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COMMENTARY

Can we select for respect in academe?

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As Ben Schneider (1987) put it, “The people make the place” (p. 437). This sentiment rings true in all organizations, including in academe. In closing out their focal article, Cortina, Cortina, and Cortina (2019) emphasize the myriad ways in which industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology can help to promote a better place to work, one where incivility is infrequent and civility is the norm. Such efforts are important regardless of the tension between civility and free speech in academia. In their words, “ . . . it is important that organizations (in academia and beyond) tend to the social side of work: Define it, promote it, reward it” (Cortina et al., 2019, p. 372). We wholeheartedly agree. But there is still more that I-O psychology can offer to that end: I-O psychology can also help us *select (for) it*. Because the people make the place, we need to make “respect” a key criterion in new faculty selection. In the mix of scholarship and teaching, the ability to consistently treat one another with respect must also be considered. This suggestion is affirmed by Porath and Pearson (2013), who assert that all organizations must “hire for civility” to keep workplace incivility at bay (p. 119).

Faculty search committees use multiple methods to evaluate applicants on their research and teaching potential. To evaluate scholarship, there is the research statement, the curriculum vita (CV), and peer-reviewed papers that can be readily downloaded to evaluate a prospective colleague’s ability and potential as a scholar. For teaching, there is the teaching philosophy, example syllabi, as well as student and peer evaluations of teaching effectiveness. None of these methods is without flaws (especially student evaluations, see Farr, 2018, . . . but that’s another story). However, they have construct validity as measures of research and teaching effectiveness, and our anecdotal experiences as members of search committees suggest they do a decent job of providing a window into a candidate’s skills and abilities.

But how do we accurately assess a faculty member’s propensity for civility or incivility? Finalists are usually invited for a campus visit and job interview, but this is an ideal context for impression management (Stevens & Kristof, 1995), and candidates are (generally) on their best behavior. Furthermore, search committee members may be subject to affirmation biases, such as interpreting subtle social behaviors in ways that are consistent with their previous evaluations of the candidate or they may let the halo effect of an impressive CV outshine indicators of rude behaviors. There may also be explicit pressures put on a department by external stakeholders to hire for prestige, beyond all other considerations. All of this is to say that the current state of affairs in faculty selection may not provide the opportunity to detect and screen out uncivil candidates.

What search committees really need is input from those who truly know how faculty candidates behave. Maybe letters of recommendation can provide insight into whether faculty candidates are jerks. On the surface, letters of recommendation, which are widely used and among the most important factors impacting faculty hiring decisions (Sheehan, McDevitt, & Ross, 1998), seem like a sound assessment tool because they originate from a source other than the faculty candidate; everyone likes multisource data, right? As Nicklin and Roch (2009) assert, the letter of recommendation “describes an applicant’s ability, previous performance, character, or potential

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for future success" (p. 76). However, as Reilly and Chao (1982) attest, "anyone who has ever worked with letters of reference knows how rare it is to find even mildly negative statements about an applicant" (p. 34). Put simply, letters of recommendation suffer from a considerable number of flaws (Bangerter, Roulin, & König, 2012), including (but not limited to) gender bias (Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009) and positive letter inflation (Nicklin & Roch, 2009). When given the opportunity to craft an unstructured letter of recommendation, are letter writers really going to document the ways in which the faculty candidate is a jerk? This seems unlikely.

Perhaps we can solve the puzzle with a few tweaks to this deeply flawed method. First, we should continue to use multirater assessments (i.e., request input from multiple references) but also expand the traditional set of raters beyond the esteemed professors who are self-selected by the applicant. With permission of the applicant, search committees could solicit feedback from others with whom the applicant interacts on a frequent basis (e.g., staff, graduate students, colleagues who may have less "name recognition"). Second, we should drop the unstructured letter of recommendation and replace it with a structured reference check, not unlike those described by Taylor, Pajo, Cheung, and Stringfield (2004) and Hedricks, Robie, and Oswald (2013). Raters could be asked to complete a standardized measure of the extent to which the applicant engages in workplace incivility. With some tweaking of the instructions, Blau and Andersson's (2005) measure of instigated workplace incivility may work well for this purpose. Finally, rather than the absolute frequency rating used in existing incivility measures, raters should be asked to provide a relative evaluation of the applicant's incivility in comparison to others they have known in that position, because such relative ratings help combat rater leniency (Taylor et al., 2004). When these tactics are combined, raters may be asked "*Compared to others you have known in their position*, how often has the applicant exhibited the following behaviors?," with an example item from Blau and Andersson's (2005) measure reading "Put down others or were condescending to them in some way" (p. 604). Responses could be captured on a relative scale ranging from "0" (*much less often than others*) to "4" (*much more often than others*). Research is needed to validate the use of such a measure for this purpose. However, we believe that such modifications will mitigate the weaknesses of letters of recommendation and assist faculty search committees in their efforts to select colleagues who engage in less incivility.

Other assessments may also hold promise for screening for incivility, such as conditional reasoning assessments (e.g., James & LeBreton, 2010). Established in the field of aggression, conditional reasoning assessments ask candidates to choose options following short scenarios, with one option consistent with the defensive and self-justifying reasoning that is often employed by aggressive people. As an assessment tool, conditional reasoning assessments could offer faculty search committees an eye into the logic and reasoning candidates use, detecting patterns that empirically predict the kind of aggressive candidates who may contribute to toxic social environments, such as undermining and other uncivil behaviors (James & LeBreton, 2010). Such tools can help overcome the limitations of traditional self-report questionnaires and interviews that are fraught with self-presentation and other biases. Evidence attests to the incremental validity of conditional reasoning assessments for predicting interpersonal deviance (Galić, 2016), which suggests that such measures may be helpful for selecting faculty members who are less likely to be frequently rude.

A key feature that differentiates institutions of higher education from many other organizations is tenure. Tenure not only serves to protect academic freedom—which is fundamentally important—but it also means that the colleagues we hire may very well be with us for the long haul, whether they are jerks or not. This means that bringing in the right people to our place of work is especially critical. In addition to defining it, promoting it, and rewarding it, we also need to select for respect in academe.

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