

# Passive-Aggressive Behavior and Leadership Styles in Organizations

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In this phenomenological study, 13 experts were asked about passive-aggressive (PA) behaviors in the workplace, specifically, whether leadership styles (autocratic, transactional, and transformational) can predict them. Participants were asked to consider the occurrence of PA behaviors in typically healthy working individuals' (rather than disordered individuals') responses to leadership styles and organizational events. Of the eight themes that emerged from the analyzed interviews, three hold particular significance to the workplace. First, a majority of the participants viewed PA behaviors in organizations as a combination of exogenous and endogenous factors. Second, most interviewees agreed that specific types of change in organizations contribute to PA behaviors. Third, most participants viewed the autocratic leadership style as a predictor of PA behaviors.

**Keywords:** *passive-aggressive; leadership styles; workplace; organizations; predictors*

Organizational leadership styles have a clear impact on organizational culture, including employee behavior (Bennis, 1987; Graham, 1995), organizational "rigidity and stagnation" (Ashforth & Lee, 1990), and corporate image (Kacmar & Baron, 1999). Graham (1995) suggested that specific leadership styles motivate employees differently and encourage specific sets of responses. For example, autocratic or coercive styles yield employee responses distinct from those resulting from transactional or task-oriented styles (Argyris, 1985) as well as those resulting from transformational (Burns, 1978) or servant (Greenleaf, 1977) leadership styles. Some leadership styles or certain aspects of them add significant costs to an organization's bottom line through decreased productivity, lower employee morale, broken deadlines, and miscommunication (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). In addition to adding cost to an organization's product or service, certain employee responses diminish the workplace climate (Tagiuri & Litwin, 1968).

In this exploratory, qualitative study, we attempted to obtain and integrate expert opinions about the predictive qualities (if any) of organizational leadership styles for passive-aggressive (PA) behaviors in the workplace. Among the central research questions asked were, Is the autocratic leadership style an antecedent to this cluster of behaviors in typically productive

employees? and Does the transformational style of leading predict fewer incidences of PA behaviors in the workplace?

## Definitions

Following are definitions of key concepts discussed in this article: autocratic, transactional, and transformational leadership styles and PA behaviors.

Leadership styles are defined as "a pattern of emphases, indexed by the frequency or intensity of specific leadership behaviors or attitudes, which a leader places on the different leadership functions" (Casimir, 2001). The three leadership styles used in this research are autocratic, transactional, and transformational. Although categorization is restricting, it is also convenient. Instead of falling in distinct categories, leadership styles exist on a continuum. This continuum reflects the range of styles, not the frequency with which they are exhibited. Most leaders use combinations of skill types depending on the situation, context, and the styles of those within their spheres of influence. Nonetheless, each exhibits a predominant style. It is those dominating styles that we addressed in this research and used for the sake of comparison.

The autocratic style falls at one end of the leadership style continuum. It is sometimes depicted as coercive

in leadership literature, with coercion running “counter to working with followers to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2001, p. 8). This style aims to engender obedience in those working for an organization to comply with and conform to the directives of the leader. The autocratic style does not provide ethical inspection, review, or input by subordinates and ultimately provokes negative subordinate reaction (Greenleaf, 1978).

With a task-oriented style, a transactional leader occupies the middle area of the continuum. Leaders with this style largely react to the performance of their employees and reward for compliance to their directives, a factor Northouse (2001) called “contingent reward” (p. 140). Transactional leaders do not address employees’ needs, motivations, or development. In general, their focus does not include intangibles, such as goodwill, because the influence of similar intangibles may be subtle, future oriented, or not easily calculated. Organizational positions are defined according to tasks to be fulfilled, and employees are evaluated on the same. Workaholic patterns are modeled and rewarded (Graham, 1995, p. 47). Transactional leaders “focus on the exchanges that occur between leaders and their followers” (Northouse, 2001, p. 132) and use “corrective criticism, negative feedback, and negative reinforcement” (p. 140) actively and passively.

The transformational (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) style occupies the opposite end of the leadership continuum from the autocratic style. Its characteristics overlap the participative and servant (Greenleaf, 1977) styles but can be distinguished by its motivating power. Within the continuum of styles, a transformational leader may swing from “charismatic” to “individualized consideration” (Northouse, 2001). We focused on the latter, which shows a leader approaching employees in a caring way, coaching each to develop his or her capabilities and to grow intellectually and professionally. The transformational leadership style overlaps with the servant leadership style in its attempts to share knowledge and power and to recognize the “have-nots . . . as equal stakeholders in the life of the organization” (Northouse, 2001, p. 257).

The following three widely accepted constructs explain PA behaviors: the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) categorical construct (previously defined), Millon and Davis’s (1996) multi-dimensional traits, and McCrae and Costa’s (1987) five-factor taxonomic trait model. First, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* requires that a person with PA (negativistic) personality disorder

exhibit four or more of the following seven criteria beginning in “early adulthood and in a variety of contexts” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, pp. 734-735):

1. passively resists fulfilling routine social and occupational tasks;
2. complains of being misunderstood and unappreciated by others;
3. is sullen and argumentative;
4. unreasonably criticizes and scorns authority;
5. expresses envy and resentment toward those apparently more fortunate;
6. voices exaggerated and persistent complaints of personal misfortune; and
7. alternates between hostile defiance and contrition.

