

Chapter 2

Forms of Workplace Mistreatment

Abstract This chapter explores the definitions of various forms of workplace mistreatment, contrasting them with a definition of workplace incivility. The chapter considers conceptual models for understanding the causes, processes, and consequences of workplace mistreatment, indicating the potential contribution of the Risk Management Model. A section towards the end of the chapter reflects upon the first two propositions introduced in [Chap. 1](#) regarding the importance of belonging as a motive and the human capacity to perceive and interpret their social world.

Definitions and Implications of Incivility

What is Incivility?

The ways in which people mistreat one another at work has attracted concern from managers, consultants, professional groups, and academics over recent decades. This interest has brought an important issue well-deserved attention. Extensive surveys across a variety of occupational groups have established that workplace mistreatment occurs entirely too often. Large scale surveys report diverse rates of workplace bullying, ranging from 5 to 50 % (Zapf et al. 2003). A regional survey in the south of France found that 10 % of participants had experienced workplace bullying and that the experience of bullying was associated with sleep disturbances (Niedhammer et al. 2000). Schat et al. (2006) found that 6 % of participants in a national survey in the USA reported workplace violence while 41.4 % reported psychological aggression. Bullying towards nurses occurs so frequently that nurses consider it a normal part of the nursing profession (Advisory Board Company 2009; Hutchinson et al. 2005). Surveys have reported that 21 % of USA employees have been the target of workplace bullying (Keashly and Jagatic 2000; Namie and

Namie 2000). The exact figures vary with working populations and definitions of mistreatment, but it leads to a consensus that these things occur too frequently.

Yamada (2000) defined bullying as “the intentional infliction of a hostile work environment upon an employee by a coworker or coworkers, typically through a combination of verbal and nonverbal behaviors” (p. 480). Namie and Namie (2007) defined it as “repeated mistreatment by one or more perpetrators of an individual or group... driven by a need to control other people” (p. 43). Keashly (1998) defined bullying as “hostile verbal and nonverbal, nonphysical behaviors directed at a person(s) such that the target’s sense of him/herself as a competent person and worker is negatively affected” (p. 86). Whatever may be the ideal definition for bullying, it comprises unpleasant, unwanted social behavior that has no constructive place in workplace cultures.

The Broader Context of Incivility

Mistreatment of colleagues at work occurs within a broader context of a civility crisis. Workplaces are one of many venues for incivility. People complain of receiving or witnessing frequent incivility while driving, going to school, walking on the sidewalk, and participating in the political process. They see incivility in a diminished use of *please* and *thank you*, abrupt interruptions from communication technologies, people using public space as if it were their own personal space, diminished concern for community, and blatant shows of disrespect for leaders (Alkon 2010; Mills 2012; Truss 2005). The incivility crisis has been attributed to a clash of cultures: people from differing national backgrounds encountering one another more frequently in a global community (Morand 2003). In a parallel manner, clashing codes of comportment across generations result in older people dismissing young people as rude, uncultured louts lacking a work ethic (Leiter et al. 2010). Mills (2012) emphasized the importance of distinguishing discussions of societal and personal civility. Stereotypical thinking occurs at the intersections of cultures as people from one culture apply their views of comportment to people from another. This situation differs in a meaningful way from within-culture incivility that may arise from either (1) perpetrators who have failed to learn proper comportment or (2) perpetrators who choose to violate civility despite knowing proper comportment. Ideally, people would learn and exercise codes of civility as they pertain to each person they encounter, adapting their own behavior to accommodate the feelings of the other. Regardless of whether attaining such an ideal is possible, it does not appear likely in the foreseeable future.

Alkon (2010) opens her book referring to invasions of public space by people talking loudly on phones. A bygone era contained telephone calls in phone booths; now phone conversations are ubiquitous. The loud and generally vapid conversation invades the mental space of neighboring people. Conversation tends to attract attention even when people have no interest in the conversation. Talking

audibly on a phone thereby disrupts the attention of others. People are willing to relinquish privacy for their phone conversation for the convenience of talking wherever they happen to be. That convenience may be at the expense of other people's peace of mind. This violation of civility is an example of using public space as private space. As an indication of the emotional impact of incivility, Alkon presents herself—in the cover picture as well as in the text—as an avenging angel, rebuking individuals for lacking consideration. Her implicit message is that people are not only offended but desiring revenge when experiencing incivility. Incivility provokes strong negative emotions in others, potentially encouraging mistreatment in return. It is not clear how Alkon sees reciprocity and emotional contagion as bringing about change. These dynamics seem more likely to exaggerate the current situation.

