The Positive Effects of Incivility in the Context of the Armed Forces: Exploring Work Context as a Moderator of Incivility

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Abstract
In the typology of harassment and aggression in the workplace, workplace incivility is situated as a non-aggressive, low intensity form of deviant behaviour with an uncertain intent to cause harm. The importance of incivility to organizational theory and human resource management is that it may have a negative effect on organizational outcomes and more importantly it may be a precursor for more overt forms of workplace violence. Two potential influences on the effects of incivility are personality and workplace context; the latter of these two has not been sufficiently explored in the literature. This paper will take one step towards addressing this gap by examining the ways in which incivility is moderated in the context of military organizations. The result of this contextual examination of incivility will be a proposal that incivility may have a positive effect through the development of coping strategies for stressful situations encountered by armed forces.

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Introduction

Workplace incivility has been described as a process of “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). The importance of incivility to organizational theory and human resource management is that it may have a negative effect on organizational outcomes and more importantly it may be a precursor for more overt forms of workplace violence (Cortina, Magley, Langhout, & Williams, 2001; Martin & Hine, 2005). Personality and workplace context are identified in the literature as two potential moderators of incivility (Blau & Andersson, 2005; Cortina, Magley & Lim, 2002). However, the potential of work context as a moderator has been theorized, but not sufficiently explored in the literature.

This paper will contribute to the incivility literature through an exploration of the moderating effect of work context. In particular, it will examine ways in which incivility can be moderated in one specific work context: the armed forces. It is proposed that the use of incivility in a military work context can result in positive outcomes. This is in contrast to the purely negative outcomes described in the incivility literature. To begin the exploration of this idea, this paper will first review and critique the literature on workplace incivility and describe the typology of harassment and aggression in the workplace in which the construct of incivility can be situated. The measurement and moderators of incivility will be examined, leading to the development of an argument that incivility may have a positive effect in the specific work context of the military through the development of coping strategies for stressful situations encountered by armed forces. Some suggestions for future research stemming from the findings of this paper will be developed.

Literature Review

The incivility construct

Andersson & Pearson (1999) initiated the discussion of the construct of workplace incivility. They were the first to describe incivility as “rude, thoughtless and discourteous behaviour that violates respectful standards” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, 455). Furthermore, Andersson & Pearson (1999) theorized that the instigators, the victims and the observers of incivility cannot clearly distinguish uncivil behaviour as having a clear intent to harm. Thus, it may appear to victims and observers that incivility is merely part of the process of coping with daily hassles (Pearlin and Lieberman, 1979, 220). Incivility, then, is a process rather than a single event (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) that is not readily detectable by perpetrators or victims.

The literature on workplace incivility draws on multiple concepts to develop the incivility construct; it is perhaps for this reason that the construct seems to be ill-defined (Griffin & Lopez,
Andersson & Pearson’s seminal article on incivility best illustrates this problem, in that incivility is described in comparison to what it is not; that is, incivility is not aggression, bullying or harassment but a subset of all these behaviours.

After reviewing the available literature on incivility and the related constructs from which it is derived and differentiated, it appears that incivility is a specific form of employee deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004) that is in turn a subset of antisocial employee behaviour. This latter construct is described by Giacolone & Greenberg (1997) as behaviour that brings harm to an organization or its employees. Many manifestations of workplace incivility could properly fall into the category of what is termed daily hassles, a concept that can best be thought of as the routine nuisances of everyday life (Pearlin & Lieberman, 1979). The daily hassles literature documents a range of negative effects (Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams, 2001) and as the frequency of incivility increased, it was found that individuals described themselves as having less job satisfaction (Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams, 2001). Further support for the negative effects of incivility can be found in the literature on abusive supervision that links between abusive supervision to psychological distress and negative outcomes for organizations (Tepper, 2000).

Elements of workplace aggression must figure large in any analysis of the workplace incivility construct. This is because the theorized end result of incivility is overt aggression or violence. Andersson & Pearson (1999) suggest that in the workplace violence is rarely a spontaneous criminal act, but perhaps the path towards overtly aggressive behaviour is a process of accumulating a series of minor stresses resulting from uncivil encounters. These minor, seemingly surmountable stressors are posited to be more damaging than a single, large stressor and lead towards a point where a marginal incivility marks the transition to overt aggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams, 2001, 65). The defining qualities of aggressive behaviour include the intent to cause harm, the belief that harm will be caused by the behaviour, and the further belief that the victim will attempt to avoid the aggression (Bushman & Anderson, 2001).

