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**WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: CAUSE FOR
CONCERN OR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A
NEW CATEGORY OF FEAR?**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the problems raised by growing media, official and organisational attention to workplace violence. At present this issue is documented in a diffuse, and frequently inflammatory way with little attention to accurate quantification of incidence nor any systematic attempt to place the risk in context. Suggestions are made for definition, classification and operationalisation of the variables which constitute workplace violence to facilitate agency data collection, research and management.

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: CAUSE FOR CONCERN OR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW CATEGORY OF FEAR?

Workplace violence is becoming a focus of attention in western industrialised societies in a way never previously encountered. There have always been incidents involving aggression and even overt violence in some workplaces; the nature of some work environments has left employees exposed either to potentially aggressive clients or to frustrating and irritating interactions with fellow workers with the potential to generate violent conflict. Why then has workplace violence suddenly emerged as an issue with high level media attention and institutional concern? Certainly tolerance of violence is decreasing in our society, we are no longer prepared to accept intimidating and violent actions as social norms (the once tolerated pub brawl, the casual use of force by police, threats to service providers and above all domestic violence). There has also been an increased willingness to acknowledge behaviours previously ignored, such as child sexual abuse, as both occurring and doing violence. The home has been the central area of concern during the last twenty years with regard to increasing awareness of the nature and impact of violence and sexual intimidation. The spotlight may to some extent have begun shifting onto the workplace. There are increasing concerns about sexual harassment in the workplace which reflects, in part, the altered levels and types of participation of women in the workforce, and in part a greater assertiveness in women over what constitutes unacceptable sexually motivated behaviours.

The nascent concerns with workplace violence may represent a widening of the perspective established by the increased consciousness of the workplace as an arena for sexual aggression. It may also embody an attempt by workers to exert a greater control over their workplace environment. Having been largely frustrated on traditional fronts in the struggle for greater worker participation and control, the issues of safety, harassment and violence offer a potentially legitimate route to placing in question the adequacy and aims of management.

Issues of violence and abuse in our society have been, to a considerable extent, medicalised and depoliticised. This process has a long history dating back to the 19th century when criminal violence ceased to be viewed primarily as the product of either sin or poverty and became increasingly constructed as a product of degeneracy (disease) and biological inferiority in the individual offender (Foucault, 1977; Vold, 1979). The area of child abuse offers another example. Child abuse became a social and political issue in the 19th century as cruelty to children came to be regarded as a product of poverty, overcrowding and lack of education. It was reconstructed in the 1950s and 60s first as battered child (baby) syndrome, a medical category, and latterly the whole area of child abuse has been usurped by child sexual abuse, which has stripped it of its social dimension (despite evidence of its relationship to the traditional categories of poverty, deprivation and social and family disorganisation) and has left it to the politics of gender and to the therapists (Hacking, 1991 & 1995; Scott, 1995).

In the currently emerging constructions of workplace violence evidence of the same forces being at work can be discerned, with the focus on the individual perpetrator (and in particular their psychopathology) or on groups of perpetrators defined by their individual deviance, (eg substance abusers). There is occurring a whittling away of the social context (both in the wider society and the workplace). There is also a rhetoric of responsibility and consequences directed at the individual perpetrator of violence which evoke punishment, exclusion and possibly therapy as the appropriate manner of dealing with the problem (see: Toohey, 1993 and Fox & Levin, 1994 for criticism; Mantell with Albrecht, 1994 and Reynolds, 1994 as proponents). The power of this approach derives from its easy compatibility with dominant social attitudes to deviance in general and from the fact that it contains more than a modicum of truth. The danger of such a viewpoint is that the decontextualisation of workplace violence leaves it meaningless outside of the characteristics of the individual perpetrator. Workplace violence is thus stripped of its potential for raising critical questions about workplace management or wider social realities; it is directed instead to procedural issues about workforce selection, early detection of potential troublemakers, adequacy

of liability insurance, risk management and effective exclusion of potential as well as actual offenders.

FREQUENCIES, PROFILES AND CONTEXT

As with other aspects of workplace violence identification of causal or associated factors has been emotional rather than systematic. Fear that declining social standards and cohesion and rising crime are inevitably leading to increased violence which encroaches on all aspects of life, even work, drives this issue, an example of what Singer and Endreny (1993) describe as 'shared sociocultural assumptions' (p104), assumptions so taken for granted that they are beyond debate. Fear based on such assumptions arises not out of a careful assessment of official data on frequency but from perceptions gained from the front page sensational reporting of incidents.

