Bullies Grow Up and Go to Work

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Workplace aggression has been a prominent topic of articles in business, management, and organizational literature. Counselors have not responded with the same level of attention even though workplace aggression can devastate the mental health of targets (sometimes referred to as victims). This article features a review of literature related to workplace aggression including definitions, manifestations, effects, and prevalence. Implications and recommendations for professional counselors are provided.

Bullying has commanded attention of authors and researchers from a variety of sectors and countries. For example, the prevalence of bullying in schools has been described as “staggering” (Sassu, Bray, & Kehle, 2004, p. 1), “pervasive” (Goodman, N.D.), and “widespread” (Hirschstein, Edstrom, Frey, Snell, & Mackenzie, 2007, p. 3.) In this regard, Ross (2003) asserted that “bullying may be the most prevalent form of violence in American schools and one that is likely to affect the greatest number of students” (p. 43). Calling attention to the severity of the bullying phenomenon,

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D’Andrea (2004) challenged school counselors to provide leadership for comprehensive initiatives designed to prevent and address bullying. Unfortunately adulthood does not always mitigate proclivity toward bullying. According to Dilts-Harryman (2004) “society is learning that little bullies grow into big bullies. . . . Change a few of the words, and the adult bully was once the young bully who sat in your classroom” (p. 29). In this regard, Olweus (1993) suggested that children who engage in childhood bullying behaviors continue to display elevated aggression in workplaces, intimate relationships, and family relationships during adulthood. Correlation has been shown between youth who engage in bullying behaviors and adults who engage in criminal activities. Thus, rather than mitigating tendencies toward bullying, journeying to adulthood may provide opportunities for perfecting power seeking strategies.

Bullying behaviors attributed to adults manifest directly and indirectly, and they occur in a variety of contexts. Sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse are among the observable, though often unobserved, forms of adult bullying. Subtle, covert bullying behaviors include verbal assaults and relational aggression. Such nonphysical bullying actions are most frequently exercised in workplaces (Keashly & Harvey, 2006; Randall, 2001; Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006).

The purpose of this article to call attention to adult on adult bullying behaviors, particularly as they manifest in the workplace. We include definitions of bullying and a review of extant literature related to workplace aggression. Recommendations are provided for positions and actions that professional counselors can take to mitigate workplace aggression. In this article, workplace aggression is used as an umbrella term encompassing workplace incivility, relational aggression, mobbing, and other forms of nonphysical bullying. These terms are more fully defined in the next section.

Terminology, Dimensions, and Factors

Because of the international attention to the general phenomenon of workplace bullying, diverse terminology appears in the literature. For example, European authors and investigators have referred to mobbing, harassment, victimization, and psychological terrorism (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). Scholars in the United States have written about relational aggression, incivility, and emotional
abuse. Other U.S. authors have retained the terminology of workplace bullying (e.g., Ferris, 2004; Namie, 2003; Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006).

Definitions of bullying proffered by authors and organizations reflect a spectrum of specificity related to duration, frequency, nature of behaviors, intention of bullies, and perception of targets. Bullies’ intent and motives have challenged adequate and consistent definition. One viewpoint restricts actions of bullying to the actors’ intention to harm a target. Of course, verification of intent is difficult at best.

Rigby (2008) succinctly defined bullying as “the systematic abuse of power in interpersonal relationships” (p. 22). Coloroso (2006) provided more specificity: “Bullying is the conscious, willful, and deliberate hostile activity intended to harm, induce fear through the threat of further aggression, and create terror . . . . Bullying will always include these three elements: Imbalance of power, . . . Intent to harm, . . . and Threat of further aggression” (pp. 13-14).

Endeavors to define bullying that occurs in the workplace are further complicated by workers’ subjective assessment of the actions and events (Rayner et al., 2002). For example, one individual may experience a coworker’s actions as intimidating; another may not be affected. Accordingly, authors’ inclusion of targets’ reactions in definitions poses another area of inconsistency; although contemporary researchers typically respect targets’ perception of their experiences, and the meaning they attach to those experiences (Tehrani, 2001). For example, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) suggested that “adult bullying at work is a pattern of persistent, hostile discursive and nondiscursive behavior that targets perceive as efforts to harm, control or drive them from the workplace. It includes public humiliation, constant criticism, ridicule, gossip, insults, and social ostracism -- communication that makes work tasks difficult or impossible, and socially isolates, stigmatizes, and discredits those targeted” (p. 408).

