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Marshela Vlahovic, BSc

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Univ.-Prof. Dr. Arnd Florack

Mitbetreut von / Co-Supervisor:

Dr. Hyunji Kim

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Abstract

In this study, it is argued that personal relative deprivation is an extremely prevalent psychological phenomenon in organizations in the Western Balkans that has never been researched in the region. Personal relative deprivation is not only partially responsible for a skill shortage in the Western Balkans, but also for many negative organizational outcomes, such as distrust and instrumental aggressive behavior in the workplace. It was hypothesized that interpersonal distrust and organizational distrust explain the relationship between personal relative deprivation and passive workplace aggression and two separate mediation models were used to test the hypotheses. It was also expected that organizational distrust mediates the relationship between personal relative deprivation and passive workplace aggression with a higher effect compared to interpersonal distrust. A cross-sectional design was used to test the hypotheses. The results showed that organizational distrust mediated the relationship between personal relative deprivation and passive workplace aggression, whereas interpersonal distrust did not. Finally, useful recommendations for organizational leaders are provided in order to help address personal relative deprivation present in various workforces.

Keywords: Personal relative deprivation, interpersonal distrust, organizational distrust, passive workplace behavior

Abstrakt

Persönliche relative Benachteiligung ist ein äußerst verbreitetes psychologisches Phänomen in Organisationen auf dem westlichen Balkan und wurde in der Region noch nie erforscht. Persönliche relative Benachteiligung ist nicht nur teilweise für einen Fachkräftemangel auf dem westlichen Balkan verantwortlich, sondern auch für viele andere negative organisatorische Ergebnisse, wie zum Beispiel Misstrauen und instrumentelles aggressives Verhalten am Arbeitsplatz. Es wurden die Hypothesen aufgestellt, dass zwischenmenschliches Misstrauen und organisatorisches Misstrauen die Beziehung zwischen persönlicher relativer Benachteiligung und passiver Aggression am Arbeitsplatz zumindest teilweise erklären. Es wurden zwei separate Mediationsmodelle verwendet, um diese Hypothesen zu testen. Erwartet wurde, dass organisatorisches Misstrauen die Beziehung zwischen persönlicher relativer Benachteiligung und passiver Aggression am Arbeitsplatz mit einer höheren Wirkung im Vergleich zu zwischenmenschlichem Misstrauen vermittelt. Ein Querschnittsdesign wurde verwendet, um diese Hypothesen zu testen. Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass organisatorisches Misstrauen die Beziehung zwischen persönlicher relativer Benachteiligung und passiver Aggression am Arbeitsplatz erklärte, wohingegen zwischenmenschliches Misstrauen nicht. Schließlich werden nützliche Empfehlungen für Organisationsleiter gegeben, um die persönliche relative Benachteiligung verschiedener Arbeitskräfte anzugehen.

Schlagwörter: Persönliche relative Benachteiligung, zwischenmenschliches Misstrauen, organisatorisches Misstrauen, passives Verhalten am Arbeitsplatz

Introduction

In most Western Balkan countries, wealth inequality is at a rise (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018). Various historical and political events have contributed to the issue, such as the dissolution of communism and the transition to capitalism, which marked a sharp turn of events for its member countries and the region as a whole (Jano, 2008). The break-up of Yugoslavia and the rise of nationalism in the aftermath of communism fueled brutal wars between several countries (Kreider, 1990), destabilizing the entire region and leaving future generations with crippled political and economic systems on their hands. Attempts at postwar reconstruction were not always successful, partially due to the rise of informal economy and systemic corruption dominating in the region (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2013). Both are social mechanisms of informal redistribution and are linked to social consequences including inequality, impoverishment, social exclusion and a sense of social injustice (United Nations Development Program, 2011).

Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star, and Williams (1949) explain that the belief that one's standing is disadvantaged compared to others and the perception that the disadvantage is unjust may lead to the experience of relative deprivation. In comparison to the rest of Europe, individuals in the Western Balkans are at high risk of experiencing relative deprivation both at the group and personal level, driven by state failure to implement quality education, investment in human capital and redistributive tax-and-transfer systems, as well as inability to tackle high unemployment levels, specifically among young people (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018). The resulting wealth inequality has gravely impacted the region, predominantly translating into large emigration numbers of highly skilled workers and the formation of a tremendous talent vacuum in human capital (Vracic, 2018). This emigration trend is particularly observed among millennials, who display a lower level of loyalty

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towards their employers and do not shy away from new employment opportunities (Berger & Berger, 2015). Furthermore, considering the declining and ageing populations in the region, skill shortage is expected to rise in the near future (Vracic, 2018). This resulting skill shortage continues to affect “competitiveness, growth and economic convergence” (World Bank, 2018, p. 2) in the public and the private sphere and it poses one of the most persisting and serious challenges for businesses in the region (Deloitte Insights, 2019).

While relative deprivation may cause a lot of highly skilled workers and millennials to leave local companies, providing a considerably higher reward to these individuals may negatively impact the feeling of personal relative deprivation for the rest of the workforce. In organizational settings, employees often find themselves in a state of social competition, where relative performance outweighs the absolute team or company performance (Mishra, Barclay, & Lalumiere, 2013). Hence, many employees may not easily come to terms with the fact that a particular group of employees receive significantly higher rewards compared to them. Moreover, given that the resources that workers are fighting for are finite and bias may be present in how these resources are distributed (Berger & Berger, 2015), high levels of personal relative deprivation are likely to surface. Therefore, addressing personal relative deprivation in the region is not only important for highly skilled workers or millennials, but for the entire workforce.