With the above characterization of aggression in mind, it would seem difficult to consider incivility as an aggressive behaviour because, as this paper has already demonstrated, with incivility there is no clear intent to cause harm. Furthermore, it has also been shown that the ambiguous nature of incivility implies that the instigator of incivility does not necessarily believe that uncivil behaviours will cause harm. By extension, the victim cannot attempt to avoid the incivility because it is so difficult to detect. In other words, incivility is behaviour that seems to fly under the aggression radar and individual manifestations are difficult to discern from normal behaviour, assuming that the role of varying workplace norms are considered. How then can the theorized aggressive end point of incivility be reconciled with the seemingly non-aggressive characterization of the construct? An answer may be found elsewhere in the aggression literature.

Incivility has been theorized as a process of accumulating low-level hostile exchanges between individuals. Since the literature on aggression has found that “the most important single cause of human aggression is interpersonal provocation” (Anderson & Bushman, 2002, 37) it is conceivable that this accumulation of provocations in the so-called incivility spiral (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) can have as its endpoint some form of aggression. Furthermore, it has been
shown that if the target of aggression is not the person who caused it, displaced aggression is the result (Marcus-Newall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). The importance of this finding to incivility is found in Blau & Andersson (2005) where the antecedents of incivility are described, and the argument is made that the starting point of incivility may be the aggressive behaviour of others in the organization. Taken together, these ideas may allow incivility to be situated somewhere in the set of aggressive behaviours.

Incivility appears to be a moving target, in that it shares aspects from related constructs but does not completely displace them (Martin & Hine, 2005). In other words, incivility is found in the intersection of the broad concepts of workplace aggression and employee antisocial behaviour (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Blau & Andersson, 2005; Cortina, Magley & Lim, 2002; Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams, 2001). When examining the contents of this intersection, one finds constructs such as bullying, daily hassles and harassment. Since incivility shares elements of many of these ideas, it should be amenable to analysis and critique using the literature from these areas. Therefore, this paper will adopt the approach of using critiques from the antisocial behaviour, harassment and related research in its critique of incivility.

To summarize, incivility is an outwardly mild but potentially damaging form of workplace abuse that tends to fly under the radar because it is not easy to detect by victims or instigators. Perhaps it is because of the ambiguous nature of incivility that it shares many features of similar constructs, and so the construct remains somewhat ill-defined (Griffin & Lopez, 2005; Wright and Wright, 2001). The literature suggests a typology of interpersonal mistreatment in which various constructs such as incivility, aggression and bullying can be located. The theoretical endpoint of incivility is violence or overt aggression, an argument supported by findings about causes of human aggression. The importance of incivility to human resource management is found in this potential for aggression. Despite the ambiguous nature of the construct itself, several scales have been developed that purport to measure incivility, and this paper now turns to an examination of these measures.

Measuring Incivility

Three incivility scales were found in the available literature: the Workplace Incivility Scale (WIS) (Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams, 2001), the Uncivil Workplace Behavior Questionnaire (UWBQ) (Martin & Hine, 2005) and a measure of instigated workplace incivility (Blau & Andersson, 2005). Each of these will be reviewed and critiqued.

Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams (2001) develop the WIS scale in a paper that also examines the effects of incivility on negative work outcomes and individual psychological outcomes. The authors develop the WIS through focus interviews with a group of employees from a particular work context, although no detail is given on the methodology behind this component of the study. The scale asks respondents to identify whether they have experienced a situation in the past five years where they felt that coworkers or superiors were uncivil towards them. They suggest that the seven items that make up the WIS scale are consistent with what are considered the most common negative acts in the workplace: that is, devaluation of work and efforts, insulting remarks and social exclusion (Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams, 2001).
Interestingly, these elements are very similar to the bullying construct as defined by Einarsen (1999).

To assess the convergent validity of the incivility construct, Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams (2001) correlated the WIS with the perception of fair interpersonal treatment scale or PFIT. The PFIT measures perceptions of civil and fair treatment; therefore the WIS should be negatively correlated with an incivility scale. It was found that the WIS demonstrated significant negative correlations (Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams, 2001) with the PFIT. They then conducted confirmatory factor analyses on the seven items from the WIS that measured incivility and found that the seven items loaded significantly onto a single-factor model (Cortina, Magley, & Lim, 2002).

