RELATIONAL AGGRESSION: A PRECURSOR TO WORKPLACE BULLYING?

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ABSTRACT

Workplace aggression, in the form of bullying, increases every year. This form of “non-violent” aggression, typically referred to as relational aggression, has its roots in our biology and our social constructs. Researchers have studied and provided interventions, but with little success. One reason for lack of progress may be a lack of understanding of the possible fact that some individuals attach a positive value to relational aggression, as has been suggested by earlier research. If there is a positive aspect to non-violent aggression, then interventions to stop such bullying may be unsuccessful, which is the result typically seen in school intervention programs. Equally important, if there is a positive aspect to non-violent aggression, that behavior may continue into adulthood and express itself in the workplace. Workplace statistics suggest that this is the case as workplace aggression and bullying continues to increase and is a significant issue in some industries, such as healthcare. Organizational leadership may also be a catalyst for positive perceptions of relational aggression. This study focuses on an attempt to clarify positive and negative associations of relational (non-violent) aggression to the independent variables of gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Administration of a Likert-type survey and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the independent variables is presented.

Keywords: Bullying, Workplace Aggression, Relational Aggression, Non-violent Aggression, Socioeconomic Status, Organizational Leadership.

RELATIONAL AGGRESSION: A PRECURSOR TO WORKPLACE BULLYING?

Media coverage of events involving violence and aggression, especially in the workplace, are ever-present. A research report by Baron and Neuman (1996), written nearly 15 years ago, noted, “Recent news reports have focused attention on dramatic instances of workplace violence – extreme acts of aggression in work settings” (p. 161). The same headline could easily appear in 2011. Baron and Neuman also noted that, although the news focused on cases of extreme violence, most aggression in the workplace is verbal and indirect.
Relational Aggression: A Precursor to Workplace Bullying?

The number of aggressive events is be increasing, not decreasing, despite the work by many behavior researchers. The FBI (2004) reported increasing acts of aggression in the workplace, with an estimated 1.7 million acts of aggression. Aggression comes in many forms, as noted in the FBI report, including violent acts to more benign acts known as bullying or relational aggression.

The purpose of this paper is to look at relational aggression, its origins, and its implications in workplace bullying. Study of non-violent aggression goes back many decades, and has possible ties to organizational leadership as well as developmental biology and developmental psychology. The intent is to determine if there might a positive association with relational aggression and a link between that perception, workplace bullying, and organizational leadership.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

The early work by Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) focused on studying the causes of aggression in young children. The researchers were meticulous in establishing the protocols for their research and limiting the number of variables studied. The method used included observation and detailed notes, as well as interviews with parents, teachers, and the students, which provided phenomenological meaning to the observational data. The action research model provided a tool for later researchers in studying personality in motion.

The research by Lewin et al. (1939) also provided a rich platform for researchers and practitioners of personality-related behaviors because Lewin et al. did not try to explain the behavior in detail. Lewin et al. did offer explanations, but they were tentative, and not the focus of the original study. The original study focused on seeking cause-and-effect relationships. The research also focused on the relation of aggression to leadership styles.

The importance of the original study by Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) stems from an attempt to understand group dynamics among young children. It is potentially important to understanding the functionality of aggression and how children interrelate, as these behaviors tend to perpetuate into adulthood. Boulton (1999) noted the importance of understanding how children interact with one another in groups. Longitudinal studies, such as those by Boulton, demonstrated the need to understand issues around aggression, bullying, and victimization from the perspective of the victim as well as that of the aggressor.

Relational Aggression

Relational aggression is manifest through ostracism and spreading of rumors about an individual (Rose & Swenson, 2009). The same sort of behavior was noted in the Lewin et al. (1939) study when anxiety and aggression was high, and club members would select a teammate as a scapegoat. Defining types of aggression, however, can be a challenge. Crawshaw (2009) provided 33 different terms to describe workplace acts of aggression. Struch and Schwartz (1989) focused on relational aggression and suggested there is a relationship
between the strength of in-group relationships and aggressive acts against outside groups. The focus of this current research is to limit the focus on aggression to relational aggression.

