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A Model of Superiors' and Subordinates' Aggressive Communication in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

In the workplace, superiors and subordinates may engage in a spiral of aggressive communication and emotional reaction that can lead to negative attitudes and unproductive organisational outcomes and higher staff turnover. In the manuscript, we develop and propose a model of superiors' and subordinates' aggressive communication and emotional reactions. In our model we suggest that organisational context (culture) and individual personal characteristics (personality, trust, self-esteem) influence superiors' and subordinates' aggressive communication. We also suggest that individual emotional characteristics (positive/negative affect, emotional intelligence) influence the protagonists' emotional reactions. Finally, we propose that subordinates' emotional reactions and organisational culture influence their attitudes (organisational identity, perception of a masculine vs. feminine organisation) and their considered behaviours (performance, turnover). We conclude with a discussion of potential limitations, and implications for theory, research, and practice.

Keywords: Emotions, communication, conflict management

In this article, we argue that workplace superiors and subordinates can become locked in a spiral of aggressive communication instigated by individuals' emotional reactions. Thus, our aim is to present a model of organisational and individual factors that influence this process. Aggressive communication refers to the involvement of one individual (sender) applying force to influence another individual (receiver) (Infante, 1987, 1995). Individual emotional reactions are described by Scherer's (2005) as "an episode of interrelated, synchronised changes in the states of all or most of the five organismic subsystems in response to the evaluation of an external or internal stimulus event as relevant to major concerns of the organism" (p. 697). More recently, Infante, in conjunction with other scholars has focused on research and theory building on aggressive communication (see, Infante & Gorden, 1991; Infante, Riddle, Horvath & Tumlin, 1992; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Rancer, Kosberg & Baukus, 1992); while Scherer (2000b, 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) now suggests that individuals experience emotional reactions after appraising a relevant event. Based on these theories, we develop a model where organisational and individual traits determine the nature of superior-subordinate aggressive communication and emotional reactions.

Although recently Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) developed a model of aggressive communication between superiors and subordinates based on emotional abuse, where the organisational environment and culture are essential. In this model however, Lutgen-Sandvik does not include the role of superiors and subordinates emotional, gender and personal traits. In addition, Lutgen-Sandvik's

model is based on muted group theory (Kramarae, 1981), where Lutgen-Sandvik argues that the workplace mutes all employees and muting subordinates is generally inherent in superior-subordinate communication and the extreme level of silencing occurs when subordinates experience targeted abuse (2003). In contrast, our model is based firstly on the work of Infante, (1981, 1982), who was the first to present a model and definition of aggressive communication, secondly on Scherer's work (1988, 1993), who developed a process of emotion-antecedent appraisal. We suggest that by building our model on Infante's and Scherer's work will extend and could complement Lutgen-Sandvik's model on aggressive communication between superiors and subordinates in the workplace.

We start by reviewing in greater detail aggressive communication and emotional reactions, and then focus on describing our model of superior-subordinate aggressive communication. We first deal with the effect of organisation environment and culture. Next, we describe the roles of superior and subordinate gender, followed by their personal characteristics and their emotional characteristics. Finally, we cover the effect of subordinate emotions reactions on their attitudes and subsequent performance. We conclude with a discussion of limitations, and the implications of our model for research, theory and practice.

Aggressive Communication

Infante (1995) suggests that aggressive communication may be constructive or destructive. According to Infante (1987), constructive aggression facilitates interpersonal communication satisfaction by developing comprehension and closeness; while destructive aggression creates dissatisfaction, and occurs if an individual feels less favourable regarding him/herself and the condition of the relationship is diminished. Infante (1995) suggests that constructive traits are comprised by two components: Assertiveness and argumentativeness, where argumentativeness is a subset of assertiveness. Similarly, destructive traits are comprised by two components: Hostility and verbal aggressiveness, where verbal aggressiveness is a subset of hostility.

In Infante's (1995) theory, hostility is the general destructive trait of aggressive communication and verbal aggressiveness is a subset of hostility. Thus, even though all verbal aggression is hostile, not all hostility necessarily involves verbal aggression attacks. Nonetheless, hostility and verbal aggressiveness can also be constructive. For example, being verbally aggressive towards a person

engaged in an unlawful event may prevent an observer from becoming a victim (see Infante, 1987). For the purpose of our model, however, we consider only instances where assertiveness, argumentativeness, hostility, and verbal aggressiveness constitute destructive aggressive communication.