Worklife is one of many life domains where people have concerns about incivility. The problem calls for a response from individuals, workgroups, and managers. Addressing the problem begins with clearly identifying the nature of incivility and of civility.

Definitions

A feature of intense academic focus on a topic is concept redundancy. When social scientists examine a phenomenon thoroughly, they notice variations. Some concepts separate into clear categories; others are subtle nuances. As Hershcovis (2011) explored in depth, the field of workplace mistreatment has generated a plethora of terms, "... including bullying (e.g., Rayner 1997), incivility (e.g., Andersson and Pearson 1999), social undermining (e.g., Duffy et al. 2002), mobbing (e.g., Leymann 1990), workplace aggression (e.g., Neuman and Baron 1998), emotional abuse (e.g., Keashly et al. 1997), victimization (e.g., Aquino et al. 1999), interpersonal conflict (e.g., Spector and Jex 1998), and abusive supervision (e.g., Tepper 2000)" (Hershcovis 2011, p. 499). She welcomed the close attention to the diverse forms of the phenomenon while cautioning against the field's fragmentation as researchers pursue one form of mistreatment without appreciating parallel work on other forms. Researchers tend to become aligned with and committed to a certain measure or language, reducing their openness to broader developments in the field. In a meta-analysis, she demonstrated that the constructs had little differential impact: for example, the predictive power of social undermining was not appreciably enhanced by additional measures of bullying or aggression. The bottom line was that mistreatment was the core issue; the specific form of mistreatment—whether it was bullying, social undermining, or incivility—was very much a secondary matter.

Hershcovis (2011) concluded by proposing a model that depicts workplace aggression as the generic phenomenon leading to a variety of distressing outcomes. The various forms of mistreatment arise through the operation of moderators (intent, intensity, frequency, etc.) of the relationship of workplace

aggression with a variety of outcomes. The qualities that differentiate the various forms of workplace mistreatment include surface characteristics—frequency, intensity, and invisibility—of the offending behavior as well as qualities of the relationship between perpetrator and its target. Hershcovis (2011) questions how these differentiations make a meaningful contribution to understanding the processes to which they refer. It is worth considering that the commonalities across all forms of mistreatment are more salient than their differences.

Surface Characteristics

Hershcovis (2011) identifies three surface characteristics of mistreatment: frequency, intensity, and invisibility. Two of the surface characteristics are definitive in distinguishing among some of the widely used terms for mistreatment. Regarding frequency, definitions of bullying limit the term to situations that include multiple incidents over time (Hershcovis 2011). Regarding intensity, the most widely accepted definition limits incivility to low intensity behavior (Andersson and Pearson 1999). The third surface characteristic, invisibility, does not differentiate among the various forms of misbehavior, but serves to sustain misbehavior over time by avoiding reprimand against the perpetrator from those in authority (Baron et al. 1999). As workplace mistreatment becomes less acceptable to the point of being illegal in some jurisdictions, perpetrators become more adept at subtle forms of bad behavior.

The proposition that associates greater intensity of mistreatment with a stronger impact depicts incivility as parallel with physical aggression. Certainly, more intense physical assault results in more physical harm. A parallel process would propose that intense verbal abuse (screaming, cursing, etc.) generates greater distress than subtle incivility (rolling one's eyes, making a sarcastic remark). That is, the model proposes that the intensity of the mistreatment, regardless of its modality (physical aggression, sexual abuse, verbal abuse) produces harm in targets proportionally. The impact of intensity may be more complex.

The Risk Management Model proposes a nonlinear relationship of intensity with harm for non-contact forms of incivility (words, facial expressions, gestures, spatial positioning). First, language has a subtle complexity that far exceeds that of physical confrontation. People vary in their interpretation of a shrug but they are more likely to concur on the significance of a punch or a grope. Second, incivility has a trigger function regarding risk: any sign of disrespect flags problems with a working relationship. This quality is especially relevant in a time and place where blatant mistreatment of colleagues or subordinates prompts condemnation from the organization. Subtle cues would be the only ones available to people attempting to understand their status within the workplace community.

