this research

H01: There is no significant relationship between Superior Subordinate Communication and employee aggression.
H02: There is no significant relationship between Quality of information and employee aggression.
H03: There is no significant relationship between Superior openness and employee aggression.
H04: There is no significant relationship between Opportunity for Upward Communication and employee aggression.
H05: There is no significant relationship between Reliability of Communication and employee aggression.

Conceptual model
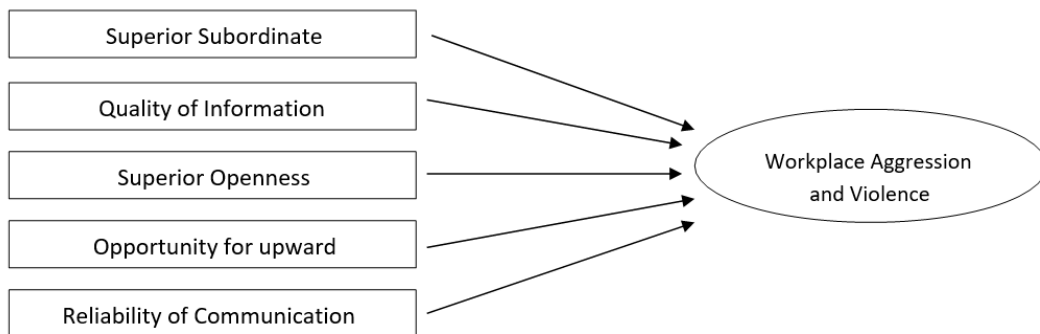
Methodology

Sampling

The goal of this research was to establish causal links between five aspects of workplace communication environment and aggressive behaviour. The correlations were identified through an observational survey research rather than any kind of controlled trials. In the business world, the education industry has one of the highest rates of hatred and violence (Nowrouzi & Huynh, 2016; Piquero et al., 2013) For this study, a representative sample of 250 academics and professionals from leading Indian institutions was recruited. The participants were selected by a method known as convenience sampling. The researcher is conveniently located and easy to get in touch with, after all.

Scale of measurement

Organisation Communication (OC)

This research utilized the Dennis' (1974) Communication Climate survey to study the organisation communication. For the purpose of this study the instrument was used to measure employees' perception of the communication climate in the organization and hypothesized to be related with aggression at workplace. The survey identifies five factors: superior-subordinate communication, quality of information, superior openness/candor, opportunities for upward communication, and reliability of information. All five factors are studied in relation with workplace aggression. The Cronbach's alpha of Superior-subordinate communication was 0.852; Quality of Information was 0.777; Superior Openness was 0.774; Opportunities for Upward Communication was 0.766; and Reliability of Communication was 0.869. Responses were reported on a 6 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

Workplace Aggression

Workplace Aggression Scale (WPAS; Neuman & Baron, 1998), the WPAS was developed as an overall measure of the self-report prevalence of workplace aggression. The scale consists of three factors representing unique categories of aggression: (a) Expressed Hostility involves 15 items representing verbal and symbolic release of feelings of anger, discontent or negative attitudes toward others (e.g., staring, obscene gestures, belittling); (b) Obstructionism involves 9 items based on actions intended to impede another's performance (e.g., failing to return phone calls, work slowdowns, showing up late for meetings); and (c) Overt Aggression involves 8 items that focus on physical actions toward an individual or their property (e.g., attack with a weapon, threats of physical violence, sabotaging company property needed by the target).

Demographic profile of the respondents

In this study, we used descriptive statistics. The majority of the respondents in this research was females, i.e., around 33.2% males and 66.8% females. The proportion of respondents with tenure in the organisation above 10 years was 26.40%, with 5–10 years was 33.20%, and less than 5 years was 40.40%. Similarly, the age group from whom we collected data were below 20 years (11.60%), 20-30 years (27.20%), 30-40 years (34.40%), 30 to 40 years (15.60%) and 50 above (11.20%). (74.40%) respondents were married while (25.60%) were unmarried. Finally, the respondents' education levels included post-graduate (54.80%), graduate (40.40%), and undergraduates (4.80%). The detailed sample demographics are presented in Table 1.