Second, Millon and Davis (1996) proposed that their negativistic descriptor is broader, encompassing the “total pattern” (Millon, Davis, Millon, Escovar, & Meagher, 2000, p. 472). They specified four types of negativists: vacillating (which adds borderline components to PA behavior), discontented (which adds depressive components to PA behavior), abrasive (which adds sadistic components to PA behavior), and circuitous (which adds passive-dependent components to PA behavior).

Third, the five-factor model has assumed many forms since its inception in 1932 by McDougall and its subsequent validating factor analysis by Thurstone (Digman, 2002, p. 17). By 1994, Costa and Widiger characterized the current five factors (or dimensions) as extraversion or surgency, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability or neuroticism, and openness to experience or intellect (Digman, 2002).

For the purposes of this research, which did not focus on the personality disorder construct, the PA cluster includes the following behaviors that convey aggressive feelings through passive means: verbal indirectness, verbal passivity, indirect and physically passive behaviors, action avoidance, blame avoidance, change avoidance, resistance, “passing the buck, playing dumb, overconforming, depersonalizing, smoothing and stretching, stalling, playing safe, justifying, scapegoating, misrepresenting, escalating commitment, resisting change, protecting turf” (Ashforth & Lee, 1990, p. 621), obstructionism, passive deceit (Wetzler & Morey, 1999), and “negativism” (Millon, 1993, p. 78).

## Review of Literature

Most extant literature about organizational passive-aggressiveness details the effects it has on workplaces,

company productivity, and coworkers (Kantor, 1997; Tracey, 2004). Although some researchers contend that workplace incongruity can be productive (Stohl & Cheney, 2001), others (Katz & Kahn, 1966) claim that it precipitates employee "burnout and stress" (pp. 191-192). The prevalent bottom-up view of the effect of an employee's PA behavior on the organization ignores the antecedents of the PA cluster and its effects on the workplace (Baron & Neuman, 1998; Ferris et al., 1996; Geddes & Baron, 1997; Kacmar & Baron, 1999).

Although little research focuses on organizational antecedents (e.g., leadership styles) that may foster PA behaviors in workers, a few theorists see forces operating top down from the workplace climate to employees (Baron & Neuman, 1998; Kantor, 1997) and have proposed characteristics of organizational climates that precipitate or predict PA behavior (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; Hoffmann, 1994).

First, Ferris et al. (1996) tested a model that linked employees' perceptions of organizational politics with various predictors, moderating effects, and mediating effects, using the results from 822 questionnaires administered to nonacademic employees of a large university. This quantitative research negatively correlated bureaucratic and heavily layered organizations with employees' perceptions, senses of control, and understanding. The response rate was low (29%), but the study offered a good cross-sampling of race, gender, job positions, and salary grades. The authors performed *t* tests and multiple regressions with their data from six measures, correlating organizational centralization positively with organization politics, the formalization of policies and procedures negatively with organization politics, hierarchical level negatively with politics, advancement opportunity negatively with politics, female gender negatively with politics, and age negatively with politics.

Fedor, Ferris, Harrell-Cook, and Russ (1998) reviewed and assessed literature on the multidimensionality of perceptions of organizational politics. Their purpose was twofold: to assess the one-, three-, and five-factor models that had been proposed to that date (including the previous study by Ferris et al., 1996) and to examine the predictability of organizational and personal factors in political perceptions (pp. 1760-1761). This study differed from others in its inclusion of data from 282 organizations through questionnaires sent to 975 members of the Society for Human Resource Management, each from a different organization (p. 1773). Fedor et al. found that the five-factor model

of perceptions underlying organizational politics produced the best fit (p. 1785). The five dimensions underlying employees' perceptions of organizational politics reflected how employees perceived (a) the presence of coercive others, (b) that how one dealt with uncertainty rather than hard work led to advancement in the organization, (c) the distortion of information that benefitted a few individuals, (d) that supervisors protected and enhanced their images through veiled comments, and (e) that policies regulating pay and promotion were not clear (p. 1785).

The focus of a study by O'Connor and Morrison (2001) was to determine and describe employee predictors to organizational politics. The authors used seven measures to evaluate 501 surveys returned by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and then evaluated the measures using factor analysis and the  $\chi^2/df$  ratio. The results showed that 52% of the variance in respondents' perceptions of organizational politics could be predicted by organizational climate, formalization, internal and external loci of control, and Machiavellianism. The authors substantiated their hypothesis that workers' perceptions of organizational politics were negatively correlated with situational variables, such as job autonomy, level in the hierarchy, departmental formalization, and favorable organizational climate. In addition, workers' perceptions of organizational politics were positively correlated with "dispositional" variables, such as external loci of control (being at the mercy of others) and Machiavellianism ("cynical beliefs about human nature, morality, and the acceptability of various manipulative tactics to satisfy one's goals"; p. 304).

Kiewitz, Hochwarter, Ferris, and Castro (2002) examined employees' perceptions of organizational politics, with a similar focus to that of O'Connor and Morrison (2001). However, Kiewitz et al. surveyed 131 restaurant employees to determine whether the psychological climate (the perceptions and interpretations of the work environment) of the organization moderated the relationship between politics and work outcomes in the organization. Kiewitz et al. defined psychological climate as composed of six elements: "supportive management, role clarity, contribution, recognition, self-expression, and challenge" (p. 1189). The authors' confirmatory factor analysis strongly supported one of their hypotheses, that employee commitment is predicted by the interaction between political perceptions and each of the psychological climate elements except challenge (p. 1200). That is, when an employee perceives strong organizational

support, he or she perceives lower levels of destructive organizational politics and vice versa.

