TARGETS' REACTION TO COWORKER INCIVILITY: A SOCIAL NETWORK PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Workplace incivility – "low-intensity deviant behavior with an ambiguous intent to harm" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457), is on the rise, and so is the tangible cost involved (Porath & Pearson, 2013; Yao et al., 2021). Therefore, the quest to understand the antecedents and subsequent effects to diagnose the severity of workplace incivility continues. However, given the number of people involved in an incivility engagement (instigator, target, witnesses, and reciprocators – those who seek retribution), the scarce use of social networks to further understand workplace incivility appears questionable. More so when literary evidence exists to substantiate that social networks helped further understand various other workplace aggression constructs (Huitsing et al., 2014; Yang & Treadway, 2018; Pauksztat & Salin, 2020). To respond to this research gap, we examine the role of social network ties on how the targets respond to uncivil events.

Essay 1: Supervisors, coworkers, and customers are significant sources of workplace incivility (Schilpzand et al., 2016). Among these sources, incivility from supervisors and customers has an inherent hierarchy, power differential, and status-related issues (Sliter et al., 2010; Potipiroon & Ford, 2019). However, we hypothesized that social networks can play a detrimental role in how they affect the response to coworker incivility. Thus, *Essay 1* intends to answer the question, does the workplace social relationship of the target with the instigator have *any role in reciprocating or not-reciprocating incivility?* The social network's relational context implies that either close, problematic, ambivalent, or indifferent ties attach each coworker among themselves (Bloor et al., 2004). Therefore, consistent with social exchange theory, we examined how one chooses to react to incivility instigated by a known coworker. More so, when this known coworker shares a specific relationship with the instigator. We conducted a social network survey (*Study 1 – 129 university faculty members from 13 faculties*) and a social network survey-based daily diary study conducted in two waves across seven days (*Study 2 – 106 university faculty members from 11 faculties*) to test the role of the four types of social network ties in the relationship between incivility and two types of behavioral reactions to workplace incivility – reciprocation and non-reciprocation. The results in both *Study 1* and *Study 2* suggest that within-person differences exist in how the targets of uncivil behavior react to the uncivil instigators. Similarly, the two studies also find evidence of the moderating role of problematic and indifferent ties in the relationship between incivility and non-reciprocation, suggesting that social network ties are one plausible explanation for within-person differences in reacting to uncivil events. While *Essay 1* measures the moderating effect of social network ties on the behavioral response to workplace incivility, *Essay 2* incorporates the moderating effect of social network ties on both affective and behavioral reactions to workplace incivility.

Essay 2: Consistent with cognitive-motivational-relational (CMR) and affective-events theory (AET), we address the research question, '*Does the relationship (network tie types) that targets and instigators of workplace incivility share generate specific affective and behavioral*

reactions?' A recent study suggests that overt forms of workplace aggression generate approach-based and covert forms, such as workplace incivility, generate avoidance-based affective and behavioral reactions (Ferris, Yan, Lim, Chen, & Fatimah, 2016). However, specific research within the incivility context suggests anger as an approach–based negative affect and reciprocation or confrontation as an approach-based behavioral reaction to workplace incivility (Porath & Pearson, 2012; Bunk & Magley, 2013). *Essay 2* addresses this literary contrast by proposing social network ties as the plausible mechanism. *Study 1* employs the scenario-based daily diary survey conducted in two waves across five days and included data from 320 postgraduate and PhD students. *Study 2* uses an experience sampling technique conducted in two waves across seven days and includes data from 79 university faculty members from 11 faculties. Both these studies again confirmed within-person differences in how targets of uncivil behavior respond to uncivil instigators. In addition, the scenario-based study suggests a moderating role of close ties in the indirect effect of incivility on avoidance as a behavioral reaction (through anxiety). Similarly, we also found evidence of the moderating role of ambivalent and problematic ties in the indirect effect of incivility on confrontation (through anger). Lastly, the study also substantiates the moderating role of problematic and indifferent ties on the direct effect of incivility on reciprocation. Like the first study, the second study also supports the mediating role of anxiety and anger between incivility and avoidance and between incivility and reciprocation and confrontation, respectively. However, the results of this study reject the moderating hypotheses of social network ties.

The study discusses one of the crucial contextual variables of workplace incivility, i.e., social network tie type, in the context of its limitations, followed by managerial implications.

Keywords: Coworker incivility, Social network, Approach-avoidance framework, and Social network tie type

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We examined three possible reactions to workplace incivility involving the target's response affecting the instigator somehow. Reciprocation as a reaction involves the instigator facing incivility from the target in response to their incivility. Confrontation involves the instigator facing a backlash from the target that their uncivil act was not well taken. Avoidance has the potential to keep the instigator guessing. Two of these reactions are action-oriented behavioral tendencies, and one was avoidance-oriented tendencies per the avoidance-approach framework. Thus, we attempted to cover ample types of reactions that can be included in one study without unnecessarily complicating the model. However, we encourage future researchers to incorporate other forms of workplace incivility, such as reporting, absenteeism, withdrawal, and rumination.

Insert Figure 23 about here

6.6 Conclusion

The current thesis sets an interesting premise through the use of social networks with social exchange theory as its theoretical perspective. One of the tenets of social exchange theory used in this study establishes that the nature of interpersonal relationships can be that crucial context that sets the rule of how negative social transactions, such as workplace incivility, will be interpreted and reacted upon. The results of the multiple studies suggest that interpersonal relationships in the form of four different network types play a role in how co-workers may evaluate and selectively react to specific instigators. More specifically, when the target-

instigator dyad is problematically or indifferently related to each other. Our study contributes to workplace incivility scholarship by providing insights from social network perspectives to suggest when a covert form of workplace aggression, such as incivility, may lead to approach or avoidance-based affective and behavioral tendencies of targets. However, in contrast to the experimental setup, the participants' responses from the realistic settings seem muted. This muteness raises challenges with regard to the use of socio-centric measures of social network surveys in workplace incivility scholarship. Contrary to our belief, some of the counterintuitive findings of the study further suggest exploring the role of perceived incivility climate and gender differences between target and dyad as other sets of important contexts other than interpersonal relationships.

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