		Frequency	%
Gender	Female	167	66.80
	Male	83	33.20
Age	Below 20	29	11.60
	20-30	68	27.20

	30-40	86	34.40
	40-50	39	15.60
	50 and above	28	11.20
Marital Status	Married	186	74.40
	Unmarried	64	25.60
Educational Qualification	Intermediate	12	4.80
	Graduate	101	40.40
	Post Graduate and above	137	54.80
Total work experience	<5 yrs	101	40.40
	5-10 yrs	83	33.20
	>10 yrs	66	26.40

Table 1

Analysis and Results

The results in Table 2 show that all three scales and their sub-scales have a satisfactory level of internal consistency, as shown by the reliability coefficients. These coefficients, for the SSC (Superior Subordinate Communication) scale, QI (Quality of information) scale, SO (Superior openness) scale, OUC (Opportunity for Upward Communication) scale, RC (Reliability of Communication) scale, and EA (Employee Aggression) scale, were found to be 0.89, 0.76, 0.84, 0.91, 0.91, and 0.89 respectively. Overall, the reliability coefficients indicate a high degree of internal consistency across all three scales.

Table 2: Internal consistency reliability

	Mean	SD	α	AVE
SSC	3.4	0.57	0.89	0.63
QI	2.6	0.44	0.76	0.60
SO	3.7	0.42	0.84	0.67
OUC	4.2	0.51	0.91	0.63
RC	3.9	0.43	0.91	0.61
EA	4.1	0.54	0.89	0.59

Note(s): SSC: Superior Subordinate Communication, QI: Quality of information, SO: Superior openness, OUC: Opportunity for Upward Communication, RC: Reliability of Communication, EA: Employee Aggression

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity refers to the extent to which different measurements correspond to distinct concepts. The concept is that if two or more concepts are distinct, then they will not be correlated and the discriminant validity will be established (Bagozzi et al. 1991).

Table 3: Discriminant Validity and corelations

	1	2	3	4	5	6
SSC	0.79					
QI	0.49**	0.77				
SO	0.42*	-0.77**	0.81			
OUC	0.29	0.57*	-0.083*	0.79		
RC	0.32	026	0.34	0.61**	0.69	
EA	0.42	0.53	0.36	0.54	0.61*	-

Note(s): SSC: Superior Subordinate Communication, QI: Quality of information, SO: Superior openness, OUC: Opportunity for Upward Communication, RC: Reliability of Communication, EA: Employee Aggression

Fornell and Lacker Criterion

The criterion set by Fornell and Larcker (1981) states that discriminant validity is established when the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for a particular concept is larger than its correlation with all other constructs. This study found that the square root of AVE (SSC = 0.63, QI = 0.60, SO = 0.67, OUC = 0.63, RC = 0.61, EA = 0.59) was stronger than its correlation with other constructs, as shown in Table 2. This provides strong evidence for the demonstration of discriminant validity.

Common Method Bias

This study relies on self-reported data, which means that common method bias could be a concern. To address this, a Harman Single Factor test was conducted and the maximum variance explained by a single factor was found to be 31%, which is less than 50% (as per Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, it can be concluded that common method bias is not a significant issue in this study.

Results

Multiple regression was used to test the hypotheses (refer to Table 4). The first hypothesis (H1) stated that there is a significant relationship between Superior Subordinate Communication and employee aggression (β = 0.54, $p < 0.01$), and the results supported this hypothesis. The second hypothesis (H2) proposed that there is a significant relationship between Quality of information and employee aggression (β = 0.46, $p < 0.01$), and the results supported this hypothesis. The third hypothesis (H3) suggested that there is a significant relationship between Superior openness and employee aggression (β = 0.32, $p < 0.05$), and the results supported this hypothesis. The fourth hypothesis (H4) proposed that there is a significant relationship between Opportunity for Upward Communication and employee aggression (β = 0.46, $p < 0.01$); this hypothesis was also supported by the results. The fifth hypothesis (H5) stated that there is a significant relationship between Reliability of Communication and employee aggression (β = 0.52, $p < 0.01$), and the results supported this hypothesis.

