

## **Workplace Incivility: What Do Targets Say About It?**

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*Every year millions of people fall prey to workplace incivility. Although current literature attempts to discuss the nature of workplace incivility, its impact, outcomes, and solutions, researchers stated that further work is required to understand this complex phenomenon. Thus, the purpose of this paper was to understand how workplace incivility is manifested in organizations and ways in which targets cope with uncivil behaviors. Findings suggest that power dynamics, perpetrators intentions and personality, and lack of organizational policies play a huge role in inhibiting workplace incivility that result in targets facing detrimental consequences. Implications for research and practice are provided.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Workplace incivility is steadily rising with the changing nature of work in the new millennium (Estes & Wang, 2008; Roscigno, Hudson, & Lopez, 2009). Every year millions of people fall prey to workplace incivility. Pearson and Porath (2009) reported that about one-fourth of the workers they polled in 1998 received rude treatment once or more in a week. By 2005 that number had risen to nearly half; about 95 percent reported experiencing incivility from their coworkers (Pearson & Porath, 2009). It is terrifying yet a reality that incivility prevails in all types of organizations, ranging from Fortune 500 companies, medical firms, government agencies, to national sports organizations, academia, and many other for-profit and non-profit organizations (Person & Porath, 2005).

Researchers have conceptualized workplace incivility in various ways with an attempt to capture the complexity and intensity of the phenomenon. For instance, Rau-Foster (2004) described workplace incivility as “subtle rude or disrespectful behavior that demonstrates lack of regard for others” (p. 702). Andersson and Pearson (1999) defined incivility as “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). Andersson and Pearson’s (1999) definition is the most cited throughout the literature and encompasses the key characteristics of the construct. Specifically, behaviors such as speaking in a demeaning manner, belittling, harassing, or bullying people, demonstrating a temper, interrupting individuals, spreading rumors or gossip, and causing violence are some forms of incivility (Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001; Rau-Foster, 2004).

Due to the emerging nature of workplace incivility, theories specific to workplace incivility are scarce. Nevertheless, Andersson and Pearson’s (1999) spiral theory of incivility is very popular. The

spiral begins at the starting point where an uncivil act is acknowledged and perceived as uncivil by an individual due to violated norms or unacceptable conduct (Anderson & Pearson, 1999). The victim's reaction is either desire for revenge triggered by negative affect or a decision to depart from the organization, which could take place at any point throughout the spiral. The desire for revenge is likely to result in an act of incivility in response to the incivility experienced. As the spiral continues, one or both parties are likely to reach a tipping point due to anger, loss of face, or insult, which could trigger intentional intense behaviors such as violence or aggression. The spiral of incivility is an epidemic that could continue until justice is restored, forgiveness is given or asked, or one of the parties resigns. Further, the primary spiral could trigger a secondary spiral. A secondary spiral is triggered by observers of incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). For example, members who observe incivility spirals are likely to engage in uncivil acts; thus, increasing organization wide incivility. Additionally, observing negative responses to incivility also give rise to secondary incivility spirals. Based upon the spiral theory of incivility it can be concluded that incivility is a vicious cycle which can be triggered from a minor issue and escalate to severe coarseness. Essentially, it can spread like a virus that is difficult to stop or control. In order to discontinue incivility spirals, it is imperative to establish a civil culture and climate in the organization, especially a culture of zero-tolerance towards incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2005).

Workplace incivility has detrimental consequences on both victims and organizations. On the individual level, victims suffer from psychological distress due to disrespectful actions and words (Estes & Wang, 2008). They experience anxiety, depression, insomnia, low self-esteem, and stress (Estes & Wang, 2008). Individuals who have encountered incivility are often traumatized and constantly worried that they may be targeted again (Cortina, 2008). In fact, the victims spend a majority of their time at work thinking and talking about the uncivil experiences they went through (Cortina, 2008). Further, workplace incivility reduces individual creativity, performance, motivation, focus, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Estes & Wang, 2008; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000), ultimately leading the victims to resign from their job (Lim & Cortina, 2005). On the organizational level, incivility results in high turnover, lack of productivity, absenteeism, and financial losses (Cortina & Magley, 2009; Pearson & Porath, 2005). In addition, observers of workplace incivility are also likely to engage in uncivil behaviors themselves, consequently increasing the occurrence of organizational incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

