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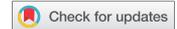


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The Modern Face of Workplace Incivility

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The goal of this special issue is to answer the question “What does workplace incivility look like in the current organization?” The focus of the special issue is on exploring workplace incivility specifically in the context of organizational changes and evolving workplace structures and environments along with incivility’s impact on the individual employees, their mental schemas and behaviors. This special issue provides a myriad of perspectives on the modern face of workplace incivility: theoretically, methodologically and empirically.

Workplace incivility, “a low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 453), has become an issue of concern within the American society (Carter, 1998; Marks, 1996; Morris, 1996). Bad or rude behavior encompassing impoliteness, with diminished use of basic courtesies such as “please” and “thank you,” along with abrupt and curt language when using technological communications with a singular lack of respect for leaders and colleagues, can all be called mundane and minor but can still have consequences that are overwhelming. Behaviors constituting belittling, harassing, interrupting and ignoring others, spreading rumors and gossip, or sending nasty e-mails to colleagues all could increase employee stress and turnover and reduce overall organizational productivity. Even though separate from overt hostile behaviors and actions such as sexual harassment, workplace bullying, aggression, and violence (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; Hershcovis, 2011; Kunkel, Carnevale, & Henderson, 2015), incivility not only creates unpleasant office environments but negatively impacts the company’s profitability, reputation, and corporate image. Prevalent in all types of organizations ranging from medical firms to public companies, national sports organizations, hospitals, academia, and volunteer and nonprofit organizations (Pearson & Porath, 2005), this “dark side” of organizations has been shown to impact roughly 98% of the workforce, with half of the workforce experiencing

incivility at least on a weekly basis (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Since its emergence in the 1990s as an organizational behavior research topic, workplace incivility, with its moral and ethical implications, has received considerable scholarly attention (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). However, increasing complexities in the form of globalization, economic, political and technological changes resulting in new organizational structures, diverse working cultures, dissolution of traditional norms, demanding jobs with no stability, and fusion between home and office boundaries (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2005) argue for another “look” at workplace incivility. This special issue aims to give this new look at incivility. Reflecting on past research, this issue looks to identify the limitations for scenarios and problems currently existing in organizations, offering new thoughts, guidelines, and suggestions to meet the future challenges facing organizations. Investigating and understanding workplace incivility from the two angles of individual and personal antecedents, this special issue seeks to unveil the modern face of workplace incivility.

Personal antecedents

In her book *Understanding Everyday Incivility: Why Are They So Rude?*, Shelly Lane (2017) defines the idea of civility as being the behaviors that demonstrate responsibility, respect, and restraint. With this idea in mind, one can naturally assume that a lack of these facets can thus be defined as uncivil behaviors; however, this simple definition does not provide enough information as to what is occurring in today’s society on the individual level. As incivility increases, understanding what personal antecedents may be the root cause can shed light on this ever-growing societal issue. When looking at the rise of incivility from a personal antecedent viewpoint, changes in communication, perceptions, and intellectual capital may offer insight.

Incivility today may be best identified as a form of poor communication—or at least communication skills. Though it was not so terribly long ago, many people have forgotten the society prior to the AOL, Prodigy, and Yahoo chatrooms of the 1990s (Dewey, 2014). With the development of these “anonymous” forums came the ability to cast off responsibility, respect, and restraint in what one was saying to others, putting into motion a downward spiral of insults, gossip, lies, and even grammatical corrections. While these communications were anonymous, their modern-day counterparts are seemingly less so. Within the advent of social media, individuals predominately had no choice but to self-identify in both name and image (although this practice seems to have gotten less so in recent years), but rather than causing an improvement in communication, these forums seemed to open the floodgates for uncivil behaviors due to the relative lack of consequences (Dutton, 1996; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Papacharissi, 2002). At some point, it is logical to assume that these uncivil online behaviors have manifested in offline, face-to-face communication.

While on the surface it might seem as though the open channels of communication have fundamentally changed people, a more plausible explanation might be that these channels have simply allowed human nature to come forward. *Ethos*, which commonly refers to the manner in which character reveals itself through language (Baumlin, 2001), would indicate that the incivility seen today is not caused by the open channels of communication but rather the incivility is a result of human nature simply having the channels to reveal itself. If one subscribes to the Darwinian philosophy of evolution (Darwin, 1872/1965), the “fight or flight” tendency of human nature would only serve to thrive in the open channels that social media provide, allowing one to more fully defend oneself from ideological, political, and personal attacks. While executed in a defensive manner, the repercussions of these actions have only served to increase what the receiver deems uncivil.