Bullying is often an escalating process as opposed to an event (Einarsen et al., 2003). Within this conceptualization, initial actions are indirect, subtle, and covert. Over time, intensity and severity of aggression increase. Ultimately, some bullies engage in physical and psychological violence. In rare situations workplace violence is a single episode with no escalation of intensity or severity.
Thus, bullying includes a spectrum of actions ranging from indirect exclusion and subtle nonverbal gestures to direct assault and use of weapons (Baron & Neuman, 1996). Such forms of bullying range from deliberate silence to homicide (Bishop, McCullough, Thompson, & Vasi, 2007). We draw from Keashly's (1998; 2001) comprehensive definition of emotionally abusive workplace actions to proffer the following definition of workplace bullying, both physical and nonphysical: Workplace bullying includes physical (workplace violence) and nonphysical (workplace aggression) actions that are (a) repetitive in nature, (b) neither welcomed nor solicited, (c) potentially harmful or injurious to recipients of the actions, and (d) intentional or within the aggressor’s control. Additionally, such actions violate codified or practiced standards of conduct and feature differential positions of power, whether legitimate or coercive. As mentioned previously, we use workplace aggression to encompass nonphysical forms of bullying. Like many experts in the field of bullying (e.g., Coloroso, 2006) we conceptualize the phenomenon in three levels of participation or passive involvement: bully, target, and bystander.

**Bullies**

Bullies, the aggressors, may threaten, humiliate, intimidate, shout, and throw objects. They also may engage in covert activities such as hiding things, ignoring email or telephone messages (Dilts-Harryman, 2004), and using demeaning language (Vickers, 2006). Bullying actions include glares, harsh teasing, sarcasm, rumors, racially based insults, aggressive posturing, ostracism, innuendos, intimidation, harassment, and property destruction.

Power imbalance is a central factor of bullying, whether psychological or physical, actual or perceived (Einarsen et al., 2003; Kennedy, 2007; Olweus, 1993). Power differential may be related to physical size and strength, group size, confidence, verbal dexterity, skills in manipulation, or status (Rigby, 2008). In this regard, aggressive actions may provide demonstration of one’s ability or propensity to control others (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003).

**Targets**

Adult “targets are everywoman, everyman” (Namie & Namie, 2003, p. 38). Neither graduate degrees nor professional rank provides immunity. In fact, workers of all ranks and professional
sectors have been targeted as punishment for being assertive or successful, particularly if they pose a threat to bullies (Dilts-Harryman, 2004; Namie & Namie, 2003). Target position is not a factor of personal or professional strength or weakness (Randall, 2001). Targets may be self-assured, skilled, bright, independent, cooperative, ethical, just, and kind (Namie & Namie, 2003). Targets often have a strong work history that includes commitment, integrity, and productivity (Duffy & Sperry, 2007). As targets, they are often ashamed or embarrassed that they have succumbed to aggression of a coworker (Duffy & Sperry, 2007), and may not readily acknowledge that bullying has occurred (Coloroso, 2006). Additionally, they may fear retaliation, and their confidence in others’ ability or desire to help may be diminished. Because their bully is often a friend, targets find themselves in a double bind. Any act of self-protection may endanger the relationship, which they so desperately want.

Targets may engage in self-deprecation, blaming themselves or experiencing shame and embarrassment. They are often disenfranchised with no language to communicate their experience (Duffy & Sperry, 2007). Thus, they leave their workplace with no explanation for “feeling dead, wanting to be dead, feeling invisible, and abandoned” (Duffy & Sperry, 2007, p. 401). Such reactions to bullying become salient and entrenched. In order to gain a broader understanding of workplace aggression, Keashly (2001) conducted individual interviews with people who reported having interpersonal difficulties in their workplaces. A prominent finding was targets’ inability to describe their experiences to other people because the bullying actions were subtle and ambiguous. A general perception among the research participants was that “unless you live it, you don’t understand it” (p. 240). When they tried to describe their experiences to others, including organizational managers, they often felt dismissed and invalidated.

Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts (2006) elucidated the effects of workplace aggression by examining metaphors that targeted workers used to describe their experiences. Research participants spoke of feeling dead, beaten, broken, trapped, betrayed, and eviscerated. Bullying became “an uncontrollable” or “waking nightmare” (pp. 161-162). These targets also referenced childhood experiences such as recollections of being “the unpopular kid at school” and “It sounds
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like junior high school” (Tracy et al., 2006, p. 169). Others spoke of leaving positions they loved. Like participants in the Keashly study (2001), the targets had little confidence that others would understand the experiences they tried to describe. The researchers suggested that the plight of targeted workers is often “invisible” (p. 178).