Workplace homicides, the least common but most visible of extremes are variously attributed to our violent society (Kinney, 1993; Mantell with Albrecht, 1994; Reynolds, 1994; Wykes 1994), disgruntled and vengeful workers, and very occasionally to organisational culture and management practice (Toohey, 1993; Mantell with Albrecht, 1994). Workplace homicide is characterised in the press with headlines such as these: "Merrill Lynch executive slain" (*Boston Globe*, 8 April, 1988) and "Workplace traumatized by slaying at Convair" (*San Diego Union-Tribune*, 11 August, 1992) (both quoted in Mantell with Albrecht, 1994). Management itself is warned of the calamitous tide of violence and murder about to hit their workplaces and provided with 'guidance' for its management via a raft of new textbooks with equally sensational titles (*Breaking Point: The Workplace Violence Epidemic and What To Do About It*, Kinney & Others, 1993; *Ticking Bombs: Defusing Violence in the Workplace*, Mantell with Albrecht, 1994).

The sensationalism inevitably attaching to homicide and to associated claims for frequency must be approached with caution. For example, it has been reported that homicide is the most common cause of death at work for women in the United States (a total of 40% of all work related deaths for women) (National Worksafe Institute, 1995, Dobrin, Wiersma, Loftin & McDowall, 1996). This should obviously be viewed with scepticism, the overall number of women involved was low compared to men. Women, in the past, have had a very low risk of work related injury and death, from any cause, compared to men as they do not work in the high risk industries, jobs and professions which have traditionally contributed to high rates of injury and death for men (England, Farkas, Kilbourne & Dou, 1988). However, it is possible that female 'gender tagged' jobs, in the caring professions (nursing, teaching, social work), the retail trade and banks, place women at greater risk in the 1990s in what have previously been considered 'safe' areas of work. It should be noted, however, that a more careful interpretation of the data on occupational fatalities for all workers in the United States for the period 1980 to 1989 reveals that over 96% of those who died from accidents and homicides were men, although a disproportionate 20% of those who were murdered at work during the same period were women (Dobrin, Wiersma, Loftin & McDowall, 1996, p183).

A similar claim was made for all workers in *The New York Times*, with this headline: "Homicide now leading cause of death on job" (24 February, 1993). This claim is, again, inherently unlikely. Examination of the data indicates that homicide was, in fact, the largest 'single' cause of death at work (7% of fatalities at work between 1980 and 1989) (Dobrin et al, 1996). That any work related death should be as the result of homicide is intolerable, but *The New York Times* headline, taken at face value, as an epidemic requiring limited resources to be shifted away from the multitude of risks and hazards faced by men and women every day in their place of work, could have a disastrous effect as far as the broad risk for occupational fatality and injury is concerned.

A range of official bodies in most countries collect data of one type or another on violence associated with work. Research has also recently been carried out by a range of agencies (government bodies, specific industries, large businesses and a few academics). Since there is, as yet, little agreement on the key variables there is little or no consistency in the type of data collected. This makes it difficult both to obtain an overall picture of the nature and size of the problem and to make comparisons between national statistics and between research findings.

The United States is reasonably well served in terms of national data on workplace violence compared to other countries. This is collected by a variety of organisations including the Bureau of Labor Statistics; the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health; the National Traumatic Occupational Fatalities Surveillance System; and the Department of Justice's Supplementary Homicide Reports (compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation) although accurate quantification is considered to be hampered by what has been termed 'inappropriate official classifications' (Fox & Levin, 1994; Mantell with Albrecht, 1994).

In the United Kingdom agency data is more diffuse and incomplete. This led at least one textbook author to resort to drawing conclusions from general crime data, personal experience, newspaper reports and anecdotal evidence (Reynolds, 1994).

The Australian case is similar to that of the United Kingdom. Official sources include workers' compensation data and the Equal Opportunity Commission. A few research projects have been conducted in specific industries, these include the report on violence committed on care givers by intellectually disabled adults (reported by: Yarwood, 1992, p10), Toohey's study of six large national organisations (1993) and the study of Australian management style conducted by researchers from Griffith University (reported by: Heath, 1994; James 1995).

