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Incivility hates company: Shared incivility attenuates rumination, stress, and psychological withdrawal by reducing self-blame

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ABSTRACT

Although episodes of workplace incivility can lead to deleterious personal and performance outcomes, we suggest that differences in how incivility is experienced (i.e., as a singled-out target, or in the company of another who is also treated uncivilly) can have significant impact on the cognitions and behaviors that follow uncivil treatment. Drawing from Sociometer Theory, we test the notion that sharing the experience of incivility with another target can greatly diminish individual-level harm, and demonstrate that causal beliefs related to self-blame mediate consequent downstream effects. Using an experimental design within a team task environment, we found that experiencing incivility from a team member increased participants' rumination about mistreatment, task-related stress levels, and psychological withdrawal behavior. Moreover, we found support for conditional indirect effects, such that viewing mistreatment of a fellow team member at the hands of the same uncivil team member (shared incivility) attenuates the harmful effects of incivility, by reducing self-blame.

It's a rather rude gesture, but at least it's clear what you mean.
[*Katharine Hepburn*]

1. Introduction

Managers and organizational scholars alike have become increasingly concerned with the profoundly negative impacts of interpersonal mistreatment in the workplace as evidenced by heightened attention to "respect" in employee manuals, the growing interest generated by the popular press (Sutton, 2007) and increased research activity around various forms of interpersonal deviance and workplace mistreatment (see Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Hershcovis et al., 2007 for relevant meta-analyses). While much attention has rightfully been directed toward high-intensity forms of workplace mistreatment, organizational scholars have also begun to accumulate evidence for the unique and deleterious effects of workplace incivility, a form of low-intensity mistreatment defined as "behavior characterized by rudeness and disregard for others in the workplace, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; p. 466).

Incivility likely represents the most subtle, chronic, and common form of negative interpersonal behavior experienced in the workplace (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2005). A recent narrative review summarizing the extant literature on incivility has noted the broad array of negative outcomes that targets of incivility experience, including increased levels of stress, decreased task performance, and decreased work engagement (see Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016). Even in light of well-documented harm caused by incivility (Schilpzand et al., 2016), surprisingly little research to date has focused on factors which may reduce the negative effects of incivility.

Additionally, extant work on the outcomes of uncivil treatment has revealed that experiencing incivility negatively impairs targets' cognition by reducing their ability to recall information and by causing distraction (Porath & Erez, 2007; Rafaeli et al., 2012). However, the underlying mechanisms driving rumination following uncivil episodes, as well as what specifically occupies the minds of those treated uncivilly, remains unclear. Accordingly, we introduce a new theoretically-driven cognitive mediating mechanism linking uncivil treatment to negative outcomes, and also propose a moderator of the mediated effects of uncivil treatment. Drawing from Sociometer Theory (Leary, 1999, 2005, 2011; Leary & Baumeister, 2000), we propose and test a model identifying when and why experiencing episodes of incivility will lead to negative outcomes.

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We suggest that, because incivility represents relatively low-intensity behavior (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), episodes of incivility may plausibly be interpreted as proportional treatment for one's own mistakes, intended to signal social disapproval by the uncivil party. Thus, uncivil episodes may be treated by the target as early warning signs that their own behavior may result in eventual social rejection. Accordingly, individuals are likely to engage in self-blame cognitions that initiate functional corrective responses, which will help avoid potential subsequent social ostracism. Using a controlled experimental design, we further systematically explore how sharing uncivil treatment with another target (shared incivility) might reduce self-blame in targets of incivility and thus reduce the negative impact of incivility on task-related outcomes.

1.1. Self-blame as a response to incivility

Established research and theory suggests that blaming one's self is a common first response to serious harm caused by others, including sexual assault (Abbey, 1987), battery (Miller & Porter, 1983), and criminal victimization in general (Bard & Sangrey, 1979). However, self-blame is also a common response for seemingly unavoidable negative events such as cancer diagnosis (Taylor, Lichtman, & Wood, 1984), and losing a loved one (Chodoff, Friedman, & Hamburg, 1964). Indeed, previous research has shown that people are more likely to consider and think about *their own* behavior when determining how harmful outcomes might have been prevented than they are to focus on other participants in the event (Davis, Lehman, Wortman, Silver, & Thompson, 1995; Kahneman & Miller, 1986).

