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Witnessing wrongdoing: The effects of observer power on incivility intervention in the workplace☆

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ABSTRACT

Research often paints a dark portrait of power. Previous work underscores the links between power and self-interested, antisocial behavior. In this paper, we identify a potential bright side to power—namely, that the powerful are more likely to intervene when they witness workplace incivility. In experimental (Studies 1 and 3) and field (Study 2) settings, we find evidence suggesting that power can shape how, why, and when the powerful respond to observed incivility against others. We begin by drawing on research linking power and action orientation. In Study 1, we demonstrate that the powerful respond with agency to witnessed incivility. They are more likely to directly confront perpetrators, and less likely to avoid the perpetrator and offer social support to targets. We explain the motivation that leads the powerful to act by integrating theory on responsibility construals of power and hierarchy maintenance. Study 2 shows that felt responsibility mediates the effect of power on increased confrontation and decreased avoidance. Study 3 demonstrates that incivility leads the powerful to perceive a status challenge, which then triggers feelings of responsibility. In Studies 2 and 3, we also reveal an interesting nuance to the effect of power on supporting the target. While the powerful support targets less as a direct effect, we reveal countervailing indirect effects: To the extent that incivility is seen as a status challenge and triggers felt responsibility, power indirectly increases support toward the target. Together, these results enrich the literature on third-party intervention and incivility, showing how power may free bystanders to intervene in response to observed incivility.

1. Introduction

Workplace incivility is defined as low-intensity deviant acts with ambiguous intent to harm the target (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Despite its low intensity and ambiguous nature, workplace incivility may be associated with outcomes that are as detrimental as more severe forms of workplace aggression, such as abusive supervision (see Hershcovis, 2011). Perhaps because of its low intensity, or because others treat it as innocuous, workplace incivility regularly occurs in front of witnesses (hereafter observers). For instance, among the more than 9000 employees studied by Porath and Pearson (2010), only 1% reported never having seen incivility occur in their workplace. This might help explain why researchers have begun to turn their attention to observers as important actors in the dynamics of workplace incivility (e.g., Chui & Dietz, 2014; Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015; Porath & Pearson, 2012; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015).

Initial evidence suggests that observers may serve a useful purpose in deterring workplace incivility. For instance, Reich and Hershcovis (2015) found that observers of incivility took advantage of opportunities to punish offenders by allocating them unpleasant tasks. Similarly, Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umpress, and Gee (2002) found that observers are willing to punish the perpetrator, even at a personal cost to themselves. However, such forms of "vigilante" justice can be

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counterproductive, because they may cause incivility to spread and escalate (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Therefore, in this paper, we consider other forms of third-party responding, including constructive interventions to stop the incivility, the choice to avoid the perpetrator and opt for non-response, and "invisible remedies" of supporting the target (e.g., Rosette, Carton, Bowes-Sperry, & Hewlin, 2013).

In particular, we are interested in how power influences each of these possible responses to incivility. At first glance, the literature on the psychology of power would appear to suggest that the powerful might not be particularly helpful as witnesses to incivility directed at others. An influential line of research suggests, for instance, that power can reduce shared distress, compassion, empathy, and perspective taking (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010; Van Kleef et al., 2008). However, there is also a growing body of literature suggesting that under the right conditions, power can free the powerful to behave prosocially (e.g., Magee & Langner, 2008). Despite the ubiquity of power as a factor in the incidence of workplace incivility (Cortina et al., 2001), we know little about how power shapes observers' reactions to perpetrators and targets of incivility.

In this paper, we describe in three studies how and why power influences observer responses to incivility. Drawing on power-approach theory, we demonstrate that power leads observers to respond agentically to observed incivility by confronting the perpetrator, and being less likely to avoid the perpetrator and support the target. We demonstrate this effect in a video vignette experiment in which role power was manipulated. In our second study, we focus on why the powerful are motivated to action, considering the prevalent view that the powerful tend to act out of self-interest and in pursuit of their own goals (e.g., Guinote, 2007). Drawing on previous research on the responsibility construal of power (Sassenberg, Ellemers, & Scheepers, 2012), we argue that incivility triggers a sense of responsibility to act. We predict that this felt responsibility will mediate the effect of power on confronting and avoidance, and will indirectly increase social support for the target, attenuating the negative direct effect of power on supporting. We find evidence supporting this perspective in a field study of university staff, measuring both relative observers' power over the perpetrator, as well as observers' personal sense of power. In our third study, we extend this perspective further by seeking to deepen our understanding of why observing incivility triggers felt responsibility. We draw on research on power and hierarchy-maintenance goals (Willis & Guinote, 2011) to develop theory about the role of status challenge in promoting responsibility and action by the powerful in response to witnessed incivility. We predict that incivility creates a perception of status challenge, which increases feelings of responsibility. We further predict that these mechanisms mediate power's effect on confronting and avoidance, and indirectly reduce its negative effect on supporting. We test this final set of hypotheses in a vignette experiment, in which we manipulated role power and measured status challenge and responsibility as mediating mechanisms.