Parker et al. (2003) performed a meta-analysis of 121 independent samples from 94 studies of employees' perceptions of their work "outcomes, such as employee attitudes, psychological well-being, motivation, and performance" (p. 389). Because the authors found no quantitative analyses of the relationships between individual perceptions and work outcomes or between individual perceptions and organizational work outcomes, they used structural equation modeling to examine competing theories. The results revealed that individual psychological well-being has the strongest relationship with one's perceptions of job and leader, whereas individual work attitudes related most strongly to psychological climate dimensions of workers' leaders, work groups, and organizations (p. 405).

Fox and Spector (1999) assessed the antecedents of counterproductive work behaviors. The authors used four scales and one survey to study 186 employees from eight corporations. Their data analysis involved structural equation modeling and zero-order correlational analysis to evaluate three antecedents: situation, disposition, and affect. They found a positive relationship between employees' perceptions of situational constraints and counterproductive behavior (pp. 923-924). Although PA behavior was not named as one of the counterproductive behaviors, these data pointed to related behaviors (employee and organizational aggression) as consequences of situational constraints. Fox and Spector also found relationships "between behavioral responses and frustration ( $r = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )" and between situational constraints and behavioral responses ( $r = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )" (p. 926).

## Method

### Design of the Study

Because this study's participants and design were significantly different from those of extant literature, it was appropriately a quantitative, phenomenological study whose results are meant to lay the groundwork for subsequent research about leadership styles and PA behavior in organizations. The method consisted of the lead researcher conducting individual interviews using semistructured questions with each consenting participant.

Pilot interviews were conducted with three Caucasian men, each of whom had a PhD and consulted

for organizations. The first pilot interview was conducted with a clinical psychologist who had been an organizational vice president, had consulted for organizations for over 20 years, had taught various psychology courses in academic graduate programs, and had published widely in the field of organizational dynamics. He suggested no changes to the interview questions. The second interviewee was a Caucasian man who had a doctorate in organizational psychology, directed a consulting firm, and had written articles about leadership and human resources. This interviewee suggested that the researcher clarify her definitions of frequently used terms (e.g., *passive-aggressiveness*) with each participant before the interview. The third pilot interview was conducted with the principal of a research consulting organization. Also a Caucasian man with over 15 years of experience in business and academia, this interviewee had a doctorate in social theory. His suggestion for change was similar to that of the second interviewee: Introduce and discuss the protocol's key terms and definitions to participants before the interviews.

### Participants

A nonrandom, purposive sampling (Heppner & Heppner, 2004) of 13 qualified individuals was conducted. Initial interview participants were obtained from Internet searches of professional organizations and universities. All participants were initially contacted by telephone. The researcher then met with all who agreed to the interview process. At the end of each interview, the investigator asked participants if they could recommend similarly qualified and potentially interested colleagues for the same interview. Through this nonparametric snowball sampling technique, the remaining participants were obtained. The snowball sampling technique is used when participants with specific qualifications are difficult to find.

### Data Collection

The insights and narratives of the participants were collected individually using semistructured, face-to-face interviews ranging from 45 to 75 minutes in length. All interviews used the same 13 questions (listed below), inquiring about the participants' knowledge of PA behavior in organizations, their experience of it in the workplace, and whether and/or how they saw a relationship between PA behavior and leadership styles. The depth and detail of a participant's responses determined whether the interviewer prompted the participant for more information with

performed follow-up questions. Whenever an interviewee's responses warranted prompting, the interviewer asked one or more of the italicized questions following each main question:

1. Do you have experience with the three styles depicted in the handout? If so, please describe that experience. *Are there other leadership styles that you see more often or that you think are more prevalent? If so, what are they? Why do you perceive them as more prevalent or dominant?*
2. Have you witnessed, experienced, or worked with passive-aggressive behavior in workplaces? If so, please describe your experience in detail, using examples if possible. *Would you characterize your experience with passive-aggressive behavior as minimal, moderate, or extensive?*
3. Does your perception of passive-aggressive behavior agree with those in the handout? If so or if not, in what ways? *What behaviors in the handout would you add, eliminate, or change? Can you say why?*
4. Do you think passive-aggressive behavior is exhibited more often under certain circumstances than others? If so, please describe those circumstances in detail. *Are you aware of passive-aggressive behavior as being manifested more frequently at a specific organizational level (e.g., employee, manager, leader, officer)? If so, please specify the level.*
5. What do you perceive as the causes of passive-aggressive behavior in the workplace? *How have you arrived at that judgment? In your organizational experience, what perceptions brought you to those causes?*
6. What are the effects or costs of passive-aggressive behavior to the workplace? To the recipients of the behavior? *How have you seen this manifested in the organization? Were the perpetrators and recipients aware of these effects or costs?*
7. What are the effects or costs of passive-aggressive behavior to the perpetrator? *How have you experienced this in the organization? Can you give examples?*
8. What have you seen as some advantages of passive-aggressive behavior in the workplace to the perpetrator? *If you saw some, how were these advantages used or expressed? Can you cite examples?*
9. Do you suspect there are antecedents or predictors of passive-aggressive behavior in the workplace? If so, please describe them in detail. *In your experience in organizational change consulting, how have you determined these factors to be antecedents or predictors? Are they components of leadership constructs?*
10. Do you think any of the following factors contribute to passive-aggressive responses in the workplace? If so, how? *Could you explain why you feel any of the*

*following are factors?* (a) Number and/or position of women in the workplace; (b) change in communications or way messages and directives are conveyed within organizations; (c) change in personal communication styles; (d) change in number of workers in the workplace; (e) change in organizational structure (formal or informal); (f) change in group processes (e.g., team work, group communication, etc.); (g) layoffs, firings, consolidations, takeovers, etc.; (h) ageism; (i) interracial relations; (j) sexism; and (k) anything else.