Despite its presence and negative impact for businesses in the Western Balkans, the psychological construct of personal relative deprivation has never been researched in this context. While several articles and scientific papers have examined wealth or income inequality in the region (e.g. Koczan, 2016; El Ouardighi, & Somun-Kapetanovic, 2009), they mostly relied on economic indicators and macro data including GDP per capita, unemployment, etc. (Vladisavljevic, Nazarani, & Golubovic, 2017). Personal relative

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deprivation theory takes the stance that “absolute levels of deprivation only partly determine the feelings of dissatisfaction and injustice” (Pettigrew, 2016, p.10). Therefore, drawing conclusions on personal relative deprivation from macro data or economic wealth inequality indicators is an ecological fallacy, as the latter overlook unique individual characteristics that might contribute to the subjective perception of personal relative deprivation (Pettigrew, 2016).

Several outcomes of personal relative deprivation have been previously discussed in literature, including a generalized sentiment of distrust and aggression towards others and specifically towards the state or other forms of authority (European Political Strategy Centre, 2018; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018). Social psychology experiments have shown that personal relative deprivation is a predictor of both distrust and intention to rebel (Chen, Wang, Liu, Dong, Zhu, & Hou, 2017). In a situation marked by high distrust, individuals tend to have low moral expectations of others (Adams, Highhouse, & Zickar, 2010, p.39) and this may play a key role in predicting individual cooperative behavior. As the latter is a key ingredient of organizational success, it is important to address whether distrust may be at least partially responsible for explaining the relationship between personal relative deprivation and noncooperative behavior, such as passive workplace aggression.

Theoretical Background

Personal Relative Deprivation

Personal relative deprivation is a psychological concept that assumes “a subjective state that shapes emotions, cognitions, and behavior” (Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012, p.203) that causes one to perceive his relative standing as disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent (Stouffer et al., 1949). Three psychological processes

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constitute personal relative deprivation: (a) First, a cognitive comparison is made, which leads to (b) a cognitive appraisal that one of one's group is disadvantaged, and (c) these disadvantages arouse feelings of resentment and are perceived as unfair (Pettigrew, 2016).

Over the past decades, the concept of relative deprivation has been extremely valuable in the social sciences and has been considered responsible for a variety of behavioral outcomes both at the group and personal level. Personal relative deprivation theory has been integrated with other related theories such as social identity theory, social comparison theory and distributive justice theory (Walker & Smith, 2002) to name a few. Various studies have confirmed its link to behavioral outcomes like poorer physical health (Pham-Kanter, 2009), more frequent gambling (Callan, Shead, & Olson, 2011), increased intention to rebel (Chen et al., 2017), higher risk propensity (Mishra & Novakowski, 2015), higher intergroup hostility and interpersonal aggression (Smith et al., 2012), etc. Individuals that scored low on subjective socioeconomic status (SES) were generally involved in more aggressive behavior compared to individuals in medium and high SES and personal relative deprivation mediated the impact of SES on aggression (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2017). However, personal relative deprivation was only linked to increased aggression directed to the source of the deprivation. Only the ones perceived as responsible for their predicament were at risk of experiencing hostility, the noninvolved remained safe (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2016).

Passive Workplace Aggression

Personal relative deprivation is an aversive state, where the people that experience it have an immediate need to restore their sense of self or personal deservingness. Aggressive behavior, in the form of retaliation, or in extreme cases even violent behavior like delinquency are examples of that (Neilson, Pasternack, & Nuys, 2005). Aggression can be

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differentiated from violence along the three dichotomies outlined by Buss's comprehensive model of aggression (Buss, 1961). This model includes the following dimensions: (a) Physical-verbal; (b) active-passive; and (c) direct-indirect. Violence can be characterized as physical, active, and direct in nature and consists of behaviors such as sexual assault or the use of weapons, whereas aggression encompasses a wider range of behaviors, such as shouting, unfair criticism, damaging gossip, withholding resources, etc. (see Table 1). Whereas all types of violent behavior contain aggression, not all types of aggression can be classified as violence.

Table 1

Types of Aggression According to Buss's Typology (1961)

Physical-verbal dimension	Active-passive dimension	Direct
Physical	Active	Glared at in hostile manner Sexual assault Obscene gestures Homicide and nonfatal assaults with weapon
	Passive	Intentional work slowdowns Excluded from work-related social gatherings Refusing to provide needed resources Prevented from expressing self
Verbal	Active	Threats Yelling/Shouting Unfairly harsh criticism Insults, sarcasm, rude and disrespectful comments
	Passive	Refusing requests Intentionally failing to return phone calls Giving others the silent treatment Showing little empathy during difficult time

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Physical-verbal dimension	Active-passive dimension	Direct
Physical	Active	Theft Sabotage Defacing property Destruction of hiding of needed resources
	Passive	Showing up late for meetings Delaying work to make a target look bad Failing to protect other welfare Denied raise/promotion without a valid reason
Verbal	Active	Blamed for others' mistakes Talking behind target's back Spreading rumors Belittling opinions
	Passive	Failing to transmit information Failing to deny false rumors Failing to provide important feedback Failing to warn others of impending danger

Aggression can be further categorized into overt versus covert aggression; for example, certain verbal exchanges are more visible than others forms of aggression, which are more covert in nature, such as withholding needed information or resources from others (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). Another relevant distinction is between proactive or instrumental versus reactive or affective aggression. Instrumental aggression refers to “cold” aggression as means of obtaining some other desired end and there is no affect involved (Geen, 1998). For example, this type of aggression could occur in a situation where one feels that there is no other way to achieve the desired goals. According to risk sensitivity theory, individuals who are competitively disadvantaged are more likely to take higher risks to succeed, because they perceive they are less likely to achieve their goals through safer, low-

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risk means (Mishra, Barclay, & Lalumiere, 2013). Affective aggression on the other hand refers to situations where people react to actions that they feel provoked from, also characterized as “hot” aggression (Geen, 1998).