Table 4: Confirmation of Hypothesis and Regression results

Hypothesis	β-value	R2	F	p-value	Supported
SSC -> EA	0.54	.276	83.54	<0.01**	Accepted
QI -> EA	0.46	.126	62.63	<0.01**	Accepted
SO -> EA	0.32	.343	84.12	<0.05*	Accepted
OUC -> EA	0.46	.461	76.32	<0.01**	Accepted
RC -> EA	0.52	.321	78.43	<0.01**	Accepted

Note(s): SSC: Superior Subordinate Communication, QI: Quality of information, SO: Superior openness, OUC: Opportunity for Upward Communication, RC: Reliability of Communication, EA: Employee Aggression

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that positive relationships exist between several communication and aggression factors which means all the internal communication dimensions are correlated with aggression. The result of the study supports the study conducted by (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012) according to which internal communication is one of the key determinants of abuse at work. Superior- subordinate communication has been studied in association with bullying (Africa et al., 2003). The current study also found that Superior Subordinate Communication had the highest correlation to aggression. We could infer from these results that when an employee is provided ways to interact with senior management there is a greater impact on their behavioral outcomes in the organization, they experience positive or open communication with their superior and share a mutual understanding.

The study's findings support the theoretical claim that when managers provide resources (internal communication) in a way that is viewed as advantageous, staff members will view the relationship positively and respond with engagement (Biswakarma, 2017). In order to prevent aggression in the organisation the employee must develop a strong belief that they are heard. Superiors can achieve this through internal communication which builds employees' perceptions of support. Perceptions of unfairness tend to trigger dysfunctional behaviours, such as workplace aggression (Baron et al., 1999; Beugre, 1998). Since aggression-inducing cognitions lead to aggressive actions (J. Greenberg & Alge, 1998) managers may reduce such cognitions by maintain open communication and providing an explanation containing a reason to mitigate the harm-doer's responsibility for some action (J. Greenberg, 1993). When people receive detailed information about decisions affecting them, they tend to react less negatively even if the outcomes received are negative (Bies et al., 1988)

Practical Implications

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. Firstly, the study broadens the application of communication climate and Workplace Aggression and Violence concepts to capture previously uninvestigated effects. The findings enhance our comprehension of the antecedents of workplace aggression and work-related outcomes that are crucial for organizational success. Be- sides revealing empirical evidence on the importance and impact of communication

climate necessary to understand the employees' attitudes and behavior, the results may provide scholars and practitioners with a deeper understanding of employees' cognitive appraisal process and its outcomes. Secondly, the study adds to the communication and aggression literature by demonstrating how communication climate affects WPA. Thus, practitioners/managers can gain insights to make better decisions concerning communication practices in the organization. Thirdly, by exploring the influence of the different factors of communication climate as antecedents and mediators, managers can effectively gain valuable insights to enhance the communication systems within the organization and devise strategies to affect the employee's cognitive appraisal of the stressful situation, in order to gain non aggressive behaviors; while the employees can concentrate on using communication as a tool to improve working relationships, foster mutual understanding, and create a more positive work environment.

Limitation & Future Scope

As is the case with most empirical research, several constraints were placed on the design of this study which may affect the interpretation and generalizability of results. First, because our data is cross-sectional, we are not able to make causal inferences regarding predictor/outcome relationship. To enable true causal inferences, longitudinal designs are necessary. Second, the study has been done only on the education sector and a cross sectional study including other sectors like service and manufacturing may give more insight into the topic. Furthermore given the nature of the question under investigation, social desirability may affect the likelihood of obtaining accurate reports of aggression. This is of some concern as social desirability may be an issue in self-reported co-worker directed aggression (L. Greenberg & Barling, 1999) and sexual harassment (Dekker & Barling, 1998). While the concepts of communication climate are a heavily studied subject individually, the results from this study provide a glimpse at the relationship between the communication climate and workplace aggression. Future research regarding the relationship in experimental group setting will provide insight about other variables that may have an effect on the communication climate --- employee aggression relationship.

Conclusion

Workplace aggression can contribute to staff burnout, low staff retention rates, and decreased productivity (Rossler, 2012). According to Fujishiro, Gee, and de Castro (2011), organizations that allow employees to engage in aggressive acts are unlikely to provide a supportive work environment. Encouraging open communication with the staff will give an opportunity for workers to express their opinions. This way of improving communication flow and sharing information are considered to be the most important and effective measures to reduce stress and aggression in an organisation.

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