Another interesting perspective on the breakdown of civility is offered by researchers Lane and McCourt (2013), who offer that the rise in incivility may be the result of the changes in societal norms that in turn have caused a lack of understanding of what is and is not appropriate. Incivility is inherently affected by perception (Sliter, Withrow, & Jex, 2015), and thus in today’s hypercompetitive world, those on the receiving end of the behavior—the perceivers—may simply not know how to appropriately categorize the behaviors of others. Lane and McCourt also state “that confusion about behavioral and rhetorical norms may influence

perceptions of uncivil behavior” (2013, p. 26). As norms change, so too must the decision-making process of determining what is and is not uncivil behavior; however, what is unknown is whether the increase in incivility is due to heuristic decision making (the perceiver already experiences the behavior and categorized it as uncivil) or satisficing (the perceiver elects to call the behavior uncivil rather than analyzing it for its true meaning). One’s motivation and potential lack of understanding must be considered in defining today’s civility norms and this certainly serves as an area in great need of deeper research.

A final viewpoint on the rise of personal incivility might be found in the idea of intellectual capital. Generally defined as the knowledge, skills, and attributes that work together within an organization to create competitive advantage (e.g., Harris, 2000; Klem & Prusak, 1994; Ulrich, 1996), intellectual capital might not be the first thought one has when thinking about incivility; however, a plausible link can be seen. In today’s society, power dynamics are highly in play in which individuals will abuse others due to power associated with their rank (defined as *ranksism* by Fuller & Gerloff, 2008). While some individuals move themselves forward through hard work and positive contributions, others achieve their power through bringing others down, creating a situation that Fuller (2010) refers to as “somebodies” and “nobodies.” Again, in these hypercompetitive times, it is not inconceivable that as pressure to gain power increases, so too do the behaviors aimed at making power more attainable—even if those behaviors are viewed as being uncivil.

Organizational antecedents

Pearson et al. (2005) suggest that organizational changes and pressures are leading causes responsible for rising levels of workplace incivility. Contemporary working life has been exposed to numerous organizational changes such as new types of employment, uncertainty brought about by downsizing, mergers, and acquisitions, restructuring, shifts in the former career development model, flexible and alternative working arrangements (i.e., compressed time and deadlines), and altered psychological contracts (i.e., lack of job security and employability) (Holm, Torkelson, & Backstrom, 2016; Pearson et al., 2005). To new forms of technological communications, work and information overloads resulting in higher levels of employee stress and anxiety, and harassment and discrimination (with continuance of glass ceiling), rising levels of incivility can also be attributed. Other suggested causes include increased levels of diversity in corporations in the form

of generational differences, gender differences, and multiracial employees, leading to interpersonal misunderstandings and differences (Blau & Andersson, 2005).

To further elucidate, the gig economy has brought into existence temporary and flexible jobs, independent contracts, and freelancers instead of full-time employees. These freelancers have not gone through the organizational socialization process and therefore are not fully integrated into the norms and culture of the organization, with a result of lessened (or nonexistent) organizational commitment. The potential for uncivil behavior also stems from these employees having less social support and thus feeling marginalized and isolated, and lacking proper acknowledgment for their contributions. This group would also be inclusive of volunteers and other nonpaid employees working in nonprofit organizations (Holm et al., 2016).

Furthermore, contemporary organizations are embracing technologically advanced communication modalities in their daily organizational functioning, generating a new form of online incivility such as cyber-incivility, incivility via text messages, instant messaging, and e-mails. As with the personal antecedents, this asynchronous form of communication provides a false sense of anonymity, making it easier to be uncivil (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014). Sending blunt or terse e-mails, flatly ignoring e-mails, or replying with incomplete information creates organizational conflict, thereby leading to “hateful attacks on [one’s] character, motivations, physical attributes and intellectual abilities” (Dickerson, 2005, p. 51). Cyber-incivility, the influence of social media, e-mails, text messages, and other computer-mediated interactions on employee rudeness, therefore demands further research and analysis.

Finally, the levels of diversity within organizations has increased (Githens, 2011), seeing greater diversity concerning race, gender (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2013), and sexual orientation (Zugelder & Champagne, 2018), along with generational changes (such as the changes in outlook, perspective, and opinion between Generation Y and Millennials) bringing communication issues, interpersonal conflicts, and blurred managerial perceptions about the organization (Bond & Pyle, 1998; Cortina, 2008; Githens, 2011; Kern & Grandey, 2009). Diversity could also create situations of gameplay—politics and leadership styles further exacerbating incivility among employees in an organization. In fact, incivility against minorities (i.e., gender, racial, sexual orientations, etc.) are not just “temporary aberrations” but rather deep-rooted psychological beliefs of individuals with deep rooted prejudices. These beliefs need to be “treated”

and exposed for creation of more congenial and healthy workplaces (Foucault, 1978).

Content of special issue

The first article in this special issue, titled “From Cyber to E-Mail Incivility: A Psychometric Assessment and Measure Validation Study” and authored by Kimberly McCarthy, Rajnandini Pillai, and Michael Steigerwald, looks at how e-mail as a form of organizational communication is often misused by employees. This article examines the limitations of the current scale used to measure cyber incivility and designs a new scale with improved psychometric properties to measure rude e-mails, allowing for new research boundaries of workplace incivility.