Struch and Schwartz (1989) also noted that forming in-groups provides “positive social identity” (p. 365). LeShan (1958) noted that seeking social identity is a driving force justifying aggression, especially in certain ethnic and low economic status individuals. Understanding the relationship between the etiology and norms around aggression is important. Knowing how this behavior evolves into the workplace may lead to a better understanding of workplace violence, specifically bullying.

**Etiology**

The issue of workplace acts of aggression has roots in human development. Huesmann (1988) presented a model of aggressive behavior that develops from repetitive scripts acquired early in life. The consistent repetition of these scripts during the formative years of a child makes the child’s behavior resistant to change, and these mental scripts “persist into adulthood” (p. 13).

Significant research exists demonstrating a large biological component in aggression. The biological basis of aggression is controversial (Nelson, 1974), yet the evidence for biological catalysts of aggression is extensive. Much of the biological research on the origins of aggression also focuses on differences in how genders manifest aggressive behavior (Hess & Hagen, 2006; Cole, 2007).

Hess and Hagen (2006) reported that young boys tend to be more physically demonstrative expressing aggression; young girls tend to be more indirect. “Virtually all studies of adults have found a sex difference in physical aggression, but most have failed to find sex differences in the use of more indirect forms of aggression” (p. 231). Hess and Hagen’s research reported those differences, finding females used indirect aggressive more extensively than males. Cote (2007) reported similar results, suggesting that young boys are more physically aggressive and the tendency declines as males grow older; the use of indirect aggression in females increases as they grow older. Gender consideration in aggression research is important.

**Reinforcement of the Problem**

Students who saw themselves as outsiders to popular groups expressed the opinion that relational aggression is both the norm and expected behavior by popular students (Huesmann, 1988; Rose & Swenson, 2009). Dodge, Coie, Pettit, and Price (1990) noted aggression manifest in play activities in early school years was a way to establish peer status. Research by The Metropolitan Area Child Study Research Group (MACS, 2007) noted that children from lower-income families found an advantage in expressing aggression. LeShan (1958) suggested that recognition for being aggressive is a way to establish identity. Puckett, Aikins, and Cillessen (2008) also noted a positive relationship between relational aggression and social status, leadership, and cooperation.
**Previous Research**

The causes of workplace aggression shape the focus of research. Hershcovis, Turner, Barling, Arnold, Dupre, Inness et al. (2007), through meta-analysis, provided multiple perspectives on past research. Situational indicators exist that have predictive value at the individual level. Different predictors exist for organizational analysis, depending on placement of the individual within the organization. Different individual traits and biology, plus situational factors all play a part in predicting the likelihood of workplace aggression.

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The general problem is that acts of aggression and violence in the workplace continue to escalate (FBI, 2004). Research in aggression has many diverse facets (Crawshaw, 2009), making comparisons and analysis difficult. Most research focusing on aggression assumes that aggression is negative, even though there might be a strong biological imperative for its expression (Hall & Hirschman, 1991).

The specific problem is that a lack of understanding of the etiology and dynamics of aggression in the workplace limits the ability of leadership to act affectively. It is also possible, based on the research by Lewin et al. (1939) that leadership may be a catalyst for some forms of workplace aggression. Creation of an accurate topology (Bing et al., 2007) considering gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status could provide more effective leadership tools for managing aggression in the workplace. Lack of these tools is frustrating and counterproductive.

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a research approach to the study of workplace aggression incorporating an acceptance of both the biological and sociological basis of aggression. If aggression in the workplace is not decreasing, despite multiple interventions (Ferris, 2009), one possibility is that some forms of aggression have value, either to the individual or to the organization.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Baron and Neuman (1996) describe workplace aggression as intent to do harm to fellow workers. Most research studies focus on the attempt to measure, predict, or assess the likelihood of acts of aggression or violence in the workplace. What researchers ignore are the potentially positive consequences to the actions under study. Aggressive behavior, especially relational aggression, may have a real or perceived value by those in and outside the circles of power. Understanding the perceptions of employees, both aggressors and recipients of aggressive action, could provide new insights for organizational leadership and provide effective utilization of personnel. Additionally, if leadership style plays a role in employee aggressive behavior, such findings could modify how organizations address workplace aggression.
METHODOLOGY

Campbell, Muncer, and Coyle (1992) introduced the Expagg survey as a tool for differentiating expressive and instrumental aggression. “The reliability of the scale was adequate indicating an acceptable degree of internal consistency” (Campbell, Muncer, & Coyle, 1992, p. 105). The survey consisted of 20 items, each with two choices representing a preference for instrumental or expressive aggression. The assumption was that expressive and instrumental aggression were different ends of a single factor.