Specifically, the only form of mistreatment in Hershcovis's (2011) analysis that had a stronger relationship with an outcome than incivility was bullying that had a stronger correlation with physical wellbeing than did incivility. In contrast,

incivility had stronger correlations with job satisfaction and turnover intention than did other forms of mistreatment. Abusive supervision did not have stronger correlations with outcomes than did incivility. One possible explanation for this finding could be the third surface characteristic: invisibility. Although the narrative that receives attention in popular media (This American Life 2010a, b) is the blatantly abusive boss, problematic supervisory relationships may be much more subtle. In displaying blatant abuse, bosses risk vulnerability to grievances from employees or reprimands from their superiors. They may also recognize that subtle shows of dominance gain more respect from bystanders than do blatant abuse.

Instead of a differential impact for intensity, the Risk Management Model proposes incivility as a threshold event. Regardless of whether incivility is blatant and intense or subtle and mild, incivility conveys increased risk. A line has been crossed. The strength of the association with distressing outcomes reflects qualities other than intensity. From this perspective, incivility need not be low intensity. The important definitional point is that incivility may have low intensity and still be a matter of consequence. Instead, frequency of incivility matters in that more frequent uncivil encounters suggest greater deterioration of the social environment of work with increased risk to its members.

Relationship Issues

The other qualities Hershcovis (2011) identified as moderators describe the relationship of perpetrators with targets: power differentials and intention. Power differentials give a quality to workplace mistreatment in that a party with greater power can inflict more harm on targets through physical strength, organizational authority, or influence. Research has reported that supervisor incivility has stronger relationships with job satisfaction, management trust, and turnover intentions than does coworker incivility, despite the greater frequency of coworker incivility (Leiter et al. 2011). The more consequential power of supervisors means that problems with the supervisory relationship present greater risks than do problems with collegial relationships. Supervisor incivility could have low intensity while communicating disrespect for the target employee. In contrast, incivility from fellow employees may have greater intensity or frequency but be viewed as less risky because of its more modest implications for career development. The stronger relationship of supervisor incivility with turnover intention supports this proposition from the Risk Management Model.

A second relationship quality is intent. The Andersson and Pearson (1999) definition of workplace incivility states that intention may be ambiguous. The definition encompasses the range of situations in which people find another person's behavior offensive or aggressive despite the supposed perpetrator lacking intent to harm. These situations may arise through thoughtlessness (an employee talks loudly in the hallway, disturbing the concentration of colleagues, despite bearing them no ill will) or a limited appreciation of the unintended impact of

behavior (telling an off-color joke for the amusement of friends without appreciating that others may feel offended or even threatened by hearing the joke).

Regarding intent, research to date has established that targets' perception of intent is associated with greater impact of aggression (Aquino et al. 2001). However, the current state of research has not yet established that impact is associated with the actual intent from the perspective of the person generating the questionable behavior. Hershcovis (2011) rightly observed that more thoroughgoing paradigms that integrate the perspectives of diverse participants in social encounters are needed to address such questions.

It may be that intentional incivility conveys greater risk than incivility derived from thoughtlessness. Although the company of thoughtless colleagues may be unpleasant, it is not necessarily threatening. They may leave dirty dishes in the sink, fail to replace depleted coffee creamer, or use loud, obnoxious ringtones, but, aside from their serenity-destroying properties, these behaviors have little consequential impact. In contrast, intended incivility depicts perpetrators as making deliberate decisions to show disrespect or disdain towards targets. Simply, the perpetrators' expression of incivility suggests that they are confident that targets lack the power to reciprocate or to find protection. Whatever power differential was assumed prior to the uncivil act becomes exaggerated by the encounter if the target cannot promptly and convincingly respond. Intentional incivility could thereby present greater risk to targets than do unintended acts, regardless of the intensity of the incivility.

The Experience of Incivility

Models of workplace mistreatment often follow a linear model in which unpleasant treatment, arising for often unspecified reasons as exogenous factors, have an impact on victims leading to subsequent harm, such as career success or well-being (Cortina 2008; Hershcovis 2011; Pearson and Porath 2009). The more immediate perspective of the Risk Management model focuses on harm within the interaction itself.