The second article covers incivility experienced by volunteers, a group so far singularly ignored by the workplace incivility literature. “Resilience Only Gets You So Far: Volunteer Incivility and Burnout,” written by Sheriden Trent and Joseph A. Allen, looks at volunteers and incivility, and the burnout caused by the incivility experienced by these workers. The authors use COR theory to hypothesize that environmental stressors lead to burnouts experienced by volunteers. Their study also suggests that through resilient coping, volunteers can effectively overcome burnout resulting from incivility.

The third article of this special issue, titled “What Is Workplace Incivility? An Investigation of Employee Relational Schemas,” written by Jonathan Samosh, investigates employee relational schemas. According to the author, workplace incivility studies have failed to critically consider the role of employees’ cognitive representations or relational schemas. However, as the author argues, cognitive representations of social interactions and relationships influence the actions and behavior of employees, and to comprehensively understand incivility, it is essential to further explore relational schemas of incivility. The article provides in-depth theoretical conceptualizations, along with qualitative perspectives using an inductive phenomenological analysis, to generate new perspectives on employees’ relational schemas and to allow for the development of appropriate interventions that would prevent workplace incivility in the future.

“Incivility and Beyond at the Top Management Team Level” by JoAnne O. Martinez and Julia Eisenberg serves as the final article. The motivation behind this article stems from the authors’ view that academic research has not examined the effects of incivility at the top of the organization. Through interviews and analysis of 15 top management team members, the

authors explore the effects that incivility has on these individuals who most often carry the highest levels of responsibility in the organization, as well as setting the standards for behavior and culture. The authors' findings indicate that those at the top tend to be mostly analytical in their responses, which influences their behaviors.

In addition to the presented research articles, this special issue also offers an essay entitled "On Observers' Conjunctive Attributions and Blame for Workplace Mistreatment" by James M. Wilkerson and Janet C. Meyer. This essay reflects on the lack of current research on the reactions of observers to various workplace incivility and mistreatment incidents taking place within organizations, and argues that when exploring causes and consequences of workplace incivility, understanding the perspectives of perpetrators and victims is not enough; rather, examining the opinions and judgments of the witnesses to the mistreatment incidents allows for a more complete and comprehensive analysis and a holistic representation of the events that might have occurred.

Conclusion

Based on our experiences as researchers as well as editors of this special issue, we feel confident in saying that workplace incivility is no longer a random occurrence; it is a routine part of life within today's organizations. Not only have the boundaries changed but they will keep changing due to both internal and external pressures, resulting in the need for advanced theoretical and methodological understanding and solutions to minimize the repercussions and outcomes of incivility. Despite this need, academic voices have been relatively muted and muffled; however, the authors within this issue work to unmute this discussion and call for others to join the investigation within both discipline-wise and interdisciplinary levels. Moreover, more meaningful focus on solutions is also brought to the forefront.

On its most basic level, workplace incivility relates to ethics and workplace rights of employees. To safeguard employees, workplaces should define the basic issues of office etiquette to create appropriate codes of conduct, professional behaviors, and expected congeniality. Second, greater awareness should be created regarding uncivil behaviors, publicly stating that these behaviors will not be quietly accepted, as the inhumanity of these behaviors can serve to increase levels of stress, depression, and burnout, leading to lower levels of self-esteem and productivity.

A conscious effort should be made to record incidents of incivility so that organizations can learn from

their own environments. This self-reflection and disclosure would create protections for employees who have become the targets of incivility, along with creating respect for the basics of human rights and dignity. The debate, though, on how this organizational change should be made is strong and even reflected by the authors of this introduction. While Akella encourages the need to strongly advocate for corporate and legal laws that safeguard the interests of employees while at work instead of just leaving them to face disrespectful and humiliating treatment, Lewis encourages opportunities to educate and encourage employees not just to learn about one another but also to develop their understanding of what are considered uncivil behaviors so that not just the office setting can be improved but also the cognitive processes of all employees within the organization.

In addition to alleviating the issues faced by the targets of incivility, acknowledging the psychological defense mechanisms of the originator should also be honored. Understanding, and respecting, the struggles with depression, emotional and mood swings, prejudices, biases and superiority complexes faced by the originator, along with the ever-increasing struggles faced by all employees to maintain work-life balance, can work to not only stop the unwanted behaviors but also aid these employees in their own growth. Rather than simply creating labels and punishments for the originators of incivility, offering help to these individuals should be given increased priority, so as to facilitate their growth and create more congenial workplaces.

Be it intentional or otherwise, incivility is not simply personality conflicts but rather behaviors that are aimed at the destruction of others. Workplace incivility may be minor rudeness that slowly affects an individual, creating darkened outlooks or blatant aggressive behaviors that damage not only the individual but the organization as a whole. Regardless, incivility can ultimately lead to feelings of animosity, depression, aggression, and violence, with severe ramifications for the workplace and the society at large. Fortunately, not only is workplace incivility addressable, it is fixable; thus, we now offer the following explorations of the topic and see them as adding to the foundation for creating organizations that provide all individuals with the opportunity for success, fulfillment, and, most importantly, enjoyment of their daily activities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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