Over the past decades, workplace aggression has emerged and has become an important research topic across various disciplines (Neuman & Baron, 2005). For instance, many studies have already explored long lists of negative behaviors at work including counterproductive work behavior (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001), social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), dysfunctional, deviant, or unreliable workplace behavior (Hogan & Hogan, 1989). However, most of the research on workplace aggression has focused on affective rather than instrumental aggression, despite the fact that the latter is more prevalent in organizational settings (Neuman & Baron, 2005). Because instrumental aggression is less visible, it is also more ambiguous in interpretation, as the actor can always claim to have an alternative explanation to the behavior (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Furthermore, as these actions are not necessarily motivated by aggressive intent, researchers tend to not categorize them as instances of workplace aggression (Neuman & Baron, 2005). Employees often use these forms of aggression in the workplace in order to protest against or resist organizational policies that cannot be challenged openly (Collinson, 1994), which is consistent with risk sensitivity theory (Mishra, Barclay, & Lalumiere, 2013).

Many behavioral outcomes associated with personal relative deprivation have also been related to forms of aggression, both passive and active, but the mechanisms behind this relationship were various. For example, Mishra and Novakowski (2015) showed that personal relative deprivation predicted individual differences in key personality traits like high impulsivity, low self-control, and facets of sensation seeking, which in turn predicted different forms of aggression; for example sensation seeking predicted reactive aggression,

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i.e. showing aggression as a reaction to frustration ($r = .17$) (Miller, Zeichner, & Wilson, 2012). Furthermore, personal relative deprivation also predicted trustworthiness and legitimacy of political institutions (Smith et al., 2012) and interpersonal distrust (Chen et al., 2017), which have also been linked to forms of aggression (Cadenhead & Richman, 1996; Bies & Tripp, 1995). These variables will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Interpersonal Distrust

Interpersonal distrust is a widely discussed concept in literature that received attention from many scholars; however, not many of them seem to agree on its definition (Adams, Highhouse, & Zickar, 2015). Reiersen (2017) refers to interpersonal trust as a belief about what to expect from others, which reflects one's opinion about the trustee. According to this definition, trust is not a behavior, but "a psychological state, in which a person is willing to accept vulnerability" (Reiersen, 2017, p.438) and where the risks linked with the interdependence in a given relationship are accepted. Here, the crucial component behind trust is confidence in other individuals (Ma, Schaubroeck, & LeBlanc, 2019). Bowler, Paul, Gavin, Joplin, and Bowler (2018) categorized this psychological model of trust as process-based trust, meaning that trust is based on behavioral expectations from direct experience with others. Experience then shapes how individuals respond in future situations and may lead to the formation of predispositions or attitudes towards others. For example, Rotter (1971) suggested that people draw from their early trust related experiences to generate general beliefs about other people. These beliefs tend to form relatively stable personality characteristics that persist in time (Ma, Schaubroeck, & LeBlanc, 2019).

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While many scholars subscribe to the previous definitions of trust (Camlor & Alcover, 2012), several other definitions have gained popularity as well. Another prevalent definition is that of trust as a choice or behavior that helps individuals to act in a social world (Reiersen, 2017). Similarly, Camblor and Alcover (2012) view trust as “a mechanism to reduce vulnerability” (p.234) as means of getting by in the world. This type of trust can be often found in settings, where a large degree of social complexity is present, such as in organizational contexts (Kramer, 1999). Here, actors trust that others will behave in accordance with what is expected of them. For example, trust is based on the expectation that other members of society will behave consistently with rooted social and ethical norms, as this would capture the common interest of all actors involved (Adams, Highhouse, & Zickar, 2010). In this scenario, actors rationally choose to trust others, therefore trust is a choice and it represents one the foundations of solving collective problems successfully (Ostrom, 2003). Actors are motivated to make rational choices by determining the riskiness of a situation and take decisions that maximize expected gains or minimize expected losses from their transactions (Kramer, 1999). This view is presumably “the most influential image of trust within organizational science” (Kramer, 1999, p. 572). However, as we know from behavioral economics, human beings are not entirely rational in their decision making; in fact, they often make suboptimal decisions with regard to gains and losses that are driven by emotional and social influences in their environment (Kahneman, 2003). Indeed, trust as a rational choice is criticized because of failing to consider these types of influences (Kramer, 1999).

One such social and emotional phenomena that could potentially impact choices on trust is that of personal relative deprivation. For example, Alesina & Ferarra (2002) showed that income inequality is related to the level of interpersonal trust that individuals feel in

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relation to others, as severe income inequality makes people more likely to refuse to trust other members of society (Uslaner, 2010). Personal relative deprivation and distrust were also closely related, and the former had a strong depressive influence on trustworthiness (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). At the same time, distrust was also a predictor of intention to rebel (Chen et al., 2017) as well as lower prosocial behavior and higher aggression (Cadenhead & Richman, 1996), suggesting that trust may play a role in whether the feeling of personal relative deprivation causes people to engage in high-risk, passive-aggressive strategies to cope with various situations.

