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Observing Workplace Incivility

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Abstract

Interpersonal mistreatment at work often occurs in the presence of others, however, these 'others' are rarely examined in empirical research despite their importance to the context of the negative interaction. We conducted two experiments to examine how witnessing incivility affects observer reactions toward instigators and targets. In Study 1, participants ($N = 60$) worked virtually with an ostensible instigator and target. In Study 2, participants ($N = 48$) worked *in vivo* with confederates (hired actors) on a job task. Across these two studies, we found that observers of incivility tend to punish instigators while their reactions to targets were generally unaffected. Further, the effect of witnessing incivility was mediated by observers' negative emotional reaction toward the instigator.

Keywords: Incivility, Observers, Third-parties, Organizational Justice, Social Undermining, Workplace aggression, Deontic justice, Affective Events Theory

Observing Workplace Incivility

Workplace incivility, or low intensity deviant acts with ambiguous intent to harm the

target (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), is ubiquitous, has serious outcomes highlighted both

theoretically (cf. Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Bies & Moag, 1986) and empirically (Hershcovis,

2011), and often occurs in the presence of others (Porath & Pearson, 2010). Examples of

workplace incivility include ignoring or making demeaning comments about a target (Cortina,

Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Given its prevalence, estimated to have been experienced

by as much as 96% of the workforce (Porath & Pearson, 2010), understanding observer

responses to incivility is especially important as these will likely have implications for the

instigator, the target, and the organization. If observers react negatively toward the instigator or

positively toward the target, observers may deter future mistreatment and buffer the negative

effects of incivility for targets. Conversely, if observers react negatively toward the target or

positively toward the instigator, observers may exacerbate the incivility. The current paper draws

on theories of deontic justice (Folger, 2001) and affective events (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) to

consider how witnessing workplace incivility influences observer responses toward instigators

and targets.

This paper makes three important contributions. First, by examining observer reactions

toward targets, we help to resolve conflicting arguments that third-parties will either compensate

(Lotz, Okimoto, Schlösser, & Fetchenhauer, 2011) or develop negative evaluations of (e.g.,

Cortina & Magley, 2003) targets of mistreatment. Organizations are responsible for providing a

safe work environment for employees; to do so, it is important to understand whether witnessing

incivility alters observer behavior towards targets. Second, our focus on observer reactions to

low intensity norm violations allows us to determine whether the pattern of findings observed

among third-parties towards perpetrators of *injustice* (e.g., Bies & Tripp, 1998; Brockner, 1990;

Skarlicki, Ellard, & Kelln, 1998) extend beyond a context of (a) a clear distributive injustice

(e.g., Rupp & Bell, 2010; Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, & Gee, 2002), (b) a power

difference between the perpetrator and the target (e.g., Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010; Umphress,

Simmons, Folger, Ren, & Bobocel, 2012), and (c) "minimalistic paradigms that constrain

participant responses to punishment" (Lotz et al., 2011, p. 480). Finally, by drawing on Affective

Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), we investigate two theoretical mechanisms, affect

and attitudes, that explain observer reactions to witnessed incivility.

Deontic Responses to Witnessed Incivility

According to the deontic model of justice (Folger, 2001), individuals have a negative,

evolutionary-based emotional reaction to witnessed injustice which can motivate uninvolved

observers to engage in retributive behavior toward perpetrators (Folger, 2001; Skarlicki & Rupp,

2010), even at a personal cost (e.g., Turillo et al, 2002). According to this model, individuals

care about justice (and will punish justice rule violators) not only because it has implications for

their own future outcomes (i.e., instrumental models; Cropanzano, Rupp, Mohler, & Schminke,

2001) or their standing within a group (i.e., relational models; cf. Tyler & Blader, 2000), but

because it is moral or *right* (Cropanzano, Goldman, & Folger, 2003, 2005).

There is a growing body of research examining third-party reactions to *overt* forms of

injustice perpetrated by high-powered individuals towards low-powered targets (e.g., Skarlicki &

Rupp, 2010; Turillo et al., 2002). This research shows that observers respond negatively toward

perpetrators of overt injustice directed towards subordinates. Although useful in terms of

validating the construct of deontic justice and some of its boundary conditions, we contend the

prototypic design of these studies limits our ability to extend these findings to less overt forms of

mistreatment (i.e., incivility). For example, in one study by Turillo et al. (2001, Study 4),

participants were explicitly told that the supervisor enjoys belittling a subordinate. Overt

mistreatment is likely to elicit an overt response, and therefore removes observer interpretation

of the act of mistreatment. Similarly, mistreatment (or injustice) from high-powered sources

compared to low-powered sources is likely to be more salient to observers because employees

expect a higher level of professionalism from supervisors, and people attend closely to the

behavior of high-powered others (Fiske & Dépret, 1996). Incivility between peers is ambiguous,

and leaves room for considerable interpretation on the part of observers. Therefore, it is

important to understand whether the deontic model applies to these more ambiguous negative

interactions.

