

ALEXANDER ABDENNUR

**CAMOUFLAGED  
AGGRESSION  
IN ORGANIZATIONS**

A BIMODAL THEORY

## **Camouflaged Aggression in Organizations**



ALEXANDER ABDENNUR

# CAMOUFLAGED AGGRESSION IN ORGANIZATIONS

A BIMODAL THEORY



UNIVERSITY of ALBERTA PRESS

Published by

University of Alberta Press  
1-16 Rutherford Library South  
11204 89 Avenue NW  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2J4  
uap.ualberta.ca

Copyright © 2020 Alexander Abdennur

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA  
CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Title: Camouflaged aggression in  
organizations : a bimodal theory /  
Alexander Abdennur.

Names: Abdennur, Alexander, 1945– author.

Description: Includes bibliographical  
references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200249037 |  
Canadiana (ebook) 20200249150 |  
ISBN 9781772124910 (softcover) |  
ISBN 9781772125290 (EPUB) |  
ISBN 9781772125306 (Kindle) |  
ISBN 9781772125313 (PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: Violence in the workplace. |  
LCSH: Personnel management.

Classification: LCC HF5549.5.E43 A23 2020 |  
DDC 658.4/73—dc23

First edition, first printing, 2020.

First electronic edition, 2020.

Copyediting by Anne Laughlin.

Proofreading by Joanne Muzak and

Tanvi Mohile.

Indexing by Adrian Mather.

Book design by Alan Brownoff.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without prior written consent. Contact University of Alberta Press for further details.

University of Alberta Press supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with the copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing University of Alberta Press to continue to publish books for every reader.

University of Alberta Press gratefully acknowledges the support received for its publishing program from the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Government of Alberta through the Alberta Media Fund.

Canada



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada

Alberta  
Government

## CONTENTS

*Introduction* ix

### **1 | Three Faces of Aggression** 1

*Confrontational Aggression, Passive-Aggression, and Camouflaged Aggression*

Definition of Aggression 2

Types of Aggression 3

Two Modes of Aggression 4

The Two Modes Are Qualitatively Different 11

The Two Modes Balance and Contain Each Other 14

Modal Shift as an Aggression-Reducing Technique 15

The Implications of the Model for Organizations 17

A Quantum Hypothesis 17

Displacement in Camouflaged Aggression 22

Multidirectional Aggression 24

Resonance of Aggression 25

Warehousing of Aggression 25

### **2 | A Paradox of Modern Society** 27

Bureaucracy 27

Bureaupathology 29

Modifications in Bureaucratic Structuring 31

Organizational Development and Camouflaged Aggression 31

Organizational Complexity	32
Interdependence of High-Tech Systems	33
Antisocial Aggression in Organizations	34
The Strategy of Camouflage	36
The Organizational Person as a Camouflaged Animal	37
A Paradox of Modern Life	39
Phylogenetic Regression	41
Ethical Regression	43
The Convergence on Injustice as a Form of Ethical Decline	48
Incivility as Ethical Decline	50
Machiavellian Management as Ethical Decline	51

### **3 | Patterns of Camouflaged Aggression** 55

1. Indecision	55
2. Rigidity	56
3. Time Manipulation	57
4. Waiting as a Status Degradation Ceremony	59
5. Information Manipulation	59
6. Control by Overwork	62
7. Withdrawal	62
8. Inaccessibility	64
9. Non-interference	65
10. Entrapment	66
11. Random Kindness	66
12. Subordination via Sexualization	67
13. Undermining the Sense of Security	68
14. Ego Bashing	68
15. The Bureaucratic Vendetta	69
The Hydraulic Principle	70
The Hydraulics of Human Aggression	72
The Hydraulics of Camouflaged Aggression	73
Regressive Aggression	76
Self-Destructiveness in Organizations	77

## **4 | Camouflaged Aggression and Personality 81**

Camouflaged Aggression and Personality Disorders	84
Personality Disorders	86
Camouflaged Aggression in “Normal” Personality Profiles	103
Personality Disorders and Voluntary Organizations	110
Personality Disorders and Political Organizations	112
Can Camouflaged Aggression Become Addictive?	113
The Impact of Camouflaged Aggression on Health	114
The Porcupine Entanglement	115
Diagnosing Personality Disorders by Means of a Balance Sheet	116

## **5 | Sociocultural Factors in Camouflaged Aggression 119**

Alienation	119
Anomie	120
Learning and Cultural Transmission	121
Narcissistic Values	122
Cross-Cultural Values and Importation	123
Anti-Confrontation Values	125

