

## 7. Selective incivility: gender, race, and the discriminatory workplace

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Recent decades have seen extensive social research on “modern” or “contemporary” forms of sexism and racism (e.g., Dovidio and Gaertner, 1998; Sears, 1998; Tougas et al., 1999; Swim et al., 2004). This encompasses covert biases, held even by people who value egalitarianism and avoid discriminating (intentionally) on the basis of gender or race, in a similar vein, organizational psychologists have shown increasing interest in “general incivility,” or subtly rude behavior that lacks a clear intent to harm (e.g., Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Cortina et al., 2001, 2002; Pearson et al., 2001). Bridging these literatures, Cortina (2008) proposed a theory of *selective incivility*, drawing attention to incivility as modern discrimination in organizations. Her central argument was that incivility is not always so “general,” sometimes constituting a veiled expression of bias that ostracizes women and people of color. While there have been efforts to eradicate discrimination from employment, selective incivility can fly under the radar and persist without challenge, representing a disguised form of dysfunction in many contexts of work.

In this chapter, we begin by drawing from a range of literatures and theoretical traditions to frame Cortina’s propositions about selective incivility. Included here are theories on the social psychology of modern discrimination and the organizational psychology of workplace incivility. We then touch on the concepts of “intersectionality” and “double jeopardy,” to suggest that women of color may be most at risk for uncivil treatment. Next comes empirical evidence of selective incivility in three organizations. The chapter ends with discussion of avenues for future work, bridging theory and research, in an effort to expand investigations of this phenomenon.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Modern Discrimination

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which revolutionized anti-discrimination laws and practices in the United States. Overt employment discrimination based on gender and race (among other factors) is now illegal. Nevertheless, gender and racial disparities endure in US organizations. For example, Benokraitis (1997) observed that, although only one-third of the US population was white and male in the mid-1990s, white men constituted 80 to 95 percent of all tenured professors, law firm partners, Fortune 500 CEOs, and political leaders at the national level. We have seen little progress in the twenty-first century, with women and ethnic/racial minorities still receiving lower salaries and working in lower-status jobs than white men (Greenman and Xie, 2008; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Moreover, these patterns are not explained by gender or race differences in education, experience, or skill (e.g., Dipboye and Halverson, 2004).

Social psychologists have pointed to different forms of “modern” discrimination in an effort to explain persistent gender and racial inequalities in the United States. In the literature examining gender bias, these concepts include *modern sexism* (e.g., Swim et al., 1995, 2004), *subtle sexism* (Benokraitis, 1997), *neosexism* (Tougas et al., 1999), and *contemporary sexism* (Jackson et al., 2001). Research on race relations includes similar phenomena, such as *aversive racism* (e.g., Dovidio and Gaertner, 1998), *symbolic racism* (Sears, 1998), and *modern racism* (McConahay, 1986; Brief et al., 2000). While specific nuances vary among these different concepts, they are exemplified by Swim et al.’s (1995, p. 199) depiction of modern sexism as “the denial of continued discrimination, antagonism toward women’s demands, and lack of support for policies designed to help women (for example, in education and work).” Modern racists display similar beliefs and behaviors toward ethnic minority groups. People with these attitudes do not see their views as based in sexist/racist ideology; in fact, they claim to value egalitarianism and overtly reject sexism/racism. However, implicitly held biases overrun the explicit rejection of prejudice; this yields subtle forms of discrimination, which are often unintentional and unconscious. In an effort to avoid accusations of bias and to preserve an egalitarian identity, modern sexists/racists only engage in discrimination when there is an alternative explanation for their behavior, one that does not hinge on gender or race.

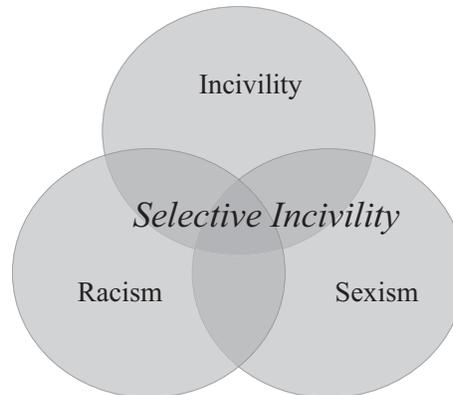
Overtly discriminatory behaviors – for example, expressing blatant antipathy and essentialist views of the inferiority of women and people of color – have undergone a radical decline in recent decades (e.g., Swim, et al., 1995; Brief et al., 1997; Dovidio and Gaertner, 1998; Sears, 1998). This “old-fashioned” sexism and racism has evolved into contemporary forms of bias in the workplace. For this reason, scholars have argued that a limited focus on overt, formal discrimination is insufficient for explaining the prejudices faced by women and minorities on the job today (Deitch et al., 2004).