An example of immediate harm comes from an interview with JoAnn Chiakulas, the only juror on the trial of former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich who believed he was innocent of trying to sell Barack Obama's senate seat (This American Life 2010a, b). She spoke of other jurors demeaning her as part of a strategy to change her vote. However, she was unable to give specific examples of demeaning statements. When pressed, she said that other jurors pointed out that "We have to convict him because the prosecution will have to retry the case if we don't." This statement is true (and Blagojevich was retired and subsequently found guilty of this charge) and not explicitly demeaning of Chiakulas. Another example was, "We'll be embarrassed if we don't find him guilty." This statement is not purely a statement of fact but it is not specifically demeaning of Chiakulas either. To some extent the lack of specific examples reflects the invisibility of incivility.

The demeaning quality is conveyed in the vocal inflections or expressions accompanying the words. To some extent, the impact of the exchange is the exchange itself. The subtle cues conveying incivility do not explicitly threaten future harm or retribution. The exchange in itself creates distress by excluding the target from the perpetrator's community. Isolation increases the target's vulnerability to risks within the group and when venturing outside of the group. Isolated people have a diminished capacity to address the hazards they encounter.

The Bright Side: The Role of Civility in Countering Risk

Civility encompasses a range of behaviors, words, and emotional tone that convey respect and acknowledge that the parties in the interaction share a community (Alderfer 1972; Herzberg et al. 1959). Civility is often associated with etiquette, suggesting that it follows rules of comportment that regulate behavior, keeping more base qualities of people in check (Elias 1982; Hartman 1996; Morris 1996). By managing one's behavior carefully within social discourse, people can demonstrate their membership in society, including the capacity to cross boundaries to interact with people of different social classes or occupations. In this way, civility has a quality of a common language that facilitates communication in a complex social world. This view of civility suggests that it may be insincere in that it masks one's true feelings behind a performance designed to convey an impression upon its audience (Lakoff 2006). While making discourse more manageable, this form of civility may also reduce its depth.

Civility has as well a less formal and more genuine quality when it conveys respect (Gilin-Oore et al. 2010). In contemporary work organizations, rules of comportment are less codified but showing respect remains critically important. In contrast to domains where bullying and abuse persist, many work environments across the industrialized world have an active, ongoing concern with respect. When working from a limited vision, the concern focuses more on avoiding unintended offence, as in political correctness, to prevent grievances charging implicit racism or sexism. In more value-driven settings, organizations have instituted interventions designed to increase civility as a means of showing respect and engaging employees more thoroughly in their work (Osatuke et al. 2009).

In its more genuine sense, civility in social interactions begins with being aware of the other person. At the most rudimentary level, simply perceiving the presence of another is an improvement over being unaware of sharing space with another person. Bumping into someone that whose presence went unnoticed seems rude. People may talk loudly or engage in other disruptive behaviors simply because they are not attending to the people around them. Going beyond simple awareness to acknowledging the other person conveys a greater degree of civility and respect. Although there are situations in which people prefer to be ignored, a nod, a greeting, or a conversation is generally well received because it conveys more respect and civility in most instances. Expressing appreciation and adapting one's

behavior to accommodate others go even further in expressing respect. Both appreciation and accommodation convey awareness of the distinct qualities of the other person. These actions establish a more personal relationship with the other person by explicitly referring to the other person's distinct and positive qualities.

Research has established that civility among members of a workgroup is associated with more positive experiences of worklife. Leiter et al. (2011) in a sample of 1,107 hospital employees found team civility to be strongly correlated with respect ($r = .53$), efficacy ($r = .34$), job satisfaction ($r = .51$), commitment ($r = .43$), and management trust ($r = .39$). The relationship with management trust provides the most direct indicator of employees' assessment of risk. The civility assessed in this study referred to the interactions among colleagues and only incidentally referenced management. That is, greater civility among colleagues increased the extent to which employees felt that management was trustworthy.