Organizational Distrust

Research on interpersonal trust lays the foundations for studying organizational trust, which has been linked to a myriad of positive organizational outcomes, including enhanced organizational citizenship behaviors, decreased counterproductive work behavior, higher group performance, etc. (Bowler et al., 2018). Organizational trust rises from the nature of interactions between employees and organizational representatives (Olson, Nelson, & Parayitam, 2006) and can be defined by using the two main definitions of trust that were discussed above: On the one hand, trust on organizations is understood as expectations about the reliability of the organizations' statements and commitments in general, which is largely shaped by history-based processes during employees' lives (psychological model). On the other hand, it is based on the morally directed trust perspective, which considers the extent to which employees expect organizational goals and intentions to be consistent with social norms (Adams, Highhouse, & Zickar, 2010), enabling them to make the decision to trust the organization (trust as a choice).

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Following this theoretical assumption, in order to generate organizational trust among their employees, organizations need to be perceived as reliable in relation to their commitments and fulfill the basic requirement of respecting social norms, which in many cases are legally regulated. While the former could also be regulated to a certain extent – for example through a formal employment contract (e.g. contracts can outline what is expected of the employees and what they will receive in return) – employees perception of an organization's reliability can also be highly dependent on the violation or fulfillment of the psychological contract between the parties. For instance, if employees perceive their rewards to be unfitting to their performance because they feel that they are entitled to more, which goes hand in hand with the experience personal relative deprivation (Crosby, 1984), this might lead to feelings of distrust towards the organization (Rani, Arain, Kumar, & Shaikh, 2018).

In this study, organizational distrust is not only discussed as a consequence of personal relative deprivation but also as a potential predictor of passive workplace aggression and as a mediator of the relationship between the two variables. After organizational trust has been violated, i.e. promises are broken, formal contracts are breached or employees feel lied to, they often engage in retrospective cognitions or rumination where they revisit the scene and find more personalistic attribution of guilt, thus reinforcing the blame on the perpetrator, i.e. organizational representatives that are held responsible for the violation. Employees may then develop revenge fantasies which they sometimes act upon, such as bad-mouthing, working less, withholding help or support, etc. (Bies & Tripp, 1995). Therefore, organizational distrust may also be considered to be a predictor of passive workplace behavior.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, personal relative deprivation is more likely to lead to aggressive behavior when the aggression is directed towards the source of deprivation (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2016; Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2017). While this study is not interested in the directionality of passive workplace aggression, this finding raises the question whether personal relative deprivation leads to higher passive workplace aggression via organizational distrust with a stronger effect compared to when interpersonal distrust is used as a mediator, as workplace aggression may be more justified in employees' eyes' when it is tied to distrust towards the source of deprivation.

Overview of the Current Study

The aim of this study was to expand personal relative deprivation theory to organizational contexts in the Western Balkans by examining the relationship of personal relative deprivation to the previously discussed constructs: Passive workplace aggression, interpersonal distrust and organizational distrust. Previous literature confirmed personal relative deprivation as a predictor of interpersonal distrust (Uslaner, 2010; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and aggressive behavior (Chen et al., 2017; Cadenhead & Richman, 1996) and the latter was also predicted by interpersonal distrust (Smith et al., 2012). Therefore, the first goal was to explore whether interpersonal distrust mediates the relationship between personal relative deprivation and aggression in the workplace. The outcome of aggression was modified to be better adjusted to organizational settings, therefore passive workplace aggression was used instead, as it is a more common form of aggression in this context (Neuman & Baron, 2005).

H₁: Interpersonal distrust mediates the relationship between personal relative deprivation and passive workplace aggression.

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Similarly, personal relative deprivation was discussed as a predictor of organizational distrust (Rani et al., 2018), which in turn affects passive workplace behavior (Bies & Tripp, 1995). Therefore, the second goal was to test organizational distrust as a potential mediator between the main predictor and the outcome.

H₂: Organizational distrust mediates the relationship between personal relative deprivation and passive workplace aggression.

Furthermore, it was expected for the mediating effect of organizational distrust to be larger than interpersonal distrust because the former refers to distrust on the organization, which represents the source of deprivation (Greitermeyer & Sagioglou, 2016; Greitermeyer & Sagioglou 2017). Interpersonal distrust however is conceptualized as a more general form of distrust that is not necessarily tied to any source of deprivation.

H₃: The second mediation model with organizational distrust as a mediator will yield a higher indirect effect compared to the first mediation model with interpersonal distrust as a mediator.

Much of the literature discussed in the theoretical section used general measures of aggression, such as the State Hostility Scale (Anderson, Deuser, & DeNeve, 1995) or measures of risk-taking tendencies, such as the Domain Specific Risk-Taking Scale (Blais & Weber, 2006), which do not specify what exact type of behavior is expected to result from the experience of personal relative deprivation. Therefore, in order to draw a clearer picture as to what type of aggression may manifest itself in relation to the main predictor, the variable passive workplace aggression behavior was split into its verbal and physical components, which were further tested as outcomes in the mediation models. This part of the study was entirely explorative.

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Since the focus of the study was to measure several variables in a given large sample size at the same time (discussed in the section below) and to test multiple hypotheses, a cross-sectional design was employed for the study.