## **6 | Prevention and Control of Camouflaged Aggression 137**

Balancing the Two Modes	139
Balancing the Two Modes at the Conceptual Level	140
Confrontation IS the Ideal Strategy	142
Balancing the Two Modes at the Practical Level	144
Intervention Focusing on Abnormal Personality Functioning	151
Other Intervention Strategies	155
Combat Philosophy	162



**Epilogue** 167

*Complexity, Camouflage, Entropy, and Explosive Violence*

Complex Systems 168

Camouflaged Aggression as a Complex System 169

Entropy 169

Explosive Violence 170

*Glossary* 173

*References* 181

*Index* 189

## INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK is to identify common forms and strategies of aggression that are today permeating the workplace and social interaction in general. The expressions of aggression studied here are often carried out in the context of large, complex organizational structures where organizational procedures and regulations can be used as instruments for the delivery of and as masks for the aggression. In this book, aggression is defined as any action or inaction directed by an individual toward the goal of making another individual suffer.

The *bimodal theory of aggression* proposed in this book maintains that when aggression is expressed through formal structures it becomes masked. Four components of the aggressive act can be hidden: the intention to hurt, the perpetrator, the act of aggression, and even the victim. The structures of the formal organization can mask and rationalize all of the above components, while none of them can be masked within a strictly interpersonal conflict. Thus, in the context of formal organizations, the psychological drive of aggression undergoes three qualitative changes: 1) it acquires multiple avenues for expression; 2) it seeks to avoid responsibility or retaliation; and 3) it undergoes a phylogenetically based regression. This regression shares aspects of the camouflage strategy relied

on in lower species. The animal uses camouflage (as blending and false pretence) to better zero in on the prey, to escape being preyed on, and to minimize counterattack. The use of camouflage and deception may at certain times be viable in a competitive world; yet it is important to note that humans evolved mainly through directly confronting the world and transforming the environment.

According to the proposed bimodal theory, aggression is expressed through two major modes: the confrontational mode and the non-confrontational mode. These two modes, which emerge from the same drive, become qualitatively differentiated in their social expression and impact. Being qualitatively different, a dialectical relationship develops between them, allowing them to balance and contain each other. Since most types of aggression in organizations are expressed through formal structures, they are often non-confrontational and masked. When avenues for expression and redress belonging to each mode are available, camouflaged aggression is better contained, as this allows the processes of modal balancing to take place. When avenues for the expression of one mode are not available, there is an increase in the aggression in the opposite mode, which is often followed by an increase in the overall level of aggression.

There has been rising public concern about non-violent aggression in the workplace. This type of aggression can negatively impact morale, mental health, and productivity. Four main approaches to workplace aggression have been adopted by experts studying this phenomenon:

1. A *personality* approach, focused on typical personality traits of perpetrators as they behave in organizational settings. Some experts (e.g., Markham, 1993) describe typical cases of “difficult individuals” in the workplace and how to handle them. Others (e.g., Babiak & Hare, 2006) use case illustrations based on the established psychiatric diagnosis in their study of the workplace psychopath. The present study examines the several personality disorders in relation to workplace aggression. Established

diagnoses may constitute better reference points than general case studies.

2. A *management* approach, which relates most aggressive behaviour in the workplace to failures in management. Instances of inadequate management create frustrations and conflicts that lead to all forms of aggressive behaviour. Effective organizational behaviour reduces aggression.
3. A *classification* approach, which focuses on categories of abusive behaviour in the workplace. This approach seeks to account for workplace aggression by depicting: 1) the type of aggressive behaviour, 2) the type of harm inflicted, 3) the motive behind the behaviour, and 4) the medium or context of expression, such as physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, and cyber forms of aggression. Such accounts appear under classifications and general constructs such as bullying, mobbing, incivility, abusive supervision, social undermining, work sabotage, and interpersonal conflict. The most popular construct has been *bullying*. The term has been extensively used to refer to forms of behaviour intended to harass, intimidate, dominate, manipulate, and humiliate a person, in the workplace and other social domains (Williams, 2011; Lipinski & Crothers, 2014; deLara, 2016). When bullying is carried out by a group against an individual, it is referred to as *mobbing* (Leymann, 1996; Duffy & Sperry, 2014). An essential assumption for the existence of bullying is an imbalance of physical and social power; the stronger party bullies the weaker. But in complex formal systems the behaviours described as bullying can be carried out without a power differential; they can be carried out horizontally and upwardly through the organizational structure. Accordingly, bullying becomes less distinguishable from conflict where individuals clash over opposing principles, interests, and perceptions. But most importantly, it tends to overlap with other related behaviours, such as abusive supervision, social undermining,

and incivility (Hershcovis, 2011). Paradoxically, the construct of bullying is largely incongruent with the symbol it is attached to. The bull attacks in a straight line and is highly visible, whereas organizational bullying is often indirect and camouflaged.