A number of studies have been conducted on workplace incivility. Most of them focused on explaining the nature, prevalence, consequences, and management of this phenomenon (e.g., Cortina and Magley, 2009; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Estes and Wang; 2008; Felblinger, 2008; Hutton and Gates, 2008; Reio and Ghosh, 2009; Pearson et al., 2001; Pearson and Porath, 2005; Smith, Andrusyszyn, & Laschinger, 2010; Zauderer, 2002). For instance, Pearson et al. (2001) examined the nature of incivility, the difference of incivility from other workplace mistreatments, as well as implications of workplace incivility on employees and organizations. Their findings revealed that incivility differs from other organizational mistreatments and causes unhealthy organizational climate where unresponsive hierarchy serves to silence the targets. Also, effects of incivility are long lasting for not only the targets but also co-workers and witnesses. Similarly, Cortina et al. (2001) found that 71 percent of employees endured incivility in the workplace within the last five years. They further noted that women and men were equally faced with uncivil behaviors and had to deal with the effects which resulted in employees experiencing poor communication within organizations, impaired coordination, and loss of respect for leaders. Taking a critical perspective, Bierema (2009) argued that power and its impact are rarely examined from a structural perspective. Callahan (2011) echoed that workplace incivility often indicates a structural problem of power and inequity at the organizational level. These critical analyses lead to the conclusion that power or one's position within an organization plays a significant role in terms of employees' experiences of incivility.

In addition, extensive research has been conducted to understand bullying, sexual harassment, and violence that occur within organizations (e.g., Jones, 2006; LaVan & Martin, 2008). Models have been developed to identify and describe uncivil behaviors (e.g., LaVan & Martin, 2008; Martin & Hine, 2005). Blau and Andersson (2005) developed a method to measure instigated workplace incivility (perpetrators'

execution of uncivil behaviors) versus experienced workplace incivility (the target experience of the perpetrators' uncivil behaviors). These authors found that instigated workplace incivility was less intense compared to experienced workplace incivility. For instance, interrupting someone while talking (instigated incivility) would have less impact on individuals versus being interrupted by someone while talking (experienced incivility).

## **THE PROBLEM**

Given the significant negative impact of workplace incivility as revealed by previous studies, this phenomenon is worthy of further systematic investigation. Since late 1990s, many organizations have consistently expressed concern about uncivil behaviors which occurred in the workplace (Estes & Wang, 2008). Nevertheless, the phenomenon of workplace incivility is “generally not well understood and accordingly not recognized as an issue needing attention” (Estes & Wang, 2008, p. 218). As a result, limited actions have been taken by organizations to address this serious issue (Pearson et al., 2001).

Furthermore, a limited number of workplace incivility studies have been conducted from the human resource development (HRD) perspective. Estes and Wang (2008), Reio and Ghosh (2009), and Zauderer (2002) are amongst the few HRD researchers who made an attempt in this direction. These researchers suggested some ways in which HRD practitioners and scholars can make a difference in reducing uncivil behaviors and improving organizational performance. They called for further research to generate additional insight into this complex topic and its antecedents.

Next, there are even fewer studies which examined individual differences on targets of workplace incivility (e.g., Milam et al., 2009) and their response or coping strategies (Cortina & Magley, 2009). Milam, Spitzmueller, & Penney (2009) revealed that targets who often disagree with others or perpetrators experience anxiety, have a mellow personality or a physical disease and also experience greater incivility than others. Accordingly, Cortina and Magley (2009) noted that targets respond to incivility in differing ways such as detachment, seeking support, minimizing contact with the perpetrators, and avoiding conflict. These actions depend upon the targets' assessment of the situation, the duration of the situation, organizational power, and the position of the targets and the instigators.

Finally, the dominant methodology used for conducting workplace incivility studies has been quantitative in nature. While quantitative data shed light on the breath of the problem, it does not provide deep insights into the problem. It is thus imperative that organizational leaders and human resource developers gain an in-depth understanding directly from targets using qualitative research methods.

## **THE PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to explore the manifestation of workplace incivility in the organizational context; and (2) to identify coping strategies used by targets or victims of workplace incivility. Findings from this study will enrich our current understanding of workplace incivility, its impact on victims, and strategies used for dealing with uncivil behaviors. With a solid knowledge of workplace incivility, human resource practitioners will be better positioned to assist both employees and organizations in identifying and addressing uncivil behaviors, as well as fostering a civil work climate. The following two questions guided the study:

1. How is workplace incivility manifested in organizations?
2. What strategies do victims use to deal with workplace incivility?