Method

Participants

The target population included private local organizations in the Western Balkans across various industries. 383 participants were recruited from nine companies from four countries. Two were located in Belgrade, Serbia, two in Pristina, Kosovo, four in Tirana, Albania, and one in Skopje, North Macedonia. The organizations operate in areas like IT software, human resources, construction, distribution, etc., providing a heterogeneous group of knowledge workers across various countries in the region. 212 participants completed the questionnaire successfully. In order to exclude participants that gave invalid responses, the Mahalanobis distance was measured for all the variables, which helped identify four participants as multivariate outliers ($p < .001$), who were therefore eliminated from the study. The statistical analysis was conducted based on the data recorded from the remaining 208 participants. The participation rate largely surpasses the minimum calculated sample size of 104 using G*Power with a medium effect to achieve 80% power.

Procedure

A preliminary list of 15 potential companies was created beforehand and each of them were contacted via e-mail. The companies were selected based on two main criteria: (a) They needed to contain a reasonable amount of knowledge workers, and (b) ease of access. Only nine responded with an interest to participate. First, the study details and invitation were sent

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to a human resources representative, who was instructed to forward the survey in a random manner to allow for the cluster sample to be as representative as possible. Participants were not provided with a cover story, but the study description was vaguely explained, and participants were debriefed after they completed the survey.

Measures

Personal relative deprivation measure. When selecting the appropriate measures for the study, one of main considerations was to select tools that are adapted for organizational settings. For measuring personal relative deprivation, a modified version of Personal Relative Deprivation Scale (PRDS) by Callan, Shead, and Olson (2011), which aimed to improve the internal consistency of the questionnaire was employed. The next modification involved rewording the statements so that they are applicable in organizational settings; for example, the statement ‘I feel privileged compared to other people like me’ was replaced by ‘I feel privileged compared to other people like me in the organization’ and were rated using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). One important characteristic of this scale is its ambiguity in relation to the type of deprivation, be it financial deprivation, social deprivation, deprivation in relation to opportunities for growth, etc. It allows participants to ascribe their own value to deprivation, allowing for a more organic and generalized measure of the construct. Although we cannot know with certainty what type of deprivation participants are referring to in their responses, this scale is more appropriate as organizational rewards may encompass a wider range of both monetary and nonmonetary gains that may contribute to one’s subjective feeling of personal relative deprivation.

Passive workplace aggression measure. Passive workplace aggression was measured by using The Workplace Aggression Tolerance Questionnaire’s (WATQ) measure

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of passive workplace behavior, based on Buss's Typology of workplace aggression (Buss, 1961; Coombs & Holladay, 2004). Because overt, proactive workplace aggression is rare (Neuman & Baron, 2005), aggressive behavior categorized as direct and active, either physical or verbal were omitted from the survey. The remaining categories included physical-passive-direct, physical-passive-indirect, verbal-passive-direct, and verbal-passive-indirect. The introductory question 'How often do you engage in the following behaviors at work?' was followed by statements like 'purposefully work very slowly' or 'fail to send the manager or colleagues information they need'. They were rated using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*).

Interpersonal distrust measure. Interpersonal distrust was measured by using a three-item scale of Interpersonal Distrust (IPDS) developed by Ma (2012). Similar to the PRDS, these items were also reworded to fit within organizational contexts; for example, 'people do more and more hypocritical things in our society' was replaced by 'employees do more and more hypocritical things on our organization'. The statements were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

Organizational distrust measure. Organizational distrust was measured by using the 13-item Corporate Distrust Scale (CDS) from Adams, Highhouse, and Zickar (2010), where the word 'corporations' was replaced with 'organizations' and the statements were modified to refer to the participants' attitude towards their respective employer as opposed to the general attitude towards corporations. The reworked version included items like 'people who run the organization will lie if doing so will increase company profits', 'the organization does not consider the needs of their employees when making business decisions' and 'the organization exploits its workers'. These items were also rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

Social desirability measure. Social Desirability Scale was included in the survey in order to control for social desirability, particularly considering the inclusion of the measures of passive workplace aggression and organizational distrust, which could induce participants to be dishonest from fear of being exposed. To this end, the ten-item Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale short form was used (MCSD-SF). This is a reworked version of the original 33-item scale that offers the practical benefit of distributing ten as opposed to 33 items (Vesteinsdottir, Reips, Joinson, & Thorsdottir, 2017).

Demographic information and control variables. Other covariates included variables like salary, age, gender, education, and English proficiency. This was important because the questionnaires were distributed in English, which if translated could risk modifying the intended meaning of the questions.

Results

The statistical analyses were conducted by using SPSS 26 and the PROCESS 3.4 add-on by Andrew F. Hayes. SPSS was used to examine descriptive statistics and to perform the correlation analysis, whereas PROCESS model 4 was used to perform the mediation analyses. Because of the suspected high collinearity between interpersonal and organizational distrust, two mediation models were performed as opposed to a multiple mediation model that would incorporate both mediators.

First, the sample characteristics based on the demographic data of gender, age, education, salary, and English proficiency were explored. As shown on Table 2, the majority of the participants were female (57.2%), however the sample still remained relatively equally distributed with regard to gender. The most prevalent age group was 26 - 35 (52%) followed by 36 - 45 (25.5%), consisting mostly of millennials. More than half of the participants

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reported having a Master's degree (61.5%) indicating a high overall education level, however most of the participants reported being in a relatively low monthly net salary category of EUR 400-600 (31.3%), followed by a medium category of EUR 600-900 (26.4%). Finally, more than half reported having an advanced English proficiency (52%), suggesting that most participants should have had no trouble filling out the questionnaire.