11. Do you see a connection between leadership style and passive-aggressive behavior in the workplace? *If so, what is that connection and how does it work? If so, did you perceive this connection before our interview or as a result of these questions? If not, please explain why not.*
12. Could certain leadership styles predict passive-aggressive behavior? If so, what style(s) do you think predict(s) PA behavior and how? *If not, what do you perceive to be antecedents to passive-aggressive behavior? If you do not recognize antecedents to PA behavior, do you see all PA behavior as endogenous?*
13. Do leadership styles cause, provoke, or encourage PA behavior? If so, please explain why you believe this is true. *If so, do you differentiate between styles being antecedents and predictors? If you do not see leadership styles as fostering PA behavior, please explain your view.*

After the interviews, each interviewee was assigned a number, which was used in lieu of the participant's name. Replacing the participant's name with a number ensured confidentiality for the interviewees and increased the analyst's impartiality during data sorting, definition, and analysis. The audiotaped interviews were transcribed by the researcher and sent to each participant for review of accuracy. In addition, the responses were evaluated and reviewed for discrepancies or incompleteness.

"Debriefing" involved sending the participants copies of their transcribed interviews and requesting their feedback or any needed changes. After the data were analyzed and summarized, the findings were sent to the participants with a request for their feedback if they saw a need. Participants were also requested to supply explanations for any suggested changes. Detailed field notes were maintained to maximize reliability of the data. Each audiotaped session was actively searched for discrepant data because potential bias is built into the interview process, but none was found.

## Data Analysis

The analytic process was based on evaluation of the data and iterative reviews, sorting, and categorizations that characterize the phenomenological approach. Because literature on the predictor effects of top-down flow from leadership style to employee PA behavior does not exist, the phenomenological approach lays the groundwork for defining, sorting, and populating categories, which will eventually contribute to the formulation of a theory. With themes established, future qualitative and empirical research will ensue.

The data were analyzed in six steps, similar to those proposed by Colaizzi in 1978 (Heppner & Heppner, 2004, pp. 174-175), and the coding procedure for data analysis was specified by Heppner and Heppner (2004, p. 152).

The first step involved the researcher's reading each interview several times to gain an overall sense of each interviewee's opinions and ideas. The second step involved analyzing the raw data further by identifying and extracting key responses from each participant (e.g., "I think when someone changes his or her personal way of communicating, it could be a factor in contributing to PA behavior") for all questions in the interview. The third step involved collecting and listing the key responses (by participant number) under each interview question. In this new list, key words and phrases within each response were highlighted.

In the fourth step, a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was created for each interview question. Each key word and/or phrase became a data unit, for example, Question 10b ("change in personal communications"). Each data unit was then recorded in its own row, with adjacent columns noting the page number of a participant's interview on which the citation (data unit) was located. Whenever follow-up questions (those in italics after the main questions) were asked, responses were included in the spreadsheet with the main question, even if they were not answered by all respondents. A total of 346 data units were derived from this first set of Excel spreadsheets that categorized all data units within all questions.

Step 5 involved identifying "emergent themes." When a question yielded agreeing responses from a majority of participants (7 of 13), it was classified as an emergent theme and moved to a second, separate set of Excel spreadsheets that tracked the themes, associated data units, and participant responses (Heppner & Heppner, 2004, pp. 316-318). If fewer than 7 interviewees expressed similar thoughts on an issue, it was not

considered an emerging theme. Each theme was labeled as succinctly and accurately as possible to maintain the interviewees' ideas while showing their participation in a common idea. Eight themes and 246 data units survived from the original data. The data units from Questions 1, 2, and 3 were eliminated from the second group of Excel spreadsheets (themes and data units) because they were "warm-up" questions that established participants' experience with PA behavior and the three leadership styles. Themes were grouped by closeness in idea or separated because of the importance the participants placed on different words within a question. To illustrate, the second theme (PA origins and causes and its three subcategories) included two questions: Question 5 and a follow-up to Question 12. And some questions in the interview yielded two or more themes. For example, Question 6 yielded two main themes ("PA effects, costs to workplace" and "PA effects, costs to recipients"), each with multiple, associated data units.

In the sixth and final step, the theme results were sent to all interviewees. The study participants were asked to review them for congruence with their own experiences and suggest any changes, additions, or deletions. None were found.

## Validity and Reliability

To maintain research validity, the interviewees' words were used verbatim while creating data units and themes during analysis. Exact quotations were tracked and used to reduce the possibility of contamination.

Because this phenomenological study used the snowball technique of sampling, reliability was uppermost in the researcher's mind. To maximize reliability, interviewees who possessed understanding of the concepts in question and considerable experience in dealing with them were sought. Both academic and experiential knowledge were important requirements.