Bystanders

The phenomenon and negative implications of bullying extend beyond bullies and their targets (Jeffrey, 2004). Indeed, Jeffrey (2004) suggested that “bullying is a public interaction in which there are perceived winners and loser . . . Bullies like an audience” (p. 7), and may be motivated by passivity among witnesses. For some members of this audience, the observation can be entertaining and arousing (Jeffrey, 2004). Others become distressed because of associated guilt, embarrassment, and anger (Jeffrey, 2004). Members of the audience often silently witness workplace aggression because of fear. Bystanders may recognize that they could become the next target; self-preservation becomes more important than intervening to support a target (Coloroso, 2006; Jeffrey, 2004; Randall, 2001). Additionally, aggressors are often in management positions (Lawrence, 2001). Nonetheless, bystanders passively collude with the bully. They also draw conclusions with lasting consequences about “power, authority, empathy, injustice, social responsibility, and courage, or the lack thereof” (Jeffrey, 2004, p. 7).

Workplace Aggression: Incivility, Relational Aggression, and Mobbing

Scandinavian researchers are credited with providing leadership in the investigation of workplace bullying; their inquiries began in the 1980s (Einarsen et al., 2003; Rayner et al., 2002; Namie, 2003). Approximately a decade later, interest extended beyond the Nordic countries as publications appeared in mainland Europe, Australia, and Canada.

The Harassed Worker (Brodsky, 1976) was written by an American author in the 1970s. Brodsky called attention to the plight of workers affected and injured in unsafe and stress inducing work environments. Interest in workplace bullying (violence and aggression) among other researchers and authors in United States appeared nearly three decades later (Namie & Namie, 2003).

American scholars Neuman and Baron (1998) proposed a framework to differentiate components and categories of
workplace bullying. They distinguished workplace violence (i.e., direct physical assault) from workplace aggression, which encompasses “efforts by individuals to harm others with whom they work, or have worked, or the organizations in which they are presently, or were previously, employed” (p. 395).

These authors further proposed and empirically examined a spectrum of actions that include (a) expressions of hostility, (b) obstructionism, and (c) overt aggression. High frequency expressions of hostility included (a) spreading rumors, (b) interrupting, (c) belittling, (d) ignoring, (e) negative eye expressions, and (f) failing to intervene in gossip transmission. Obstructionism included (a) ignoring phone messages or memos, (b) tardy entries to meetings, and (c) interfering with a co-worker’s work. Overt aggression ranged from theft to physical assaults and use of weapons. Although workplace aggression may escalate from passive and indirect activities (e.g., listening to false rumors without offering a correction) to physical and indirect actions (e.g., obscene gestures), actions and events do not necessarily follow a linear progression of sequence and severity.

Workplace Incivility

Workplace incivility is a “low intensity deviant behavior characterized by ambiguous intent. Incivility includes rude and discourteous behavior, acting with disregard for others in the workplace, and being in violation of workplace norms for respect” (Vickers, 2006, p. 74). Because intent related to harming another is unclear, the inclusion of workplace incivility within the spectrum of workplace aggression is questionable. Nonetheless, the potential consequences of incivility for workers and workplaces warrant attention (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001; Vickers, 2006).

Sending unkind or demeaning email messages, undermining the credibility of a coworker, reprimanding a colleague in a public forum, spreading rumors, and engaging in gossip are examples of incivility. Such actions, particularly as isolated events, appear to be minor or benign; however, their accumulating effect erodes relationships, good will, and workers’ psychological well-being. Additionally, without intervention, actions of incivility escalate to more intense acts of aggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Baron & Neuman, 1996; Vickers, 2006) and interfere with organizational productivity.
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Because of the subtle and insidious nature of escalation, social norms of the organization deteriorate, thereby allowing actions that contribute to toxic work environments and disguising workplace aggression. As Vickers (2006) suggested, workplace incivility is akin to a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” (p. 82).

Relational Aggression

Relational aggressors are often “intensely charismatic, even seductive” (Simmons, 2002, p. 62). They may be “in control, intimidating, [and] smart” and have the “power to make others feel good or bad” (Wiseman, 2002, p. 26). They often have keenly developed social skills and are popular among their peers.