Table 2

Sample Characteristics

Demographic variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	119	57.2
Male	89	42.8
Age		
≤ 25	32	15.3
26 - 35	108	52
36 - 45	53	25.5
46 - 55	10	4.8
56 – 65	5	2.4
Education		
Bachelor	59	28.4
Master	128	61.5
MBA/PHD	6	2.9
Other	15	7.2
Monthly Net Salary (EUR)		
<400	28	13.5
400 - 600	65	31.3
600 - 900	55	26.4
900 - 1500	39	18.7
1500<	21	10.1
English proficiency		
Poor	7	3.3
Intermediate	66	31.7
Advanced	108	52
Excellent	27	13

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The correlation analysis (see Table 3) revealed positive significant correlations between personal relative deprivation and the variables organizational distrust ($r = .409, p = .000$), interpersonal distrust ($r = .187, p = .007$), and passive workplace aggression ($r = .156, p = .024$), providing further evidence to the big body of research linking personal relative deprivation to aggression (Chen et al., 2017; Geitermeyer & Sagioglou, 2017), as well as distrust (Uslaner, 2010; Chen et al., 2017). Passive workplace aggression also correlated significantly with organizational distrust ($r = .453, p = .000$), but surprisingly not with interpersonal distrust. Reasonably, the two types of distrust also correlated with each other ($r = .395, p = .000$), as the CDS was based on the theoretical conceptualization of interpersonal trust (Bowler et al., 2018). Personal relative deprivation correlated significantly with physical aggression ($r = .214, p = .002$), but surprisingly not with verbal aggression. Both types of aggression correlated significantly with organizational distrust ($r = .437, p = .000$ for physical aggression and $r = .402, p = .000$ for verbal aggression), but neither correlated significantly with interpersonal distrust.

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Table 3

Correlation Analysis

Measures	Mean	SD	Age	Salary	Education	PRD	OD	ID	PaWA	PWA	VW A
Age	2.27	.865	1								
Salary	2.81	1.188	.394**	1							
Education	1.89	.769	.059	-.023	1						
PRD	2.73	.641	-.026	-.277**	-.069	1					
OD	1.81	.707	-.061	-.073	.025	.409**	1				
ID	2.95	.868	-.187**	-.016	-.048	.187**	.395**	1			
PaWA	1.41	.505	.033	.023	.077	.156*	.453**	.128	1		
PWA	1.39	.526	.087	.021	.070	.214**	.437**	.089	.896**	1	
VWA	1.43	.566	-.016	.014	.071	.092	.402**	.130	..937**	.687**	1

Note. PRD = Personal relative deprivation; OD = Organizational distrust; ID = Interpersonal distrust; PaWA = Passive workplace aggression;

PWA = Physical passive workplace Aggression; VWA = Verbal passive workplace aggression

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

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Prior to the mediation analyses, the assumptions of linear regression were tested. As no drastic deviation from normality were detected, the normality assumption was met. Homoscedasticity was also accepted for all outcomes and no multicollinearity was detected. The first mediation analysis included interpersonal distrust as the mediator between personal relative deprivation and passive workplace aggression (see Figure 1) and yielded no indirect effect (indirect effect = .001, 95% CLa CI: -.004 – .051). Personal relative deprivation positively predicted interpersonal distrust, as expected, however interpersonal distrust did not predict workplace aggression, therefore the data does not provide support for the first hypothesis of the study. The direct effect was weak and only marginally significant ($r = 0.28$, $p = .0509$). When organizational distrust was used as a mediator (see Figure 2), a weak effect was present (indirect effect = .038, 95% BCa CI: .023 – .058), confirming the second hypothesis as well as making the third hypothesis redundant, as organizational distrust was the only variable that partially explained the relationship between personal relative deprivation and workplace aggression. This analysis revealed no direct effect of personal relative deprivation on passive workplace aggression. When the variables age, salary, and social desirability were included in the model as covariates, no changes were noticed, suggesting that these variables did not have confounding effects on the mediation models.

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Figure 1

Mediation Model with Interpersonal Distrust as the Mediator



Note. **Effect is significant at the 0.01 level

Figure 2

Mediation Model with Organizational Distrust as the Mediator



Note. **Effect is significant at the 0.01 level

The next part of the analysis involved splitting the outcome into physical and verbal passive workplace aggression. When interpersonal distrust was used as a mediator, the indirect effect was detected on neither the physical (indirect effect = .002, 95% BCa CI: -.003 – .008) nor the verbal component (indirect effect = .005, 95% BCa CI: -.001 – .013). An interesting observation was made with regard to the direct effect however, where it was revealed that the significance of the direct relationship differed depending on the type of passive-aggressive behavior. As shown in Figure 3, there was a significant direct relationship present when physical passive workplace aggression was the outcome ($r = .042, p = .003$), which was not observed with verbal passive workplace aggression (see Figure 4). While the direct effect was larger with the physical component compared to the original outcome in Figure 1, the difference was not profound.