Superiors' and Subordinates' impulsive behaviours

Neuman and Baron (1998) point out that superiors' and subordinates' aggressive communication may involve distinct impulsive behaviours, even including physical aggression. Moreover, based on Kassing and Avtgis (1999), we argue further that dissent represents an often impulsive expression of contradictory opinions in the organisation. Finally, we include favouritism as a form of impulsive behaviour, where individuals prefer or favour other individuals who they considered similar to themselves, over individuals whom they consider to be dissimilar (see Brewer, 1979).

Superiors' and subordinates' emotional reactions

A relevant aspect of Scherer's (2005) definition of emotion is that the consequences of the eliciting event should be "relevant to major concerns of the organism" (p. 701). Thus, emotions may be seen to be relevance indicators (Scherer, 1984a, 2005). Scherer (2005) suggests also that the significance of an event is influenced by a rapid and occurring evaluation or appraisal process with specific emotion outcome profiles. In addition, Scherer (2005) distinguished two types of appraisals intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic appraisals refer to the evaluation of the feature of a person or an object, based on genetic or learned preferences. Extrinsic appraisals refer to the evaluation of events and their consequences to the individual conduciveness for salient needs, desires, or goals of the appraiser.

Scherer (2005) suggests further that appraisals of events change rapidly, and thus emotional responses towards the event will also change rapidly, where emotional processes are constantly changing, permitting fast rearrangement to evaluations. Therefore, emotions serve as a preparation to adaptive action predispositions and their motivational support. Thus, Scherer suggests that emotions have a strong effect on emotion-consequent behaviour. Even more importantly, Scherer suggests that "the motor expression component of emotion has a strong impact on communication which may also have important consequences for social interaction" (p. 702).

Aggressive communication and emotional reactions: What's the link?

Based on the foregoing arguments, we argue that both superiors' and subordinates' aggressive communication are associated with their emotional reactions to each other in interpersonal encounters. Furthermore, superior and subordinate aggressive communication and emotional reactions may become locked in a spiral cycle with consequences for individuals (e.g., stress) and the organisation (e.g., absenteeism). In the following sections, we present a model that suggests this cycle can be understood in terms of organisational context (i.e., organisational culture), and individual variables (i.e., gender, personal characteristics and emotional characteristics).

A MODEL OF SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

The model we present is illustrated in Figure 1. In this model, we suggest that organisational culture will influence superior's aggressive communication and subordinates attitudes (e.g., organisational identity), but that superiors and subordinates have their own organisational environment (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). From an individual perspective, key variables comprise superiors' and subordinates' gender, personality, trust and self esteem (Infante, 1987). In addition, superiors' and subordinates' emotional reactions may be influenced by their positive and negative affective states (Scherer, 2005) and their emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Subordinates' emotional reactions however, may influence subordinates' attitudes towards the organisation, and subordinates' attitudes may also influence subordinates' considered behaviour (e.g., performance or turnover) (Shwarz & Bohner, 2001).

Insert Figure 1 around here.

In our model, we present 8 propositions (indicated in Figure 1 by the letter P). Proposition 1a indicates that the organisational culture influences the superior's aggressive communication, and Proposition 1b implies that organisational culture also influences subordinate's attitudes. Then, Propositions 2a and 2b suggest that superiors' and subordinates' gender traits influence their personal characteristics. Likewise, Propositions 3a and 3b indicate that superiors' and subordinates' personal characteristics influence their aggressive communication; subsequently Propositions 4a and 4b

suggest that superiors' and subordinates' aggressive communication influence subordinates' emotional reactions. In Propositions 5a and 5b we suggest that the protagonists' emotional characteristics may influence superiors' and subordinates' emotional reactions, and in Propositions 6a and 6b we propose that superiors' and subordinates' aggressive communication spiral is reciprocally influenced by the protagonists' emotional reactions. Subordinates' emotional reactions however, could also influence subordinates' attitudes – as suggested in Proposition 7. Lastly, Proposition 8 indicates that subordinates' attitudes influence subordinates' considered behaviours. We discuss each component of our model in detail next.

