Tit for tat: burnout as a mediator between workplace incivility and instigated workplace incivility

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of burnout as a mediator in the relationship between workplace incivility (WI) and instigated WI.
Design/methodology/approach – A survey of 303 white collar employees from small- to medium-size industries in Australia was conducted. Self-reported measures were used to obtain data on WI, burnout, and instigated WI. Mediation analyses with bootstrap via PROCESS was used ascertain the proposed relationship.
Findings – Results indicated that WI was positively linked to instigated WI. Importantly, results indicated that burnout fully mediated the relationship between WI and instigated WI.
Research limitations/implications – The correlational and self-report nature of the study exclude inference about causality between variables and may be more prone to bias. However, despite these limitations, pre- and post-cautionary steps were taken to ensure that these biases were kept at bay as much as is possible.
Practical implications – The study highlights that burnout may be an important underlying mechanism responsible for target’s and perpetrator’s uncivil relationships toward each other. Management should be cognizant of possible burnout among employees who experienced WI and to take appropriate training as preventive measures for WI.
Originality/value – This study responded to the call for more empirical investigation of WI. This study also integrated conservation of resources and the spiral of incivility theories to develop a theoretical model which linked WI to instigated WI.

Keywords Business administration, Human resource management

Retaliation is counter-poison and poison breeds more poison […] (Mahatma Gandhi).

Incivility is becoming more prevalent in the workplace and it is highly destructive for employers, employees, and organizations (Civility in America 2013, 2013; Pearson and Porath, 2009). Porath and Pearson (2010) found that 25 percent of the employees they polled in 1998 reported that they had experienced incivility at least once a week; but by 2005, this figure had increased to more than half. In a recent Civility in America 2013 study, 37 percent of employees in the USA had personally experienced workplace incivility (WI). More worrying is the trend in the increased numbers of employees quitting their jobs because of an uncivil workplace (Civility in America 2013, 2013). This trend is a concern because high employee turnover can threaten organizations' reputations and bottom line. Research has also shown that WI has a detrimental effect on individuals, contributing positively to burnout, cognitive distractions, psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, and lower job satisfaction and creativity (Ben-Zur and Yagil, 2005; Cortina and Magley, 2009; Dormann and Zapf, 2004; Grandey et al., 2004; Ringstad, 2005).

What is WI?
WI has been conceptualized as “subtle rude or disrespectful behaviors that demonstrate lack of regard for others” (Rau-Foster, 2004, p. 702). Andersson and Pearson (1999) defined WI as “low-intensity, disrespectful or rude deviant workplace behavior with ambiguous intent to
harm the target and is in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (p. 457). In other words, WI consists of “seemingly inconsequential words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct” (Pearson and Porath, 2009, p. 21). Some examples of uncivil behaviors include sarcasm, critical remarks, disparaging tones, hostile stares, and the “silent treatment” (Lim et al., 2008). Not turning off mobile phones during meetings, leaving a jammed printer, gossiping, and snapping at co-workers are also cited as examples of uncivil behaviors in organizations (Johnson and Indvik, 2001).

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 19), psychological stress occurs when a “relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being.” In other words, regardless of how minor an event (e.g. WI) may seem, if the individual perceives the event to be stressful, then this event can have a negative impact for the individual. In fact, daily hassles (e.g. caught in daily rush hour traffic) were found to have a more negative effect on individual’s well-being than any major, time-confined events (Fisher, 2000; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Perceived this way, WI may be just as damaging psychologically as harassment or any other form of workplace mistreatment.

Importantly, a distinctive feature of uncivil workplace behavior is the notion of ambiguity (Cortina et al., 2001). This ambiguity reflects the varying interpretations on what constitutes WI which may be attributed to ignorance or oversight by the instigator, or misinterpretation or hypersensitivity of the target (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). The perpetrator need not demonstrate the intent to hurt or harm targets, rather, what is perceived as uncivil or offensive depends on a target’s subjective interpretation of the actions and on how these “ambiguous intents” make them feel. It is this ambiguous nature of WI that makes it very difficult for victims to deal with. Consequently, this type of excessive and prolonged stress (i.e. in the form of WI) can cause victims to become psychologically and emotionally drained.