The remainder of this article consists of four parts. First, we present the methods we used for conducting the study. Second, we report major findings from our thematic analysis. Third, we discuss the findings in relation to relevant literature. Finally, we offer recommendations for future practice and research.

## **METHOD**

In this section we present the methods we used to address the two above research questions. We also briefly discuss our role as researchers and articulate how it might have influenced the study.

### **Methodology**

We adopted a basic qualitative research design as it is suitable to achieve the study's objectives. Merriam (2009) stated that the most common type of qualitative research used in applied fields is basic, interpretive study. The central characteristic of basic qualitative research is to construct reality through social interactions (Merriam, 2009). Specifically, the goal is to understand a social phenomenon from the actors' perspective (Firestone, 1987). Data in basic qualitative studies are collected using interviews, observations, or document analysis (Merriam, 2009). In the current study, the goal was to understand manifestation of workplace incivility and individuals' coping strategies. A basic qualitative approach was appropriate and allowed us to directly obtain information from the victims of uncivil behaviors in their workplace.

### **Sampling Procedures and Participants**

Padgett (2008) stated that sampling methods should be determined by research purpose and questions. This led to our selection of purposive sampling strategies in order to obtain information-rich data. As Merriam (2009) noted, "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). In this study, the main criterion for participant selection was that the individual must have experienced incivility at work during their career. This criterion would have automatically given way to satisfy the second aim of the study, which is, identifying individuals' coping strategies upon experiencing incivility in the workplace, as those who experienced uncivil treatment would have consciously or subconsciously taken action to deal with it. However, the study did not limit participants to one single organization and doing so enabled us to obtain information from multiple organizational contexts.

We identified the potential participants through our personal contacts, including personal acquaintances, friends, or colleagues. The first author contacted each candidate via email informing them of the purpose of the study and giving them a brief introduction to workplace incivility. A number of individuals who met our primary criterion agreed to participate in the study. The final sample consisted of 11 participants (eight women, and three men) as this number represented the point of data saturation. Additionally, as many candidates met our selection criterion, the final sample was determined based on convenience. In other words, all the study participants lived and worked in the same city where we (researchers) live so that we could have easy, and multiple access to them for data collection. It is worth noting that the female participants outnumbered the male participants reflected a mere coincidence, not a purposeful plan. In this study, it was important for us to gain a holistic perspective by recruiting both male and female participants.

Participants of this study represented a wide age range (27 to 55 years old), and diverse professional backgrounds (including military, community college administration, multinational corporations, universities, the government, and private companies such as insurance franchises and catering companies). Each participant had varied work experiences and changed jobs at least once in his or her life at the time they were interviewed. Most participants had a master's degree or were pursuing one. Further, participants racially identified themselves as either African American, Caucasian, or Hispanic.

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection used for this study was interviewing. We developed an interview guide which included six semi-structured, open-ended questions to give the study participants the ability to portray their world in unique ways (Merriam, 2009). The questions focused on allowing participants to recall and reflect on incidents of workplace incivility and their impact as well as the coping

mechanisms they used. The selection of a semi-structured interview guide ensured that specific information with regards to participants' experiences with workplace incivility would be obtained consistently yet offered flexibility. In addition, semi-structured interviews also enable researchers "to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). Due to this interview structure, the first author was able to have a conversation with the interviewees as well as obtain rich information and clarification through probing questions. Sample interview questions included in the Interview Guide are: (1) Tell me about a time when you experienced uncivil treatment in the workplace; and (2) How did incivility affect your work and personal life?

Each participant was interviewed one time only in a location of their choice. Each interview lasted for 45 to 60 minutes, and was digitally recorded for the purpose of transcription. According to Merriam (2009), pilot interviews are essential in order to evaluate the efficiency of question guide and its quality. Thus, there was an intentional gap of one week between the first two interviews and the rest of the interviews. This provided us with an opportunity to assess the interview questions and quality of the information obtained by reviewing the first two interview transcripts. We were satisfied with the results of the two pilot interviews and did not see the need to modify our pre-developed interview questions.

