

## AGGRESSION IN THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT: A CROSS-SECTORAL SURVEY IN CROATIA

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### SUMMARY

**Background:** Workplace aggression constitutes a serious problem in individual, organizational and social cause-effect relations. The aim is to determine the prevalence of such aggression on the pilot sample to test the appropriateness of the research design for the further conduct of a national survey on the specified topic.

**Subjects and methods:** The sample included 113 employees in the city of Split, deployed within the public, profit and non-profit sectors. The research was conducted through an online survey. The questionnaire consisted of pre-coded questions on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and their perception of interrelations with colleagues and clients/customers of products and services, exposure to various forms of physical and verbal aggression and the frequency of somatic and psychological problems caused by the workplace conditions and interrelations in this context.

**Results:** Although participants did not suffer direct physical assault from associates, and only two of them have experienced it from clients/customers, they emphasize the frequency of psychological workplace abuse through more subtle forms of physical and verbal aggression. The training of employees at all hierarchical levels is required for the better understanding of the roles of their associates and clients/customers. Its effects strengthen their mutual respect, tolerance and solidarity. In this way, the interrelations that many respondents do not see as good or excellent can be improved, hence improving the prevention of aggression.

**Conclusions:** The study of aggression should include a broader social context. Aggression tends towards a quantitative and qualitative expansion in different environments. When individuals seek some benefit for themselves in a dubious way, while neglecting others, aggressive acts are foreseeable. Therefore, Croatian society has the foundation for aggressive behavior, as it is unable to make the consensual practice of a moral, political and economic recovery.

**Key words:** interrelations – work – aggression - health problems

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### INTRODUCTION

Shocking news on workplace brutality (murder, kidnapping, rape, etc.) has led to the increased interest of the government, employers and researchers in the issue of workplace aggression (Schat 2003). Although the formalistic uncensored media reports confirm the depth of the aggression which has become a daily issue, within the spheres of work, family, leisure etc. (Marcus 2009), the interest of society contributed to the perception that its causes, sources, forms and targets are rather diverse, so it is difficult to determine the precise number of victims (Dupré 2003). It is clear nowadays that aggression encompasses much more than physical violence as an extreme form of physical aggression which by premeditated acts harms the victim (misappropriation of things, excessive use of precious resources, frequently leaving the room when a target enters etc.). It includes verbal aggression (gossip, insults, concealing of information, silence, non-refutation of untruths etc.), which also causes serious physical and psychological consequences for the participants (victims and witnesses), including organizational consequences due to the continuity of aggression and thereby reduced productivity, commitment to set objectives and identification with the company/service, absenteeism and workforce shedding, compensations for suffered damage etc. (McFarlin 2001). Besides physical or verbal, aggression has been considered as passive or active due

to the criterion of committing/non-committing something, as well as direct or indirect according to whether addressed directly to the victim or damage occurs indirectly (expansion and/ or non-refutation of rumors, destruction of property, slowing of associates on which performance of the target depends, etc.) (Baron 1996). Unlike its everyday comprehension, it usually possesses verbal features in the workplace since the perpetrator weighs the effects with the consequences in regards with their observation/ detection. Numerous aggressive acts are legally punishable, associated with warnings and/or job loss. Therefore, the tendency is to conceal the identity and intentions through a selection of activities generally not considered as aggressive, which corresponds to the verbal, passive and indirect aggression (Bjorkvist 1994).

Although this article focuses on the consideration of the frequency of workplace aggression, it should be emphasized that it is not only caused by the characteristics of the perpetrator, but that the situational (organizational) factors have a likewise indispensable role, while aggression is generated by their interaction (Barling 1996). The perception of distributive, procedural or interpersonal injustice among employees, as well as excessive surveillance by superiors, contributes to the articulation of external attribution, anger, anxiety and negative affectivity in general. If these are expressed characteristics of the perpetrator, with a tendency to alcohol consumption and an aggressive past (such beha-

violation is learned and not short-term), unwanted scenes are very likely to happen (Martinko 2006).