Together, these studies contribute to the literature on incivility and power in two important ways. First, we move beyond the existing research on observer responses, which tends to focus on retribution and vigilante justice (e.g., Hershcovis & Reich, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2015), to consider *how* observers might engage in more constructive responses to incivility—like confronting the perpetrator directly, or providing support to the target. Secondly, our paper identifies how power can promote positive and prosocial responses to observed incivility, and how some of the darker characteristics of psychological power (for instance, the salience of hierarchy-maintenance goals) may in fact contribute to these desirable outcomes.

2. Power and intervention

Power stems from asymmetries in social relations. Power occurs when someone is able to control valuable resources, impose their will on others, and shape their own outcomes and the outcomes of others in ways that others cannot (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Though power is rooted in structures—the control of social and material resources—it can also be a psychological property of the individual. The behavioral effects of power are as much determined by the felt *sense* of power as the structural basis of power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). As Galinsky and colleagues summarize, those with power "roam in a very different psychological space than those without power" (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008, p. 1451).

Below, we consider how the experience of power might influence three potential responses to observed incivility. Extending previous research on target responses to incivility (Cortina & Magley, 2009), we focus on three categories of observer responses that are available to witnesses: (1) The assertive response of direct, constructive confrontation of the perpetrator, (2) the avoidant response of minimizing, ignoring or downplaying the transgression, and (3) the compassionate response of offering social support to the target. We consider how power, given its tendency toward action orientation (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), might influence the prevalence of each strategy.

2.1. Power, action, and constructive confrontation

Research on psychological power suggests a strong link between the experience of power and the tendency toward action. The powerful make rapid judgments, focus on satisfying their goals, act with automaticity, and exhibit less inhibition and deliberation (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Keltner et al., 2003). They are prone to action, and act without the same considerations others might give to constraints, norms, or limits to their behavior (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky et al., 2003; Keltner et al., 2003). Power enhances one's sense of confidence and competence (Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012), which in turn lowers one's hesitation to follow impulses toward action. The powerful tend to simplify decisions, and are less likely to weigh the pros and cons. Instead, they are selective in their processing of information (Guinote, 2007) and tend to make automatic decisions instead of engaging in controlled processing (Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014, 2015).

When witnessing incivility in the workplace, we propose that the powerful will tend toward "fixing the problem" through constructive confrontation. This form of response is externally-focused; it directly targets the source of the undesirable behavior. Of course, this course of action is also confrontational, and perhaps risky. But research suggests that the powerful tend to be more optimistic and risk-tolerant in pursuit of their aims (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). They have the tendency toward harsh social judgments (van Prooijen, Coffeng, & Vermeer, 2014), moral condemnation of others (Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010), and a greater tendency to confront others for unacceptable behavior (Ashburn-Nardo, Blanchar, Petersson, Morris, & Goodwin, 2014), often employing a dominant conflict-resolution style (de Reuver, 2006). Thus, they may be more likely to engage in constructive confrontation.

Beyond their disinhibition and willingness to confront, there is another factor that may promote constructive confrontation by the powerful—that is, the belief the powerful have in their own influence over others. Research suggests that the powerful are more prone to trying to influence others (Ferguson, Ormiston, & Moon, 2010), a tendency that may spring from their high estimates of their own ability to shape others' behavior. Fast and colleagues, for instance, demonstrate that power enhances the illusion of personal control (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009), while Anderson, John, and Keltner (2012) conceptualize the assumed ability to influence others as a central characteristic of felt power. In short, when faced with observed incivility, we expect the powerful to tend toward a mode of responses that is direct, disinhibited, and focused on exerting control and influence over the source of the incivility.