### **Data Analysis**

For data analysis, we used the constant comparative analytical method. The first author transcribed all the interviews verbatim. Then, we (both researchers) read the transcripts and coded the data independently by jotting down notes, comments, or observations in the margins. Open coding enables identifying data that potentially answers the research questions (Merriam, 2009). We then sorted the codes into different groups. This process of grouping open codes is called axial coding (Merriam, 2009) and each group becomes a category. The codes and categories were then re-sorted, or modified upon our further reviews of the data. This process primarily involved "comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 30) in order to identify patterns. Through this reiterative data coding and analysis process, we identified and agreed to major themes under four categories which we will report in the subsequent section.

### **The Researchers' Role**

As researchers and minority women, we both have worked in varied positions and organizations and experienced and witnessed workplace incivility at varied stages of our professional lives. Further, we both come from high power distance cultures (Indian and Chinese) where authority, hierarchy, status, respect, harmony, gratitude, and happiness of others are emphasized in our value systems. Due to the paradox nature of these cultural forces, it is likely that uncivil behaviors are unappreciated but tolerated at the same time. It is the combination of these highly complex personal experiences we have as researchers that prompted our interest in pursuing the study of workplace incivility. Furthermore, given that we researchers are the data collection instrument in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), declaring our positionality was one way to show how the study findings and our interpretations of the findings might have been informed by our backgrounds and biases.

## **FINDINGS**

In this section we report the major findings centered around the two research questions. They are classified into four categories: (a) position and personality, (b) negative attributes of the perpetrator, (c) impact on the victim, and (d) organizations' willful blindness. For confidentiality, we have given each participant a number (e.g., Participant 1) to represent their identity. Direct quotes will be used to support each theme presented below.

## **Position and Personality**

From the responses of all the participants it was clear that a person's position within an organization and his or her personality is a significant determinant of experiencing or instigating uncivil behavior as well as coping with it. Specifically, the unequal power structure, that is, where the victim has less power or is submissive in nature compared to the perpetrator, is the primary cause of workplace incivility. The different examples and situations provided by the participants revealed the perpetrators' advantages and the targets' disadvantages due to power relations and differing personalities that prevail in organizations.

One major disadvantage as identified by all the participants was that their supervisor or the person in a higher position failed to comply. In other words, the higher-level individual would hinder the target's ability to complete or perform his or her job effectively and in a timely manner. Alternatively, the failure to comply could occur with a person with a dominating or a bullying personality despite in the same or lower position. For instance, Participant 1 worked at the HR Department of a Community College where her job was to update job descriptions. In order to complete a particular job description, she needed the support of the Vice President (VP) of Information Technology (IT) and the administrative assistant of the IT department. However, the job description did not get updated until a year later and was only completed because the college was getting ready for an audit by their accrediting agency. So, for a period of one year, Participant 1 was unable to progress with her job due to the VP and the administrative assistant's negligence and failure to respond to her request. Participant 1 explained,

I didn't even want to meet with them. I didn't need any time from them. I just needed them to collaborate and get this job description updated. I would either not hear a response back, or I would hear, "Oh, yes yes yes, I'll get to that at the end of the week," or "I'll reply by next week" for a year. I had pretty much sent an email to both of them every three or four weeks consistently for a year, trying to get them to do this. Then in the summer, when I was back there full-time, when I would see them in the hall, I would talk to them in person about it, or call them on the phone. I kept getting the same run around.

In order to cope with the run around that she faced, Participant 1 started emailing both the VP and the administrative assistant once every day. Participant 1 stated, "I'm just going to annoy them to death, basically, with emails until they get me the updated job description." Eventually, after persistence in contacting both the individuals, Participant 1 managed to complete the job description. This coping strategy of badgering the instigator was used by Participant 1 was necessary as her job was at stake. However, one could label her response to the uncivil behavior as uncivil too, due to her daily emails to both the individuals. Nevertheless, Participant 1 believed that her action was able to derive results; hence, she found it appropriate.