4. An approach based on *empirical* studies that focus on particular aspects of workplace aggression. These studies seek to conceptualize and operationally define types of antisocial behaviour within suggested working theories and research needs. Articles with this focus started appearing about two decades ago. One well-known book on the subject, *Antisocial Behavior in Organizations* (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997), dealt with frustration, cognitive dynamics of revenge, determinants of lying, sabotage, whistleblowing, and organizational culture. This type of research was further expanded as revealed in the contents of a recent book: *Research and Theory on Workplace Aggression* (Bowling & Hershcovis, 2017). This book dealt with topics such as environmental instigators to aggression, improving measurement of workplace aggression, damaging consequences of workplace aggression, perception of abusive supervision, critique of the victim precipitation theory, the role of identity in contextualizing workplace aggression, impact of third-party reactions, spillover of aggression, ostracism as aggression, cross-cultural differences in the reactions to aggression, and coping with and reducing aggression via training and policy interventions.

The growth of research on workplace aggression in the past two decades has been intensive and is moving toward the development of a “scientific” study of workplace aggression. Many antecedents, consequences, mediators, and causal factors have been depicted and analyzed, as indicated by the above list of topics. This progress, in my view, may not be altogether promising, both theoretically and practically, for the following reasons:

1. Most of the topics mentioned above have been already identified in organizational management research that relies heavily on social science theory. The focus of empirical research on aggression limited to the domain of the workplace may narrow the scope of causal relationships in that they lose their larger social context and intellectual relevance.
2. The research findings do not actually contribute beyond what common sense would dictate. The deployment of research methodology or academic sophistication (standard measures, figures, tables, academic jargon, etc.) does not always produce useful knowledge; it may not lead to creative landmarks but rather to rediscovering or relabelling what has long been studied, as in “old wine in new bottles.” A research domain can become little more than an arena for the production of publications intended for promotion within academic ranks.
3. The vast number of such papers produced during the last decade are heavily bulked out with references to similar publications. The limited scope and the vast number of cited references from the same context amounts, in my view, to a form of academic ritualism that recycles knowledge and keeps adding to a redundant mass. A fifteen-page article would fetch seven pages of references, most published in the last ten years: this is what qualifies as “fresh” knowledge. The references in the Bowling and Hershcovis (2017) text contain around 1,400 references to articles related to the scientific study of workplace aggression. This proliferation of multidisciplinary research within a specific domain begs the question of its academic and practical value. Such research activity and publishing also constitute a serious threat to the “economy of attention.” According to Thorngate (1990), attention is finite in capacity and in operating time. The proliferation of new, often specialized, areas of research in social sciences leads to the compartmentalization of disciplines. The common core knowledge of a discipline recedes, making meaningful and

overarching theorizing scarce. Also, the many new publications may serve, by virtue of their number, to drown out creative contribution. For professionals and students, reading these publications becomes not only a boring exercise, but also an uncertain one; they are read, or partially read, only by those who are writing similar papers. A new academic concern has now arisen: too much researching and publishing and too little reading. We may need to devise ways to reward academics who read published papers as well as those who wilfully desist from publishing!

4. The development of such domain-restricted research in social sciences is doomed to hair-splitting and redundancy. Nietzsche's (1882/1968) theory of eternal recurrence may help explain why there is hardly any way out of this redundancy. The idea of eternal recurrence is a logical outcome of a totally deterministic universe or system. If the parts of a system are finite, then their combinations and the causal links between their parts will keep recurring infinitely. The workplace can be seen as a system consisting of a finite or limited number of relationships that are likely to recur in similar forms. Behaviours such as revenge, sabotage, and status degradation have typical causal antecedents and typical dynamics, despite some variations in the structural setting. These recurring behaviours become readily understandable to experienced managers and administrators with basic knowledge in the social and behavioural sciences. Thus, enlightened management would regard this domain-restricted research and theorizing as superfluous and of marginal importance.