We suggest that self-blame is an especially likely attribution for the relatively mild negative experiences described by episodes of incivility. First, relatively mild episodes of incivility may escalate in to more severe forms of mistreatment over time (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), creating both the opportunity and motivation to adjust one's own behavior to prevent future harm. Although incivility is characterized by a mild violation of norms of respect, we posit that one interpretation of uncivil behavior is that the target is unworthy of respectful treatment as a function of their actions, and that their current behavior is potentially problematic. While more serious forms of mistreatment (such as verbal aggression or abuse) are likely to be seen as uniformly condemnable (i.e., it is never appropriate to scream or physically harm a colleague or subordinate), milder acts of incivility may be interpreted as a natural (albeit disrespectful) initial response to irritating behavior or poor performance (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Accordingly, targets of incivility are likely to consider whether there is a useful diagnostic signal about their own behavior to be found in the uncivil episode and question whether their own behavior warrants uncivil treatment.

Relatedly, Sociometer Theory (Leary, 2005; Leary & Baumeister, 2000) proposes that people continuously monitor their social environment for threats to their self-view or social status and engage in appropriate psychological, physiological, and behavioral responses to reduce the impact of threats (Chen et al., 2013). Sociometer Theory makes the observation (based on our evolutionary history of interdependent group-living) that natural selection has favored individuals with interpersonal skill and talents for engendering acceptance, help, and support from others (Leary, 2011). Maintaining close interpersonal ties and cooperative groups requires people to perceive others' evaluations, and to seek to immediately identify and correct features of their own conduct that may cause others to devalue an interpersonal relationship with them (Leary, 2011). Thus, people are especially attuned to perceive and gauge their standing in others' estimation, strive to minimize the likelihood of rejection, and aim to keep up their "relational value to other people" (Leary, 2005, p. 82).

Accordingly, this advanced monitoring system (i.e., the Sociometer) allows for the opportunity to cease problematic behavior or engage in corrective action before rejection becomes permanent. Leary (1999) notes that given the 'warning-system' function of the Sociometer, even the mere possibility of rejection would alarm an individual to correct behavior that is potentially de-valued by others and which might ultimately lead to ostracism or rejection. "Ongoing social inclusion evokes little response but events that connote exclusion set off the bells in the Sociometer's warning system" (p. 88). As such, the Sociometer's warning system "may lead people to do things that are not always beneficial, but it does so to protect their interpersonal relationships rather than their inner integrity" (p. 34). Sociometer Theory would suggest that self-blame in the absence of a clear explanation for uncivil treatment is actually adaptive: erring on the side of blaming one's self for negative outcomes can prevent more intense mistreatment or eventual ostracism in the future.

Whereas abuse or undermining may quickly and correctly be appraised as an unfair or mean-spirited attack against the target, episodes of incivility are not readily interpretable in terms of their deservedness (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), leaving open the possibility that the target is at least partly accountable for the way he or she is treated. Because incivility describes relatively mild acts that may communicate annoyance or irritation (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), uncivil actions may be viewed as relatively acceptable (rather than especially egregious) behavior that is difficult to uniformly dismiss as an indictment on the character of the perpetrator (e.g., "that guy is a jerk!"). Thus, we argue that self-blame is an especially likely response to relatively mild forms of mistreatment (i.e., incivility). Supporting evidence from recent research has triangulated around the notion that self-blame may be a common response to incivility: Bunk and Magley (2013) found that subjects who retrospectively felt guilt (rather than anger) about mistreatment in their workplaces were more likely to engage in self-blame.

Because we propose that self-blame is a common response to incivility, we also seek to add to the existing literature describing conditions which trigger or reduce self-blame cognitions. For example, past research has found that individuals are more likely to engage in self-blame cognitions when the possibility of discrimination was ambiguous rather than clear (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995), and that self-blame cognitions arise more frequently among those predisposed to experiencing guilt rather than anger (Bunk & Magley, 2013).

We suggest that the social context of incivility (i.e., sharing mistreatment with another target) may similarly impact the extent to which self-blame attributions are constructed. While many jobs may create opportunities for employees to be exposed to uncivil treatment (including technical or sales support workers who may regularly interact with irritated customers; Goldberg & Grandey, 2007), we note that incivility may also be directed at multiple targets simultaneously. For example, a team member may speak sarcastically to one or all of her teammates in a meeting; a frustrated restaurant patron may remark condescendingly to just a table busser or to the waiter and manager as well; and a manager who has just left a disappointing meeting can behave dismissively toward the reasonable request of one or multiple colleagues. We suggest that under conditions of *shared* incivility, wherein another individual is simultaneously the target of uncivil behavior, self-blame will be greatly diminished.

Interestingly, while prior research has found that witnessing acts of rudeness directed exclusively at another party can cause relatively similar negative cognitive and affective responses as directly being mistreated (see Schilpzand et al., 2016 for review), previous work has not examined the notion that BOTH experiencing and witnessing incivility in tandem (i.e., shared incivility) from the same offending party could actually reduce potential harm.