### **Workplace Incivility**

Quite separate from the literature on modern discrimination, organizational psychologists have begun studying another subtle form of maltreatment, termed incivility. Pearson and Porath (2009, p. 21) define workplace incivility as “the exchange of seemingly inconsequential words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct.” A hallmark characteristic of incivility is that its objective is ambiguous, particularly with respect to intent to inflict harm. That is, although people sometimes behave rudely with the express goal of degrading or insulting another person, at other times their uncivil conduct can be attributed to irritability, fatigue, carelessness, or ignorance of local social norms; intent, whether present or not, is ambiguous to either the actor, target, or observer of the behavior (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Pearson et al., 2001).

### **“SELECTIVE INCIVILITY” AS MODERN DISCRIMINATION**

Research has clearly defined workplace incivility, differentiating it from other types of *generic* mistreatment. It is less clear how incivility relates to more *specific* forms of hostility, such as those based on gender and race. While conceptually distinct, incivility, gender harassment, and racial harassment have common qualities: degradation, intimidation, or offense of the target, as well as violation of social norms dictating that workplace relations be respectful. Cortina (2008) has proposed that these behaviors are, at times, one and the same. This may seem implausible, with “generally” uncivil conduct making no overt reference to gender, race, or other social category. However, when women and people of color are selectively targeted, incivility may represent a *covert* manifestation of gender or race bias. Cortina has dubbed this phenomenon *selective incivility*, conceptualizing it as a place where sexism, racism, and incivility collide (see Figure 7.1).



*Figure 7.1 Selective incivility*

Selective incivility could be a mechanism that perpetuates gender and racial disparities in organizations.

Cortina (2008) specifically proposed that, in many organizations, women and people of color encounter more uncivil treatment than men and whites. With incivility being subtle (e.g., being ignored, interrupted, or excluded from professional camaraderie) and ambiguous with respect to intent (e.g., accompanied by apologies, “I didn’t see you,” “I’m exhausted”), it often escapes the attention of management. On its surface the behavior is also neutral with respect to gender and race, which makes it challenging to bring about accusations of Title VII violation. Cortina (ibid.) thus argued that incivility provides a means by which individuals can discriminate (even unintentionally and unconsciously) against women and people of color, while preserving an image of themselves as egalitarian.

The notion of selective incivility parallels modern conceptions of discrimination. For example, scholars (e.g., Dovidio and Gaertner, 1998; Brief et al., 2000) contend that *aversive racism* grows out of implicit negative emotions and cognitions toward people of color. However, aversive racists publicly denounce prejudice and consciously endorse egalitarianism and justice. So they only discriminate against people of color when the discriminatory nature of their conduct either (1) is not evident or (2) if evident, is rationalizable (i.e., can be explained by something other than race). Both of these characteristics apply to many instances of workplace incivility.

### **Towards an Intersectional Perspective**

Theories of “intersectionality” and “double jeopardy” combine the gender and race effects implied by work on modern discrimination. Studies of

intersectionality “simultaneously consider the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage” (Cole, 2009, p. 170). An intersectional perspective acknowledges the multiple axes of identity (based on gender, race, class, etc.) that any individual holds at any one time, rather than centering the analysis on a single identity to the neglect of others. These “intersecting” social identities vary in power and privilege, which can have meaningful consequences for people’s lives; intersectional frameworks have advanced our understanding of how women of color face different realities than men of color or white women, especially in the labor force (e.g., Browne and Misra, 2003; Greenman and Xie, 2008).

Related to intersectionality, theories of double jeopardy focus on the downside of holding two undervalued social identities. This theory suggests that women of color should encounter a “double whammy of discrimination” (Berdahl and Moore, 2006, p. 427), driven by both gender- and race-based biases (e.g., Beal, 1970; Buchanan et al., 2008; Greenman and Xie, 2008). That is, they are disadvantaged due to both their female gender and minority race, and this doubly oppressed status should heighten their experiences of injustice. Using empirical survey research, Berdahl and Moore (2006) found support for the double jeopardy hypothesis, such that women of color reported the most harassment on the job – more than men of color, white women, or white men. This work on intersectionality and double jeopardy suggests that individuals with multiple stigmatized identities, such as women of color, may be uniquely targeted with incivility in the workplace.

### **Cognitive, Behavioral, and Affective Response**

Incivility may be a subtle transgression, but its effects permeate the working life of targeted individuals, as well as their organizations. As employee experiences of incivility increase, so does their reported job stress, distraction, dissatisfaction, and intention to quit. At the same time, their creativity, cooperation, and citizenship declines (Pearson et al., 2000, 2001; Cortina et al., 2001, 2002; Pearson and Porath, 2004, 2009). Even *observers* of incivility (e.g., toward colleagues) describe lower job satisfaction and commitment and greater job burnout and turnover intentions (Miner-Rubino and Cortina, 2004). Incivility also affects organizational bottom lines, with employers having to absorb costs related to lost productivity (due to distraction and discontentment, work team conflict, etc.) and lost employees due to voluntary turnover (Cortina, 2008).