## Investigator's Biases

Having experienced and observed PA behavior from so many angles and in so many contexts, the researcher is biased against its destructive effects in any organizational setting. She is also aware that destructive PA behavior is different from the occasional PA responses every human being may use intermittently. This investigator has seen work environments and groups deteriorate and become unbalanced under the inappropriate manipulation of PA leaders, managers, and employees.

To counteract her bias, the investigator made a commitment to not engage in agreeing or disagreeing

**Table 1**  
**Description of Participants**

| Variable              | <i>n</i> |
|-----------------------|----------|
| Highest degree earned |          |
| BA                    | 1 (8%)   |
| MA or MS              | 2 (15%)  |
| PhD                   | 7 (54%)  |
| EdD                   | 1 (8%)   |
| PsyD                  | 1 (8%)   |
| JD                    | 1 (8%)   |
| Sex                   |          |
| Female                | 4 (31%)  |
| Male                  | 9 (69%)  |
| Race                  |          |
| African American      | 1 (8%)   |
| Caucasian             | 12 (92%) |

with the participants. To help maintain objectivity, the interviewer responded to interviewees' statements with neutral comments, such as "I understand what you're saying" or "I see your point of view." These types of responses served to restrain the interviewer's judgment or opinions while allowing the respondents to feel understood. The researcher also worked to counteract her bias while culling and categorizing data during the analysis phase by first questioning her choice of each data unit by looking at whether it answered the interview question, not whether it represented her point of view. Second, the investigator reviewed each data unit as an isolated response so as not to overlook it as a redundant response by any participant or not to exclude a response because it conflicted with a prior view expressed by the same participant. In other words, the researcher did not exclude responses because they appeared contradictory to previous views expressed by a participant.

## Results

During the study interviews, 13 participants shared their ideas and feelings about PA behavior in the workplace, three leadership styles (autocratic, transactional, and transformational), and the possibility of a relationship between leadership styles and PA behavior. Participants in this research had worked professionally for an average of 21.2 years (range = 14 to 35 years). All were based in and around the Philadelphia area, with many traveling extensively within the United States to work with clients. At the time of interviewing, most participants were self-employed as management or organizational consultants. Of the

exceptions to the consultant rule, one was the director of program development in a trade school. Another was an attorney who owned an investment firm and chaired a reform commission of a major city school district. The only participant without a graduate degree managed a methadone clinic. Participant characteristics are listed in Table 1.

Without exception, all participants expressed having had experience with autocratic, transactional, and transformational leadership styles that were defined in the handouts given by the interviewer to the participants. Two participants stated that autocratic leadership was most prevalent. Five participants viewed transactional leadership as the most prevalent in current workplaces. One participant said that a combination of styles was prevalent, and one participant did not know. Two participants reported that all styles were prevalent.

The second interview question inquired about the participants' experience in witnessing or working with PA behavior in the workplace. All participants reported having had either moderate or extensive experience with PA behavior in the workplace. From these interviews, 346 original data units of meaningful words and phrases were derived.

During the coalescing of themes, associated data units were reduced to 246. Table 2 details the eight emergent themes (with subcategories), the numbers of participants citing the themes, and the number of total data units within each theme.

## Discussion

The following eight themes or findings build on one another in a stepwise fashion.

### Theme 1: Circumstances Under Which PA Occurs Most Often

The findings of this first theme reflect those of Ashforth and Lee's (1990) study, which linked organizational stressors with bureaucratic forces and individual reactions. Their meta-analysis focused on "threat" and "powerlessness" and how they combine with "formalization" and "specialization" to yield defensive reactions, such as "over-conformance," "playing dumb," "stalling," and "resisting change" (p. 624). This study's participants also suggested a correlation between threat and powerlessness and the costs of PA behavior.

For example, respondents noted circumstances such as when a person "doesn't have the power" or a power struggle is likely to invoke PA behavior. Respondents also cited threatening circumstances, such as "working

**Table 2**  
**Themes**

| Theme                                                    | Participants<br>Citing<br>Theme | Data Units<br>Within<br>Theme |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Circumstances when PA behavior occurs                    | 12                              | 17                            |
| PA behavior origins/causes                               |                                 |                               |
| Endogenous                                               | 7                               | 10                            |
| Exogenous                                                | 10                              | 20                            |
| Not all endogenous/both                                  | 10                              | 4                             |
| PA behavior costs, deleterious effects                   |                                 |                               |
| To workplace                                             | 13                              | 28                            |
| To recipients                                            | 11                              | 16                            |
| PA behavior costs, advantages to perpetrators            |                                 |                               |
| Costs to perpetrators                                    | 13                              | 21                            |
| Advantages to perpetrators                               | 12                              | 29                            |
| PA behavior awareness                                    | 10                              | 6                             |
| PA behavior antecedents, predictors                      |                                 |                               |
| Antecedents                                              | 3                               | 4                             |
| Predictors                                               | 11                              | 23                            |
| Contributing factors                                     |                                 |                               |
| Not number and position of women                         | 7                               | 4                             |
| Change in organizational communication                   | 13                              | 1                             |
| Change in personal communication                         | 13                              | 1                             |
| Change in number of workers                              | 7                               | 4                             |
| Change in organizational structure                       | 13                              | 1                             |
| Change in group processes                                | 12                              | 2                             |
| Layoffs, firings, takeovers                              | 12                              | 2                             |
| Ageism                                                   | 8                               | 3                             |
| Interracial relations                                    | 8                               | 5                             |
| Sexism                                                   | 11                              | 2                             |
| Other                                                    | 14                              | 11                            |
| Styles connect to, predict, encourage, cause PA behavior | 41                              | 22                            |

Note: PA = passive-aggressive.

in a state of confusion" or "pressure," that would increase the likelihood of PA behaviors being exhibited. Through these examples, the study participants concurred with Ashforth and Lee's (1990) findings that organizational stressors (e.g., "mixed messages" and "organizational change") are the fuel that ignite materials such as "bureaucratic forces" and "individual reactions" to create a bonfire of PA behavior. Both studies agree that PA behaviors erupt when several components are in place. Without stressors such as "mergers" and "autocratic workplaces," PA behaviors would appear less frequently. Similarly, without the formalization and specialization of bureaucratic organizations, another component in the formula would be missing, decreasing the incidence of PA behavior.

