Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 109 (2009) 29–44

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp

Overlooked but not untouched: How rudeness reduces onlookers' performance on routine and creative tasks

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 January 2008
Accepted 20 January 2009
Available online 27 February 2009

Accepted by John Schaubrock

Keywords:
Rudeness
Performance
Social behavior
Creativity
Helpfulness
Dysfunctional behavior
Incivility

ABSTRACT

In three experimental studies, we found that witnessing rudeness enacted by an authority figure (Studies 1 and 3) and a peer (Study 2) reduced observers' performance on routine tasks as well as creative tasks. In all three studies we also found that witnessing rudeness decreased citizenship behaviors and increased dysfunctional ideation. Negative affect mediated the relationships between witnessing rudeness and performance. The results of Study 3 show that competition with the victim over scarce resources moderated the relationship between observing rudeness and performance. Witnesses that were in a competition with the victim felt less negative affect in observing his mistreatment and their performance decreased to a lesser extent than observers of rudeness enacted against a non-competitive victim. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

"I couldn't believe how XXX went after him so rudely in a meeting in front of our whole team. I sat there, totally uncomfortable––he didn't deserve that treatment—nobody did." (Employee of Fortune 500 company)

"My boss was often uncivil and rude to people. One day he started screaming rudely at my colleague. I thought "what a jerk" and attempted to steer clear of him. I didn't want to be his next victim." (Manager)

Rude and disrespectful behaviors as those described above by witnesses seem to be very prevalent in organizations. In a poll of nearly 800 employees, 25% reported witnessing workplace rudeness daily (Pearson & Porath, 2005). The growing number of reported uncivil acts[1] is not limited to working organizations, nor is it restricted to one country (Truss, 2005). Sixty percent of American teenagers witness uncivil events daily in American schools (Operation Respect, 2004). In Australia, a recent study suggested that rudeness is experienced frequently and that it leaves a memorable and confronting impression on the mind (Phillips & Smith, 2004). In England, former Prime Minister Tony Blair asserted that lack of respect was one of the top problems facing the United Kingdom (Rice-Oxley, 2006). It seems that Blair and other international leaders such as former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard (Stephens, 2004) as well as many US leaders, believe that an uncivil environment has a negative effect on people—even if they're just 'around it'.

There is some empirical evidence to suggest that these strong intuitions about the detrimental effects that mistreatment of others have on witnesses, are justified. Indeed, the interactional injustice, altruistic punishment, and other fairness and justice literatures clearly suggest that observers are affected by others treated unfairly, and may punish perpetrators. Specifically, several notable studies suggest that those who witness unfair behaviors punish wrong-doers even if their retribution requires self-sacrifice (e.g., Fehr & Gachter, 2002; O'Gorman, Wilson, & Miller, 2005). For example, Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler (1986) and subsequently Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, and Gee (2002) found that participants who learned that their anonymous partner had behaved unfairly toward another partner were likely to punish the unfair partner even though they lost money in the process.

Curiously, although performance is at the core of effective organizational functioning, with one exception (e.g., De Cremer & Van Hiel, 2006) no research that we know of has investigated the influence of mistreatment of *others* on witnesses' performance. There are, however, reasons to believe that observing mistreatment of

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[1] We use the terms incivility, disrespect, and rudeness interchangeably. This is consistent with Andersson and Pearson (1999) and Pearson, Andersson, and Wegner (2001) and others, who define incivility as mild aggressive behaviors that are characteristically disrespectful or rude.

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doi:10.1016/j.obhdp.2009.01.003

others will affect performance. First, several studies have recently shown that mistreatment affected victims' performance. For example, Harris, Kacmar, and Zivnuska (2007) found that downward mistreatment and Porath and Erez (2007) found that rudeness affected task performance. Similarly, Zellars, Tepper, and Duffy (2002) and Aryee, Chen, Sun, and Debrah (2007) found that abusive supervision affected citizenship behaviors. Although these studies investigated the performance consequences of the mistreatment of *self*, not *other*, their results suggest that mistreatment affects not only attitudes but actual behaviors that may hamper organizational functioning. Second, even more directly, De Cremer and Van Hiel (2006) found that perceptions of unfair procedures in treating others increased participants' own negative emotions, and decreased their intentions to cooperate and enact citizenship behaviors (OCBs). While De Cremer and Van Hiel investigated intentions and intentions do not always lead to behaviors (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), their findings clearly imply that witnessing mistreatment may have harmful effects on performance.

Our study was primarily designed to test whether witnessing rudeness and disrespect affects behavioral measures of task performance, creativity, and citizenship behavior. Second, we also test how witnessing mistreatment affects dysfunctional ideation. Given the sheer numbers of people who witness uncivil acts, if rudeness primes witnesses to think in an aggressive and hostile manner, it could have a meaningful toll on organizations and society. Third, we examine a mediating mechanism that links observed mistreatment and observers' performance. Finally, we test a boundary condition of witnessing incivility on performance. Specifically, we explore if witnessing rudeness has the same detrimental effects under competitive situations, or whether it is limited to situations where cooperation is important.