Studies creating data based on clearly defined variables from carefully structured research are rare. The study of the violence experienced by general practitioners reported by Hobbs (1994) is an exception; this measured the rate, type, and scale of violence and defined the context in which it occurred. Hobbs reported that 66% of aggressors were men, 37% of these were male patients (direct users) and 25% male relatives, and overall 38% of aggressors were relatives of patients (indirect users of the service). Most aggressors were under 40 years old (76%). Intoxication with drugs and alcohol were precipitators in 27% of incidents and were frequently associated with more serious incidents involving assault and injury. Anxiety in the perpetrator accounted for a further 26% of incidents and precipitants of distress such as a long wait or bereavement contributed 11% and 5% of incidents respectively. Violence related to anxiety was confined to some type of verbal abuse. Mental illness in the perpetrator was reported in 15% of incidents and was related to more serious incidents involving assault and injury.

At an interim point (between sensationalism and empirical research) Fox and Levin (1994) bring some order to the proliferating and sensational messages from newspapers and textbooks on workplace homicides. On the basis of their exploration of available official data in the United States they reported that of those who committed workplace homicide 93% were men. These men were typically middle-aged, white and facing termination of employment (or were already terminated) and had no immediate prospect of re-employment. Younger workers who killed were typically perpetuating a robbery or some other felony, older workers killed as the result of an argument with the boss.

The most frequently quoted examples of workplace homicides are based on the US Postal Service (with a total of 750,000 employees) where forty workers have been killed in eleven separate incidents since 1983 constituting several times its share of the overall total of workplace homicides in that period (Fox & Levin, 1994; Dobrin et al, 1996).

Using the US Postal Service example, what were the main factors associated with the unprecedented violence there? Fox and Levin's view was that the key factor, in addition to management style (characterised by the Postal Workers Union as quasi-military in structure and culture and by the Post Master General as authoritarian) and the resulting job stress, was and remained job insecurity. The perception amongst workers was that they would lose their jobs to automation and re-organisation, ruining their careers and incomes, placing them in a labour market where there are few openings for middle-aged men with obsolete skills. Other factors, which may have precipitated strong, even violent reactions to the threat of job loss is that postal workers in the United States (as with public or civil servants in other western countries) have a strong sense of entitlement, have often been in long service and, in addition, may have gained their jobs through veteran's preference schemes. Many entered the postal service at a time when it promised job security for life and a good pension which they traded off against lower wages and possibly lower job satisfaction (Fox & Levin, 1994). Job loss and curtailment of planned on superannuation for

some employees of the US Postal Service left them, not surprisingly, feeling cheated if not actually persecuted.

Some workers, who have suffered long term cumulative frustration such as career failures, never getting the right job or the promotion they perceived themselves as deserving can become resentful and may launch attacks to extract vengeance against the supposed cause of their frustration. Being fired can be the final straw, particularly for people who typically externalise blame and responsibility leading to lashing out at those who they see as responsible for their failures. Workers who do become violent are claimed to be loners, more likely to be separated or divorced and to have few, if any, friends. For them losing their jobs means loss of self-esteem, income and a major source of stability, and organisational and social ties, stripping them of virtually all supports and potential satisfaction (Fox & Levin 1994; Mantell with Albrecht, 1994; National Worksafe Institute, 1995). That such loss (actual or threatened) induces anger and resentment and sometimes leads to violence, is hardly be wondered at.

There is some evidence that the advancement of women may also form the basis of resentment in men who perceive that they may have been unfairly passed over. Again in the US Postal Service, an employee, six weeks after the dismissal of his complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that he had been discriminated against in favour of women colleagues, shot three people and killed one other at work (National Worksafe Institute, 1995).

DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

The diffuse nature of information and data relating to workplace violence mirrors the difficulties in defining what workplace violence actually is. This can be illustrated by the these attempts by agencies in Britain providing guidelines for its management: (i) "Purposeful or reactive behaviour intended to produce damaging or hurtful effects physically or emotionally, in other persons (*Violence to Staff Handbook*, Family Services Unit, 1989)."; (ii) "The application of force, severe threat or serious abuse, by members of the public towards people arising out of the course of their work whether or not they are on duty. It includes: severe verbal abuse or threat where this is judged likely to turn into actual violence; serious or persistent harassment (including racial or sexual harassment); threat with a weapon; major or minor injuries; and fatalities (*Violence to Staff*, Report to the DHSS Advisory Committee, 1988)."; (iii) "Any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted by a member of the public in circumstances arising out of the course of his or her employment (*Violence to Staff*, Health and Safety Executive Pamphlet, 1988)" (Reynolds 1994, pp11/12).