Martin & Hine (2005, 478) suggest that while the WIS “displays good divergent validity by not correlating significantly with extrinsic organizational commitment, the brief and uni-dimensional nature of the WIS may not adequately capture the full breadth of the workplace incivility construct.” To address this issue, the authors develop their own scale, the UWBO, and find four factors of incivility: hostility, privacy invasion, exclusionary behaviour and gossiping (Martin & Hine, 2005). Confirmatory factor analysis was used to confirm that their four factor solution was a better description of incivility than the single factor WIS model suggested (Martin & Hine, 2005). They confirmed that their scale exhibited good convergent validity by correlating significantly with the WIS and the PFIT scale (Martin & Hine, 2005). The authors suggest that “different types of incivility may lead to different types of negative outcomes, which further reinforces the utility of conceptualizing incivility as a multidimensional construct” (Martin & Hine, 2005, 487).

The incivility measures found in the literature have been used to determine whether incivility exists in the workplace. All have been directed towards measuring the effects of incivility on the victims. Blau & Andersson (2005) move beyond these results and try to understand why employees are uncivil in the workplace in the first place. Recalling the discussion of the bullying literature presented elsewhere in this paper, it was noted that incivility studies have been limited to asking victims who have experienced incivility about their perceptions of the instigators of incivilities. Blau & Andersson (2005) include instigators of incivility in their study and attempt to measure what motivated them in their behaviour; this they termed instigated incivility whereas incivility that is felt by the victim is called experienced incivility.

To measure instigated incivility, the authors simply rework questions from the WIS so that the scale asks questions about instigated rather than experienced incivility; in other words, they flip the WIS experienced workplace incivility scale to create an instigated incivility scale (Blau & Andersson, 2005). Exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were used to validate the measurement and it was found that the instigated workplace incivility construct is distinct from the experienced workplace incivility construct (Blau & Andersson, 2005). It was also found that “individuals are more likely to perceive experiencing rather than instigating workplace incivility and that instigated workplace incivility is of lesser intensity and is distinguishable from general interpersonal deviant behaviour” (Blau & Andersson, 2005, 607). One particularly relevant finding was a determination that the antecedents of instigated workplace incivility are distributive justice, procedural justice, job satisfaction, and work
exhaustion (Blau & Andersson, 2005, 608). These antecedents provide preliminary insight was gained into the mechanism behind the spiraling of incivility (Blau & Andersson, 2005), but the study stops short of trying to determine whether or not the instigator has ambiguous intent. Recall that the ambiguous intent of the instigator is inherent in the definition of the construct, and is therefore a characteristic of incivility that distinguishes it from other related constructs.

In sum, the literature reviewed on measures of incivility shows that reliable and valid measures of the construct exist. From the development of an initial, uni-dimensional scale, the literature revealed a multi-dimensional scale that suggested four factors of incivility. Further, the literature has shown that incivility has an experienced and instigated form, both of which can be uniquely measured. However, available measures fail to incorporate critical incivility criteria such as the ambiguous intent of instigators. Furthermore, the literature reviewed did not attempt to measure whether and to what extent incivility might escalate into more extreme forms of workplace aggression or violence (Martin & Hine, 2005). The absence of this key element of incivility from the measurement literature means that only compelling theoretical arguments exist that incivility is a precursor to violence. Empirical studies are required to test the proposition that incivility is damaging over the long term.

Moderators of Incivility

Perhaps this lack of evidence for the claim that there is overt aggression or violence at the end of the incivility spiral can be the result of factors that moderate incivility. Incivility does have a real, negative impact: studies have found significant correlations between incivility and negative work outcomes (Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams, 2001), and it has been found that stress experienced by employees can hurt organizations through performance and productivity declines (Cortina, Langhout, Magley, & Williams, 2001). However, these results should be seen in light of the additional finding that in the experience of workplace incivility varies widely among employees (Cortina, Magley, & Lim, 2002). From the outset of the literature on workplace incivility, Andersson and Pearson (1999) stress that context and personality are factors in incivility. The moderating effect of personality will first be explored, followed by an exploration of how work context might impact incivility.

Despite the theorized low-level harassment that would be experienced by victims of incivility, one study found that incivility was simply not perceived to be threatening (Cortina, Magley, & Lim, 2002). In addition, it was found that “the most common reaction to incivility was to do nothing or tolerate the situation” (Cortina, Magley, & Lim, 2002, 21). Some approaches to investigating these puzzling findings with the goal of understanding how personality moderates incivility will now be described.