## Theme 2: Causes of PA Behavior in the Workplace

Ferris et al. (1996) proposed that employees' perceptions of organizational politics are linked to two moderating effects: employee control and understanding of organizational politics. When queried about causes of PA behavior, participants in this study extended this link by citing "loss of control" as an exogenous cause of PA behavior. One also suggested that feeling out of control would moderate one's view of organization politics.

Kantor (1997) proposed that an individual's endogenous qualities can merge with exogenous factors (e.g., hostile work environments) to inhibit productive functioning. Twelve respondents agreed that PA behavior is a mixture of endogenous and exogenous origins. Only 1 respondent voiced strong feelings about the two sources of PA behavior as distinct origins. In agreeing that PA behavior is a combination of endogenous and exogenous behavior, 12 interviewees acknowledged that both types had to be present for a person to behave passive-aggressively. As such, these respondents support Kantor's notion that the interplay between endogenous qualities or traits and exogenous factors can bear on and alter organizational climates, morale, and productivity.

To a manager or any troubleshooter within an organization who must resolve problems, knowing whether behavior is largely endogenous or exogenous can point to the source of a problem and its solution. For example, if an employee's behavior is reported as blocking the progress of a project, the person in charge must figure out where the problem originates, sometimes without much cooperation from the involved players. One way to find out is to consult psychological assessment results (if previously administered) to determine whether the person had been assessed as PA. If the behavior were determined to be atypical for the individual, the project leader could use approaches with the individual that probably would not work with someone who routinely behaved passive-aggressively.

## Theme 3: Effects or Costs of PA Behavior to the Workplace and Recipients

The relationship between stress and PA behavior in the workplace was suggested both overtly and indirectly by several participants in this study supporting Kantor's (1997, 2002) theory that stress in the workplace contributes to certain PA behaviors. Specifically, participants cited costs of PA behavior as "lack of

harmony”; “culture of negativity”; “frustration, tension”; “dysfunction”; “doubt, fear, anxiety”; “change”; “lay-offs and firings”; and “feeling attacked.” All are specific examples of stress-inducing conditions. In fact, stress is such an omnipresent concept and topic of discussion that most of the negative effects offered by the study’s participants could easily fall under the rubric of stress. The presence of these factors should precipitate an investigation into the cause of the stress.

All 13 participants cited unequivocally negative repercussions of PA behavior on productivity, interpersonal relations, and organizational climate. The combined readiness with which respondents cited examples and the stress on negative consequences revealed a common, disturbed reaction to the memories of PA behavior in the workplace, despite or because of the respondents’ understanding of them and their dynamics. In other words, the participants viewed PA behavior in the workplace as serious and sometimes dire: “career-stopper,” “good people will leave,” “loss of morale,” and “reduces creativity.”

Once PA behaviors find a safe place to reside, they are not easily removed. Nothing short of a thorough examination of the causes and factors that allow them to thrive and an active and inclusive resolution will expel them from the environment. PA behaviors are also resistant to change because they have a large emotional component; the endurance of emotions is no mystery. A leader who finds himself or herself consistently confronting this behavior cluster must be persistent, creative, and systemic in planning and enacting a resolution. Unfortunately, few managers have the resources of time and money to follow through. By not rooting out their causes, the dynamics of this cluster are prone to multiply and thrive as they foster more of their own. When non-PA individuals watch the behaviors multiply, they grow demoralized and lose hope. Soon, the spread of PA behaviors is systemic and very costly to eradicate.

#### **Theme 4: Costs and Advantages to the Perpetrator**

This study offers anecdotal confirmation to Geddes and Baron’s (1997) survey data, which found that the most common reactions to negative feedback were passive forms of aggression. Similarly, Fedor and Maslyn (2002) proposed that the type of power a manager or supervisor is perceived to have influences employees’ perceptions negatively or positively about the organization’s politics. Specifically, employees who received negative feedback from bosses whom

they viewed as having expert and referent types of power took more corrective actions to change their behavior and sought further feedback. In these cases, employees perceived a lower degree of organizational politics playing a role in their feedback. Conversely, employees who received negative feedback from bosses whom they viewed as having coercive power avoided further feedback from their bosses and did not seek to make suggested feedback changes to their behavior. They saw organizational politics as playing a more commanding role in their work environment (p. 279). Although Fedor and Maslyn addressed neither PA behavior nor leadership styles per se, they linked perceived management power styles and employee responses.

Participants also cited employees’ responses to unbalanced and unconstructive feedback by bosses, including the avoidance of employee responses, such as “anger at the boss,” “backed off the challenge,” “not productive,” exhibiting “parental transference,” “costs to personal development,” and “slow[ing] things down.” These examples support the contention that autocratic, directive (i.e., noninclusive), or coercive leadership styles do not encourage or aid the change they are intended to initiate.