Another challenge that the participants faced was resistance either from higher-ranking employees or from employees who were in a similar position. Participant 3, an ex-military official, took a management position in an organization where she was required to deal with department heads in order to collect information which would help her complete her job requirement. However, she was faced by unexpected resistance from these individuals. As a result, Participant 3 had encountered immense difficulty obtaining the necessary information. Participant 3 revealed, "Even though the boss said this is what I want, and I could not produce it alone. I had to have their support, and they were less than supporting." Participant 3 was not welcomed by the heads of the departments as she was considered as having no background of the civilian world. She elaborated, "They would sit there with a smile on their face and 'yadda, yadda, yadda,' but when it came the time to actually produce what they needed to produce, you never got anything, which is problematic when you need their input to be able to produce the final project." Nevertheless, Participant 3 did not give up. After a lot of struggle and persistence, she managed to develop a one-on-one relationship with them, which was fruitful in allowing her to extract information from the department heads. It also shows that incivility could be dealt with gracefully or tactfully as Participant 3 demonstrated in her case.

Subtle sabotaging is another form of incivility which is inflicted from a superior, a subordinate, or someone in a lateral position. When Participant 5 worked in an Air Force base, his job required him to be in a lot of presentations and briefings. A female colleague of him, although in a similar position as Participant 5, acted as his supervisor and mentor due to more years of work experience she had than Participant 5. According to Participant 5, the female colleague was helpful and supportive as mentor and gave him tips for day-to-day activities of the job. However, as a supervisor, she took credit for the work he did, which he considered uncivil, unethical, and unappreciative. Participant 5 stated,

Not that I need credit, but that hurt me deeply, because I had looked upon her as a mentor and now here she was acting like it was all her. I don't remember the resolution of that. I think that nothing ever came of it, because I didn't say anything. I figured that if the General didn't know, it wasn't my place to tell him, and I didn't say anything to her because she was my boss, and I feared for what she might do to me if I challenged her.

This example shows that perpetrators can have two different types of personalities and can easily sabotage the victim for their own personal gains or interests. However, it is important to note that avoiding conflict or confrontation is the most frequently adopted strategy of dealing with incivility as it was revealed by Participant 5.

Similarly, Participant 6 also faced subtle sabotaging from a woman who worked at the same level as her for the State of Texas. Participant 6 was in charge of the computer network and the perpetrator of this incident used her personal contacts to incapacitate the network. However, in this situation, Participant 6 worked with her supervisor in devising a newer and more recent network which was much needed by the department. Since she was able to convince her boss to implement a new system, the perpetrator was unable to destroy the network due to lack of access to passwords and other details. Nevertheless, this is another example of sabotaging which was handled tactfully.

A threat from supervisors or colleagues is another form of workplace incivility reported by the participants. Participant 2 worked in a multinational corporation where she was exposed to a boss who discussed profane personal experiences (e.g., nooners) and also threatened to physically abuse her if she ever decided to date a colleague who was interested in her. In spite of the fact that Participant 2 had made it very clear she was engaged and had no interest in dating any other men, her boss continued to threaten her. Participant 2 stated, "My dad asked me to stand up to her. But instead, I just took a transfer." Escaping from the situation is another frequently mentioned coping mechanism by the study participants.

Overall, workplace incivility is inflicted due to power structures within an organization and individual personality. From the above examples, it was clear that a supervisor or someone in the similar position can instigate uncivil behavior. Some forms of incivility mentioned by the participants in this study include failure to comply, resistance, sabotaging, lack of common vision, and giving additional tasks beyond an individual's job description. On the other hand, the ways in which the participants chose to cope with the uncivil treats differed based on their personality and/or the circumstance in which they were. In this study, the participants chose to escape from the situation, avoid it, deal with it tactfully or gracefully, or engage themselves in workout sessions. Confronting the perpetrator or responding with incivility was also identified by the participants as coping tactics but it was not common practice as the participants were in fear of the consequences such as the loss of their jobs. However, based on the participants' report, there was no question that workplace incivility prevailed in every organization involved in this study.

### **Negative Attributes of the Perpetrator**

Upon analyzing the causes of workplace incivility it appeared that targets all identified negative attributes of the perpetrators for their instigation of uncivil behavior. For example, the study participants identified a number of triggers for incivility, including jealousy, competition, dislike, work experience, and ignorance to explain the inappropriate behavior of the instigators. However, it is interesting that none of the participants blamed their experiences of incivility on themselves, or their personalities and actions.

