

Management PhD Research Topic

The Ignorance of Workplace Incivility

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Abstract

Workplace incivility has detrimental consequences for those who experience and witness it and, most likely, for those who instigate it. While employees involved in uncivil incidents at work bear a myriad of human costs, organizations bear significant monetary costs due to amongst others project delays and decreased performance and productivity. Nevertheless, organizations seem to largely ignore uncivil conduct in the workplace. Hence, those who instigate workplace incivility are not stopped, random acts of workplace incivility may develop into a rudeness climate, and uncivil incidents may spiral into violence and aggression. Research is needed into why workplace incivility is largely ignored and how organizations could address and curb it.

Further details

Making a derogatory remark about a colleague, interrupting someone who is speaking, eyerolling, and impatiently standing in front of a co-worker who is engaged in a phone conversation are examples of rude and discourteous behaviors that disregard others in the workplace. We refer to such antisocial behaviors as workplace incivility, which is defined as “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457).

Workplace incivility is ubiquitous. Although the specific behaviors that are considered to be uncivil may differ across geographic areas, cultures, industries, and professions, it occurs worldwide, across sectors and vocations (Schilpzand et al., 2016). Workplace incivility is also widespread and pervasive. Reports suggest that up to 98% of people experience incivility at work while 90% of people admit to sometimes being uncivil at work.

Workplace incivility has detrimental consequences for the targets (i.e., those who experience the uncivil incident), bystanders (i.e., those who witness the uncivil incident), as well as the perpetrators (i.e., those who instigate the uncivil incident). Workplace incivility may also have detrimental consequences for organizations as a whole: It is contagious, random acts of workplace incivility may develop into a rudeness climate, and uncivil incidents may spiral into violence and aggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

In the past two decades, academic scholarship and the popular press have increasingly attended to workplace incivility. Yet, its prevalence and consequences appear to be largely ignored in organizations. Although employees who experience or witness uncivil interactions in their work environment want to “right the wrong” and see justice restored (Tripp et al., 2007), they seem unwilling to speak up. Managers seem reluctant to hear about and address interpersonal issues in their place of work.

The above gives rise to several research questions that could be addressed:

1. Why do targets of workplace incivility, who suffer a myriad of negative consequences, remain silent about the uncivil behaviors they experienced?

2. Why do witnesses of workplace incivility, who not only see the victim's reactions to the uncivil incident but also bear significant negative consequences of witnessing the uncivil conduct, remain silent about the uncivil conduct they witnessed?
3. Why are managers reluctant to listen to reports of uncivil conduct in their organization?
4. Why are managers reluctant to address uncivil conduct in their organization?
5. What could (and should) managers do to limit and/or eradicate workplace incivility?

These five questions are examples of interesting research questions related to the ignorance of workplace incivility. A review of recent research on workplace incivility and other forms of interpersonal misbehavior may provide additional interesting research questions related to this topic.

Although most research on workplace incivility has, so far, been quantitative in nature, questions related to the ignorance of incivility can be addressed using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Key articles on workplace incivility that will help create an understanding of this area of research include the following. Links are provided where available to the article via the title of the paper.

Andersson, L. M., & Pearson, C. M. (1999). [Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace](#). *Academy of Management Review*, *24*, 452-471.

Han, S., Harold, C. M., Oh, I. S., Kim, J. K., & Agolli, A. (2022). [A meta-analysis integrating 20 years of workplace incivility research: Antecedents, consequences, and boundary conditions](#). *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *43*, 497-523.

Park, L. S., & Martinez, L. R. (2021). [An "I" for an "I": A systematic review and meta-analysis of instigated and reciprocal incivility](#). *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *27*, 7-21

Schilpzand, P., De Pater, I. E., & Erez, A. (2016). [Workplace incivility: A review of the literature and agenda for future research](#). *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *37*, S57-S88.

Tripp, T. M., Bies, R. J., & Aquino, K. (2007). [A vigilante model of justice: Revenge, reconciliation, forgiveness, and avoidance](#). *Social Justice Research*, *20*, 10-34.

Yao, J., Lim, S., Guo, C. Y., Ou, A. Y., & Ng, J. W. X. (2022). [Experienced incivility in the workplace: A meta-analytical review of its construct validity and nomological network](#). *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *107*, 193-220.