Relational aggression is generally considered a female experience; although males can be relational aggressors and targets as well (Dellasega, 2005). Ross (2003) described typical relational aggression actions of girls with the following comments:

The peer group that is ousting the target child may tell lies about her, spread rumors, walk past her chattering enthusiastically but avoiding eye contact, and write very unpleasant notes about her. In adolescence, as peer interactions become refined to the point of artificiality, relational victimization also becomes more subtle. Efforts are directed at damaging the victim’s relationship with peers. She is completely ignored while friendly overtures are made to girls who are with her at that moment, gossip about her sexual activities is rampant, and the whole victimization procedures becomes extraordinarily complex.

The impact of relational aggression experienced in childhood potentially continues through adulthood (Dellasega, 2005; Simmons, 2002). “Mean girls grow up to be mean women” (Dellasega, 2005, p. 7); targets often grow up with residual effects as well (Dellasega, 2005; Simmons, 2002).

As mentioned previously, such aggression and its effects are difficult to identify. In this regard Simmons (2002) called attention to a “hidden culture” (p. 15) in which “friendship is a weapon” (p. 3). Within this culture, targets are often devastated when their peers ignore them or walk away from them. Simmons further suggested that the pain of friendship losses and challenges parallel the closeness of the relationship between the target and the aggressor.
Mobbing

Scandinavian authors (e.g., Leymann, 1996) conceptualized nonphysical abusive behavior in the workplace as mobbing, which is “a social interaction through which one individual (seldom more) is attacked by one or more (seldom more than four) individuals almost on a daily basis and for periods of many months, bringing the person into an almost helpless position with potentially high risk of expulsion” (Leymann, 1996, p. 168). From his investigations of nonphysical workplace aggression, Leymann derived five categories of disruption that included (a) communication, (b) social contacts, (c) reputation, (d) occupational situation, and (e) physical health. Within this framework, individuals may be silenced or socially isolated. They may be shamed by gossip or ridicule. Work assignments may become meaningless, and ultimately dangerous. Ultimately, targets recognize no option but departure from the organization.

Mobbing activities progress from isolated and minor incidents between the aggressor and the target. In time the aggressor involves other workers and the environment becomes increasingly hostile for the target. Additionally, co-workers may distance themselves from the target to prevent their own involvement, thereby contributing to the target’s isolation. Administrators and supervisors, with no awareness of precursors to the outcome, often support the aggressor and castigate the target as the problem; indeed, by this time the target may be depressed, physically ill, or distracted. Resolution of the problem, from the manager’s perspective, may be dismissal of the target.

Prevalence

Establishing statistics related to the extent workplace aggression exists is compounded by a range of variables (Rayner & Hoel, 1997; Schat et al., 2006). Nonetheless, findings of multiple inquiries in which diverse research designs were employed are consistent: workplace bullying is widespread (Beale, 2001). In fact, Randall (2001) concluded that “It is generally agreed that the incidence of workplace bullying is far greater than was ever thought” (p. 17).

Journalists have reported physical assaults and related workplace violence with increasing frequency (Neuman & Baron, 1998). However, these forms of workplace violence and bullying are relatively rare when compared to nonphysical forms of aggression (Keashly, 2001; Neuman & Baron, 1998). In this regard,
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Neuman and Baron (1998) found that various expressions of nonphysical aggression were “ubiquitous in organizational settings” (p. 397). Rayner and her colleagues (2002) examined workplace aggression in Britain, and reached similar conclusions. “Someone withholding information which affects your performance” and “having your opinions and views ignored” (p. 37) were reported as dimensions of workplace aggression that occur most often. Researchers in many countries have investigated the prevalence of workplace aggression. According to the Workplace Bullying Institute (2007) 37% of American workers have experienced some form of bullying. Over one-half (54%) of the bullying actions were reported to be in public forums, and 72% of the bullies were in supervisory positions. The majority of targets’ reports were ignored, or the reports resulted in additional problems. These findings corroborate other studies, which can be reviewed on the Workplace Bullying Institute web site (www.bullyinginstitute.org).

Effects and Costs of Workplace Aggression

Effects of workplace aggression are compelling. Individuals who work in aggressive environments experience detrimental psychological as well as physiological responses (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Pearson et al., 2001; Rayner et al., 2002), as depicted in the case illustration. In this regard, Vickers (2006) reported that “There is now extensive evidence that bullying, mobbing, and other forms of workplace aggression, mistreatment, and violence have a severe impact on individuals targeted” (p. 79).

Targets experience heightened levels of anxiety, depression, irritation, and physiological symptoms (Dilts-Harryman, 2004; Keashly, 2001; Tracy et al., 2006). They are often confused by their own range of strong emotions. Professional ability and productivity are diminished as isolation among workers escalates.