Cortina et al. (2011) further suggest selective incivility to be an insidious vehicle for numeric gender and racial disparities in the workplace. Rather than tolerate an unfair and unpleasant situation, women and people of

color may respond by leaving it, that is, exiting the organization and/or occupation. In 2011 women constituted only 2 percent of the CEOs in the Fortune 500 (*Fortune*, 2011), and only 31.5 percent of all lawyers and 32.3 percent of all physicians and surgeons were female (US Department of Labor, 2011). Likewise, fewer than 14 percent of employees in management occupations, 13 percent of physicians and surgeons, and 8 percent of lawyers were black or Latino (*ibid.*). Many factors likely fuel these imbalances, one of which may be selective incivility. That is, if working women and people of color experience more uncivil treatment than their white male counterparts, and uncivil treatment predicts turnover behavior (e.g., Pearson et al., 2001; Pearson and Porath, 2009), then selective incivility could be one mechanism explaining female and minority underrepresentation in many industries.

An outstanding question is *how* a stressor as subtle and ambiguous as incivility could fuel these outcomes. Put differently, what are the mechanisms that translate low-level insult into long-lasting injury? A critical component could be negative emotion, which commonly follows uncivil work experiences (Pearson et al., 2001; Porath and Erez, 2009; Kabat-Farr and Cortina, 2011). The incivility–emotion link aligns with *affective events theory* (AET), which focuses on the “structure, causes and consequences of affective experiences at work” (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996, p. 11) and proposes that emotional responses have direct effects on behaviors and attitudes. Importantly, AET leaves room for affect as a multidimensional construct, which acknowledges the complex structure of the psychological experience, such that different emotional reactions lead to different behavioral outcomes (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). More specifically, AET distinguishes between behaviors that are direct outcomes of affective reactions (affect-driven outcomes), and behaviors that are based on cognitive evaluations and judgments (judgment-driven outcomes). This theoretical distinction could explain diverse outcomes, so future research should continue the investigation of emotional response to workplace incivility.

Emotional response is complicated, moreover, when organizations discourage negative emotions. This can lead to “emotional labor” (employees suppressing true feelings and instead displaying emotions that are acceptable; Grandey, 2000), which alleviates the conflict between negative affect and the expectations and requirements of the job. This emotion regulation process can lower behavioral responses and trigger adverse physiological activity (e.g., high blood pressure; Pennebaker, 1985), which can in turn weaken the immune system and contribute to chronic disease (e.g., Gross, 1989; King and Emmons, 1990; Smith, 1992). In other words, emotional labor in response to incivility may undermine employee health and well-being. This is particularly troubling if the least powerful, lowest-paid

workers (women, people of color, and especially women of color) are at greater risk for incivility, increasing their vulnerability to emotional labor and resulting health problems.

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Cortina et al. (2011) have empirically documented both gender- and race-based disparities in the experience of uncivil behavior, supporting the theory of selective incivility. Their results were based on survey data from three organizations: a city government in which women have a strong presence, a law enforcement agency that employs sizable numbers of ethnic minorities, and the US military (which oversamples women and people of color in certain surveys). In the sample of city government employees ( $n = 369$ ), women reported significantly more incivility than their male counterparts. Similarly, in the law enforcement agency ( $n = 653$ ), employees of color reported greater incivility than whites. The military sample ( $n = 15,497$ ) was diverse enough to examine interactions of gender and race, revealing that African American women experienced higher levels of incivility than white women, white men, and African American men. This effect would not have emerged had the focus been solely on gender or race, underscoring the importance of taking an intersectional approach to understanding incivility risk.

Cortina et al. (2011) also reported tests of moderated mediation, which revealed that gender and race had indirect multiplicative effects on turnover intent, via uncivil treatment. That is, the indirect relationship between gender and turnover intentions – via incivility – was significant for both racial groups, but over twice the size for African Americans compared to whites. These results remained even after accounting for demographics of both the target (job tenure, age, and rank) and context (gender of the work group and supervisor), ruling out alternative explanations. Although these were cross-sectional findings, other studies have longitudinally linked hostile work experiences to subsequent job withdrawal (Glomb et al., 1999; Sims et al., 2005). Cortina and colleagues (2011) therefore have good reason to believe that the turnover intent followed, rather than preceded, the uncivil experiences.