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Figure 3

Mediation Model with Interpersonal Distrust as the Mediator and Physical Passive

Workplace Aggression as the Outcome



Note. **Effect is significant at the 0.01 level

Figure 4

Mediation Model with Interpersonal Distrust as the Mediator and Verbal Passive Workplace

Aggression as the Outcome



Note. **Effect is significant at the 0.01 level

Finally, personal relative deprivation indirectly predicted both verbal (indirect effect = .035, 95% BCa CI: .019 – .054) and physical passive workplace aggression (indirect effect = .040, 95% BCa CI: .023 – .060) via organizational distrust. However, no direct effect was present for either outcomes (see Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5

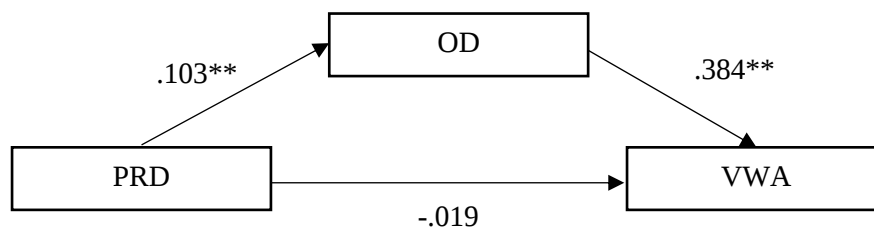
Mediation Model with Organizational Distrust as the Mediator and Physical Passive Workplace Aggression as the Outcome



Note. **Effect is significant at the 0.01 level

Figure 6

Mediation Model with Organizational Distrust as the Mediator and Verbal Passive Workplace Aggression as the Outcome



Note. **Effect is significant at the 0.01 level

Discussion

The findings indicated that organizational distrust mediated the relationship between personal relative deprivation and passive workplace aggression, as well as the relationship between personal relative deprivation and both verbal and physical components of passive workplace aggression. Interpersonal distrust however mediated none of these relationships. Overall, it seems that personal relative deprivation is an antecedent of distrust, both at the interpersonal and organizational level, confirming previous research (Wilkinson & Pickett,

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2007; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Personal relative deprivation may as a result not only cause employees to distrust their employer, but it may also lead to the formation of dispositional trust, depending on the duration and intensity of the experience personal relative deprivation. The more often individuals experience personal relative deprivation, the more it will fuel distrust, and the longer they are exposed to distrust, the higher the chances that they will generalize their distrust (Adams, Highhouse, & Zickar, 2010). However, the underlying mechanisms through which personal relative deprivation leads to long-term dispositional distrust need to be more thoroughly scrutinized in future research, as the latter represents a more permanent form of distrust that may be harder to manage in real life compared to non-dispositional interpersonal distrust.

The link between personal relative deprivation and passive workplace behavior was notably not confirmed in this study, with the exception of a weak effect of personal relative deprivation on physical passive workplace aggression. One potential reason for why the model with the verbal passive aggression outcome was insignificant could be due to the item contents, which reflected a more difficult form of aggression to implement; for example, ignoring others when they are reaching out, which refers to verbal passive workplace aggression may be more obvious to detect compared to leaving the room when the manager enters, which represents physical passive workplace aggression (see Appendix A). Moreover, given that communication is key in any collaborative organization, refusing to verbally engage with others may have a direct impact on job performance, which may in turn affect rewards and personal relative deprivation levels. The difficulty of this interpretation however lies in the assumption that employees are aware of the emotions that they feel and that they understand how their feelings and emotions link to what they think, do or say, which is not necessarily the case with everyone (Olson, Nelson, & Parayitam, 2006).

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The study provides evidence that personal relative deprivation leads to passive workplace aggression via organizational distrust, meaning that when individuals feel personal relative deprivation at work, this may lead to a sense of organizational distrust, which drives individuals to engage in passive workplace behavior. This seems to be true for both physical and verbal passive workplace aggression. Although personal relative deprivation also predicted interpersonal distrust, the latter did not lead to passive workplace behavior, therefore the second mediation model was not confirmed in this study. One reason for this could be that when personal relative deprivation fuels interpersonal distrust, the attribution of guilt is missing, giving employees no motive to engage in passive workplace aggression. When corporate distrust is present however, employees may be more inclined to blame their organizations; therefore, when employees' distrust is oriented towards their organization, i.e. the source of deprivation (Geitermeyer & Sagioglou, 2016; Greitermeyer & Sagioglou, 2017), they may have a stronger motive to engage in passive workplace aggression.

One important remark here is that the variable passive workplace aggression did not measure aggression towards the organization, rather aggression as an act that aimed to overcome the disadvantages associated with one's perception of personal relative deprivation, i.e. to make others look bad or impede their performance to create the impression that one is better than the rest, in line with risk sensitivity theory (Mishra, Barclay, & Lalumiere, 2013). Therefore, the aim was not to replicate previous findings (Greitermeyer & Sagioglou, 2016; Greitermeyer & Sagioglou, 2017) related to increased aggression towards the source of deprivation. In other words, the interest was not to explore the directionality of passive workplace aggression, rather whether more passive workplace aggression was present when distrust towards the organization was fueled by personal relative deprivation.

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Noteworthy is also that the majority of the sample constituted of millennials and more than half of the participants reported having a Master's degree. Considering that, we know we are dealing with a highly educated workforce, who on one hand are likely less loyal to their employer (Berger & Berger, 2015) and have little restraint to move around the marketplace, and on the other hand may have higher entitlements with regard to reward, reinforcing the feeling of personal relative deprivation even more (Crosby, 1984). Assuming that our sample is representative of the population in organizations in the Western Balkans, it is therefore extremely important for organizations in the region to address personal relative deprivation present in their workforce.

In response to that, two types of recommendations are offered. First, it is crucial to understand the root of the feeling of personal relative deprivation that employees may experience, i.e. why employees experience it in the first place. A good starting place for management to do so would be to first understand how employees determine the causes of outcomes or behaviors, for example whether any type of attribution error such as self-serving bias – internalizing successes and externalizing failures (Olson, Nelson, & Parayitam, 2006) – is in place among the workforce. If such biases were at large, this could potentially impact employees' perception of distributive (in)justice. Therefore, exploring these biases would represent an attempt to understand whether the feeling of personal relative deprivation is rooted in objective distributive injustice or whether it is affected by other present psychological mechanisms. Only after understanding this can management take effective measures to address the issue. In the event that organizations deem personal relative deprivation claims to be justified for a significant portion of their workforce, they can combine both monetary and nonmonetary rewards to achieve a balanced approach without depleting their limited financial resources.