Workplace aggression also damages organizations (Johnson & Indvik, 2001; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Tracy et al., 2006; Vickers, 2006) and negatively affects financial profit (Johnson and Indvik, 2001; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000). In an aggressive environment, targets’ performance and contributions decrease, they miss work, and they leave their positions. Additionally, workers who witness
workplace aggression leave the organizations (Rayner et al., 2002; Vickers, 2006).

Illustration

The following paragraphs are excerpted from one person’s portrayal of her workplace experiences. Although the description is essentially accurate, revisions have been made to protect anonymity. This person’s experience illustrates a gradual and ambiguous escalation of aggression. As the range of aggressive interactions increased, often outside awareness of coworkers, the culture changed.

Relationships and behaviors at work ever so gradually changed. Disagreements between two people escalated as they were distributed via departmental emails. Conversations between and among colleagues reflected increased sarcasm. Teasing became increasingly harsh. The use of profanity escalated. Office decorum gradually degenerated [incivility].

And then I became confused by my own reactions to what seemed to be innocent interactions. There were looks that evoked discomfort. I felt invisible when she walked past me without comment or smile. I heard loud laughter in the hallways that seemed to say, “We are having a good time out here without you.” I noticed her escalating prominence and dominance at meetings. I grew weary of repeated comments about conversations with various executive officers [relational aggression, references to power, intimidation].

Each time I assumed responsibility, saying things to myself like, “Grow up. You aren’t in third grade. She likes to be front and center. You don’t.” Even though I was in therapy for depression, I would not admit that I was depressed because my friend was not acting like my friend. I felt childish, foolish, and ashamed. “Depressed because a friend is ignoring me and spending time with someone else? Grow up.”

Exclusion gradually became observable and public. A coworker and I conducted a training program. She attended the presentation and asked questions despite our request to observe quietly during a demonstration. Before she left, she hugged my coworker. I was rendered invisible [relational aggression].

Ultimately others participated. I was reprimanded in meetings for actions and attitude that had been previously praised. Passion for my profession was criticized as rigidity. My professional
judgment was called into question [mobbing and bystanding]. I was defenseless and undefended. I was silenced. I retreated. Leaving the position and profession in which I had invested time and energy for two decades was my only option. I was defeated. Irreparably damaged. Ashamed. Humiliated. Dead [effects].

Discussion

Because workplace aggression is prevalent, counselors encounter its manifestation in their private practices, agencies, and schools. Insightful counselors recognize those manifestations and design interventions accordingly. Whether clients’ roles be that of bully, target, or bystanders, their perception of workplace relationships and experiences can be expanded with information about workplace aggression. Discussions and interventions directed toward workplace relationships characterized by collaboration, respect, and personal control (rather than control of others or control by others) hold promise for developing egalitarian relationships, thereby facilitating teamwork and productivity.

Implications for Counseling Practice

Clients who have encountered workplace aggression may not be aware of a possible connection between those experiences and their presenting problems. For example, the individual in the illustration blamed herself for her depression. Because of shame and humiliation, she may not have disclosed the damaging workplace environment. Nonetheless, workplace aggression was likely a major factor underlying her depression and self-deprecation. Thus, incisive counselors consider the possibility of workplace aggression throughout their work with clients.

Workplace aggression may also be a contributing factor when clients explore career options, hope to find new employment, or leave their employment with vague explanations. With increased awareness of workplace aggression, counselors inquire about (a) current career dissatisfaction, (b) reasons for leaving current positions, or (c) conditions that prompt clients to explore career alternatives. As counselors recognize symptoms of workplace aggression, they can assist clients in naming coworkers’ actions as workplace aggression. With this information and insight, displaced workers may be empowered to use discernment in enacting personal as well as environmental changes.
Although helping clients develop assertiveness skills is a strategy employed by counselors, we caution them to help clients anticipate consequences of engaging in greater levels of assertiveness in their work organizations. When addressing workplace aggression, targets and bystanders may risk increased harm (Ferris, 2004). For example, aggression or threats may increase. Supervisors may dismiss targets’ concerns, thereby colluding with aggressors and further dismissing or invalidating the target’s experiences. Other forms of retaliation may occur, including dismissal from the organization (Ferris, 2004).

Clients who have witnessed workplace aggression may also present with anxiety stemming from their own vulnerability in a precarious, and possibly hostile work environment. Bystanders who have not intervened may experience guilt, embarrassment, anger, and other distressing reactions that result from their inaction. Such reactions may have intensified with passive participation in mobbing as illustrated in the example.

