

**HOW SOCIAL SUPPORT BUFFERS WORKPLACE VIOLENCE:  
A MULTI-LEVEL STUDY AMONG THE MILITARY POLICE**

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**Abstract**

This study examined the negative relationship between workplace violence (at individual and team level) and job investments. Using data from 2782 military police officers and multilevel analyses, this negative relationship was found and it was shown that peer support buffered the impact of violence at the departmental level, such that the negative relationship between workplace violence at the departmental level and investments was stronger for those police officers with low levels of peer support.

Workplace violence has emerged as an important and very serious safety and health issue in today's workplace (OSHA, 2002). Workers who have gone through workplace violence or have been assaulted are likely to be more depressed, to report more anxiety and less job satisfaction (Driscoll, Worthington, & Hurrell, 1995). They are also more likely to suffer from decreased well-being (Schat & Kelloway, 2003), and to experience more health problems (Shakespeare-Finch, Smith, & Obst, 2002) than employees who have not been confronted with violence.

Studies on the impact of externally induced violence on organizational and individual outcomes have predominantly examined the effects of workplace violence at the individual level (Jawahar, 2002; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Schat & Kelloway, 2000, 2003; Stephens & Long, 2000; Van Dierendonck & Mevissen, 2002). However, from a social contagion perspective (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Levy & Nail, 1993; Raven & Rubin, 1983) or the idea of experiencing vicarious violence (Schat & Kelloway, 2003), it can be argued that the spread of experiencing adverse working conditions, i.e. workplace violence at the group level, may have consequences at the group level as well. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to further examine the issue of externally induced workplace violence, and in particular to study how workplace social support acts as a buffer against the negative association of departmental experienced workplace violence with job investments at the individual level. Hypotheses will be tested using data of military police officers, one of the occupations especially at risk for workplace violence (Duhart, 2001).

To study how violence experienced at the group level is associated with individual level job investments and to examine the buffering role of peer support is important from both a theoretical and a managerial point of view. Group level effects of workplace violence may add new insights into how contagion and vicarious experiences of adverse working conditions should be understood in relation to individual behaviors and job investments. Moreover, if encountering workplace violence at the group level is related to individual responses, this will elucidate that we need not only to concentrate on individual level interventions but also to focus attention on team-based interventions.

## WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

To understand the negative association between violence at work and job investments, such as commitment and dedication, exchange theory (Adams, 1965) and more specifically the concept of psychological contract breach can be used. The psychological contract refers to an individual's beliefs about terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that person and his or her employer (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). Perceived psychological contract breach is likely to result when employees perceive that they have made investments as promised, yet the employer failed to reciprocate these contributions (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). In the present study, we will examine two specific types of job investments, namely affective commitment towards the organization and dedication to the job. Affective commitment refers to employees' emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Dedication is characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez Roma, & Bakker, 2002). The perception of psychological contract breach is likely to be associated with these types of investments (Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994). That is, the experience of an unsafe and threatening working environment may lead police officers to question their job conditions. Given these negative outcomes, exchange theory (Adams, 1965; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978) and the psychological contract perspective (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994) predict a decrease of investments:

*Hypothesis 1. Military police officers who have been confronted with workplace violence, will be less (a) committed to their organization and (b) less dedicated to their work, than officers who have not been confronted with violence.*

Hypothesis 1 reflects the effects of violence at the individual level. However, police officers working in groups in which many colleagues have been confronted with violence may experience their working environment as relatively unsafe and unattractive. Further, through social contagion (Levy & Nail, 1993; Raven & Rubin, 1983), negative experiences may spread through departments and affect the behaviors of individual employees. Also, secondary victims, i.e., those who witnessed or heard about workplace violence, are likely to experience more stress and strain reactions (Schat & Kelloway, 2000, 2003) and this may, in turn, be related to individual behaviors, such as decreased job investments. Under such conditions, group members, and even those who have not been victim of workplace violence personally, will be less committed to their organization and less dedicated to their work.