Studies show the prevalence of workplace aggression (Barling 1996, Douglas 2001, Dupré 2003, Russo 2008, Đuranović 2013). In the United States, one in two employees suffers from some form of verbal aggression, one in six is sexually harassed and 5% suffer from physical assault. In addition, ILO surveys indicate a similar prevalence of these issues in Western Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as in transition countries. In some areas, the incidence is even higher than in the US (Schat et al. 2003). This proves the importance of study, prevention, identification and the sanctioning of aggression. Although it mostly occurs in verbal form, if not sanctioned, its incidence is more brutal, and the consequences for the victim more intense (anger, anxiety, fear, depression, cognitive distraction, headaches, insomnia, loss of appetite, etc.), which is indicated as the spiral of aggression (Douglas 2001). Its strengthening compromises the quality of work, family life, leisure and everyday life in the broadest sense, so the comprehensive (effective) study of aggression involves consideration of a larger social context in order to reduce its prevalence and consequences in the workplace (Martinko 2006).

## SUBJECTS AND METHODS

The study included 113 employees in the city of Split, deployed within the public, profit and non-profit sector. Although conducted on the pilot sample, the latter is heterogeneous in selected socio-demographic characteristics due to the reliability of testing the used research instrument (questionnaire with pre-coded questions) and method (online survey). After determining the appropriateness of the research design, the intention is to conduct a national survey on the phenomenon of workplace aggression.

Respondents are almost evenly divided by gender - 53.1% are male, while 44.2% are female. The majority of respondents are aged between 18 to 29 (34.5%), 30-39 (25.7%) and 40-49 years (9.7%). Slightly less than a tenth of respondents are aged from 50 to 59 years (9.7%), while 0.9% are aged from 60 to 69 years. Most of them had completed high school (55.1%), 14.2% of respondents had completed an undergraduate study, 17.5% had completed a graduate study, while 8.8% had finished a postgraduate study. Most of them work in the profit (47.8%) and public sector (41.6%), while 6.2% work in the nonprofit sector. Furthermore, the majority of respondents had worked up to 6 years in their current organization (52.2%). A lot of them have worked from 20 to 25 years in their current organization (16.8%), as well as from 6 to 10 years (11.6%). The largest proportions of respondents are manual workers and administrative staff (63.8). The proportion of managers and experts is almost equal to each other. See more on socio-demographic characteristics in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographics of sample

	f	%
<b>Gender</b>		
male	60	53.1
female	50	44.2
n/a	3	2.7
<b>Age</b>		
18-29	39	34.5
30-39	29	25.7
40-49	26	23
50-59	11	9.7
60-69	1	0.9
n/a	7	6.2
<b>Qualifications</b>		
high school	51	55.1
undergraduate study	16	14.2
graduate study	31	17.5
postgraduate study	10	8.8
n/a	5	4.4
<b>Sector</b>		
public	47	41.6
profit	54	47.8
non-profit	7	6.2
n/a	5	4.4
<b>Years of service in current organization</b>		
1-6	59	52.2
6-10	13	11.6
10-15	6	5.3
15-20	4	3.5
20-25	19	16.8
25 or more	6	5.3
n/a	6	5.3
<b>Hierarchical position</b>		
manual worker/administration	72	63.8
expert	18	15.9
manager	19	16.8
n/a	4	3.5

The questionnaire consisted of 19 pre-coded questions. In addition to sociodemographic characteristics, the respondent is examined on collaboration with colleagues and clients/customers of products and services, and on exposure to various forms of physical and verbal aggression and the frequency of somatic and psychological problems caused by the workplace circumstances. Relations among variables were considered by the correlations (Spearman's coefficient) and chi square test. The results were processed in a package IBM SPSS Statistics 19. Before the interpretation of results, discussion and conclusions, it should be noted that the study is based on the respondents' self-assessment assumptions:

- they are rarely subject of physical attack;
- the most of them has experienced psychological abuse;

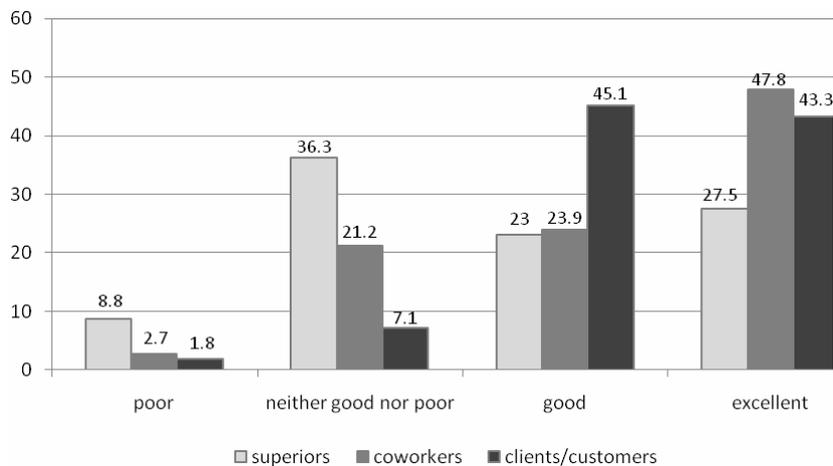
- they achieve an average poorer relationships with superiors than with coworkers and clients/customers of products and services;
- the majority of participants have had psychic and somatic problems caused by workplace conditions.

## RESULTS

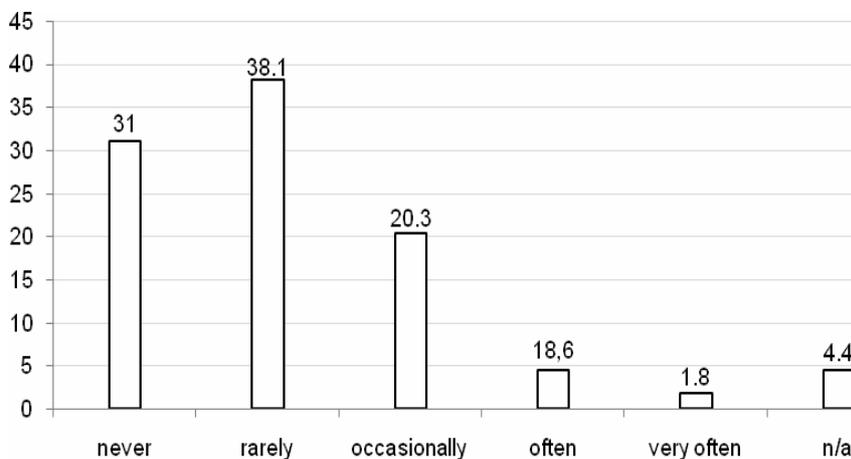
On a more general level, the participants' relationships with co-workers and clients/customers show a potential for workplace aggression (see Figure 1). Although most respondents claim that they achieve excellent or good relationships with their superiors, co-workers and the clients/customers of products and services, a significant percentage of participants emphasize having neither good nor poor relationships with their superiors (36.3%), co-workers and clients/customers (7.1%). Poor relationships are usually assessed in relation to their superiors (8.8%), while much less in comparison to co-workers (2.7%) and clients/customers (1.8%). The way one interprets the situation may suggest a negative perception of working conditions and interpersonal relationships. The fact that a large percentage of respondents do not consider their workplace relations as

good may (and often will) affect the formation of negative emotions, moods and attitudes that lead to further adverse inter-relations (Martinko 1998).