Clients who have engaged in aggressive actions toward peers are not likely to request counseling. More likely, clients who have engaged in bullying and aggressive behaviors are referred by Employment Assistance Programs or supervisors for anger management or other work related problems. When working with these clients, we recommend assessment procedures that involve family members or close acquaintances as well as consideration of individual behavioral disorders. Counseling strategies recommended for clients with histories of abusive relationships (e.g., domestic violence) can be useful. For example, helping clients with aggressive tendencies acquire empathy may be helpful.

Counselors in consultant roles have increased opportunities to intervene at the organizational level (Proctor & Tehrani, 2001). In this regard, examination of artifacts such as codes of ethics, policies and procedures, the systemic nature of the organization, and incident reports may yield information about the organization and guide intervention (Duffy & Sperry, 2007). Efforts must be focused on aggressors, targets, and bystanders. Successful interventions address leadership and managerial styles, cultural norms, procedures for reporting workplace aggression, responses to reports of aggression, and consequences for engaging in workplace aggression.

We recommend that counselors working as consultants for organizations,
such as the one illustrated, begin with an examination of the current environment and desired changes. Attention must be given to management level motivation and support for elimination of all workplace aggression as well as the strength of managers’ leadership. Without administrative competence and commitment, consultation will not yield successful outcomes. In fact, vulnerable workers may be harmed.

Interventions may include education regarding workplace aggression for all personnel, and the adoption of a code of conduct. Consultants can also provide guidance in determining appropriate consequences for engaging in workplace aggression and reporting procedures when the code of conduct is violated. Throughout the process, assurance of psychological and physical safety as well as job security for all workers must be a priority.

Suggestions for Conducting Research

The breadth of workplace aggression warrants scholarly attention to examine the efficacy of individual as well as organizational interventions. Inventories and procedures to evaluate workplace environments would provide useful tools for monitoring civility, relationship patterns, and psychological safety. As results of research related to workplace aggression and counseling are published in professional journals and newsletters, awareness of counselors in a variety of specializations will be enhanced.

We further encourage counselors to explore opportunities for Inter-disciplinary collaboration. Articles written with combined expertise of counselors and authors in business, management, and organizational fields would inform readers of both literatures. Collaborative presentations at workshops and conferences would provide opportunities for counselors to acquire knowledge and skill for responding to the deleterious effects of workplace aggression for individuals, workplaces, organizations, and society.

Conclusion

To effectively counter the harmful effects of workplace aggression, counselors must first examine their own propensity toward bullying, aggression, dominance, or power. We invite counselors to monitor tendencies to passively witness or participate in incivility, relational aggression, or mobbing.

Astute counselors recognize opportunities to intervene and prevent workplace aggression. Of course, the most immediate
environment in which counselors have opportunities to take action is their own workplace. As counselors attend to the insidious nature of workplace aggression, they will recognize opportunities to engage their colleagues in maintaining or working toward workplace civility and in addressing harmful interactions. By calling attention to aggressive actions, they may simultaneously mobilize bystanders who also deem bullying behaviors as unacceptable. Such illumination may support targets and empower them to advocate for themselves.

This review of literature addressing workplace aggression raises questions; the responses, or the lack thereof, hold salient implications. In our review of the extant literature we found only a few articles about workplace aggression in professional counseling journals (e.g., Duffy and Sperry, 2007 & Dilts-Harryman, S., 2004, November/December). Thus, we are compelled to ask: How is it that this phenomenon rarely appears in the counseling literature? How is it that counselors have not recognized aggression in the workplace as a prominent problem? Have counselors unwittingly participated in “the violence of our silence” (D’Andrea, 2004, p. 278)?

The prevalence of workplace aggression is astoundingly high and the effects are disastrous for individuals as well as organizations. The phenomenon beckons attention of counselors individually and severally, personally and professionally. The systemic nature of workplace aggression provides multiple opportunities for formal and informal intervention.

As a profession, counselors have embraced social justice and advocacy. Professional integrity warrants counselors’ attention to this debilitating societal phenomenon rather than silently colluding with aggressors as bystanders. Daniels, Aredondo, & D’Andrea (1999) challenged counselors to take responsibility for violence in American schools and communities. Similarly we challenge counselors to engage in intentional activities to promote their awareness and knowledge of workplace aggression and provide leadership for addressing aggression in the workplace.

Clearly bullying is more than a childhood issue, adult issue, school issue or workplace issue. It has become a societal issue. Thus, it is a counseling issue.
References