Organisational Environment

A relevant definition of organisational environment was provided by Aldrich and Pfeffer (1976) who defined organisational environment as “the flow of information perceived by members at the organisation boundaries” (p. 92), where the organisation has an active role in selecting structure, instead of the role of the environment in selecting suitable organisational structures and organisational reactions to the structure. We argue that many specific events in the workplace occur as a result of the various dimensions of organisational environment. A relevant theory to understand workplace events based on the various organisational environments (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1979) is Affective Events Theory (AET: Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). AET indicates that workplace events impact employees' attitudes and behaviours through employees' affective reactions (Ashkanasy & Ashton-James, 2005; Paterson & Cary, 2002; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

In particular, Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) suggest that the organisational environment results in various work events, where the events instigate an appraisal process in individuals who then assess the favourability of the event for reaching significant goals (Paterson & Cary, 2002). Thus, the employee's emotional reactions to workplace events influence subsequent attitudes and behaviours (Ashkanasy & Ashton-James, 2005). According to Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), behaviour can be impulsive, and may include negative behaviours (e.g., destructive aggressive communication) and positive behaviours (e.g., constructive aggressive communication), or considered, resulting from attitudes that form in response to affective events. The specific aspect of organisational environment that we consider is organisational culture, which we discuss next.

Organisational Culture

Schein (1990) defined organisational culture “as a pattern of basic assumptions, invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore is to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 111). Additionally, there are three levels of cultural analysis in the organisation (Wood, Chapman, Fromholtz, Morrison, Wallace, Zeffane, Schermehorn, Hunt & Osborn, 2004). The first level is the observable culture which relates on how organisations do things. In this level the methods of the group have been developed and are taught to new members (Wood et al., 2004). Types of observable culture are history and symbols. Thus, history items are unique stories, ceremonies and corporate rituals, and symbols include physical design dress codes, logos and badges (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Wood et al., 2004). The second level is the shared values, this level relates to how work values and personal values are shared (Wood at al., 2004). For instance, the extent to which individual values can change work values, and ethical decision making in the organisation based on individual values (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000). Finally, the third level is the common assumptions, which relates to organisational experiences that employees share and that guide values and behaviours (Wood et al., 2004). This level may help to explain why culture permeates every facet of organisational life (Wood et al., 2004). In particular, in an organisation permeated with aggressive attitudes, this could be expected to influence both the superior’s aggressive communication (P1a), and their subordinates’ attitudes in the workplace (P1b).

Superiors’ and subordinates’ gender traits

Researchers of gender and aggressive communication have demonstrated relevant differences between males and females, for example, males score higher in argumentativeness and verbal aggression than females (Infante, 1982, 1985; Infante & Rancer, 1996; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Nicotera & Rancer, 1994; Shultz & Anderson, 1984). Rancer and Dierks-Stewart (1985), for example, found significant gender differences in argumentativeness (e.g., men are more argumentative than women). Infante (1989) found that when males and females received verbal aggression, males retaliate verbally aggressive, while females responded with more argumentative

traits. Nicotera and Rancer (1994) suggest further that gender and sex differences in aggressive communication are related to sex role expectations for males and females. For instance, they found that males are motivated to be dominant, aggressive, competent and restrictive in their affect display (i.e., not crying). In contrast, females are discouraged to be argumentative and use verbal aggression as women should be more supportive and caring (Nicotera & Rancer, 1994; Simkins-Bullock & Wildman, 1991; Thorne & Henley, 1975). We propose therefore that superiors' and subordinates' gender determines in part their personal characteristics such as personality, trust and self-esteem (P2a & P2b respectively). We discuss each of these personality characteristics and their effects on aggressive communication in the following paragraphs.

Superior-Subordinate personal characteristics

Superiors' and subordinates' personality. Digman and Inouye (1986) and McCrae and Costa (1985c, 1989) have shown that five dimensions, known as the "Big Five", are the most universal personality factors. These are labelled as extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness. Assertiveness is one of the six facets of extroversion, while hostility is one of the six facets of neuroticism. Similarly, argumentativeness is a subset of assertiveness and extroversion (Costa & McCrae, 1980, 1992; Infante, 1987). As such, extroverted and neurotic individuals may be likely to engage in aggressive communication.