The implication to workplaces is that negative messages usually beget negative results. Managers and leaders (and others in powerful positions) should be trained to communicate in congruent verbal and nonverbal ways and to deliver difficult messages in a noninflammatory way. Unfortunately, congruent communication is assumed to be mastered by anyone who secures a position of responsibility. Nothing could be further from the truth. Delivering bad news in a palatable way is a honed skill requiring forethought and delicacy. Organizations are shortsighted in underestimating this ability or ignoring its value altogether.

#### **Theme 5: Awareness of PA Behavior**

A perpetrator’s and recipient’s awareness of his or her PA behavior is another area in which no previous literature exists. Nonetheless, this issue is important because it addresses the notion that PA behavior is often an automatic response without concern for its rippling consequences in the workplace. In addition, it illustrates the other side of the coin: Sometimes, PA behaviors are used intentionally, as volunteered by three study participants, two of whom admitted to using it with purpose themselves. One has used it to control other’s responses, and one used it in response to a boss’s aggressive and PA behavior. When PA behaviors

are used intentionally, a perpetrator can control the degree, timing, and extent of the behaviors, thereby using them in a prudent manner to make a point or to cope with a perpetually difficult person. In the latter case, using PA behaviors may reflect an individual's efforts to hold onto a job in a hostile environment or to protect himself or herself.

This study's participants overwhelmingly opined that the PA behavior dynamic is not in the awareness of most perpetrators or recipients, even though its effects are strongly felt. Only one respondent said the individuals who behave passive-aggressively are always aware of what they are doing. This finding suggests that behaviors used are not necessarily used consciously. It may also suggest that behaviors that evoke strong reactions or emotions may not be consciously analyzed or realized. In other words, perhaps "loaded" behavior such as the PA cluster is not responded to logically because we are busy reacting to it emotionally. All the more reason that workplaces would benefit from investing energy in evaluating employees before hiring them and tracking their behavior in a consistent and constructive manner (e.g., using baseline and follow-up standardized measures).

### **Theme 6: Antecedents or Predictors of PA Behavior**

Because PA behavior has been so little studied in the workplace, no antecedents or predictors of it have been substantiated through research. Only Fedor et al. (1998) have suggested that further research about organizational antecedents to job dissatisfaction and perceptions of political injustice in the workplace may offer a predictive link between coercive (autocratic) leadership and dysfunctional behavior in the workplace.

In this theme, participants specifically cited "performance reviews" as predictors of PA behavior, coinciding with Geddes and Baron's (1997) survey. Although the authors' survey mentioned "negative feedback," which encompasses several forms of communication, performance reviews are the formal mode of feedback that often elicits negative reaction from employees. The five subthemes of antecedents or predictors derived from the participants' responses showed great range: psychological assessments or instruments, personality style and traits, specific PA behaviors (e.g., "no follow-through"), organizational culture or events, and autocratic behavior. This wide range of antecedents and predictors indicates two things. First, antecedents of PA behavior could be global or specific, inherent or external, intentional or

uncontrolled. Second, predictors or antecedents are viewed as relatively nebulous and varied. When asked the question, most respondents cited nonspecific factors, such as "market down-turn" or "culture of the organization." The difficulty this study's participants had in honing in on specific antecedents may reflect investigators' reticence to research this area because it is so situationally dependent.

### **Theme 7: Contributing Factors**

Although most of the factors included in this question were offered by participants prior to this question, the investigator had no way of knowing that prior to the interviews. This question was meant to ensure that participants addressed these factors so often mentioned in the literature as pressing organizational factors. Only 1 of the 10 factors posed to the participants was rejected as a contributing factor to PA behavior. That rejected factor was "number and position of women" in the workplace. Interestingly, "yeas" and "nays" were not split exactly on lines of participant gender, so we can only conjecture that a complex mixture of attitudes entered the decisions of the respondents. In contrast, sexism was cited as a contributing factor. Without extensive further inquiry, any possible contradictions between these votes cannot be determined.

Six factors revolving around change were all considered contributing factors to PA behavior: change in organizational communication, change in personal communication, change in number of workers, change in organizational structure, change in group processes, and change in employee status (i.e., firings, lay-offs, mergers). Of these six factors, five were unanimous or near unanimous in respondent agreement. The only factor with a wider split was "change in number of workers," which could be grouped with the three remaining demographics considered contributing factors (ageism, interracial relations, and sexism) that also had less dramatic majorities. This finding suggests the participants' certainty that change in any process invokes PA behavior. However, demographic change (though still considered a contributing factor) is less clear-cut. Demographics such as age, sex, and race are often emotionally charged subjects with complicated and mixed components. The emotional involvement or attitude toward these factors could account for the less than unanimous votes.

Two findings within this theme are supported by Baron and Neuman's (1998) survey, which found that most workplace aggression "does not involve direct,

physical assaults” but “typically encompasses relatively subtle (i.e., covert) forms of harm-doing behavior” (p. 446) and results from recent changes, such as downsizing or increased workforce diversity. Both are factors cited in this theme as contributing PA behavior. In addition, cost cutting and organizational change were cited by Baron and Neuman as two factors that related to verbal aggression and obstructionism (a PA quality).