Most respondents pointed out that they had problems in relationships with superiors (61.9%) and employees (71.7%), but never in the form of physical assaults. 3.5% of respondents were physically assaulted by clients/customers of products and services. The increased prevalence of verbal aggression and less extreme forms of physical aggression are shown through the calculation that as many as 6.2% of respondents believe that they are often harassed in the workplace, 20.4% reported occasionally abuse, while only 31% were not physically abused (see Figure 2). The statistically significant, slightly negative correlation ( $r_s = -0.214$ ;  $\alpha^* = 0.026$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) between participants' qualifications and frequency of psychological abuse is found. It is less frequent with an increasing education of respondents. There is no relation between the frequency of abuse and respondents' gender ( $\chi^2 = 8.145$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), age ( $r_s = -0.126$ ;  $\alpha^* = 0.021$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), years of service in the current organization ( $r_s = -0.013$ ,  $\alpha^* = 0.896$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), social sector their organization belongs to ( $\chi^2 = 9.313$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and hierarchical position ( $r_s = 0.325$ ,  $\alpha^* = 0.993$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).



**Figure 1.** Participants workplace relationships (%)



**Figure 2.** Frequency of psychological abuse in the workplace (%)

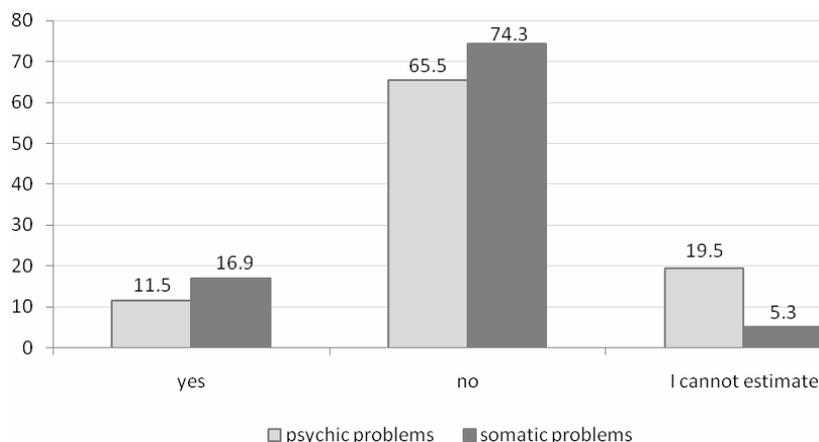
The frequency of the various forms of aggression is observed on a 5-point Likert scale (see Table 2). Most of the respondents had never experienced the mentioned forms of aggression. Further, less than 8% are exposed to such behavior often or very often. However, this is not a small percentage in regards to the consequences of aggression. The fact that a certain percentage of the respondents were exposed to very harsh forms of aggression such as threats of physical attack by clients/customers (9.8%), verbal and physical sexual abuse (6.5%), threats of physical attack by co-workers (5.3%), sending threatening letters to relatives and friends (4.5%), unreasonable touching of the body (4.5%) and sexual blackmail in order to obtain or retain a job (2.7%) should not be dismissed. The above mentioned activities are punishable by law. Thus, their frequent appearance is not expected. In this sense, considering their occasional, frequent or very frequent appearance, the most common activities are those that are difficult to prove (as aggressive) and usually are not exposed to formal sanctions. Such activities are interruption of speech (31%), ignoring others' sugges-

tions and ideas (19.5%), unfair distribution of credits (19.5%), gossip (18.6%), assigning tasks without previous instruction and instruments (17.7%), preventing participation in trainings (16.8%), concealing business information (15.9%), unfounded criticism (14.1%), assigning meaningless tasks (12.4%), persuading others to act against the victim (11.5%), exclusion of the target from meetings or projects (11.5%), silence upon the victim entering the room (10.7%), refusal of direct communication (10.6%) and exclusion of the target from social life at work (coffee breaks, celebrations, etc.) (9.7%).