Andersson and Pearson’s (1999) spiral theory of incivility provides a useful theoretical framework from which to investigate WI. According to Andersson and Pearson (1999), a negative incivility spiral begins when the acts of incivility are acknowledged and perceived by the victims as uncivil or offensive. The victim then retaliates with negative behaviors to right a wrong he or she perceived to have been done to him or her. For example, you were rude to me so I am going to be rude to you, too! Should the spiral of incivility continue, the victim is likely to reach a tipping point where more intensified negative behaviors are exchanged which may result in overt hostile behaviors or even violence. Consequently, an excitatory series of increasing uncivil behavior occurs, initiating a vicious cycle of tit for tat (i.e. the infliction of an injury or insult in return for one that one has suffered) between targets and perpetrators which can be difficult to stop or control (Andersson and Pearson, 1999).

The spiral theory of incivility also posits that observing negative responses to incivility can give rise to secondary incivility spirals. This occurs when individuals who observe uncivil acts also engage in uncivil acts themselves (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). While researchers have conducted investigations on the nature, prevalence, consequences, and even management of WI (e.g. Cortina et al., 2001; Cortina and Magley, 2003; Pearson et al., 2001; Pearson and Porath, 2001), very few studies have empirically examined the incivility spiral between targets and instigators with the exceptions of the following three studies.

**WI and instigated WI**

The first study was conducted by Blau and Andersson (2005) who collected data from 211 respondents who listed their occupations as including caretaker, waitress, paralegal secretary, landscaper, data entry clerk, and security officer. They found that incivility can result from perceptions of distributive and procedural injustice, job dissatisfaction, and...
emotional exhaustion or burnout (Blau and Andersson, 2005). In other words, if employees perceive that they have been treated unfairly or abused in the workplace, they become upset and tend to reciprocate by engaging in deviant or counter-productive behaviors such as theft, turnover, rule breaking, or cyber-loafing (Greenberg, 1993; Lim, 2002; Skarlicki and Folger, 1997). Van Jaarsveld et al. (2010) found that service employees who were treated uncivilly by customers also reacted by being uncivil to customers. Similarly, Gallus et al. (2014) found that experienced incivility predicted retaliation from perpetrators especially when perpetrators’ organizations were tolerant of rudeness. Men were found to be more likely to retaliate than women especially when their organizations tolerated rudeness. Finally Ghosh et al. (2011) found that mentors’ distancing behaviors were significantly related to protégés’ instigated WI toward them. These findings provide evidence to support the idea that when a target experiences incivility, this individual is likely to also engage in an act of incivility (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Therefore, based on these findings, we predict that:

H1. WI is positively associated with instigated WI. Specifically, individuals who experience WI will also instigate incivility.

**WI and burnout**

Previous studies have found that WI can result in burnout or emotional exhaustion over time (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Laschinger et al., 2009).

Burnout is generally referred to as a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Maslach and Jackson, 1986). Emotional exhaustion consists of “feelings of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources” (Halbesleben and Demerouti, 2005, p. 208) and is considered to be the core dimension of burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1986). Cynicism and reduced personal accomplishment represent the other two dimensions. Most emotional exhaustion research has been guided by Maslach and Jackson’s (1986) conceptualization of burnout. However, these researchers have tended to study individuals who work in the professional help industries such as therapists, counselors, and social workers. A more empirical base model is therefore needed to investigate the phenomenon outside professional healthcare industries.

A more empirical approach to burnout was undertaken by Gillespie-Numerof who developed the Gillespie-Numerof Burnout Inventory. Gillespie and Numerof (1984) categorized burnout into two categories, namely, active and passive burnout. According to Gillespie and Numerof (1984), active burnout is associated with organizational factors external to the professional; passive burnout appears to be associated with more internal social psychological factors. Thus, Gillespie (1991) defined burnout as a reaction to chronic job-related stress, characterized by physical, emotional, and defensive coping. In the present study, we used the Gillespie-Numerof Burnout Inventory to empirically measure the degree to which employees feel psychologically and emotionally fatigued on the job as a result of being treated incivilly.

Extant studies have found that WI is positively related to negative outcomes such as burnout and emotional exhaustion (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010; Laschinger et al., 2009). For example, Oyeleye et al. (2013) investigated the relationship between WI, stress, burnout, turnover intentions, and psychological empowerment among a group of nurses in community and tertiary hospitals. They found that WI was positively associated with burnout and turnover intentions. Similarly, Elmblad et al. (2014) surveyed a group of certified registered nurse anesthetists and found that WI was positively and significantly associated with burnout. We therefore hypothesized that:

H2. WI is positively associated with burnout.
**Burnout and instigated WI**

Burnout has been found to have deleterious effects both in individuals and in organizations (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003; Moore, 2000). For example, Cropanzano *et al.* (2003) found that exhausted employees demonstrated lower organizational commitment, lower job performance, fewer organizational citizenship behaviors, and higher turnover intentions. Similarly, Grandey *et al.* (2004) found that the frequency and stress appraisal of customers’ verbal aggression were positively associated with call center employees’ burnout and that this burnout also mediated the relationship between stress appraisal and employee absence. More importantly, studies have found that burned out employees engage in higher levels of incivility and counter-productive work behaviors have higher levels of turnover intentions, and are less satisfied with their job (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2003; Moore, 2000). For instance in a longitudinal study, Leiter *et al.* (2012) found that the cynicism dimension of burnout strongly predicted future instigated incivility.

Similarly, van Jaarsveld *et al.* (2010) in their study of service employees found that those who were treated rudely or uncivilly by their customers retaliated by being uncivil to the customers. Therefore, we predict that:

**H3.** Burnout is positively associated with instigated WI. Specifically, burned out individuals are increasingly likely to instigate WI.

**Theoretical framework**

According to van Jaarsveld *et al.* (2010) and consistent with Hobfoll’s (1989) conservation of resources theory, individuals are motivated to acquire, protect, and retain resources (e.g. homes, food, time, money, health, and relationships). Resources are, “those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies” (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). For example, object resources can include things such as homes, clothes, and food. Personal characteristics (e.g. self-esteem, mastery) are resources which can aid stress resistance.

Conditions such as seniority are forms of resources because they are sought after and valued. Finally, energies include things such as time, money, and knowledge (Hobfoll, 1989). A loss in any of these resources can induce stress and burnout among individuals. Importantly, individuals have finite amount of personal (e.g. mastery, self-esteem) and social resources (e.g. emotional support, assistance from friends and family). When resource loss occurs or is insufficient to counter a stressor, individuals’ well-being and job outcomes, including job performance and job satisfaction, can be detrimentally affected Sun and Pan, 2008; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009).

Perceived this way, excessive stress (e.g. WI) can deplete our resources (Hobfoll, 1989) which can lead to burnout (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004). Within the workplace bullying literature, Carlson *et al.* (2012) have found that subordinates who were threatened directly by their supervisors experienced burnout which left them with little time or energy for their families. In the context of WI, we proposed that the resource loss that arose from WI made individuals susceptible to heightened psychological strain (manifested through emotional exhaustion) that could lead them to retaliate toward other individuals. In fact, a number of past incivility studies have found that targets of incivility often worry constantly about when they will be targeted (Cortina, 2008) and, as a consequence, many become emotionally distressed, exhausted, or burned out (Estes and Wang, 2008; Laschinger *et al.*, 2009). These burned out individuals are likely to then become hostile and to retaliate with increasingly intense incivility toward other individuals (Blau and Andersson, 2005; van Jaarsveld *et al.*, 2010; Lim and Cortina, 2005). Similarly, Han *et al.* (2016) also found that ‘burnout mediated the relationship between customers’ incivility and frontline service employees’ turnover intentions. While these studies
provided important insights into the role of burnout in employees and their organizational outcomes, less is known about the mediating role of burnout between WI and instigated WI, with the exception of two studies (i.e. Blau and Andersson, 2005; van Jaarsveld et al., 2010) which have found that burnout significantly mediated the relationship between WI and instigated WI. Based on the above empirical evidence, we proposed that:

\[ H4. \text{ Burnout will mediate the relationship between WI and instigated WI.} \]

**Method**

**Participants**

Australian workers of different organizations and industrial sectors were invited to participate in an online survey about the experiences they have in their workplace. The web link was made available to participants through the Qualtrics Panel System. Participants consisted of 303 adult employees (151 males and 152 females). Participants worked an average 32.7 hours per week (SD = 13.99) with most participants working full-time (59.4 percent), followed by 32.0 percent working part-time, and 8.6 percent working on a casual basis. In terms of educational attainment, 12.5 percent of participants had a postgraduate (i.e. Master’s, PhD) degree, 39.6 percent of participants had a vocational qualification, 20.8 percent of participants had an undergraduate degree, and 27.1 percent of participants had year 12 (secondary/high school) certifications. Participants worked in a variety of industries including 142 who worked in the service industry, 113 who worked in education, health, and community services, and 48 who worked in the manufacturing industry. Participants were allowed to participate in the survey if they were 18 years old or above and currently engaged in paid jobs.