For instance, consider the case of Participant 6 who was in charge of the computer network being sabotaged by a lady who repeatedly destroyed the network in order to cause Participant 6 trouble in her job. When confronting this lady, Participant 6 learned that the instigator was jealous of her and her college degree which she did not have. In this case, the perpetrator revealed a strong dislike towards individuals who were higher in the educational ladder.

Next, in Participant 3's example, she encountered resistance because she had work experience different from the rest of her colleagues. That is, Participant 3 had come from a military background while others had not. This difference caused Participant 3's colleagues to resist working with her and dislike her because they believed that she did not have knowledge they had (i.e., how the civilian world operates).

Often people are uncivil without even realizing that they are being uncivil towards someone. When Participant 1 worked as a part-time employee in the HR Department, she shared an office with another employee who had the same job description. However, that person worked as a full-time employee while Participant 1 worked only during summer. Participant 1 explained,

I'm the first person that they [job applicants] see. And they're asking any HR question like "I'm interested in this position." I'll start to talk to them. She'll jump up from her desk and interrupt and address the person's question. Every summer it happens. There are a lot of instances like that where she just sort of takes over something. I don't know if she is even conscious of it, but I think that is a little uncivil.

Since Participant 1 and the perpetrator are also friends, she had casually mentioned to the perpetrator how inappropriate her behavior was. The perpetrator stated that she was not aware of it. However, having the knowledge did not stop the perpetrator from demonstrating the same behavior. The perpetrator's continuation of the uncivil behavior signals her strong desire to compete with Participant 1. Therefore, it is possible that perpetrators might be unaware of their uncivil behavior towards people but at the same time they could be aware of it yet still choose to continue with the same behavior for personal reasons such as jealousy and competition.

### **Impact on the Victim**

Workplace incivility causes adverse effects upon a victim's mental, emotional, and physical well-being along with their professional life. Below are a few representative sentiments shared by the study participants.

If I get frustrated or annoyed or any emotion that might not be professionally put out there, then I just keep that in. That is when you go home at night, you have to let that out at some point, whether it is exercise or going to the park, or whatever you have to do to let it out (Participant 8).

It made me feel uncomfortable and not safe ... I cried. I didn't want to go to work. Besides we'd end up talking about it instead of doing our typing. It made me feel bad about myself. And, I was nauseated from worrying about it all of the time. Yeah, it affected me physically and mentally (Participant 2).

I don't guess in the real scheme of things, it had a real big effect on me. But that is probably because I'm a very strong-minded person. If I was a little less secure in myself, it might have caused me to go hide under a rock, but for a person like me with my composition, it just made me try a little harder and do a little more. But I can see where that would not be true for all people. So, I've kind of talked a little about personal and a little about professional all blended together, but I think to sum it up, it probably didn't have a whole lot of negative effect on me (Participant 11).

The above remarks reveal that the impact of workplace incivility is strong and can be very harmful. It not only causes individuals to lose focus at work and affect their performance but it can also cause severe personal damage. On the other hand, these statements also show that the impact depends upon the personality of a person as revealed by Participant 11.

In sum, from the accounts portrayed by the participants, it is evident that people cope with uncivil behaviors at work quite differently and therefore the impact of incivility differs to different individuals. However, it is not uncommon that workplace incivility can result in poor self-esteem, poor health, foul mood, and incompetency at work. These consequences make the phenomenon of workplace incivility too important to ignore.

### **Organizations' Willful Blindness**

As indicated by the study participants, their organizations do not have a policy to specifically address workplace incivility related issues because this is such a new term or phenomenon. However, their organizations do have a policy related to violence, bullying, racism, and sexual harassment. Participants 5 and 3 who worked at the Air Force and military, respectively, were aware of a structure that was put in place due to the unique nature of their organizations. Participant 3 said, "We never talked about incivility, but people in the military know that there is military justice and so they know if they step outside the lines, whatever line it might be, there are consequences." On the other hand, Participants 2 and 4 noted that in all the organizations they worked for, incivility was not addressed or even considered as inappropriate behaviors. In contrary, Participant 7 who worked for a government agency stated, "There wasn't a policy but you were supposed to report it to your immediate supervisor. If you don't get anything out of that person, or that is the person who is being uncivil to you, then you go to an HR person and report it."