This book identifies constructs and theoretical models that account for certain dynamics of workplace aggression, aggression that is an extension of behaviour that takes place elsewhere in the social and cultural context. The book brings to the organizational context understanding of two universally occurring and challenging developments: *complexity* and *camouflage*. Other concepts are identified and defined,

such as modal expression, phylogenetic regression, modal shift, avenues of expression, and hydraulic expression. Major strategies in camouflaged aggression, the role of personality disorders in workplace aggression, and the impact of social values are also discussed. An overarching theoretical relationship (*modal balance*) is advanced. Chapter 1 presents definitions of key concepts and the bimodal theory. Chapter 2 deals with the impact of formal structures and the activation of the strategy of camouflage. Chapter 3 describes the basic patterns of camouflaged aggression and its hydraulic dynamics. Chapter 4 describes the impact of personality disorders on camouflaged aggression, and presents three problematic personality profiles that fall within the range of normal personality functioning. Chapter 5 critically analyzes the sociocultural values that sanction camouflaged aggression. Chapter 6 discusses intervention strategies that are consistent both with the cognitive and managerial-wisdom approaches and with the goal of modal balance. The Epilogue suggests that camouflaged aggression is itself a complex system that can permeate all aspects of society and lead to entropy and disorganization.

The first edition of this book (2000) did well in terms of sales and citations. However, the theoretical model was not critically addressed. I am hoping that the present edition will provoke more discussion about camouflaged aggression, its dynamics, and its social impact. I find a theoretical understanding of camouflaged aggression to be more useful than classifications of injurious behaviour, domain-restricted research, and prescriptive (what to do) approaches. For example, my observations in the area of stress management have led me to believe that individuals who grasped the basic theoretical conception of stress as “excessive demands for adaptation,” as originally proposed by Selye (1956), did better in the recognition of stress than those who resorted to detailed lists of stressors and charts of their various impacts. Theoretical understanding helps us to recognize behaviour in its many guises and contexts.

Throughout this text I recommend a *cognitive* approach for the management of workplace aggression. The cognitive approach is



defined as one that: a) gives precedence to the appropriate conceptualization of a situation needing intervention, b) views the situation in its broader organizational and cultural context, c) employs theory as an efficient way of understanding the dynamics of the variables involved, and d) considers both micro and macro manifestations and interventions. Above all, this book proposes a challenge to camouflaged aggression by promoting an understanding of its behavioural dynamics, its sociocultural expression, and by endorsing the philosophical position of confrontation.

## THREE FACES OF AGGRESSION

*Confrontational Aggression, Passive-Aggression, and Camouflaged Aggression*

DURING the 1980s and 1990s, the terms “violence” and “aggression” were used interchangeably to refer to various overlapping behaviours, attitudes and motivations. This ambiguity has allowed many acts of aggression to go unrecognized. For example, until the end of the twentieth century, most of the studies on workplace aggression dealt with physical threats and assaults (e.g., Gapozzoli & McVey, 1966; Kelleher, 1997) while neglecting the more common forms of aggression that are non-violent and camouflaged. There are two main reasons for this constriction in the use of the term: first, the term “aggression” has traditionally been applied to behaviour in which an aggressor could be identified (if detected) and in which the connection between the perpetrator’s action and the victim’s injury is apparent; and, second, the term “aggression” has often been used as a synonym for “violence.” This was common during the 1980s, when “aggression” came to refer only to hostile and injurious physical acts such as war and physical or sexual assault. The tendency to refer to any and all forms of injury, coercion, control, or even poverty (Van Soest, 1997), as “violence” may have served as a confusing expansion of the term. This use also promoted the misconception that non-physical and passive forms of aggression are less serious

and less problematic than physical and active ones. In current usage “violence” is reserved for physically injurious behaviours, and “aggression” is predominantly used in reference to *any* behaviour which is intentionally harmful. Thus, “violence” should be seen as one form of aggression but by no means the only or most prevalent form.

The first edition of this book (2000), may have had an impact on encouraging the use of aggression as a generic term, and on focusing on its masked forms within the organizational setting. The upsurge of interest in workplace aggression in the past fifteen years has led to the identification of several domains of aggression that were studied under such constructs as bullying, mobbing, incivility, and social undermining. These constructs, as discussed in the Introduction, often overlap, adding more confusion to the concept of aggression and thus compromising proper theoretical analysis. In the last decade experts in the field of workplace aggression appear to be adopting a generic conception of aggression, with a focus on research identifying its consistent expressions. However, this type of research, as discussed in the Introduction, is moving toward domain restriction, which may limit its usefulness, both theoretically and practically.

### **Definition of Aggression**

Arnold Buss (1961) defined aggression as an act or behaviour in which “one individual delivers noxious stimuli to another” (p. 9). Berkowitz (1962) later revised Buss’s statement by defining aggression as any behaviour whose intent is to harm. By adding intention, his definition served to correct a problem associated with behavioural definitions such as Buss’s, which included unintentional accidents and excluded intentional acts that fail to do harm.

In an attempt to improve on the former definitions, Baron (1977) proposed the following definition: “Aggression is any form of behaviour directed towards the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment” (p. 7).

