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Who Is the Wolf and Who Is the Sheep? Toward a More Nuanced Understanding of Workplace Incivility

Tine Köhler
The University of Melbourne

M. Gloria González-Morales
The University of Guelph

Victor E. Sojo and Jesse E. Olsen
The University of Melbourne

Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland's (2018) perspective on studying victimization in organizations is a welcome contribution to workplace aggression research. We share their believe that considering a perpetrator predation paradigm may advance and proliferate research on issues related to gender harassment, bullying, mobbing, and other explicitly overt forms of victimization where the intent to harm is supposedly clear. However, we propose that, if blindly adopted, neither the dominant victim precipitation paradigm nor the

Tine Köhler, Department of Management and Marketing, Faculty of Business & Economics, The University of Melbourne; M. Gloria González-Morales, Department of Psychology, The University of Guelph; Victor E. Sojo, Department of Management and Marketing, Faculty of Business & Economics, The University of Melbourne; Jesse E. Olsen, Department of Management and Marketing, Faculty of Business & Economics, The University of Melbourne.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tine Köhler, Department of Management and Marketing, Faculty of Business & Economics, The University of Melbourne, 198 Berkeley Street, Level 10, Parkville, VIC 3010, Australia. E-mail: tkoehler@unimelb.edu.au

suggested perpetrator predation paradigm will improve research on incivility or other more covert and indirect forms of victimization. In fact, we suggest in our commentary that both models may be counterproductive for understanding and remedying incivility in organizations.

Incivility has been defined as "low-intensity deviant behavior[s], with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). By this definition, it would be difficult to understand any large proportion of incivility as the behaviors of serial "perpetrators"—evil employees who prey on others for the sole benefit of deviant satisfaction. Certainly, the typical workplace has its share of people who take satisfaction from mistreating others and preying on minorities or people with certain characteristics. However, we need to recognize that incivility is a phenomenon that reflects how "normal" people enact behaviors that are hurtful to others and that these behaviors are often the result of contextual organizational factors and circumstances rather than evil-spirited, intentional aggressions toward others. Nevertheless, the incivility of "normal" people is nonetheless harmful (Sojo, Wood, & Genat, 2016). In the specific case of incivility, we just cannot swing the pendulum from blaming a passive victim to directly blaming an active perpetrator without taking into consideration other factors that may be involved in the interaction between two active actors within an organizational context.

Understanding the challenges of applying the perpetrator predation paradigm to incivility requires close scrutiny of two core components: the predatory behaviors and the intentions of the "perpetrator." First, as noted above, behaviors that are deemed uncivil are deviant behaviors that violate workplace norms for mutual respect. Very frequently, organizational leaders do not make explicit the norms that are supposed to create respectful workplaces. Rather, through their own behaviors and language, they often implicitly create a specific kind of workplace culture or climate. However, these unstated implicit signals are perceived, interpreted, and acted upon by individual employees, who each view the world through unique lenses. A lack of distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus around norms will allow them to be open for interpretation, creating a weak organizational context that has relatively little impact on individual behavior (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). In organizational contexts where norms are weak and unshared, how is it possible to distinguish norm-deviant behavior?

Second, a person engaging in norm-deviant behaviors—however defined—may or may not have intended to harm others. Ambiguity of intent to harm others is a crucial aspect of the definition of incivility, which acknowledges the differentiation between the intentions of the person engaging in the norm-deviant behavior and the perceptions of the person who has been harmed. This greatly impedes our assignment of the roles of

"victim" and "perpetrator." For example, many of today's workplaces are multicultural. A wide range of research on cultural differences in communication and teamwork behaviors has demonstrated that acts that constitute respectful behavior in one culture can be considered disrespectful in another. For example, in some cultures it is mandatory to inquire about each other's personal life on a daily basis. In other cultures, this behavior would be perceived as intrusive. In some cultures, questioning the leader's decisions is expected of employees to ensure that no wrong decisions are made. In other cultures, questioning the leader's decisions would be disrespectful (Köhler & Gölz, 2015). So, how should we attribute intent to harm in these cases? We have to critically ask whether a given behavior was norm-deviant or, alternatively, whether the coexistence of conflicting norms resulted in unavoidably following one norm while violating another. If the situation is characterized by conflicting norms, is the norm-violator an intentional "perpetrator"?

Taking this one step further, acts of incivility rarely come alone. If a person perceives an act of incivility, often he or she responds with his or her own act of incivility and now switch role from the "victim" role to the "perpetrator" role. Imagine the following workplace scenario: Team member Bob rarely contributes to meetings or takes on work that is not directly assigned to him. He is productive because he only focuses on his own work. He does not take on any responsibilities that may improve the work climate but that do not directly contribute to his bottom line. Furthermore, he frequently sells others' ideas as his own and receives the benefits from this behavior by being promoted faster. In short, Bob is an unpleasant coworker and his team members hate him. They actually perceive Bob as behaving highly uncivilly to them. He only comes to them when he needs or wants something, and he has exploited their goodwill many times. Consequently, Bob's team members exclude Bob from their activities. They decide not to keep him in the loop regarding important team information and try to actively channel resources away from him, so that he can no longer take a free ride on his team members' efforts. Bob has just gone into his manager's office complaining that his team members are uncivil to him. He is right; they are. But, is this a perpetrator predating scenario? Who is the "wolf" and who is the "sheep"? Maybe an organizational climate of competitiveness impedes the existence of sheep in the work team.