Superior-subordinate trust. Lewicki, Mcallister and Bies, 1998 defines trust as "confident positive expectations regarding another's conduct" (p. 439); they argue that under high trust conditions, individuals have reasons to be confident towards other individuals. In contrast, Lewicki et al. (1998) define distrust as "the expectation that others will not act in one's best interest, even engaging in potentially injurious behaviour" (p. 439). In addition Lewicki et al. (1998) developed a two-dimensional framework identifying four prototypical relationships conditions: low trust/low distrust, high trust/low distrust, low trust/high distrust and high trust/high distrust (p. 448).

In the low trust and distrust level, individual/group conversations are simple and casual, with no violation of intimacy or suggestion of closeness, thus it is possible that this communication is assertive. In the high trust and low distrust level, individual/group conversations are complex and rich, where individuals and groups are aware of each other, so it is arguable that this communication

is argumentative. In the low trust and high distrust level, individual/group conversations are cautious, protected and mixed with sarcasm, cynicism, and sinister attributions of individuals/groups intentions, so can be considered as verbal aggression. Finally, in the high trust and high distrust level, individuals/groups may be very confident in another individual/group, but individuals/groups may be also wary of and suspicious (Lewicki et al., 1998). We conclude from this that superior-subordinate trust is also a predictor of aggressive communication and impulsive behaviour.

Superior-subordinate self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined by Glauser (1984) as “an individual’s overall feelings of personal worth, usefulness and degree of liking for self” (p. 117). Research has shown that low self-esteem individuals find it difficult to interact socially and they would receive than give information with great distress on self-expression (Rancer et al., 1992), and that individuals with low self-esteem and verbal dominance lack abilities to communicate (Glauser, 1984). Related to aggressive communication, Rancer, Kosberg and Silvestri (1992) found that the self-esteem dimensions of personal power and competence were positively and significantly related to argumentativeness. Furthermore, the self-esteem dimensions for defensive self-enhancement, moral self-approval, lovability, likeability, self-control, and identity integration were negatively and significantly to verbal aggression (Rancer et al., 1992). On this basis, we argue that low self-esteem individuals are likely to engage in verbal aggressiveness and may also lack the skills to communicate in a constructive manner. As such, we conclude that low self-esteem is also a predictor of aggressive communication.

In summary, we argue that superiors’ and subordinates’ personal characteristics (personality, trust, self-esteem) influence their aggressive communication (P3a & P3b), and we suggest that superiors’ and subordinates’ aggressive communication influence their emotional reactions (P4a & P4b). Besides, superiors’ and subordinates’ emotional reactions can be influenced by their emotional characteristics, including positive and negative affective states and emotional intelligence (P5a and P5b). In the next section, superiors’ and subordinates’ emotional characteristics will be reviewed.

Superiors’ and Subordinates’ emotional characteristics

Positive and Negative Affect (PANA). Watson and Tellegen (1985) developed a two-dimensional map featuring high positive affect, low positive affect, high negative affect and low negative affect. Positive affect indicates the degree to which an individual feels strong, enthusiastic

end elated, where high positive affect is a state of high energy, extraordinary concentration and gratifying engagement, while low positive affect is a state of sadness and lethargy (see also Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). Conversely, negative affect indicates the degree to which an individual feels distress, where high negative affect is a state of anger, contempt, disgust, fear, guilt and nervousness, while low negative affect is a state of calmness and serenity. Watson et al. (1988) point out also that positive affective states match up with the personality factor of extraversion, whereas, negative affective state correspond to the personality factor of neuroticism. Therefore, it is possible that individuals in positive affective states may use constructive aggressive communication, while individuals in negative affective state may use destructive aggression. Thus, we would expect PANA to have a direct effect on emotional reactions.

Emotional Intelligence. Mayer and Salovey (1997: 10) define emotional intelligence as “the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (p.10). Further Mayer and Salovey (1997) describe the abilities of the their definition in four domains: (a) perception, appraisal and expression of emotion, (b) emotional facilitation of thinking, (c) understanding and analysing emotions (employing emotional knowledge) and (d) reflective regulation of emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that emotional intelligence will also be a determinant of emotional reactions to aggressive communication.