*Hypothesis 2. The more their department has been confronted with workplace violence, the less will be (a) the commitment and (b) dedication of individual military police officers.*

Social support from colleagues is a major resource for coping with work demands, and having friendly and helpful colleagues motivates and contributes to well-being at work and job satisfaction (Van Emmerik, 2002; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Workplace social support therefore is expected to have a direct positive relationship with commitment and dedication. Moreover, social support from peers is often found to be a strong buffer against stressful events (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cummins, 1990; Stephens & Long, 2000) and such support may mitigate the negative consequences of traumatic events (Van der Ploeg, Dorresteijn, & Kleber, 2003).

*Hypothesis 3. The more peer support, the more (a) commitment and (b) dedication of individual military police officers.*

*Hypothesis 4. The negative relationship between workplace violence at the departmental level and (a) commitment and (b) dedication will be moderated by peer support at the departmental level. Specifically, the negative relationship between workplace violence at the*

*departmental level and commitment and dedication is expected to be stronger for those police officers with low levels of peer support.*

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

This study was part of a written survey on working conditions and occupational health among all employees (both civilian and military) working for the Dutch Royal Military Police (over 5000 total). The response was 3042 questionnaires (response 61%). After deleting data of participants with missing values on the research variables, the data of 2782 police officers (91% men and 9% women) from 85 departments with a mean size of 33 police officers (SD = 18.1) per department was used. Mean age of the respondents is 36.09 years (SD = 9.50). Mean education of the respondents is 9.4 years of education (SD = 1.7).

### **Measures**

***Affective Commitment and Dedication.*** Dedication was adopted from Schaufeli et al. (202) and measured with five items (Cronbach's alpha = .84) and used a seven-point response format (0 = never, 6 = every day). Affective commitment was adopted from Mowday, Steers, & Porter (1979) and was measured with six items (Cronbach's alpha = .71) with a five-point response format (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). For both scales the items were summed and divided by the number of items (Table 1 presents the results of factor analysis and is available upon request from the first author).

***Violence.*** Respondents were asked one direct question concerning whether they had been confronted with physical violence at work directed personally at the respondent (dummy variable 1 = confronted with physical violence, 0 = not confronted with physical violence). The individual measure of confrontation with violence was aggregated at the departmental level and expressed as the percentage of police officers per department personally confronted with workplace violence.

***Peer support.*** Peer support was measured with three items adopted from Iverson, Olekalns, and Erwin (1998). These items were measured with a five-point response format (1 = never, 5 = always) and Alpha = .79.

***Background variables.*** Gender (male = 0, female = 1), age (in years), educational level (in years of education completed), and departmental size were controlled.

## **RESULTS**

Table 2 (available upon request from the first author) presents means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all measures included in the study. To test the hypotheses, multi-level analysis was used. Models 1 in Table 3 and Table 4 (available upon request from the first author) show the results of multi-level analysis for the intercept-only model for affective commitment, i.e., the model that contains no explanatory variables (Hox, 2002). The intraclass correlation coefficient for affective commitment is .04 and for dedication .12. Hypothesis 1a is supported, showing decreased commitment ( $b = -.079$ ,  $p < .05$ ) after experience of workplace violence against oneself at the individual level. Hypothesis 1b is supported as well: Dedication ( $b = -.128$ ,  $p < .01$ ) is negatively associated with the individual experience of workplace violence. Furthermore, when departments of military police officers are confronted with more violence this is associated with less commitment of police officers at the individual level ( $b = -.338$ ,  $p < .01$ ), thereby lending support to Hypothesis 2a. More workplace violence at the departmental level is also associated with less dedication of police officers ( $b = -.585$ ,  $p < .01$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2b. In addition, as predicted in