### **Theme 8: Leadership Styles Are Connected to, Predict, Encourage, or Cause PA Behavior**

The study’s eighth theme supports Graham’s (1995) link between leadership style and a cluster of behaviors evoked by each style. Graham focused on three leadership styles (autocratic or coercive leadership, institutional leadership, and transforming or servant leadership) that correlate closely with the styles posed in this study (autocratic, transactional, and transformational). Graham proposed that each style evokes a set of behaviors: (a) Autocratic leadership appeals to followers’ self-interests and seeks dependable task performance; (b) institutional leadership (roughly equivalent to transactional leadership) evokes work group collaboration; and (c) transforming (or transformational) leadership seeks “constructive participation in organizational governance” (p. 4). The participants in this study repeatedly supported Graham’s suggestion that leadership styles evoke specific sets of behaviors. Twelve of the 13 respondents in the current study saw leadership styles as connected to and predictive of PA behavior. Ten were convinced that the autocratic style predicts PA behavior more frequently than the other two styles, and 8 participants agreed that leadership styles in general encourage PA behavior.

However, only four participants were willing to say that the autocratic style causes PA behavior. Participants emphasized their choices of verbs, usually differentiating among their choices of *encourages*, *causes*, and *predicts* and specifying why they may have said “yes” to one and “no” to others. As the type of link progressed from “connected to” to “causes,” fewer respondents agreed, suggesting that all did not see a causal relationship but did see a connection of a less directional sequence.

This finding suggests that the potential links (of whatever nature) between leadership styles and PA behavior in the workplace should be taken seriously and its consequences thoroughly scrutinized. The fact that three participants did not see a causal relationship

between any specific leadership style and PA behavior is not worrisome. Considering the average participant education and training, this response is to be expected, because few individuals familiar with the scientific method would venture such a connection without evidence to support it. The fact that almost all participants saw the connection as predictive is significant and should be applied to management training, organizational consulting ventures, and academic venues. The reason this link is often not addressed is because of the difficulty in persuading autocratic leaders that their style can be ineffective. The cycle perpetuates itself: The traits that support an autocratic style are also the traits that need to be restructured to reduce unwanted behaviors in the workplace.

### **Implications for Practice and Further Research**

The discussion and research begun in this study open the door for several arenas of future research and practice. To definitively establish a connection between leadership style and PA behavior, research both in the workplace and outside the workplace is needed.

Empirical research with generalizable samples would go far to establish the existence of a connection and the type of connection (e.g., predictive, causal). The incidence of PA behavior in the workplace, the circumstances under which it occurs most often, and the forms it takes could all be further understood by pursuing the study of these two components in the workplace.

Leadership institutes and management organizations may be interested in sponsoring further research to improve the productivity and morale of workplaces. Better understanding the relationship between leadership styles and PA behavior (or other dysfunctional behaviors) would also benefit organizations such as the American Management Association and countless other business supportive associations that exist to exchange information and improve communication and processes in the workplace. Every year, new assessment instruments enter the marketplace for use by consultants and organizations to evaluate individuals at work or before hire, the attitudes at play in an organization, and the quality of interfacing between and among business groups. Putting them to work could result in their own improvement and obtain valuable workplace data.

Investigation into other counterproductive behavior in the workplace might also open exploration into worthwhile areas. For example, although violence (physical

and sexual) in the workplace has been extensively explored, its emotional repercussions on other workers, as well as its victims, have been less pursued. Instances of violence in the workplace are often explained by the perpetrator as a reaction to perceived negative remarks or feedback or an uncaring delivery. Although we are unaware of a predictive link between PA behavior and violent behavior, on the basis of research (Fedor & Maslyn, 2002; Geddes & Baron, 1997; this dissertation, 2006) both can be responses to negative messages.

Last, organizations (profit and nonprofit alike) would serve their own future functioning by investing in research of this nature and by opening their workplaces to study and assessment. Such transparency would yield countless benefits including more open dialogues about the successes and failures of communication processes, interpersonal interactions, and management styles. More important, open doors would lead to goodwill inside and outside organizations, increased morale in the workplace, and ultimately greater profits for any business genuinely involved.

## Summary and Conclusion

The preponderance of participant-expressed views held that autocratic leadership would “encourage” or “predict” more PA behavior (especially in individuals who do not normally behave passive-aggressively) than the transactional or transformational styles of leadership. They also held that coercive, inflexible leaders who do not listen would foster PA behaviors in the workplace. Study participants also attributed certain environments with qualities or events that precede (and perhaps predict) PA behavior. These circumstances include organizational and personal mixed messages, excluding workers from decisions that directly affect their work, and unplanned or unannounced change involving the organization’s structure or culture.

The results of this study also extended or supported many of the extant literature’s theory and research about the effects of leadership styles in the workplace and its contributions to PA behavior, suggesting that behavior never occurs in a vacuum and that all actions provoke reactions. Interviewees’ responses imply that even the most thoughtful and evolved individual may regress in the face of demoralizing and fluctuating circumstances. Especially in the world of work, where individuals’ livelihoods, reputations, and personal meanings are at risk, feeling controlled by unfair,

erratic, and unpredictable others can set a behavioral spiral into downward motion.

Because individuals in the working world are dependent on the actions and behavior of so many others, one person’s spiral into PA behaviors can initiate a rippling flow of negative behaviors that poison any work interface, creating local to global repercussions. Dismissing the extent of the ramifications of leadership style to PA behavior is tempting, but the quality of business relationships ripples through organizations.

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