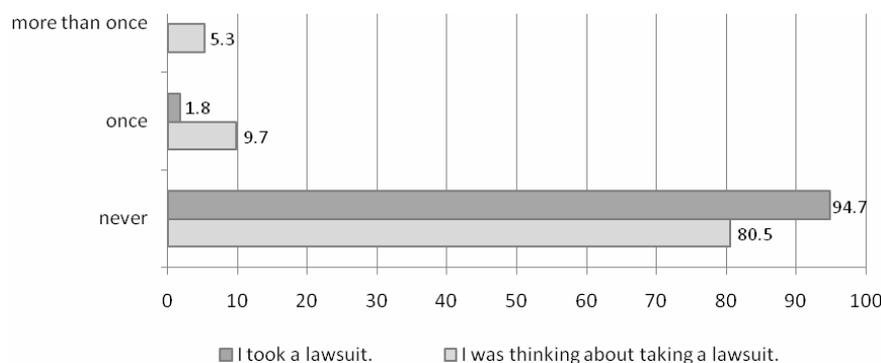
Respondents mostly claim to have psychic and somatic problems caused by workplace conditions and interrelations (see Figure 3). When compared with psychological problems (11.5%), the higher frequency of somatic complaints is emphasized (16.9%) - such as nausea, vomiting and headaches. More often, respondents cannot assess whether they have psychological problems, which is not surprising in comparison to the clear and visible symptoms of somatic problems. Although there may be a significant difference between subjective

**Table 2.** Exposure to workplace aggression (%)

	never	rarely	occasionally	often	very often	n/a
Threatening letters are sent to my relatives and/or friends	92.8	2.7	0.9	0.9	/	2.7
Silence begins after my entrance	54.7	31.9	8	1.8	0.9	2.7
My colleagues refuse to communicate directly with me (e-mail etc.)	73.5	12.3	9.7	0.9	/	3.6
Business-relevant information is withheld from me	49.5	31	9.7	6.2	/	3.6
I am interrupted while talking	49.6	15	25.7	5.3	/	4.4
My ideas and/or suggestions are unfairly ignored	62.8	14.2	15.9	2.7	0.9	2.7
My colleagues make fun of me with insulting remarks	83.1	7.1	6.2	/	/	3.6
Supervisors yell at me	69.9	19.5	3.5	2.7	0.9	3.5
I am exposed to unfounded criticism	69.9	12.4	8.8	5.3	/	3.6
Others fault is attributed to me	61.1	20.4	11.5	3.5	/	3.5
I am blackmailed with sexual favours in order to obtain/retain business	92.9	1.8	0.9	/	/	4.4
Credit for my work is attributed to others	65.5	11.5	14.2	4.4	0.9	3.5
I have experienced sexual abuse (verbal and/or physical)	88.4	2.7	2.7	1.8	/	4.4
I am a victim of gossip	54	23	13.3	4.4	0.9	4.4
My colleagues persuade others to turn against me	69.1	15.9	8.8	1.8	0.9	3.5
My colleagues exclude me from social life at work (coffee breaks etc.)	74.3	13.3	5.3	4.4	/	2.7
My colleagues preclude me from meetings and/or projects	68.1	16.8	7.1	4.4	/	3.6
My colleagues prevent my participation in in the organizational courses	66.4	13.2	8.8	5.3	2.7	3.6
My private property disappears/is being damaged at the workplace	86.4	8.3	0.9	0.9	/	3.5
I was put on a lower professional level without any valid reason	77.9	8.8	5.3	4.4	/	3.5
My work is being surveilled more than usual	73.5	15.9	3.5	2.7	0.9	3.5
I am assigned with pointless tasks	68.1	14.2	9.7	2.7	1.8	3.5
My colleagues touch me unreasonably	91.2	2.7	0.9	0.9	/	4.4
I was assigned with tasks without guidelines and tools	67.3	10.6	11.5	4.4	1.8	4.4
My coworkers have threatened me with physical assault	90.3	3.5	0.9	0.9	/	4.4
Clients/customers have threatened me with physical assault	86.7	7.1	1.8	/	0.9	3.5