In this study, several participants experienced incivility on a regular basis. Their organizations took limited measures to address this issue. Further, despite the fact that some organizations offered employees the protocol of consulting with the supervisor or HR personnel, it was unlikely that the participants would choose that option in fear of some potential consequences such as being fired, experiencing greater uncivil behavior, or forced resignation. Therefore, it seems that organizations have turned a blind eye to this serious issue even though it should be of paramount concern due to the rapid growth and adverse effects on multiple levels.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study was conducted to understand how incivility is manifested in workplaces and what strategies victims use to cope with it. Through individual face-to-face interviews, we were able to collect the first-hand data which was rich and unique to the individual participants. Based on the findings, four conclusions can be drawn. First, positional power that individuals hold in an organization and differing personalities causes incivility. Second, the negative attributes of the perpetrator contribute to workplace incivility. Third, uncivil behavior can have a major impact on the target. Finally, there lacks official organizational policies to address the issue of workplace incivility despite that it is a growing phenomenon.

Based on the first finding of the study, it appears that power relations and power struggle in organizations tend to escalate incivility. This finding support the arguments made by researchers such as Bierema (2009) and Callahan (2011) who posited that power or one's position within an organization play a significant role in terms of employees' experiences of incivility. Those in power seldom suffer from incivility; instead, they are often perceived as the instigator (Callahan, 2011) who negatively impact subordinates (Estes & Wang, 2008). Furthermore, Ashforth (1994) and Tepper (2000) confirmed that interpersonal mistreatment is often instigated from higher-status individuals. This suggests that individuals who are of a lower-status are highly likely to experience mistreatment from higher-status individuals that affects their personal and professional well-being (Carza & Cortina, 2007). This is a prominent theme emerged out of this study. As revealed by the study participants, their supervisors often used their positional power to mistreat them. Additionally, competition between individuals in the similar positions can also cause uncivil behavior. Competition arises due to personality clashes and dislike which necessitate the desire to outperform another individual, or vice versa. This results in failure of building a common ground and causing a perpetrator-victim relationship. Subsequently, situations such as failure to

comply, resistance, threats, additional job tasks, are among many experienced by targets of uncivil behavior. This finding is important and has not been highlighted in previous studies on workplace incivility. As positional power will continue to exist in any type of organizations, it is important that organizational leaders and HR practitioners become keenly aware of this type of power and develop strategies to prevent power abuse.

What was made clear by the study participants is that how to cope with uncivil behavior is largely dependent on individual differences (personal attributes such as resilience and level of maturity) and the specific situations. Some of the strategies participants used were escaping, avoiding, working out, confronting, tactfully dealing with the situation, or being uncivil in return. It appears that the most popular strategy of all was to avoid and escape. In this study, few participants chose to confront due to their fear of the instigator or concern that the situation might deteriorate further or they might end up losing their job. This finding is consistent with those from previous research (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001; Estes & Wang, 2008; Felblinger, 2008; Hutton & Gates, 2008; Smith et al., 2010; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Zauderer, 2002). However, a few interesting findings from this study are worth highlighting. First, the less important the job is to an individual, the more likely he or she would choose to confront the instigator. Second, a submissive person is unlikely to confront even in a job which is unimportant to him or her. Third, the more experienced and mature an individual is, the more likely he or she will be able to deal with incivility gracefully and tactfully.

Furthermore, dealing or coping with incivility also depends upon the participants' personal attributes as well as the impact it has caused on them. A resilient individual would likely experience less negative effects of incivility compared to an individual who has lower positive psychological capital (hope, self-efficacy, resilient, and optimism) (Roberts, Scherer, & Bowyer, 2011). Thus, an individual with lower positive psychological capital may face greater adverse effects such as low self-esteem, negative feelings about self, and poor health due to uncivil experiences. On the other hand, all these personal adversities give rise to poor performance at work which could cause a possible threat to one's job.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Workplace incivility is an epidemic that can negatively affect organizations and their members. Specifically, victims face adverse physical and psychological consequences that result in poor personal and professional life. Subsequently, an organization's bottom line is affected due to unhappy and unproductive employees who are troubled by incivility encounters. Findings from this study call for serious attention and actions to alleviate workplace incivility so that organizational members can work in an environment which is safe and healthy. In this spirit, we suggest several areas in which HR can intervene to accomplish such goals.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