Archer and Haigh (1997) suggested that expressive and instrumental aggression might be actually be two separate factors and that an individual might find both forms of aggression acceptable, but at different levels. Archer and Haigh (1997) expanded the original 20-item EXPAGG to 40 items, and used a five-point Likert-type scale. Campbell, Muncer, McManus, and Woodhouse (1999) revised the Archer and Haigh (1997) survey to a 16-item survey with “no loss of psychometric quality” (Driscoll, Campbell, & Muncer, 2005, p. 223). Forrest, Shevlin, Eatough, Gregson, and Davies (2002) demonstrated that results “obtained from the 16-item Expagg scale were superior to those obtained for other widely used measures such as the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire” (Driscoll, Campbell, & Muncer, 2005, p. 224).

Driscoll, Campbell, and Muncer (2005) modified the 16-item scale to a 10-item scale, which was the scale used in this study. The authors noted that the 10-item scale and model “suggest a better fit to the data than the sixteen item model” (p. 226).

The Pilot Study

A pilot study was complete using an online survey tool. The pilot study involved a convenience sampling of ten participants who agreed to the study by answering 10 questions from a modified EXPAGG survey (Campbell, Muncer, & Coyle, 1992). Nine surveys were completed and used in the quantification of the results. The assessment measured instrumental (I) and expressive (E) aggression based on projected responses to aggressive settings. Each participant also provided gender, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status of family. The participants were all adults. The purpose of the pilot study was to gain familiarity with the survey tool and to determine if there was value in continuing with a more elaborate study.
Results of Pilot Study

![Figure 1: Instrumental and expressive aggression by gender.](image1)

Three females (F1-F3) and six males (M1-M6) took part in the survey.

![Figure 2: Instrumental and expressive aggression by ethnic background.](image2)

Reported ethnic backgrounds included three African-American, one individual of Asian ancestry, and five white, non-Hispanics.
Discussion of Pilot Study Results

Previous research stated that male children, when asked, described their aggressive behavior as more instrumental than expressive. Female children suggested the opposite, viewing aggression as more personal (Driscoll, Campbell, & Muncer, 2005). Figure 1 data conforms to the research by Driscoll, et al. with males averaging 3.2 compared to females at 2.0 on the instrumental scale.

The small number of participants does not provide significance for any of the data. Figure 1 does suggest agreement by Driscoll et al. (2005). Figure 2 provides no relevant information about breakdown of aggression styles along ethnic groupings. Again, the small number (Asian = 1) does not provide enough data.

Figure 3 displays data about family socioeconomic status. Participants provided information regarding family income based on terms ranging from poor to wealthy. The scale from 2 to 9 indicates increasing prosperity, two being poor, and 9 being wealthy. The data is too small a sample for accurate prediction; however, there is a suggestion that more physical aggression or dominance might have a place with the poor and the wealthy. Overall, however, expressive aggression (relational aggression) is the dominant form for the participants in this study.

FULL STUDY INTRODUCTION

Instrument

This research included a quantitative analysis of variance (ANOVA) with ethnicity, family income, and gender as the independent variables. Analysis of Variance is the most commonly used method of between-group comparisons (Cole, Maxell, Arvey, & Salas, 1993). Dependent variables consisted of responses to a modified Expagg (Campbell, Muncer, & Coyle, 1992) scale. A 10-item Expagg scale was used (Driscoll, Campbell, & Muncer, 2005). The 10-item
Expagg was presented as 20 items as each of the instrumental and expressive factors on the two-factor scale were presented separately with a 5-step Likert-type scale. Three additional demographic questions were included related to the three independent variables of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

**Subjects**

The original stimulus to this study was a request from a mid-sized manufacturer in the Southeastern United States that had an interest in learning more about bullying and aggression. The company provided an intranet link to an online survey for the Expagg survey. Surveys were available to employees on a voluntary basis through an intranet server. Surveys were anonymous and no personal data that would identify an individual was collected. Only the researcher had security access to the raw data.

**RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY**

Alpha reliability coefficients for the Expagg were 0.83 for the instrumental questions and 0.81 for the expressive questions (Smith & Waterman, 2004). In research by Gomez, Luis, Andreu, Rogers, Lasprilla, and Carlos (2003), validity and reliability of the tool was statistically significant when measuring different styles of aggression. “The ten-item model gave a chi-square value of 157.91 ($p < .001$)” (Driscoll, Campbell, & Muncer, 2005, p. 226).

**RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESES**

Research Question: Is there a relationship between gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status and an individual’s perspective on the value of relational aggression?

$H_{10}$: No relationship exists between gender and an individual’s value of relational aggression.

$H_{1A}$: There is a significant relationship between gender and an individual’s value of relational aggression.

$H_{20}$: No relationship exists between ethnicity and an individual’s value of relational aggression.

$H_{2A}$: There is a significant relationship between ethnicity and an individual’s value of relational aggression.

$H_{30}$: No relationship exists between socioeconomic status and an individual’s value of relational aggression.

$H_{3A}$: There is a significant relationship between socioeconomic status and an individual’s value of relational aggression.
RESULTS

Participants were provided an online survey via an intranet corporate link. The survey consisted of ten items, each separated into two factors, expressive and instrumental aggression. Each participant was to evaluate each of the factors on a 5-step Likert-type scale. The 5-steps were counted as 1=0, 2=0.25, 3=0.5, 4=0.75, and 5=1.0. Responses for each of the 20 possible questions were averaged. Single factor ANOVA was calculated from the averages.

Gender

The participant group consisted of 76 females and 62 males.

![Figure 4: Expressive aggression by gender](image)

Table 1: ANOVA summary for gender and expressive aggression

<table>
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<th>Count</th>
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<th>Average</th>
<th>Variance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females - Expressive</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.421053</td>
<td>0.642105</td>
<td>0.02877</td>
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<tr>
<td>Males - Expressive</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.596774</td>
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ANOVA

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<th>P-value</th>
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<td>Within Groups</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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</table>
Ethnicity

There were four ethnic groups represented in the study population: white/non-Hispanic (N=89), African-Americans (N=30), Hispanics (N=11), and Asians (N=8).

[Figure 6: Expressive aggression by ethnicity]
Table 3: ANOVA summary of expressive aggression by ethnicity.

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<th>Count</th>
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<tr>
<td>White/non-Hispanic</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.752809</td>
<td>0.675281</td>
<td>0.022849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.233333</td>
<td>0.623333</td>
<td>0.013346</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.363636</td>
<td>0.536364</td>
<td>0.057759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>0.625</td>
<td>0.045139</td>
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<td>0.03329</td>
<td>0.957335</td>
<td>0.423354</td>
<td>2.866266551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>1.251839049</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.034773</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.351708136</td>
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<td></td>
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Figure 7: Instrumental aggression by ethnicity

Table 4: ANOVA summary of instrumental aggression by ethnicity

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<th>Variance</th>
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</thead>
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<td>White/non-Hispanic</td>
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<td>3.247191</td>
<td>0.324719</td>
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<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.766667</td>
<td>0.376667</td>
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<td>Hispanics</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
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</table>
Social Economic Status

Participants were asked to select one of five socioeconomic ratings: below or at poverty level (N=15), lower middle class (N=31), middle class (N=75), upper middle class (N=17), or rich (N=0). This was a simple self-report with no confirmational data. None of the subjects selected the “rich” category.

Figure 8: Expressive aggression by socioeconomic status

Table 5: ANOVA summary of expressive aggression by socioeconomic status

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<td>Below or at poverty level</td>
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<td>5.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
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<td>0.612903</td>
<td>0.028674</td>
</tr>
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<td>Middle class</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.96</td>
<td>0.696</td>
<td>0.020851</td>
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<td>Upper middle Class</td>
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<td>5.941176</td>
<td>0.594118</td>
<td>0.035717</td>
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ANOVA

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<td>Within Groups</td>
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</table>

Figure 9: Instrumental aggression by socioeconomic status
Table 6: Expressive aggression by socioeconomic status

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ANOVA

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</table>

DISCUSSION

The Expagg survey, as developed by Campbell, Muncer, and Coyle (1992), is used primarily to measure the differences between expressive and instrumental aggression in school-aged children (Tapper, & Boulton, 2004). Research has consistently demonstrated that young girls rely more heavily on expressive (non-physical aggression) whereas young boys more commonly rely on instrumental (physical) aggression (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariépy, 1989; Tapper, & Boulton, 2004).