These results corroborate past research findings of women selectively targeted with incivility and abuse in samples of attorneys (Cortina et al., 2002), university faculty (Richman et al., 1999), and court employees (Cortina et al., 2001). In general, less is known about race differences in uncivil work experiences, but the related literature on racial and ethnic harassment suggests that minority compared to white employees are at

greater risk for workplace abuse (e.g., Bergman et al., 2001; Berdahl and Moore, 2006). Moreover, emerging scholarship maintains that inter-racial encounters in any context (including work) are prone to subtle, everyday, unintentional expressions of prejudice in the form of “racial microaggressions” (Sue et al., 2007). These various studies lend further support to selective incivility theory, suggesting that women and people of color are uniquely vulnerable to uncivil and unjust treatment on the job.

## DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Empirical evidence is emerging to support Cortina’s (2008) theory of selective incivility, elucidating one piece of the incivility equation (the target’s perspective). Important questions remain about the instigator’s perspective, as well as social-organizational conditions that set the stage for incivility.

Selective incivility presupposes that cognitive, affective, and situational factors drive instigators to target women and people of color with disproportionate levels of disrespect, even without realizing it (ibid.). Future research should examine these factors empirically, instigator-focused studies will require innovative methods to avoid problems of socially desirable responding. In particular, research on aversive racism, modern sexism, and so on shows that individuals responsible for these “modern” forms of discrimination strongly identify as non-prejudiced. They see their own behavior as reasonable, fair, and unbiased, so they would not openly admit to disproportionately targeting female and minority employees with uncivil conduct. Future research should strive to incorporate research methods from social psychology, cognitive psychology, and organizational science in an effort to develop unobtrusive techniques for assessing antecedents to enactment of selective incivility.

Specifically, use of implicit measures can assess unconscious, underlying mechanisms by which instigators come to behave in a discriminatory manner. Some scholars claim that, compared to stereotypic cognition, prejudice (an affective reaction) is a better predictor of discriminatory behavior (Fiske, 2000). Prejudice can be measured as implicit or explicit attitudes, which may or may not align. Implicit compared to explicit measures are less susceptible to social desirability biases and self-presentation. One method commonly used in social psychology is the Implicit Association Task (IAT), a response latency procedure (Greenwald et al., 1998). A second approach to measuring implicit cognition, developed by organizational psychologists, is the Conditional Reasoning paradigm

(e.g., James, 1998; James and Mazerolle, 2003). IAT or Conditional Reasoning methods may be able to determine whether instigators of incivility unwittingly harbor anti-minority or anti-female beliefs and attitudes, which then influence their behaviors.

Contextual factors also deserve further attention with respect to incivility at work. Societal and organizational contexts provide the backdrop for discriminatory cognitions, emotions, and behaviors in the workplace (Cortina, 2008). Local social norms at the team- or organization-level can sway discriminatory actions (Dipboye and Halverson, 2004), as employees are motivated by a need to belong and be accepted by ingroup members (e.g., Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Williams and Sommer, 1997). These group norms determine social reality and guide individuals to behave in ways aligning with the group. If biased and discriminatory behaviors are normative, employees are more likely to follow suit and engage in discrimination (Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998; Brief et al., 2000).

Future work should also address how group composition (i.e., gender and racial demographics) affects group norms, as diverse social identities may help counteract biased implicit and explicit social cognitions. However, breaking down biases and cognitions will take more than women and people of color *entering* the workforce; as Bunch (1987) aptly stated, organizations must do more than "add women and stir" (p. 140). Positive intergroup relations require attention to group structure and process. For example, studies of the Common Ingroup Identity Model highlight the importance of cooperative interdependence, equal status, supportive norms, and degree of interaction in influencing perceptions and affective reactions in groups (e.g., Gaertner et al., 1994; Dovidio et al., 2001).

We must continue to be concerned about where numerical balances and imbalances occur in organizations. Ely (1995) questions the ways in which gender and sex are conceptualized in organizational research, viewing gender as "an ongoing social construction, the meaning, significance, and consequences of which vary for individuals across settings" (p. 590). Women's experiences are influenced by the power differences reflected in existing demographic arrangements (Wharton, 1992). With a scarcity of women in high-status positions, sex may remain a powerful category with negative consequences for women throughout the organization (Ely, 1995). Representation of minority race groups, as well as other undervalued social categories, will be important in permeating the dominant power structures found in modern organizations. Through a combination of methodological approaches, investigations of selective incivility can help us understand how increases in job opportunities for women and people of color have not been matched by increases in job respect.

**SUMMARY**

Although Title VII and related reforms made blatant job discrimination illegal, anti-female and minority biases persevere in modern workplaces in the form of selective incivility. Such disrespectful and degrading behavior translates into members of stigmatized groups being driven out of some organizations, contributing to gender and racial disparities. Research suggests that selective incivility interferes with the retention of a diverse workforce, so we must develop effective and creative strategies for examining and eliminating this veiled form of dysfunction. A full understanding of selective incivility requires that future work be innovative and multifaceted: we should investigate both implicit and explicit processes, involving both cognition and emotion, in the target, the instigator, and their social-organizational context.

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