One approach was to consider incivility as a stressor for the victim. The stress and coping literature (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) suggests that the impact of stressful events can vary as a result of individual interpretation of events, as well as how individuals cope with stress. In one study of incivility, it was found that the great majority of respondents engaged in what is termed prosocial coping and minimization. In prosocial coping, victims attempt to avoid the instigator, and minimization involves dismissing or reducing the seriousness of a potentially damaging action (Cortina, Magley, & Lim, 2002).
In another approach, Blau & Andersson (2005) suggest that the placement of cause and effect in incivility is unclear: “it may be that higher experienced workplace incivility leads to increased job dissatisfaction and distress, or that higher dissatisfaction and distress leads to increased experienced workplace incivility.” Martin & Hine (2005) also found negative outcomes for workers when measuring what they considered to be uncivil behaviour. However, they could not conclude that workplace incivility caused those negative outcomes because it may be the case that low psychological well-being and low job satisfaction may contribute to perceptions that neutral behaviours are uncivil (Martin & Hine, 2005). In a somewhat more provocative stance, Martin & Hine (2005) suggest that incivility may be brought on by the negative attitudes and actions of individuals.

To summarize, it was found that incivility is not always perceived by victims as being threatening despite its origins as a construct with negative outcomes. This suggests that incivility should have some moderators, and one moderating mechanism suggested in the literature is the normal development of coping mechanisms in response to the stress of uncivil behaviour. It may also be the case that individuals with lower tolerance for mistreatment, lower psychological well-being or lower job satisfaction are experiencing the neutral behaviours of instigators as uncivil. The literature suggests some support for the role of personality in moderating incivility. However, the effect of work context, while discussed as a possible moderator in incivility literature (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), has not been explored in any empirical studies. This paper now turns to an examination of how work context moderates incivility. It will examine one work environment in particular where the moderation of incivility could be explored in more detail.

**Work Context as a Moderator of Workplace Incivility**

The starting point for a discussion on work context as a moderator of incivility is the idea of workplace norms: these are “the norms of the community of which one is a part while at work” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, 455). Norms vary from workplace to workplace, but it is suggested that there is some form of moral code that exists in each organization (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Incivility, then, is behaviour that breaks the usually accepted norms of a particular workplace, but uncivil behaviour in one work context may be acceptable behaviour elsewhere. Therefore, there should be variance in measurement of incivility across different organizational types. Unfortunately, there do not appear to be any empirical studies that test this proposition. Despite this shortcoming, there are theoretical perspectives that allow for an understanding of how work context can moderate the disruption of mutual respect in the workplace due to incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

From the antisocial work behaviour literature, Robinson & O’Leary (1998) suggest that there is a theoretical basis for understanding how varying work contexts impact the ways in which individuals behave antisocially. Attraction-selection theory, social information processing theory, and social learning theory all suggest that individuals adjust their actions depending upon what they observe in the workplace; if antisocial behaviour is the norm, then individuals will adopt similar behaviour (Robinson & O’Leary, 1998). The authors conclude that “[a]ntisocial behaviour is not simply an individual phenomenon, but the social context of the work group has
an extensive influence over whether and when individuals will behave in antisocial ways at work” Robinson & O’Leary (1998, 670).

**Incivility as a Positive Construct**

With these theoretical perspectives in mind, we will now turn to the example of the armed forces as a specific context in which the moderating effects of workplace context on incivility can be examined. In the armed forces, workplace norms allow for the use of incivility in training of recruits: drill instructors are expected to use what would otherwise be considered verbal abuse and degradation as part of the socialization of new recruits (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Furthermore, it will be suggested that the use of incivility is somewhat paradoxical in that it produces positive effects on individuals and work outcomes. The first task is to demonstrate the extent to which incivility exists in armed forces training.

The armed forces presents new recruits with a hierarchical, highly structured work environment. Newcomers are socialized into work roles through a process of rigorous training that tightly controls individual expression, aggression and use of violence (Katz, 1990). The reason for this type of rigid socialization through a rigorous training regime is that the ultimate task of soldiers is to face the risk of death or injury (Katz, 1990). In these extremely stressful work environments, the goal of training is to socialize individuals so that they prioritize teamwork and obey instructions with as few questions asked as possible (Archer, 1999).