The Leiter et al. (2011) study focused on improving civility within nursing units as discussed more thoroughly in Chap. 6. Bae et al. (2010, p. 41) have described nursing units as "the proximal context for individuals and a bounded interactive context created by nurses' attributes, interactions, and responses". The working relationships—with other nurses, supervisors, physicians, and patients—occurring within that context contribute to defining employees' identity. These relationships can provide individuals with access to extensive resources of expertise, practical assistance, or emotional support, increasing their confidence in their potential to thrive in their profession. When going badly, these relationships can generate intense emotional crises, increasing employees' sense of vulnerability. One response to increased riskiness is to seek transfers to other work units within the hospital or to leave the institution altogether to pursue their profession elsewhere (Shields and Ward 2001).

Core Propositions

Proposition 1: People want to Belong

The most basic proposition of the Risk Management model is that incivility frustrates the human motivation to belong. A sense of belonging is comforting. It conveys a sense of completeness and security. When that motive is unmet, people act to seek out relationships and group membership. When that motive is actively frustrated, people feel anxious with a sense of being at risk. From an evolutionary perspective, belonging to a group worked well for humans (Buss 1991). Individuals lacked the wherewithal to take on the beasts of the jungle, but as members of a coordinated group, they could defend themselves adequately. The people who survived and thrived were those who could maintain membership in a community. It has been proposed that loneliness served a survival function by motivating

people towards group membership (Cacioppo et al. 2006). The immediate feeling of distress that occurs when experiencing loneliness prevents people from settling into an isolated lifestyle. Isolation was detrimental to both the lone individual as well as to the community that lacked sufficient membership to withstand the rigors of survival.

The advantages of belonging continue in a contemporary world with its increasingly complex social, economic, and cultural connections. Research has consistently found that participation in social groups improve individuals' sense of self-worth and confidence (Aquino and Thau 2009; Baumeister and Leary 1995). Group participation increases the capacity to trust and to build cooperative relationships (Stevens and Fiske 1975). Despite the scarcity of ferocious beasts, people continue to contend with a world that presents serious threats to their well-being. Career advancement and financial thriving require people to participate in large scale social institutions, such as businesses or government bureaucracies, as well as small scale groups, including project teams as well as ongoing workgroups. Not only is "being a team player" a nearly inevitable criterion for employment or promotion, opportunities for major accomplishments occur as part of a group. Advances in complex fields—computers, software, financial services, medicine, science—are created through a team effort. The lone genius is increasingly rare. The Nobel Prize goes to people who lead great teams effectively.

The survival function that belonging provided early in human evolution has continued throughout history to the present day. A social world, created by people, has become the overwhelmingly major aspect of the human environment. An active and fulfilling participation in a supportive workgroup remains a vital asset for people to thrive in that world. Incivility is not simply an unpleasant quality of a social interaction. Incivility communicates the perpetrators' understanding of their relationship to the target.

Proposition 2: People Notice

In light of the importance of belonging, it makes sense that people would have a refined capacity to interpret their standing with others. The capacities to both display emotion and to interpret the feelings of others accurately are skills that permit people to manage their participation in social groups. These capabilities have been recognized as fundamental to emotional intelligence (EI, Davies et al. 1998), and social competence (Eisenberg et al. 1998; Halberstadt et al. 2001). They constitute rudimentary social skills (Riggio 1986). They function as personal resources that people use to monitor their immediate social context.

Elfenbein et al. (2010) have demonstrated a strong relationship between these two skills: people who express well also perceive emotions accurately. The capacity to perceive feelings is also related to the extent to which people can convincingly display falsified emotions (Porter and ten Brinke 2008). Elfenbein and Ambady (2002) explored emotional eavesdropping: the capacity to accurately perceive

emotions that the other person did not intend to convey. They operationalized the construct as the extent to which hearing a person's vocal inflections improved accuracy over simply seeing the other person's facial expression. This approach assumes that people exercise better control over their facial expressions than their vocal inflections that then becomes a leaky channel that could be read by those with sufficient perceptive ability.