In summary, we suggest that superiors’ and subordinates’ emotional characteristics, PANA and emotional intelligence, will influence their emotional reactions. In addition, superiors’ and subordinates’ emotional reactions will also influence our proposed superiors’ and subordinates’ aggressive communication spiral (P6a & P6b). Furthermore, and consistent with AET, we argue that subordinates’ emotional reactions could influence subordinates attitudes (P7) and considered behaviours (P8). We discuss these propositions in detail next.

Superiors’ and Subordinates’ Attitudes and Considered Behaviours

Shwarz and Bohner (2001) conceptualise attitudes as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour” (p. 413). Scherer

(2005) notes that there are three components of attitudes: cognitive components (beliefs regarding the attitude object), affective component (affective states towards the object), and a behavioural component (an action tendency regarding the object, e.g. embracing or avoiding). Attitudes objects could be individuals, or entities (Shwarz & Bohner, 2001; Scherer, 2005).

Organisational identity and perceived masculine or feminine organisation. Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994, p. 242) defined organisational identity as “a cognitive linking between the definition of the organisation and the definition of self”. Organisational identity serves as a process where individuals define themselves in the organisation through a relationship with their employer (Dutton et al., 1994). In addition, organisational identity could be perceived as masculine or feminine (Cliff, Langton & Aldrich, 2005). For instance, the consideration of masculine and feminine organisations is a result of contemporary studies that differentiate between masculine and feminine organisations based on traits that are culturally attributed to males and females, namely: The level of bureaucracy and the femininity of their employment relationships (Cliff, Langton & Aldrich, 2005).

Finally, based on the principles of AET, where an employee’s emotional reactions to workplace events influence subsequent attitudes and behaviours (see also Ashkanasy & Ashton-James, 2005), we argue that subordinates’ attitudes are related to their subsequent considered behaviours, such as performance or turnover (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). This argument is consistent with Ajzen and Fischbein’s (1977) theory of planned behaviour and Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, and Zhang’s (2007) model of indirect effects of emotion on behaviour.

CONCLUSIONS: LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this manuscript, we proposed that aggressive communication is a process in the organisation between superiors and subordinates that may be constructive (e.g., managing conflict) or destructive (e.g., subordinate’s well being deteriorated). In addition, we assert that superior and subordinate aggressive communication is influenced by individuals’ emotional reactions, where the protagonists can become locked into a spiral of aggressive communication leading to emotional reactions that engender further aggression, resulting eventually in lowered employee performance and higher turnover. We therefore propose a model of superior-subordinate aggressive communication

and emotional reactions that incorporates organisational context (culture) and individual variables including gender, self-esteem, trust, personality, positive and negative states, and emotional intelligence.

A limitation of our model may be associated with the measurement of the various variables. For instance, when measuring the variables, care needs to be taken to avoid common method bias (Crampton & Wagner, 1994; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Podsakoff & Dalton, 1987). In order to minimise this bias, we recommend (consistent with Podsakoff et al., 2003, and Spector, 2006) that researchers administer staged surveys (i.e., administered in parts at different times), employ statistical control, and use different operationalisation of variables. An additional limitation may be associated to communication flow. Although in our model we are considering downward and upward flow of aggressive communication in the organisation, aggressive communication could also occur horizontally (Jablin, 1979; Katz & Kahn 1966).

A theoretical implication of our model relates to the superior-subordinate aggressive communication spiral possibly instigated by their emotional reactions. If our model is confirmed, theory on aggressive communication should be extended to include individual emotional reactions, and researchers will in future need to take full account of emotional variables in studies of aggressive communication. Finally, from a practical perspective, we expect that our model will further emphasise the need to take account of emotional states in managing aggressive communication in the workplace (cf. Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002). Thus practitioners could re-design organisational cultures or environments and re-develop strategies or policies to manage emotions to minimise destructive aggressive communication in the workplace.

In summary, we proposed a model of superiors' and subordinates' aggressive communication and emotional reactions involving organisational context and individual variables, leading to a downward spiral that can affect employee performance and turnover. We argue that our model has theoretical (e.g., emotional reactions as a source of aggressive communication), research (accounting of emotional variables in aggressive communication) and practical implications (e.g., a platform for managing individual emotions in the organisation) for our understanding of organisational behaviour.

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Figure 1 Model of Superior-Subordinate Aggressive Communication and Emotional Reactions