Some of the core limitations of both the victim precipitation and the perpetrator predation paradigms are associated with the requirement to unambiguously assign static roles of "victim" and "perpetrator." Also, both paradigms tend to focus on attributing the blame for a single incident rather than for a string of interactions, or even history, between the involved parties. These paradigms further tend to describe an act of harm that was deemed to be harmful. Likewise, both paradigms require that there was an act of harm

and that this harm was intended. Moreover, both paradigms seem to limit the involvement of other people in the situation as well as the contextual factors that led up to the behavior in the first place. Finally, in this context, even the terminology of "victim" versus "perpetrator" is problematic. Talking about *instigators/enactors* and *targets* may more accurately represent the dynamic at play in situations of low deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm.

Therefore, looking at the target–instigator relationship as determined by a single incident is not necessarily helpful when studying incivility, as it fails to acknowledge that targets and instigators in organizations are part of a social community that continues to interact. This is in contrast to a crime that happens once. Targets and instigators often continue to reside in an organizational context that allows them to interact freely and continuously. This continuing behavior can create incivility spirals (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) that reinforce patterns of incivility between organizational actors and that are difficult to disrupt. Furthermore, it is hardly ever only the target and the instigator who get involved in uncivil incidents. Other people in the context may become instigators or targets because they choose sides, grow angry at both parties, or simply feel victimized by what they observe. Things can therefore get out of hand more quickly and more systemically than if the situation contained two isolated actors.

Consequently, we propose that, in order to better understand and combat incivility in the workplace, we need to expand our view from just looking at the target–instigator relationship to examine and acknowledge the role that organizational factors play in a longitudinal fashion. Although Cortina et al. (2018) mention social and structural factors influencing the target–instigator relationship, they mostly elaborate on examples of social factors, such as stereotyping or social power and dominance, that increase the likelihood of targeting a specific person. Although we acknowledge that some instigators may be pathological offenders, in the case of organizational life, it is much more likely that "normal people" engage in uncivil acts from time to time. We propose that a more fruitful avenue for research with potentially greater practical impact entails examining organizational and other contextual factors that inspire, facilitate, and perpetuate incivility. A key research question under such an approach would be: What role does the organization play in creating the target–instigator relationship and in maintaining it?

Potential directions for a more nuanced approach to incivility would examine whether universal or local workplace norms for mutual respect exist, what they might be, how they are created and maintained, how opposing or negative norms come to be, and how their absence may lead to a climate for incivility. We need to also examine the origins and dynamics of spirals of incivility that involve not only targets and instigators but also other organizational members, who may in turn become targets or instigators.

We know from existing research, for example, that certain organizational structures, procedures, and processes can create a negative climate and foster the occurrence of detrimental behaviors (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Competitive promotion and career advancement systems, resource shortages, lack of role clarity, issues with understaffing, excessive hours, stress, unfair and nontransparent reward structures, and other job design issues can all create situations in which employees may show uncivil behaviors toward each other (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). These behaviors may include withholding information, protecting one's own resources (such as not collaborating, not contributing to OCBs, not sharing access to resources needed to do one's job), avoiding interactions with others who are perceived as unpleasant or stressful, downplaying others' contributions to the work one completed after previous experiences in which one's contributions were downplayed, and many more. Arguably, it is the employees who are being uncivil to each other, but it is the organizational system and structure that enables or even promotes the incivility. In order to improve incivility in the workplace, scholars and practitioners need to take a long, hard look at the kinds of workplaces we are creating through imposed organizational structures and processes.

We want to suggest here in particular that organizational leaders and human resource management professionals need to think about creating respectful workplaces from design factors. It would be naïve to rely solely on employees to practice civil and respectful behaviors at all times. Interventions and training sessions to create respectful workplaces (such as the ones suggested by Cortina et al., 2018; i.e., CREW) should be part of a more system-wide approach because individual-focused interventions assume that uncivil behaviors are behaviors that employees display with full intent. Such paradigms also assume that employees are fully aware and in control of their behavior and that they are motivated to adopt norms of civility; however, the organization has defined (or failed to define) those norms. If incivility is created and/or enabled by dysfunctional organizational structures that pit employees against each other, create conflicting roles and expectations, and reward competitive behaviors, then training will be ineffective in discouraging behaviors that can be experienced as uncivil by others. Furthermore, it is likely that employees will come to resent their organizations for implying the problem lies with them rather than with the organization's own dysfunctional structures and operations.