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The second recommendation relates to exploring ways in which the relationship between the feeling of personal relative deprivation and organizational distrust can be weakened in the workplace. This is specifically crucial in a competitive organizational environment, where eliminating the perception of personal relative deprivation may be possible only to a certain extent. Therefore, organizations need to find other ways through which they can reduce the indirect effect of personal relative deprivation on passive workplace aggression. For example, Olson, Nelson, and Parayitam (2006) identified several positive organizational influences which trigger constructive sensemaking processes within individuals, i.e. how individuals make sense of the organizational events and conditions they encounter. The first influence refers to fair and effective control mechanisms, such as clear and transparent goal-setting tools that clearly link input to output. These may include tools like management by objectives (MBO), total quality management (TQM) or more recently, Doerr's and Page's highly transparent objective key results tool (OKR) (2018). The second influence relates to informal social controls, such as established norms of treating others fairly and humanely, communicating politely and generally behaving in a civil manner with others. Last but not least, organizations need to facilitate an environment of social support, which gives employees the opportunity to reassess their view of the situation (Olson, Nelson, & Parayitam, 2006) and may even influence employees to stop viewing others as competitors that may diminish common resources, but rather as collaborators in reaching common organizational and personal goals. Future research can focus on integrating variables like social support, or various control mechanisms into moderated mediation models and see whether they weaken or even eliminate the positive relationship between personal relative deprivation and organizational distrust, which could in turn break the indirect link between personal relative deprivation and passive workplace aggression.

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Addressing personal relative deprivation is an extremely important endeavor that organizations in the Western Balkans need to take seriously, not only if they wish to retain and attract skilled personnel, but also to avoid slowdowns or impediments to performance, which will likely suffer if employees exhibit distrust or passive workplace aggression. In today's globalized, highly competitive market environments, organizations need to retain their competitive edge not only with regard to local competitors but also international ones. Therefore, the findings and recommendations of this study attempt to inspire organizational leaders to create constructive organizational mechanisms that facilitate healthy competition among its members by not only directly addressing personal relative deprivation in their workforce, but also by mitigating its impact on negative organizational outcomes.

Limitations

The limitations of the study relate to its methodology. The survey distribution was delegated to the respective HR professionals, who may or may not have followed the provided instructions to randomize the survey distribution. The possibility that daily pressures or indifference to the study may have led these professionals to distribute the questionnaire inadequately is not excluded. However, it is hoped that given the large sample, representativity is maintained to a certain extent.

The second methodological difficulty lies in the fact that the questionnaire was distributed in English, which is not native to any of the participants. Therefore, it remains unclear whether the presented terminology was understood the way it was intended. Nevertheless, the study controlled for this limitation by including the variable English proficiency in the questionnaire, which did not seem to affect the statistical results.

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Finally, a cross-sectional design is not adequate for determining the causality of the relationships between the variables. In order to understand more about this, future studies need to conduct experiments in controlled settings in order to understand whether personal relative deprivation causes distrust and/or passive workplace aggression. The controversy here however lies in the fact that laboratory experiments would likely represent a vague reflection of reality, whereas in organizational settings it would be difficult to control confounding variables. Perhaps a reasonable alternative would be to measure the causal relationship between personal relative deprivation and negative organizational outcomes in a longitudinal experimental format, which naturally also comes with challenges, such as long-term access difficulties.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire items

Personal Relative Deprivation Scale

1. I feel deprived when I think about what I have compared to what other people like me in the organization have.
2. I feel privileged compared to other people like me in the organization.
3. I feel resentful when I see how prosperous other people like me in this organization seem to be.
4. When I compare what I have with what others like me in the organization have, I realize that I am quite well off.
5. I feel dissatisfied with what I have compared to what other people like me in the organization have.

Interpersonal Distrust

1. Colleagues at work take advantage of each other.
2. If you aren't careful at work, you'll suffer losses.
3. Employees do more and more hypocritical things in our organization.
4. Even the closest colleague can't be trusted in the organization.

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Corporate Distrust Scale

1. The organization is not respectful of laws.
2. The organization does not accept accountability for its actions.
3. People who run the organization will lie if doing so will increase company profits.
4. The organization does not care about acting ethically.
5. The organization will break laws if they can make more money from it.
6. The organization puts its own interests above the public's interest.
7. The organization is driven by greed.
8. The organization cares only about money.
9. The organization wants power at any cost.
10. The organization takes a lot more than it gives.
11. The organization intentionally deceives the public.
12. The organization does not consider the needs of their employees when making business decisions.
13. The organization exploits its workers.

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Workplace Aggression Tolerance Questionnaire (WATQ)

Physical-Passive-Direct

1. Purposefully work very slowly.
2. Leave whenever the manager enters the area.
3. Interrupt others when they try to speak.

Physical-Passive-Indirect

4. Show up late to meetings.
5. Delay work to make others look bad.

Verbal-Passive-Direct

6. Fail to return phone calls.
7. Refuse to talk to others.
8. Refuse requests from others.

Verbal-Passive-Indirect

9. Fail to send the manager or colleagues information they need.
10. Fail to warn the manager or colleagues about a potential problem.
11. Fail to deny false rumors about managers or colleagues.

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