In an attempt to further improve on the foregoing definitions, some authors (e.g., Mummendey, Linneweber, & Loeschper, 1984) have argued that labelling a behaviour as aggression requires taking into consideration the perspectives of the two parties involved in the interaction. They reason that it is necessary to examine both the intentions of the perpetrator and the perceptions and evaluations of the victim. Such authors have added that to be labelled as “aggression” the behaviour must represent a violation of some norm.

Clearly, the perpetrator’s and the victim’s evaluation of the acceptability of a behaviour may influence the intensity of the behaviour, the reaction to it, and its overall effect. However, behaviour can be injurious regardless of whether or not the perpetrator or the victim believes that the behaviour is acceptable. It also can be injurious regardless of whether either party is aware that the behaviour, or its intention, is harmful or potentially harmful.

Baron’s definition, essential to understanding the form of aggression that is the focus of the present book, includes the following aspects of aggression:

1. Aggression involves both intention and potential harm.
2. The intent to aggress may be unconscious.
3. Aggression may involve either action or inaction.
4. Making others suffer can be both a goal and a consequence of aggression.

The following definition will serve the purpose of the present inquiry:  
*Aggression is any action or inaction directed by an individual toward the conscious or unconscious goal of making other individuals suffer.*

## **Types of Aggression**

Buss (1971) and Berkowitz (1989) have emphasized the fact that aggression can take different forms. Berkowitz labelled two systems of aggression: reactive and instrumental. Buss’s classification was similar.

He distinguished between anger aggression and instrumental aggression. The former comprises aggressive behaviour that is motivated by emotion. The latter comprises aggressive behaviour directed toward achieving goals. Buss considered instrumental aggression to be more important and described it as including acts of aggression which could be physical or verbal, active or passive, and direct or indirect.

An important distinction was made by ethologists such as Konrad Lorenz between two levels of causation: the level of motivational sources and that of dynamic expression: purpose versus process. That is, attempts to answer the question “What it is for?” should not be confused with attempts to answer the question “How does it take place?” Lorenz (1966) observed that although goals such as feeding, copulation, and self-preservation may direct an animal’s behaviour in a certain direction, they do not fully explain the form that the behaviour takes. The purposeful behaviour of the animal is also influenced by biologically inherited practices, such as ritualized forms of fighting. Similarly, the organizational avenues available for the expression of aggression and their particular dynamics can operationally redefine and mask personal motives such as revenge, lust for power, and jealousy.

The definition of aggressive behaviour adopted in this book endorses the above distinctions but focuses on mode as a central variable in the expression of aggression in organizations. In the expression of aggression within organizations, there is an interaction between the psychological dispositions of the individual and the structural forms of the organization. This interaction assumes a position on a confrontational–non-confrontational continuum or mode, a position that significantly qualifies the expression of aggression.

## **Two Modes of Aggression**

Fundamental to the theoretical model presented in this book is the premise that aggression can be expressed along two opposite modes: confrontational and non-confrontational. The two modes can be expressed through physical, verbal, cognitive, and emotional mediums. Here

confrontation is defined as behaviour that is mobilized and focused against some person(s) or issue(s) and is accompanied by declared intention, attendant emotions, and consciousness of values that legitimate the position. Non-confrontation is aggression that is indirect or passive and is often masked by organizational structures. Direct aggression can be part of a non-confrontational strategy (as in the case of challenging a person to avoid confronting an issue, as will be discussed in Chapter 5) and, accordingly, directness may not always be confrontational.

### **The Confrontational Mode**

In the confrontational mode, aggression is expressed manifestly, directly, actively, deliberately, and consciously. For example, if you *physically* assault your supervisors, the act would clearly constitute a confrontational form of aggressive behaviour. It would also be confrontational if you *verbally* criticized them, or rebuked, insulted, or ridiculed them, or if you demeaned them by *non-verbal* facial and bodily expressions of contempt, antagonism, or hostility.

Confrontation brings the social and the psychological components of the aggressive behaviour into conscious awareness; the aggressive activity or methods of delivery are manifest. The author of the aggressive act, its recipient, and the type of injury are identifiable. The intention to aggress and the personal responsibility for it are also easy to discern. Blame can also be attributed. The response to confrontational aggression is often prompt, which makes explicit the conflict that may have engendered the aggression. The often-accompanying anger and hostility help to identify and energize the protagonists. As a result, confrontation may escalate conflict, but at the same time, it may mobilize efforts to resolve it.

### **The Non-Confrontational Mode of Passive-Aggression**

Some social and psychological manifestations of aggression can be suppressed or denied, but aggression will not go away; like a chameleon,