From as early as 18 months, children show signs of having a capacity to figure out other people from observation. They are able to imitate others (Meltzoff 1995) and indicate that they can differentiate between intentional and accidental actions when imitating (Frith and Frith 2001; Leslie 1987). An observational study of preschool children found that five-year-olds used sophisticated strategies based upon reciprocity to elicit cooperation from their classmates (Leiter 1977). Frith and Frith (2001) argued that the speed and thoroughness with which children develop these capacities are evidence of a neurological foundation for a mentalizing system that represents links between people's intentions and their actions. This system underlies important qualities of emotional intelligence. Deficits in these neurological structures are candidates for explaining some of the social shortfalls displayed by children with autism (Mundy 2003). Overall, a large body of work has supported the proposition that humans have a structural disposition to scan their social environment, assigning intention and emotion to the people with whom they interact. These capacities are evident throughout human history and individual development.

Despite their sophisticated and diverse skills in social perception, people make mistakes. Applying simple heuristics to complex events contributes speed but creates errors. Two of the most common heuristics leading to errors are representative and availability (Maqsood et al. 2004; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). The representative heuristic applies familiar frameworks to new events. The availability heuristic arises from the relative ease of recalling large categories as opposed to small categories. Together, these cognitive patterns help to maintain the status quo. For example, a history of encountering incivility from a colleague may lead an employee to interpret a neutral or positive statement from that person as a criticism. These cognitive processes support the momentum arising from social dynamics, such as reciprocity, that perpetuate the current social climate of a work unit. That momentum resists change.

Research has produced consistent evidence of a long-standing human capacity for social perception. The sophistication of these capacities allows individuals to make the most of their opportunities within the complex networks of contemporary social environments. However, these abilities are not flawless. Cognitive limitations may contribute to the persistence of unpleasant social dynamics over time. Given the potential for impressions of other people to sustain over time, effective interventions require a way of challenging misperceptions.

The Risk Management Model proposes that a core function of social monitoring is risk assessment. The two-edged quality of social environments—as resources or threats—introduces considerable uncertainty. The anxiety prompted by uncertainty motivates people to seek information and to take action that

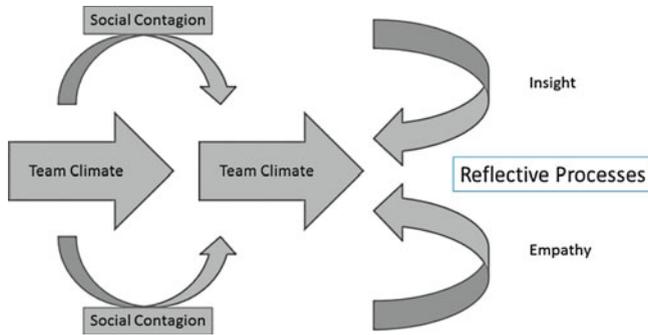


Fig. 2.1 Intervention as a reflective process

promises to reduce their exposure to risk. Often, the path of least resistance encourages people to fit into the existing social dynamic even if it is based upon unpleasant incivility and disrespect. Although people may be tempted to escape their current situation, they may encounter barriers to joining another group. A slow economic cycle may keep people constrained within unpleasant workgroups. In any case, people will seek ways to reduce their exposure to the risks signaled by workplace incivility (Fig. 2.1).

Conclusion

Incivility and civility are modes of behavior that reflect the extent to which people anticipate, accommodate, and explicitly appreciate other people. In some contexts, people judge civility by the thoroughness with which people follow rules of etiquette. In other situations—and perhaps most contemporary situations—the critical issue is showing consideration for others without explicit reference to a code of conduct. Consideration presents challenges in that it requires people to consider another person’s perspective. Consideration shares this quality with empathy. A modest level of consideration in line with pseudo-empathy asks, “Would I be bothered by someone conducting a loud phone conversation nearby?” A more sophisticated level of consideration makes an effort to acknowledge that others may differ in what they would experience as irritating.

In contrast to civility that characterizes the overall level of demeanor or climate in a workgroup, incivility exists as discrete events. When people report experiencing incivility, aggression, or psychological abuse at work, they rarely mean a constant barrage of these events. Specific forms of incivility occurred a few times a year or less (Leiter et al. 2011). As noted by the Risk Management Model, incivility represents a threshold event: an incident does not open the door to constant harassment, but it signals a more risky social environment.

These definitional issues raise questions as to the source of workplace incivility and its consequences. Related to these questions is understanding what sustains incivility among people who work together. Given the unpleasant nature of incivility and the dangers inherent in an uncivil social environment, it seems that an active process is necessary to sustain a dysfunctional environment over time.

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