The Expagg survey was used with adults for this study. The respondents answered based on current conditions, whereas in the pilot, subjects were asked to try and recall a time when they were in grammar school. The only question in the current survey related to history was family socioeconomic status.

Gender

There was no significant relationship between expressive aggression (DV) and gender (IV), F(1, 18) = 1.008, p = 0.323]. There was no significant relationship between instrumental aggression (DV) and gender (IV). F(1, 18) = 1.008, p = 0.323]. The null hypothesis for H1 was affirmed.

Ethnicity

There was no significant relationship between expressive aggression (DV) and ethnicity (IV), F(3, 36) = 0.957, p = 0.423]. There was no significant relationship between instrumental aggression (DV) and ethnicity (IV). F(3, 36) = 0.957, p = 0.423]. The null hypothesis for H2 was affirmed.

Socioeconomic Status

There was no significant relationship between expressive aggression (DV) and socioeconomic status (IV), F(3, 36) = 1.247, p = 0.307]. There was no significant relationship between
instrumental aggression (DV) and socioeconomic status (IV). \( F(3, 36) = 1.247, p = 0.307 \). The null hypothesis for H3 was affirmed.

All three null hypotheses were affirmed, nothing that there were no significant differences in the study population related to expressive or instrumental aggression related to gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Where gender differences have been seen previous research (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariépy, 1989; Tapper, & Boulton, 2004), those studies were conducted with young school-aged children. This study involved only working adults.

The outcomes may be suggestive of adults conforming more to social mores regarding how they deal with aggression. The results, however, only dealt with participants from one organization. In addition, this study was conducted entirely online. Previous research (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariépy, 1989; Tapper, & Boulton, 2004) involved the administration of the Expagg survey by a trusted adult face-to-face with the children. It is possible that an element of trust between participants in the children’s studies and with this current study may have also made a difference.

**Future Research**

Aggression in the workplace is an ongoing issue. Bullying is a topic of international concern. According to the FBI (2004), the issue continues to increase. New forms of aggressive behavior, such as cyberbullying, have become significant issues both with young people (Reeckman, & Cannard, 2009), as well as in the workplace (Privitera, & Campbell, 2009). The links to aggressive behavior may well have their roots in childhood, perhaps even in the genetic makeup of humans. This study was important in both understanding a methodology for measure adult expression of forms of aggression and more work is still needed.

**REFERENCES**


APPENDIX

Survey Questions

Modified EXPAGG (Archer & Parker, 1994)

The survey became a 20-item survey as each of the 10 Expagg factors was separated into its expressive and instrumental components with a five-step Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree)

1. **Someone who never gets mad**
   (E) Has great patience.
   (I) Lets people take advantage of them.

2. **People who are bossy are**
   (E) People who just enjoy being bossy.
   (I) People who have more friends.

3. **I would feel worse, when arguing with someone, if**
   (E) I hit another person.
   (I) I cried.

4. **If someone wanted to fight me in public**
   (E) I would feel proud if I backed away.
   (I) I would feel like a coward if I backed away.

5. **I live in a place where you have to**
   (E) Be pushy to keep from being pushed down.
   (I) Avoid pushy people who might try to hurt you.

6. **If I did hit someone, it would be**
   (E) When I am alone with the person who is annoying me.
   (I) When another person shows me up in public.

7. **Arguing is really not good because**
   (E) It hurts another person’s feelings.
   (I) Before long the other person gets right back to arguing again.

8. **Sometimes I get really mad, and the best part is that**
   (E) It gets my anger out of my system.
   (I) It makes the other person do what I want them to do.

9. **When an argument is over, I want the other person to**
   (E) Realize how upset they made me and how unhappy I was.
   (I) Make sure they never annoy me again.

10. **I believe that fighting is**
    (E) Always wrong.
    (I) Necessary to get my way.