Hypothesis 3a, more perceived peer support is associated with more commitment ( $b = .075$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Peer support is also positively associated with dedication ( $b = .261$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (cf. Hypothesis 3b). Hypothesis 4a and 4b, specifying the cross-level interactions of workplace violence with peer support for affective commitment ( $b = .197$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and for dedication ( $b = .238$ ,  $p < .05$ ) are both supported. Figure 1 and 2 (available upon request from the first author) show that the plotted interactions are in the expected direction.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study among the Dutch military police population has demonstrated negative relationships between the experience of workplace violence on the one hand, and organizational commitment and dedication to one's work on the other. A unique characteristic of this study is the association of work place violence at the departmental level with individual level job investments. Police officers who worked in departments where many colleagues had encountered violence, showed lowest levels of commitment and dedication. In contrast, peer support directly contributed to more commitment and dedication. Moreover, social support from colleagues buffered the impact of violence at the departmental level on job investments, such that the negative relationship between workplace violence at the departmental level and commitment and dedication was stronger for those police officers with low levels of peer support.

Social exchange theory provided a general approach for understanding how employees are likely to respond when they perceive that their psychological contracts are not fulfilled (Turnley et al., 2003). At the individual level, it was argued that breach of the psychological contract occurs when employees perceive a discrepancy between what they were promised – a safe workplace - and what they actually experience. From the employees' perspective, the discrepancy between what they were promised and what they actually received creates inequity in the employment relationship, and one way to restore the balance is reducing their contributions to the organization, i.e. to decrease dedication and affective commitment.

Moreover, the present study also offered new insights in the role of groups when coping with externally induced workplace violence. The findings show an association of group level phenomena, i.e., violence at the group level, with individual investment behaviors. As predicted on the basis of the psychological contract model concerning the experience of an unsafe and threatening working environment (Bunderson, 2001; Robinson, 1996), workplace violence at the departmental level was associated with less individual job investments. We suggest that in teams encountering a lot of work-related violence, members may experience the psychological contract, of a safe environment to work in, is broken. This implies that team members may become reluctant to invest in their organization and work, even when they are not personally victims of violence. This may be explained by the notion of workplace violence being compounded, so that the psychological effects are not tied to any one incident, but rather accumulate and jointly affect job investments (Glomb, 2002). Shared feelings of an unsafe environment perhaps can be also conceptualized as examples of "collective mood". According to Totterdell (2000) there are two obvious ways a team could gain such a collective mood. First, team members could respond similarly to shared events and therefore end up feeling the same way frustrated and tend to withhold job investments. Second, team members could also affect each other's moods such that their moods converge. Then indirect effects of violence will affect the job investments of individual employees as shown by the findings of the present study.

Buffering effects of peer support were found on this negative relationship between workplace violence at the departmental level and individual withdrawal. Possibly, peer

support heightens levels of trust and then it is more likely that, in the long run, employees may feel their contributions will be reciprocated or perhaps this compensates for employees' feelings of being let down by the organization (Chrobot-Mason, 2003). Hence, peer support may diminish feelings of psychological contract breach and the resulting decreased job investments. This buffering potential of peer support is well known at the individual level (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cummins, 1990; Stephens & Long, 2000). Previous studies have already comprehensively shown that social support generally reduces experienced strains, mitigates perceived stressors, and moderates stressor-strain relationships (Viswesvaran et al., 1999). However, to our knowledge, this buffering effect has not been shown before at the aggregated level and we recommend future research to include not only the individual but also the aggregate level.