Effects of rudeness on witnesses' task performance and creativity

There are several reasons to believe that witnessing rudeness may trigger negative emotional responses that, in turn, reduce task performance and creativity. First, while traditional economic theories assume that most people are driven by self-interest, a growing body of evidence suggests that people are also concerned with the well-being of others (see Kollock, 1998). In fact, a substantial proportion of the population believes that people possess an innate concern for others, and are therefore willing to trust others enough to cooperate with them in one-shot, no communication experiments (Ostrom, 1998). Moreover, as Kahneman et al. (1986), Turillo et al. (2002), and Fehr and Gachter (2002) showed, people readily punish partners whom they believe did not make a fair offer to unknown others. Even more directly, De Cremer and Van Hiel (2006) showed that unfair treatment of others resulted in a significant increase in negative emotions such as anger and irritation. Accordingly, witnessing harm to others may arouse strong negative emotions such as irritability, anger, and even hostility related to perceptions of injustice as people tend to believe that all individuals deserve respect from others (Durkheim, 1964; Vidmar, 2000).

Second, negative affect may also result from the tendency of individuals to empathize with victims. Empathizing involves the "imaginative transposing of oneself into the thinking, feeling, and acting of another" (Allport, 1937, p. 536). Observers may share the emotions of others by vicariously experiencing those emotions (Kelly & Barsade, 2001; Maitlis & Ozcelik, 2004) or by psychologically placing themselves in that person's circumstance (Lazarus, 1991).

Third, witnesses of incivility may experience negative affect based not only on concern for others, but also concern relevance to the self (Frijda, 1993; Truss, 2005). Those who observe hostility directed towards others may ask: am I next in the instigator's line of fire? As a result, they may become nervous, anxious, or scared for their own well-being. Although concern for others and concern for self may seem to be mutually exclusive dimensions located on the opposite sides of a bipolar continuum, research suggests that these are orthogonal dimensions (De Dreu, 2006). Hence, witnessing rudeness can raise concern for the victim and concern for the self simultaneously (see Frijda, 1993; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Thus, witnessing incivility is likely to cause more than one emotion and may in fact arouse negative affect – a generalized dimension of various negative feelings (Watson & Clark, 1984).

Negative affect may include emotions that are low in arousal such as depression, discouragement, and misery (Watson & Clark, 1984). Although it is possible that those who observe rudeness may also feel these emotions, it is more likely that they will feel emotions high in arousal. Rudeness and disrespect are usually uncalled for, and as such these behaviors are unexpected and surprising (cf. Pearson & Porath, 2009). In turn, unexpected incidents tend to trigger arousal which is a precursor to flight or fight response (Purves et al., 2004). There is now a large body of neuroscience research that suggests that the majority of the processing of negative emotions occurs in the amygdala (Purves et al., 2004). The amygdala is particularly sensitive to unexpected events and is activated in the presence of even very minor threats (i.e., a rustling noise in the nearby woods that may or may not turn out to be a snake) (Damasio, 1994). In response to threat, the amygdala automatically, and without conscious processing, activates the sympathetic nervous system, preparing the organism for action (Kandel, Schwartz, & Jessell, 2000). This activation results in modifications to the activity of the autonomic motor system and is expressed in bodily changes such as an increase in heart rate, blushing, turning pale, and sweating. Thus, because rudeness is unexpected, it is likely to trigger a physiological state of arousal.

There are good reasons to believe that the negative affect that is high in arousal caused by witnessing rudeness will be negatively related to performance. Indeed, there is clear evidence to suggest that negative affect can harm some significant aspects of cognitive processing that may be especially important in complex and creative tasks (e.g., Easterbrook, 1959; Eysenck, 1982; Mandler, 1975).[2] For example, Ellis and his colleagues found that compared to those in neutral affect, individuals induced with negative affect exhibited more selective processing (Varner & Ellis, 1998), did not learn and recall as well (Ellis, Moore, Varner, & Ottaway, 1997), and were impaired in their abilities to comprehend and use prior knowledge (Ellis, Varner, Becker, & Ottaway, 1995). They also found that participants exhibited a reduction in cognitive effort (Ellis, Thomas, & Rodriguez, 1984). Therefore, in complex tasks where cognitive effort is especially crucial, negative affect may reduce performance.

Negative affect may be particularly detrimental to creativity because it requires elaboration. Elaboration is the process of relating to-be-remembered information to other information even if the additional information is not required to-be-remembered (Ellis et al., 1984). In creative tasks new ideas are generated within an extensive search through a conceptual space (Boden, 1994). When searching for ideas, people use various conceptual maps that characterize standard routes in this space. According to Boden, creativity is linked to either the exploration of new parts of this conceptual space or it emerges when the fundamental rules and routes of the space are modified. In both cases, though, creativity requires an extensive elaboration that relates the new ideas to "old" information. However, Ellis et al. (1984) found that negative

[2] There is no evidence to suggest that negative affect is negatively related to performance in all tasks. In fact, in some tasks such as behavioral monitoring tasks people in negative mood may perform significantly better than those in positive mood. For example, Forgas, Bower, and Krantz (1984) found that participants in negative mood interpreted more accurately skilled and unskilled behaviors in both themselves and others than participants in positive moods.