**Figure 3.** Health problems caused by workplace conditions and interrelations (%)



**Figure 4.** Taking a lawsuit due to inappropriate workplace interrelations (%)

assessment and objective conditions, which requires more detailed consideration that is not the focus of this study, the data is certainly indicative if one takes into account that 30.1% of respondents claimed that, during the last 12 months, they spent a week on sick leave due to problems caused by their workplace inter-relations, while 6.2% spent up to 14 days. Given the self-assessment of psychological problems, the significant links between the mentioned health problems and the respondents' gender ( $\chi^2=9.934$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), age ( $r_s=-0.267$ ;  $\alpha^*=0.006$ ,  $p <0.05$ ) social sector which their organization belongs to ( $\chi^2=14.791$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and years of service in the current organization ( $r_s=-0.285$ ,  $\alpha^*=0.03$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) are found. A statistically significant relationship between perceived psychological problems and qualification ( $r_s=-0.154$ ;  $\alpha^*=0.112$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), as well as hierarchical position ( $r_s=0.034$ ,  $\alpha^*=0.723$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), is not observed. The results suggest that psychological and somatic problems are often emphasized by women working in the profit and non-profit sector. The reasons can be found in the (market) competitiveness, greater job insecurity, exhausting work, tension and stress that characterize these sectors, which along with aggressive experiences can generate health problems more commonly among women. Further, psychological problems

are often reported by younger persons with shorter internship, which may be subject to insufficient adaptation to the conditions of the workplace.

Despite the problems, most of the respondents (94.7%) did not institute a lawsuit against colleagues due to inappropriate workplace inter-relations. Only 1.8% did this. Most of them (80.5%) had not even thought about a lawsuit, while 9.7% had thought once and 5.3% more than once. The rarity of these practices can be attributed to the slowness, inefficiency and inconsistency of the Croatian judiciary system with consequent consideration of litigation as an aggressive behavior that will contribute to further conflict and workplace aggression (Figure 4).

## DISCUSSION

The stigmatization in the media and professional practice contributes to the rare incidence of physical assaults in the workplace. The unemployment rate in Croatia has crossed a critical threshold with consequences for the whole society for more than a decade (Relja et al. 2011), and business opportunities are not frequent. Therefore, the non-exposing of respondents to activities that can lead to the loss of their jobs is rather

understandable. It is not surprising that they are not exposed to physical attacks by co-workers, even in regards to threats from co-workers and clients/customers of products and services (see Table 2). In our sample no one experienced physical assault from a co-worker. Furthermore, the majority of respondents did not experience physical assault from clients/customers (1.6%).

However, the necessity for organizational investment in combating widespread subtle aggression should be emphasized. This can be done by prescribing norms and sanctions, training employees to identify the causes, nature and consequences of aggression, and the effective avoidance/mitigation of aggressive practices, engaging professionals for psychological help, etc. (Del Bel 2003). Comparative studies have shown the insufficiency of these measures in many countries.

The first research hypothesis of the rare exposure of subjects to direct physical attacks has been proved, while it is to be expected only in extreme situations. In this pilot study, it was registered only in 2 cases, including assaults committed by clients/customers. Avoiding criminal activities leads to rare verbal and/or physical sexual abuse (4.5% of respondents experience it rarely, occasionally or often), including destruction of property (1.8% of respondents experience it rarely, occasionally, rarely or often).

The second research hypothesis has also been proved, i.e. respondents mostly claim to have experienced psychological abuse in the workplace, while 20.4% point out that it is often or very often the case. Although further verification of this data on a representative sample is required, it is suggested by occasional, often or very often exposure to numerous activities perceived to be aggressive (see Table 2). It is necessary to work on prevention of such behavior (ignoring suggestions and ideas, gossip, withholding information related to the job, assigning tasks without previous instructions and instruments, exposure to unfounded criticism, persuading others to act against the victim, refusing direct communication, exclusion from social life at work, etc.).