While individually none of these appear adequate they do provide the seeds for clarification of the factors which constitute violence in a workplace setting. In order to more systematically define and classify workplace violence, the actions and behaviours which constitute violence must be identified and placed within the context of a workplace. Since the information required to construct such definitions is diffused throughout the literature the definitions presented here have been developed from a number of sources which include: the *Violence at Work: A Workplace Health and Safety Guide* booklet, Workplace Health, Safety Council, (undated); Hobbs, 1994; Mackay, 1994; Reynolds, 1994; Wykes 1994; Kraus, Blander & McArthur, 1995; The National Crime Victimization Survey, 1993 (in Dobrin et al, 1996, p192). Some definitions of workplace violence include crimes such as damage to property and robbery (Mantell with Albrecht, 1994; Reynolds, 1994); this paper is concerned only with incidents which include aggression directed at the person. A basic division of acts of workplace violence can be made as follows:

1. **Abusive communications** including verbal and written threats as well as non-verbal communications of threat or derogation.
2. **Behaviours which create an environment of fear** including intimidation, exclusion (sending to Coventry), informal initiation of new recruits (kiddin or hazing), and mobbing behaviour (ganging up).

3. **Physical abuse** which covers physically intrusive behaviours (pushing and shoving for example) which do not result in actual physical harm (Wykes, 1994)
4. **Physical assault** resulting in actual physical harm (including sexual assault). McKay (1994) suggested two categories (i) minor injury requiring first aid and (ii) major injury requiring medical assistance; a third should be included: (iii) injury resulting in death.

Sexual harassment is not usually presented in the workplace violence literature as a separate category but is included explicitly or implicitly as a sub-set of increasing degrees of severity under each of the above definitions. It is presented here as a distinct category in recognition of its special status as *the* officially recognised, defined, documented, legislated and institutionalised form of workplace violence. This definition is from Mezey (1994, pp90/91):

5. "**Sexual harassment** at work is a form of unlawful sex discrimination because the selection of victim is determined by gender. The term encompasses physical, verbal and nonverbal conduct of a sexual nature, for example unwanted touching sexual propositions and innuendo, sexually explicit gestures and the displaying of offensive material. To be defined as harassment, the behaviour must be sufficiently serious or persistent to be damaging to the victim's working conditions."

At the risk of adding the fashionable to the faddish, stalking is also included. There is growing evidence that this distinct form of distressing and potentially damaging behaviour does occur at work and can form the basis of serious incidents (Kinney, 1994; the National Worksafe Institute, 1995; Harmon, Rosner & Owens 1995; Flannery, 1996):

6. **Stalking** is repeated unwarranted intrusions through behaviours such as following, loitering near, making unwanted communications via telephone, letters and electronic mail, of a type and/or frequency which significantly intrudes on the victim's privacy and/or creates apprehension in victims for their safety (and would create such apprehension in a reasonable person in the victim's situation).

The vast majority of stalkers confine their behaviour to unwanted intrusions and communications, a minority progress to threats and property damage and a few to physical and sexual assault. The risk of a fatal assault as a culmination of a period of stalking is small but the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the United States did record that 43 employees were skilled by stalkers in 1993 (Kinney, 1994).

Malicious property damage could also be included as a separate category, though in practice this is usually found in association with threats, stalking or other harassing or intimidating behaviours.

While these definitions carry implications for levels of intensity of workplace violence this is in general terms. The scale set out below provides a more detailed set of classifications of aggression utilising seven degrees of severity (modified from a scale developed to survey the extent of abuse and violence directed towards general practitioners (Hobbs, 1994, p75)):

- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| I | = | intrusions into privacy which are experienced as intimidating (including the repeated following and unwanted communications of the stalker); |
| II | = | verbal abuse; |
| III | = | verbal abuse with specific threats (eg shaking fist) or with physical action against inanimate objects (eg banging a table, throwing an object, forcing a door); |
| IV | = | physical abuse without injury (eg pushing or obstructing); |
| V | = | physical assault with minor injury (eg cuts, bruises); |
| VI | = | physical assault with severe injury (eg being knocked out, needing hospital care); |
| VII | = | physical assault resulting in death. |

Workplace violence, sexual harassment and stalking are often characterised not by isolated incidents but by a pattern repeated over time, sometimes becoming increasingly serious in nature. Various forms of aggression may also occur together and interact (Crawford, 1994; Mezey, 1994; the National Worksafe Institute, 1995). Illustrations of this are provided by the following examples (cases reported by the National Worksafe Institute, 1995, pp5 & 10 respectively):

Example 1:

A 17 year old male who harassed the company's 31 year old receptionist (the nature of the harassment was not specified but was serious enough for the woman to report to a company vice-president). Several weeks after this woman's request for assistance was turned down this young man tailed and fatally shot her eight times with two pistols stolen from the company. This homicide was not initially recorded as a workplace incident since the murder took place outside of the physical environment of the workplace.