This socialization process involves varying degrees of psychological and physical stress to simulate that of combat situations. At one extreme, training is organized in which trainers “display exaggerated emotions including fierceness, playfulness, anger, frustration, excitement and aggression” (Katz, 1990, 462) in a process of acting out harassment and incivility. At the other extreme, army basic training has been likened to a prolonged degradation ceremony involving varying degrees of being shouted at, group sanctions, degrading or boring tasks or forced physical exertion (Steinert, 2003). At any rate, combat training effectiveness is tested under conditions of extreme psychological stress (Friedland & Keinan, 1992) that can be brought on, in part, by behaviours that fall within the typology of harassment and incivility described in this paper.

Some of the behaviours associated with armed forces training might appear to be more properly categorized as bullying, especially given the power differentials in the military work context. However, according to Katz (1990) few, if any, of these behaviours are outright violent, degrading or demeaning. Therefore, there should be at least a subset of behaviour in the military training process that could be characterized as uncivil. In comparing military training behaviours to Andersson & Pearson’s (1999) definition of incivility, there is evidence that there is ambiguous intent to harm the target and the behaviors are rude and discourteous. From the point of view of new recruits, these behaviours do violate workplace norms for mutual respect: the aggressive socialization process would in most cases violate new recruits’ perceptions of what constitutes respectful work environments.

Given that there are parallels between incivility and aspects of military training, the question becomes one of determining how behaviours on the part of military trainers that should
result in negative outcomes can actually produce positive organizational results. In other words, trainees’ exposure to intense stressors during training may heighten training effectiveness. Recall that the literature reviewed suggested that one effect of incivility is the creation of stress in victims, so it is not unreasonable to suggest that the use of harassment and incivility in the military training context induces a degree of stress that can approximate the stress of combat. Exposure to intense stressors during training may be facilitated by incivility. These stressors might infect trainees and build physical and psychological strength against anxiety (Friedland & Keinan, 1992). Evidently, procedures that enhance the trainee’s familiarity with conditions that are likely to occur in actual combat situations reduce uncertainty and fear of the unknown (Friedland & Keinan, 1992) and incivility may contribute positively to this outcome. Spreitzer & Sonenshein (2004) recognize that workplace deviance, which includes incivility, has almost exclusively been considered as a negative construct. They argue for an understanding of deviance that has honourable intentions as its goal. In this light, the mechanism by which incivility results in positive rather than negative effects in the military context is not as paradoxical as it appears.

In sum, in the case of the military it seems that work context not only moderates the effect of incivility, but can also transform a negative construct to produce positive organizational outcomes. The incivility literature theorizes a process whereby incivilities initiate small-scale abuses that eventually spin out of control towards an endpoint of violence. In contrast, this paper has suggested that incivility is used in the military workplace context to socialize and control violence and aggression. Following on from this observation, it is interesting to note that the literature proposes that an informal workplace climate increases the probability of incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Perhaps the deeply hierarchical and formal structure of military environments contributes to controlling a spiral of incivility.

Conclusions and Future Research

This paper has taken some very preliminary steps towards a greater understanding of the ways in which context can moderate the effects of workplace incivility. As a result of this exploration, it seems that a construct designed to describe negative individual and organizational outcomes can be shown to have positive effects, given the proper work context. Applying the positive deviance construct proposed by Spreitzer & Sonenshein (2004) to the incivility construct would be one interesting avenue for future research in understanding how work context moderates incivility. In addition, the extent to which incivility would be tolerated in a military or paramilitary context outside of the training process should be explored further; reviews of bullying in the police and fire service contexts suggest that harassment exists, and should not be tolerated (Archer, 1999; Lynch, 2002; Perrott & Kelloway, 2006). Therefore, the tension between the utility of incivility and related constructs during the socialization process of military training and its damaging effects in normal times could also be explored.

This also raises the interesting question of confronting incivility: a study of incivility from outside the human resource management literature paints a somewhat different picture of the incivility escalation process than that suggested by Andersson & Pearson (1999). Phillips & Smith (2004) suggest that it is the act of confronting incivility that leads to dispute escalation; this is especially the case when utilizing some kind of moral code against incivility. Wright &
Wright (2001) also suggest that the use of a moral code to counter incivility can have negative effects. Based on these observations, future research could build on these issues to determine whether the best reaction to incivility is to simply avoid reacting to incivility.

References