Respondents emphasize that they achieve worse relationships with superiors than with their co-workers and clients/customers, proving the third research hypothesis. Other studies show weaker relationships of employees with superiors too (Barling 1996, Greenberg 1999, Dupré 2003, etc.). A feeling of excessive surveillance, with which employees identify loss of control and freedom, contributes to these relationships (LeBlanc 2004). Although they tend to be pressed by different work circumstances, the managers are required to have extensive knowledge on management and human relations. In addition to educating managers in terms of lifelong learning, it is necessary to educate other employees in order to increase understanding of the hierarchy of roles, obligations and rights, which is important for the promotion of tolerance and solidarity. Furthermore, to optimize the quality of work team selection, it should be based on the stated quality and

not fraud, nepotism, corruption and other forms of deviance (Matic 2003), which is unfortunately frequent in this region.

The fourth research hypothesis was not confirmed, i.e. the majority of respondents claim no psychical (65.5%) and somatic problems (74.3%) were caused by work. However, a significant percentage of respondents emphasize the existence of certain issues, or cannot assess their causal connection to the workplace conditions and the quality of interrelations in the environment. This subject has not been our research focus and requires further verification. Studies show increased individual (health) consequences of aggression if the victim believes finding a new job would be difficult, and does not want to leave the current one. Long-term strengthening of negative emotions, moods and depression creates obvious disadvantages to an organization resulting in non-compliance/rejection of values, norms and procedures, poor productivity, dispersal of the workforce, compensation to victims of aggression, bad media advertisements etc. (McFarlin 2001; Dupré 2003; McLemore 2006; Aytac 2011). Finally, workplace aggression is spreading further through social practices that are interconnected, so it takes more communicative action, which respects others as subjects, as opposed to the all too frequent instrumentalisation, in which people are the object of others' goals (Katunarić 1990). If such an attitude toward others is unconscious, it is then a psychopathological case. If, however, it is conscious, it frequently enters the area of criminal acts. In both cases, effective sanctions should be enforced, due to the violation of feelings, needs, thoughts and habits of the victim, i.e. humanity in the broadest sense.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our research on employees in the city Split has shown the prevalence of psychological abuse in the workplace through various forms of physical and verbal aggression. Respondents were not directly physically assaulted by colleagues, while few of them have experienced physical assault by the clients/customers of products and services. Due to the local nature and other limitations of this pilot study, further research on the subject is needed. Serious individual, organizational and social consequences of aggression require awareness, education and the development of effective sanctions against perpetrators, as well as victim assistance.

Although this needs verification, the assumption is that economic conditions in Croatia greatly contribute to workplace aggression. To be more precise, this is not only in terms of the classic confrontation conditioned through the generally divided (pluralistic) interests of the liberal market model, but also because of the fact that Croatia, as a country of "late modernization", has lagged behind the competitiveness of developed markets since the mid-eighteenth century (Županov 2001). To this day, it is powerless through political and economic

practices to articulate an entrepreneurial mentality, expertise, proactivity and IT innovation. The process of political and economic transition from the end of the last century, accompanied by the war and crime, contributed to the collapse of the economic and social capital necessary for seeking development in a global society that is rapidly changing. As a result, many factories were closed, numerous people have lost their jobs, while the public sector, as a viable (but economically unproductive) oasis of avoiding unemployment, has grown. The private sector is exposed to the unenviable conditions of the Croatian economy, beset by levies for the satiety of the state apparatus, weaker exports, often lower wages than the average, etc. Whenever most individuals seek a specific benefit for themselves in a non-transparent manner, whilst neglecting others, division and aggression increases. In the end, this is a potential feature of the wider ex-Yugoslavia area, as well as the countries marked by similar processes that should not be overlooked when studying workplace aggression due to the reflection of a social context that has a lot of difficulties trying to project a coherent picture of itself.

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