Where Do We Go From Here?

In industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology, we are particularly well-placed to help organizations create structures that prevent negative workplace behaviors and foster civil and respectful behavior at work. One way to think about these structures is to systematically consider the various

HR activities that exist, including staffing (recruitment and selection), rewards, promotion, performance management, training, and so forth. We now present a few suggestions as to how organizational leaders and HR practitioners might reduce workplace incivility through the design of HR systems, but this is by no means an exhaustive discussion.

Selection research can be applied to design organizational staffing systems that screen out applicants based on the "usual suspects," such as aggression (James et al., 2005). Prior to selection, however, recruitment research suggests that organizations can send deliberate signals to potential job applicants to shape their perceptions and attract candidates with certain characteristics (Rynes, 1991). Clear signals about the organization's norms and values—including, for example, emphasis on the importance of camaraderie and positive work relationships—will set the stage for an organizational culture with well-defined norms and an intolerance for incivility. In order to function properly in the organizational system, these recruitment signals should naturally be consistent with the signals that employees receive upon being employed, avoiding a problematic mismatch between the stated and espoused values (Simons, 2002). As noted earlier, leader behaviors, messaging, and HR practices must similarly be coordinated in order to maximize the distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus around signals of the organization's norms (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Through an organization's HR practices and policies, leaders must define the rules of equity and justice that they use in designing systems around selection, promotion, rewards, and employee discipline. These rules must be communicated clearly and followed consistently, in line with organizational justice research (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Presenting employees with opportunities to voice their views is also consistent with creating an equitable workplace, but beyond its potential benefit to the climate, voice behavior has been found to negatively relate to stress and positively relate to performance (Ng & Feldman, 2011). Designing a mechanism to allow for voice behavior could create a more constructive alternative to potentially destructive norm-violating behaviors.

Leaders and HR professionals must design jobs with sufficient role clarity, which may dampen potential incivility (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). Similarly, if lack of resources and high levels of demands predict uncivil enactment, excessive demands and lack of resources should be addressed by the team and/or the leader (instead of focusing on creating strong policies against mistreatment). Likewise, performance management systems must be tailored deliberately and equitably around explicit job expectations but may also include components to specifically motivate pro-social behavior. For example, incorporating team-based targets and rewards may encourage cooperation among team members (Aguinis, 2009), though we must take

care to avoid encouraging inter-team conflict. To do this, reward mechanisms could take inter-team interactions into account or include rewards that are contingent on the performance of a larger work unit or the organization as a whole. Additionally, performance expectations could include behavioral markers relating to collaboration, engagement in positive interpersonal relations, mentoring of peers, and other pro-social activities, if these behaviors are seen as necessary to upholding norms that are critical to the organization's success.

Finally, although Cortina et al. (2018) note the importance of training to promote emotional regulation and prevent negative emotion and action, the literature suggests that a wider portfolio of training programs can provide employees with tools to respect differences and to constructively work through their disagreements civilly. Socialization programs contribute to the consistency of signals mentioned above (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Nondiscrimination and cultural sensitivity training can increase awareness of bias and inform employees about how to make decisions more objectively while respecting their peers' different backgrounds. Conflict management training can raise awareness of the distinction between task and relationship conflict, help people to understand others' interests, and respectfully leverage differences to their advantage. An important part of such training, as well as any other HR practice, is not to suppress differences and negative emotions but rather to acknowledge and even appreciate differences while reinforcing norms of mutual respect (Olsen & Martins, 2012).

In conclusion, we propose that a more nuanced approach to incivility is required, where we look beyond placing blame on either "perpetrator" or "victim." We do not challenge the importance of understanding the actors' characteristics, but scholars and practitioners seeking an understanding of incivility must acknowledge the importance of structural elements of the situation. We have offered several examples of structural factors that are worthy of further attention by both scholars and practitioners, but the opportunities for further work in this area are numerous.

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A Comprehensive Approach to Empowering Victims and Understanding Perpetrators

Justina Oliveira, Tyler M. Pascucci, and Michelle Fortin
Southern New Hampshire University

We unequivocally agree with the root of Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland's (2018) argument about the danger in focusing mostly on the victim in situations of workplace aggression. Workplace aggression is indeed initiated by the perpetrator (or perpetrators if there are two equally responsible parties in enacting the aggression). Where we believe Cortina et al.'s arguments are lacking is the hard-drawn line that the perpetrator should be the *only* subject of study. No, the victim should not hold any blame nor insinuations of blame. However, we hold the premise that both sides (i.e., perpetrator and

Justina Oliveira, Southern New Hampshire University; Tyler M. Pascucci, Southern New Hampshire University; Michelle Fortin, Southern New Hampshire University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Justina Oliveira, Southern New Hampshire University, 2500 North River Rd., Manchester, NH 03106. E-mail: j.oliveira@snhu.edu