In spite of severe effects of workplace incivility, there clearly lacks formal organizational policies to address this imminent issue. Human resource professionals can play a leading role in assisting organizational leaders in developing such policies. The policies should establish the ground rules, workplace behavior expectations, and consequences for violating such rules (Bandow & Hunter, 2008; Estes & Wang, 2008). HR practitioners must strive to ensure that these policies apply to all organizational members, particularly those in power. Treating all employees with fairness and justice is critical in reducing workplace incivility, especially given that power, hierarchical and relational status determines how individuals experience and respond to interpersonal mistreatment (Carza & Cartina, 2007) which is often instigated from higher-status individuals (Ashforth, 1994; Terpper, 2000). HR professionals must take responsibility for helping organizational members recognize the power dynamics and fostering a fair work climate.

Nowadays the climate of many organizations tends to be informal with an aim to promote innovativeness, stimulate creativity, and establish free-flowing communication (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). This informality is evident through dress code, word choice, conversational patterns, posture,

emotional expressions, and other nonverbal cues (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Informal settings make it difficult for employees and leaders to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in themselves as well as others; thus, promoting incivility. It is essential to replace an informal climate with a climate that is formal, and with clearly outlined boundaries guide the conduct of all organizational members. A formal climate gives little leeway for employees to breach acceptable behaviors, and unspoken rules of politeness and professionalism due to less ambiguity (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Additionally, it is important that HR practitioners help organizational members build an awareness of the phenomenon of workplace incivility. Providing training workshops is one way to accomplish this goal (Pearson & Porath, 2010; Zauderer, 2002). Also, HR professionals can take advantage of social media and technology to create a community where employees who experience uncivil treat can safely voice their concern and share experiences without fear of retaliations or revenges.

In addition to raising the awareness, HR professionals must delineate ways in which they can identify and eliminate the underlying causes of workplace incivility in order to prevent uncivil behaviors from occurring in the first place. Specifically, HR professionals should educate those in power (top management) on the severe impact of incivility on both the organizations and employees so that they can become leaders in creating a civil work environment (Callahan, 2011). Additionally, HR professionals must encourage organizational leaders to engage in conversations with employees who have been targets or victims of incivility. This will allow employees' perspectives to be shared, hence, help organizations focus their energy on developing effective interventions in a timely fashion. Additionally, HR practitioners should also conduct exit interviews with departing employees to understand the cause for their departure. Doing so will allow organizations to become more aware of incivility related issues and develop effective policies and strategies to address these issues (Pearson & Porath, 2005).

Next, HR professionals can help employees "establish unions and collective bargaining avenues" that help benefit both employees and organizations (Callahan, 2011, p. 17). Furthermore, socialization programs which minimize the conditions which lead to power to should be instilled and developed by HRD practitioners (Callahan, 2011; Reio & Ghosh, 2009). Finally, activities that improve communication across diverse groups must be introduced to enforce appreciation for diverse individuals and talents (Porath & Pearson, 2009; Reio & Ghosh, 2009).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Further research on workplace incivility must be conducted in order to continue to gain new insights and help reduce the number of incivility incidents at work. We recommend that future research focus on the following research questions.

1. Why do perpetrators instigate incivility and what do they intend to achieve from it?
2. How do personal attributes (e.g., personality, age, maturity, experience, cultural background) influence the way individuals handle workplace incivility?
3. Do cultural differences matter in the case of workplace incivility? If so, how?
4. Do men and women handle workplace incivility differently? If so, how?
5. How do organizational justice and support contribute to deviant behaviors in the workplace as Zoghbi-Manrique de Lara and Verano-Tacoronte (2007) pointed out?
6. What is the relationship between leadership and workplace incivility?

In addition to examine the above questions, there remains a need for further research on power from a critical perspective since incivility is very closely associated to power (Bierema, 2009; Callahan, 2011). Gaining an understanding to these issues will help expand our knowledge of the prevalence and causes of this complex phenomenon of workplace incivility. It will also help build theories on workplace incivility which are missing in current literature.

Methodologically, we encourage empirical studies using different research approaches. For example, using mixed research methods would help provide generalizable and informative data at the same time. Phenomenological studies focusing on individual experiences with workplace incivility would deepen our

understanding of the impact of this phenomenon at the individual level. Case studies that focus on organizations which have successfully addressed or failed to address important workplace incivility issues will allow us to draw valuable lessons to improve organizational practices.

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