Example 2:

A postal worker in the United States whose stalking of a fellow worker over a number of months led to his eventual dismissal. The harassment included a series of violent and sexually explicit notes and repeatedly following the woman and parking outside of her house at night for hours on end. Shortly after being dismissed this man returned to his former workplace and killed one worker and injured another.

WHO IS AT RISK, FROM WHOM AND IN WHAT CONTEXT?

As with the definition of violence, classification of who is at risk, in what context and from whom is confusing. The 'Types of Violence at Work' from the *Violence at Work* booklet (Workplace Health & Safety Council, undated, pp7-10) divides violence up into aggression arising from: dissatisfaction with service providers; disturbed people; occupational violence; and violence motivated by gain. The key variables derived in part from this classification and the review of the literature appear to be: type of violence; location; potential victims; potential perpetrators; and the context in which violence may arise. Utilising these variables the following typologies are proposed as a basis for operationalising the term workplace violence:

1. Type: **Intra-organisational conflict.** This includes situations which place employees are at risk due to interactions between employees at work.
- Location: Within the workplace itself.
- Victims: Co-workers at all levels (current employees).
- Perpetrators: Co-workers at all levels (current employees).
- Context: Conflict between workers (verbal abuse and threats, bullying, hazing, sexual harassment etc.); and conflict arising out of the situation at work: organisational culture, management style, and organisational strategy (downsizing for example).

2. Type: **Occupational violence.** This covers employees in service based occupations where the nature and/or location of their work puts them at risk of violence from: (i) dissatisfied patients, clients and customers; (ii) factors intrinsic to carrying out the job itself (as with police, security staff, nightclub bouncers etc.).
- Location: Wherever the primary task is carried out: in a bank, arresting an offender, posting a parking fine, treating a patient.
- Victims: Employees in the process of carrying out their jobs.
- Perpetrators: Clients, customers, current service users. Friends or relatives of current users. People suffering from intellectual impairment or mental health problems; people in extremely disturbing social situations (marriage break-up or other domestic tensions); and people affected by drugs or alcohol.
- Context: Dissatisfaction or irritation with service (which may be exacerbated in certain occupations, in health care for example, by health, social and other problems).

In addition to these two generally recognisable settings for workplace violence, the *Violence at Work* booklet provides the basis for a third type under the heading of 'Violence Motivated by Gain', which covers incidents randomly perpetrated by members of the general public directed at people providing goods and services (bank tellers, taxi drivers, late night convenience store assistants, garage attendants etc). This type should also include violence directed at organisational members by those who have no current legitimate connection or business with the organisation:

3. Type: **Violence from the general public.** Violence motivated by gain (money, drugs and valuable goods) and opportunistic violence (vandalism, snatch and grab, assault); and violence perpetrated by those who have no current legitimate relationship with the organisation.
- Location: Within the workplace: an ex-employee returning to take revenge, robbers who threaten or injure staff while carrying out a raid; in the environs of the workplace (car park), in the street, in or near the victim's home (bank robbers holding a manager hostage).
- Victims: Targetted workers and/or those who are there when an incident occurs plus any members of the general public present at the time.
- Perpetrators: Ex-employees; non-users of service; criminals (robbers, vandals); protesters; terrorists; stalkers.
- Context: Ex-employee returning to take revenge; violence for gain (armed robbery); domestic violence spilling over in the workplace; protests (abortion clinics); politically motivated terrorism (IRA bombing).

Some workers, workplaces and industries may be at risk from more than one type of violence. For example: bank tellers may be at risk from dissatisfied customers, the general public (robbers), and be subject to intra-organisational conflict.

DISCUSSION

Risk of workplace violence, even from the diffuse evidence we have at the moment, does appear to reflect a particular sets of circumstances within industries, firms and occupations and society in general. The economic environment of the 1990s creates a broad context for uncertainty and fears about the future which raise the potential for a violent response. These fears are centred around the

potential for a reduction in job status, less opportunity for advancement, or even job loss. Increased pressures for labour market deregulation, productivity, work flexibility and the erosion of many of the socially supportive elements of work (particularly for men) may also be raising tensions and reducing the availability of opportunities to discharge the tensions in a non-damaging manner (via the support or intervention of trade unions representatives for example).