**Procedure**

The study commenced once ethics approval was obtained from the university’s Research and Ethics Committee. The survey was administered through the Qualtrics Panel System. Panel systems of recruitment of participants are used globally and have been found to be more accurate than data collected through survey (Hsiao, 2007). A cover sheet which contained the information letter was included to explain to participants the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of the study, assurance of participants’ confidentiality, and their informed consent (through full completion of the survey questionnaire) as included as part of the online panel collection. Importantly, within the information letter, participants were instructed to answer all questions as honestly because there was no right or wrong answer. Participants were also notified that they could withdraw from the survey at any time without penalty. This request was repeated within the survey questionnaire for each sets of measurement. Finally, demographic information such as age, gender, education, and work industry were also collected.

**Measures**

*Workplace Incivility Scale (modified WIS-experienced).* Participants’ experience of WI was measured using Cortina et al.’s (2013) modified Workplace Incivility Scale. This measure consists of 12 items which assesses the actual experiences of how often participants encounter specific rude or uncivil behaviors in their workplace in the past year. Participants’ responses were recorded on a Likert scale ranging from (0 = never) to (4 = many times). Two examples of such uncivil or rude behaviors included, “Made jokes at your expense” and “Gave you hostile looks, stares, or sneers.” The Cronbach’s \(\alpha\) for this measure in the present study was 0.95, indicating strong internal consistency.
Workplace Incivility Scale (modified WIS-instigated). Instigated workplace incivility was measured using Cortina et al.’s (2013) 12 item modified Workplace Incivility Scale. Participants were given different instructions to help them complete the scale. Specifically, participants were instructed with the following statement, “Please indicate how often you have engaged in the following behaviors in the past year.” Participants were also instructed to complete the survey questions as honestly as they could as there was no right or wrong answer. This measure employed a Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (many times) to assess how often participants have actually engaged in each of the rude or uncivil behaviors in their workplace. An example item included, “Made insulting or disrespectful remarks about someone.” The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for the modified WIS-instigated scale was 0.95 in the current study which indicated strong internal consistency.

Burnout. Burnout was measured using the Gillespie and Numerof (1984) Burnout Inventory. This is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 7 (always). It consists of ten items which empirically measure the degree to which employees feel psychologically and emotionally fatigued on the job. Two example items were, “I feel crabby at work” and “I feel that everything is caving in at work.” In the current study, this inventory obtained a Cronbach’s $\alpha$ value of 0.93, demonstrating excellent internal consistency.

Results

Statistical analyses
Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistical Software version 23.0. Correlations were examined using Pearson correlation coefficients. Mediation analyses were run using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013), which generates bootstrap confidence intervals to estimate indirect effects. This nonparametric resampling method is recommended over the causal steps method (Baron and Kenny, 1986) as it has greater power and requires fewer assumptions (MacKinnon et al., 2002).

Descriptive statistics
Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all continuous variables are presented in Table I.

As illustrated in Table I and supporting both $H1$ and $H2$, WI was positively associated with both instigated incivility and burnout. Additionally, instigated incivility was positively associated with burnout, supporting $H3$. These relationships represented small to medium effect sizes (Cohen, 1992).

Mediation analysis
A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether burnout mediated the relationship between WI and instigated WI. Indirect effects were estimated using

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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Workplace incivility</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Instigated workplace incivility</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>0.63**</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>1.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.83</td>
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Note: **$p < 0.01$
95% bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence intervals (BCa CIs) based on 1,000 replications. The indirect effect was deemed significant if the 95% BCa CI did not span zero (Hayes, 2009).

As shown in Figure 1, the indirect pathway from WI to instigated WI was significant, \( b = 0.08, \) 95% BCa CI \([0.003, 0.15]\). This represented a relatively small effect, \( \kappa^2 = 0.10, \) 95% BCa CI \([0.01, 0.18]\) (Preacher and Kelley, 2011). These results supported \( H4 \) which predicted that burnout would mediate the relationship between WI and instigated WI.

Discussion
The results of the current study supported our hypothesis that burnout mediated the relationship between WI and instigated uncivil workplace behaviors. In other words, our findings are consistent with previous research which suggested that being exposed to WI is related to negative outcomes such as emotional exhaustion (e.g. Andersson and Pearson, 1999) and burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1986). Furthermore, research has supported the link between experiencing WI and the increased likelihood of becoming an instigator of the said incivility. Thus, consistent with previous research, and in support of \( H1 \) and \( H2 \), WI was positively associated with both burnout and instigated WI. This suggests that those who are the brunt of uncivil behavior will not only experience symptoms of burnout, they will also become the inciters of continuing bad behavior in their workplace.