When organizations are confronted with workplace violence, most frequently interventions are aimed at the individual level or by pushing back the influence of various environmental factors, such as identifying high-risk situations and potential hazards for individual employees. However, as the findings of this study suggest, in addition to a direct effect of employee's experienced violence, experienced violence by colleagues is vicariously carried over to individual employees (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003). Moreover, colleagues may act as role models and may be imitated through a process of emotional contagion. That is, employees may perceive the consequences of experienced violence in their colleagues and unconsciously take on the resulting decreased commitment and dedication (Buunk & Schaufeli, 1993). Such carry-over may also occur more consciously by "tuning in" to the emotions and attitudes of others. This will be the case when a person tries to imagine how he or she would feel in the position of another, and, as a consequence, experiences the same feelings (Bakker et al., 2003; Hsee, Hatfield, Carlson, & Chemtob, 1990). As the results of this study show, this social contagion and the vicarious experience of violence are associated with decreased commitment and dedication and both are negatively associated with workplace violence at the departmental level. Especially at aggression prone departments implementing team-based interventions may yield favorable results. Such team-based interventions may enhance feelings of 'together being strong' and may prevent adverse consequences of going through workplace violence. Therefore, it is important to identify the departments that are most at risk to encounter workplace violence and especially direct interventions to those departments.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that externally induced workplace violence might be beyond control of management (Dietz, Robinson, Folger, Baron, & Schulz, 2003). However, providing social support is thought to be one of the most important elements of programs for treating the consequences of such workplace violence (Driscoll et al., 1995; Flannery, 1999). The results of the present study show that job investments are lowest for those employees at aggression prone departments with low peer support. Apparently, if peer support is available, workplace violence at the departmental level does not necessarily signify psychological contract breach, with the accompanying downward work perceptions and associated decrease in job investments. Peer support is important to buffer departmental adverse working conditions. Such evoked feelings of being strong together and supporting each other under difficult circumstances, or perhaps the experience of companionship in stressful situations, correspond with the findings of Driscoll et al. (1995) that employees who have been assaulted benefit from the support and understanding of their colleagues. The present study suggests that psychological contract breach results in less dedication and affective commitment. However, the outcomes of the psychological contract may extend beyond poor job attitudes when employees perceive that their organizations have not lived up to their commitments. For

instance, also other contributions to the organization are likely to decrease and then psychological contract breach may have a negative impact on organizational performance in the long run (Turnley et al., 2003).

The effects of workplace violence have been predominantly studied within specific high-risk occupational groups such as state police personnel (Driscoll et al., 1995), teachers (Dworkin, Haney, & Telschow, 1988), bus drivers (Van Dierendonck & Mevissen, 2002), and hospital staff (Schat & Kelloway, 2000). The present study is no exception to this, but it seems obvious that workplace violence is not limited to these occupations (Driscoll et al., 1995). Further, although groups at high risk for workplace violence may share similar characteristics such as interactions with either clients, patients or the public in general, there may also be differences. Different types of workplace violence, e.g. homicide versus nonfatal workplace violence, may be faced. For example, groups such as health care workers are not at elevated risk of workplace homicide, but they are at greatly increased risk of nonfatal assaults (NIOSH, 1996; OSHA, 2002). Therefore, we recommend future research to take such similarities and differences of occupations into account. Our analyses were based on military police officers, perhaps limiting the generalizability of results. For instance, in contrast with most other high-risk occupational groups, one may argue that encountering workplace violence of military police may be considered - at least partly - to be an inevitable part of the job of police officers. However, although encountering workplace violence may be more obvious for police officers, this study does show that military police officers may experience psychological contract breach through an unsafe and threatening working environment expressed in decreased job investments, and this may also hold for other high-risk occupational groups.

Furthermore, the cross-sectional design of the present study limits causal inferences. For instance, it is not possible to know whether decreased commitment and dedication were present prior to the reported violence, in which case the confrontation with workplace violence may have exacerbated a pre-existing condition, or if the confrontation with workplace violence was indeed the cause of these conditions (Driscoll et al., 1995). Consequently, it is recommended to examine these issues more in depth using longitudinal designs in future studies.

Finally, in contrast with other recent studies on workplace violence (e.g., Andersson, 1999; Dietz et al., 2003; Glomb & Liao, 2003 Forthcoming; Greenberg & Barling, 1999), this study did not examine interpersonal aggression within work groups, but focused instead on external sources of aggression encountered by military police officers. It was shown that the expected direct beneficial effects of social support hold for this type of workplace violence. Moreover, experiencing vicarious violence (Schat & Kelloway, 2003), i.e., externally induced workplace violence at the group level, can be conceptualized as facing a common enemy, has been convincingly shown to have consequences at the individual level that can be buffered by peer support as well.

## **REFERENCES**

References available upon request from the first author.