High unemployment and the resulting marginalisation in an increasingly disaffected and neglected underclass provide the backdrop for violence directed against community and health care service providers and service industries such as banking, retailing and public transport. Cuts in public funding resulting in a reduction in resources for social services place community and health care workers at high risk. Their clients may respond violently to their perception that they are inadequately, unjustly or unfairly treated by the very agencies, that should provide support and succour. Other industries, banking for example, may be at additional risk from those who reject the values of a society which appears to have rejected them and resort to criminal activity (theft, vandalism etc.). At this level of analysis the behaviour of perpetrators of violence must be understood within the broad social context to facilitate the identification of underlying causal factors. This does not imply that victim blaming is acceptable nor does it exonerate the individual from the use of abusive, threatening or violent behaviour attributable to social factors, but what such an analysis does suggest is that merely increasing penalties to deter potential offenders is not sufficient there must also be a genuine effort to address the social realities which contribute to the conditions which breed violence.

With regard to intra-organisational conflict, again victim blaming cannot and must not be condoned, but an understanding of the elements which may carry the potential for a violent response in the workplace environment is essential for effective prevention. In the violent incidents which have plagued the US Postal Service, for example, the organisation itself cannot be absolved of all the blame. There can be little doubt that this giant bureaucracy created an environment where violent, even homicidal, reaction was possible given the vulnerability of a few employees due to their personal characteristics and social situation. Unfortunately, environments and characteristics such as these are not unique to the US Postal Service, economic rationalism and the single minded pursuit of profit puts many people into similar situations with the risk of similar reaction. The message must be that where violence arises out of organisational conflict, whether it occurs as an intra-organisational problem, between current employees or as the result of action by an ex-employee, care must be taken not to confuse actual victims (people) with the organisation, nor to allow the organisation to construct itself solely as a victim thus avoiding examining its role in the violence.

Good management must imply the provision of an environment where fear, threat and intimidation cannot, and do not, flourish. What is required is appropriate management practices and procedures based on clear identification of the risks specific to the organisation, and its employees, in the context of its strategy, structure, management style and culture and the industry in which it operates. Managements should not, however, interpret their responsibility (to eliminate, or at least reduce, risk to the organisation and its members) as a signal to winnow out potential assailants via the use of draconian recruitment and selection procedures and authoritarian control systems.

Attempts to define and quantify aggressive behaviours in the broader society have increasingly turned to schedules of questions about specific behaviour and their frequency as the best method of ascertainment and quantification (Monahan, Applebaum, Mulvey, Robbins & Lidz, 1994). There is some evidence of attempts to adapt this approach to workplace violence; one author suggesting the use by human resource managers of the DSMIII-R, a guide for psychiatrists and psychologists to evaluate psychiatric disorders and mental state, as a selection instrument (Zimmerman, 1992, quoted in Mantell with Albrecht 1994). The sensational, almost evangelical approach of texts such as Mantell with Albrecht's *Ticking Bombs: Defusing Violence in the Workplace* (1994) exaggerate the potential for risk. The adoption of the strategies suggested in these texts may well exacerbate rather than relieve organisational problems in addition to creating the potential for liability under Equal Employment Opportunity and Unfair Dismissal regulations.

There may, of course, be situations and incidents which are beyond the potential of even the best security systems and management to provide ongoing control particularly where the perpetrator has

no obvious organisational connections (robbers, terrorists, stalkers etc.) Stalkers, for example, frequently have no current legitimate connection with the organisation or the object of their obsession (although stalkers may be ex-employees, or have created a connection in their minds, with no basis in reality, as a result of their mental state (Harmon et al, 1995)). Harmon et al's sample included one patient whose only clearly defined object (of obsession) was the company (not an individual) for which she had previously worked as a secretary which she felt had persecuted her.

Conclusion

Workplace violence is a problem, though whether the frequency and nature of such violence has intensified over the last decade remains open to question. What is sure is an increasing awareness and reduced tolerance for such violence will lead to pressure on management, particularly with regard to intra-organisational conflict, to take action which in time is likely to be backed up by legislative or other official intervention. For the management of workplace violence to be effective, sensationalising and dramatising must now give way to the systematic examination and quantification of what events constitute workplace violence. This will require the development of models which do justice to the complex interactions between the perpetrator, the organisation and the wider social context incorporating the full range of threat, intimidation and assault, not just extreme violence and homicide. A commonly agreed set of definitions, classifications and typologies would facilitate agency data collection, guide research efforts, and facilitate the development of effective practices for the management of workplace violence. Prevention must be the aim.

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