Research has long established the negative work outcomes associated with WI, including increased withdrawal behaviors (e.g. coming to work late, taking longer breaks, etc.; Lim et al., 2008), reduced job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions (Cortina et al., 2001). Few studies, though, have investigated the link between the experience of incivility and the resultant likelihood of engaging in uncivil behavior. The current study extends the current knowledge by proposing that those who are treated uncivilly in the workplace are more likely to engage in uncivil behavior in the future, further perpetuating the incivility spiral. In support of \( H3 \), instigated WI was positively associated with burnout. Thus, those who are burned out at work are more likely to instigate uncivil behavior.

Results of the mediation analysis further supported \( H4 \) that burnout would fully mediate the relationship between WI and instigated WI. We posit that this may be because incivility depletes the targets’ cognitive resources as they lose time and energy worrying about the uncivil interaction and when the next uncivil interaction will occur (Pearson et al., 2000). This is particularly salient when you consider that WI is often ambiguous and victims have little control over it. Consequently, targets’ attentions and

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Figure 1.**
The mediating role of burnout between workplace incivility and instigated workplace incivility

**Notes:** \( \beta \), unstandardized coefficient; BCa CI, bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence intervals. Total effect: \( \beta = 0.55, p < 0.001 \); direct effect: \( \beta = 0.47, p < 0.001 \); indirect effect: \( \beta = 0.08, 95\% \text{ BCa CI} (0.003, 0.15) \)
self-regulatory functioning (e.g. memory, attention, and self-control) are compromised, making them highly susceptible to burnout and to engage in a spiral of incivility. As is evidenced in past research, incivility was positively linked with cognitive resource depletion resulting in cognitive and self-regulatory deficits. For example, Rafaeli et al. (2012) have found that customer service representatives who received mild verbal aggression from their customers have poor memory recall and reduced performance on analytical tasks. Similarly, Muraven and Baumeister (2000) found that incivility contributed to poor self-emotional regulation and poor self-control. Thus, it is not surprising that targets of incivility reacted by engaging in a tit for tat behavior toward their perpetrators.

Limitations and future directions
The present study’s cross-sectional and correlational design limits any inference about causality between variables. Future research could incorporate an experimental design to evaluate cause and effect of the role burnout may play in the incivility spiral. Furthermore, self-report measures are more prone to self-serving bias (Meltzoff, 2011). However, the questionnaire in the present study was self-administered anonymously via the internet. Kreuter et al. (2008) found that administering questionnaire this way was more likely to reduce social desirability biases than through assisted administration methods. Additionally, participants were instructed to be as honest as they could in the information sheet and the survey instructions. Participants were told that there was no right or wrong answer to any of their responses as the researchers were only interested in their personal opinion. We also assured participants that the responses they provided would be kept anonymous and confidential. These precautionary steps should reduce the impact of social desirability, if any. Finally, we conducted Harman’s single factor to test for common method bias to see if this was a problem. Our result indicated that the first (largest) factor did not account for the majority of the variances (42.02 percent less than 50 percent) suggesting that CMB is not a real concern in our study.

Conclusion
Despite these limitations, our study provides two important contributions to the literature on WI. First, we provide empirical evidence about the existence of the incivility spiral between targets and perpetrators in a sample of Australian workers. Very few studies have empirically investigated the incivility spiral between targets and instigators and fewer still have tried to understand how burnout may mediate the relationship between WI and instigated incivility. By attempting to examine the role of burnout in predicting instigated incivility, we hope to provide researchers with some direction on potential underlying mechanisms which may be responsible for future instigated uncivil acts. This is important as modern workplaces are becoming increasingly diverse and uncivil. According to Pearson and Porath (2009), WI represents one of the most challenging issues faced by many contemporary organizations and their workers (Pearson and Porath, 2009). Therefore, it is imperative that researchers continue to uncover factors which may mitigate or reduce the negative impact of WI. For instance, Laschinger et al. (2009) found that having strong structural empowerment (e.g. access to information, support, resources, and the opportunities to grow) protected a group of nurses against the negative impact of WI. Other researchers have called for more diversity awareness training to reduce miscommunications, more professional conflict resolution training, stress management, and workplace etiquette training to help prevent WI (Pearson and Porath, 2005; Reio and Ghosh, 2009).
References


Burnout as a mediator between WI and instigated WI


Further reading

About the authors
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