  Although peer-to-peer incivility represents a weaker situation than supervisor-to-

subordinate overt injustice, the deontic model (Folger, 2001) should still apply to observers of

incivility. While it may be more frequent and less salient than supervisor injustice, incivility is

still a norm violation in the sense that people come to work expecting to be treated with respect

(Andersson & Pearson, 1999). When employees see someone behave rudely to someone else, it

is a violation of one's fundamental expectation of how others should be treated at work. As

argued by O'Reilly and Aquino (2011), on witnessing workplace mistreatment, observers are

likely to develop a moral intuition that this treatment is wrong, even without being consciously

aware of this moral judgment. This intuition can simultaneously lead observers to experience

"moral anger"—a negative affective state that can include several discrete emotions (O'Reilly &

Aquino, 2011)—which may motivate observers to punish perpetrators (O'Reilly & Aquino,

2011; see also Tripp & Bies, 2009). Hence, consistent with the deontic model, we expect that

observers will act to punish instigators of incivility. Further, we expect that the effect of

witnessed incivility on observer reactions toward the instigator will be mediated by observers'

negative emotional reaction toward the instigator.

> *H1: Observers will evaluate less favorably (H1a), will allocate more undesirable work to*
>
> *(H1b), and will be more aggressive toward (H1c) an individual when he or she is the*
>
> *instigator rather than a non-instigator of peer-to-peer incivility.*
>
> *H2a-H2c: Negative affect towards the instigator will mediate H1a to H1c.*

As noted above, we draw on the deontic model to propose that incivility will result in

observers having a negative emotional reaction towards the instigator over the target's unfair

treatment. The deontic model primarily concerns observer reactions to such emotions by

focusing on the perpetrators of injustice (see Lotz et al., 2011 for an exception). However, the

deontic model may also have implications for observer reactions toward targets (Lotz et al.,

2011), which consequently will have important implications for these vulnerable actors.

Observers who react positively toward a target may buffer the negative effects of incivility on

targets (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001), whereas those who react negatively, or even those who do

nothing, may exacerbate these negative outcomes (see for example Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon,

2002). Given the prevalence and gravity of incivility at work, understanding observer reactions

toward targets is critical.

The deontic model takes as its starting point third-parties' desire to make things "right".

This perspective opens the door to other forms of justice restoration beyond punishing the

instigator. Darley and Pittman (2003) contend that there are two impulses to justice provision:

punishment of the perpetrator *and* compensation of the victim. Relatedly, O'Reilly and Aquino

(2011) theorized that those with power relative to the perpetrator would perceive more options

for responding to witnessed injustice. These options include punishing the perpetrator *and*

helping the victim. In the case of witnessed peer-to-peer incivility, we contend that observers have a range of justice restoration options open to them because all members of the triad have equal structural power; therefore, observers may opt to punish the instigator or help the target. Indeed, observers may perceive target compensation as a less risky strategy because it is less likely to raise the ire of the instigator than would be punishing the instigator, while still enabling the observer to restore the injustice.

In their review, Darley and Pittman (2003) acknowledged that an individual's impulse to punish a harmdoer or compensate a victim is not always a product of elaborate cognitive processing. Instead, these reactions often occur non-consciously, particularly when the initial harm is not overt (as in the case of incivility). Drawing on Rozin, Lowery, Imada, and Haidt (1999), these authors proposed that moral emotions—anger, in particular—may account for witnesses' retributionist tendencies. The notion that affect, and in particular anger, may influence observer reactions is also consistent with other theoretical perspectives. For instance, O'Reilly and Aquino (2011) theorized that, in addition to its effect on third-parties' punishment of the perpetrator, moral anger could also motivate third-parties to aid the victim. Since observer anger arises out of a perceived injustice that they are driven to restore, one way to restore the injustice, and indirectly to get back at the instigator, is to find a way to compensate the target. Therefore, we expect that observers will act to compensate targets of incivility, and that this effect will be mediated by observers' negative emotional reaction toward the instigator.

We consider two broad forms of compensation: target evaluations and mitigation of target harm. Darley and Pittman (2003) note that, at least in the American legal system, victim compensation is typically intended to restore the victim to the state he or she was in before the wrongdoing. To offset uncivil treatment, observers may attempt to restore the target's character

and enhance their opportunities by evaluating them more positively; we therefore examine observer evaluations of targets for a future job. Second, observers may attempt to comparatively improve a target's situation by offsetting or mitigating further harm/punishment relative to the instigator. We therefore examine the extent to which an observer is willing to allocate fewer undesirable tasks to a target, and is inclined to engage in less aggression towards a target compared to a non-target.

> *H3: Observers will evaluate more favorably (H3a), will allocate less undesirable work to (H3b), and will be less aggressive toward (H3c) an individual when he or she is the target rather than a non-target of peer-to-peer incivility.*
>
> *H4a-H4c: Negative affect towards the instigator will mediate H3a to H3c.*

In both Studies described below, individual participants are assigned to groups of three, and the other two group members are confederates. We manipulate whether one confederate is uncivil to the other in the context of a work-related task (following the recommendations of Hershcovis & Reich, 2013), and we measure participant reactions.

Study 1

Method

Participants. We recruited 75 participants for two ostensibly unrelated studies through the research lab at a large UK university. Participants (students and staff) were paid £5.00 (approximate $7.50 USD) for their time. We excluded two participants due to suspicion about the study's purpose. A further 13 were omitted for incorrectly answering a question about the instructions. The final sample consisted of 60 participants (35 women, 25 men, $M_{age} = 24.80$, $SD = 6.12$, age range: 19 to 55).

Materials and Procedure. Participants arrived at the lab for what they were told were two computer-mediated studies (Study 1a and 1b). We told participants that Study 1a would involve brainstorming ideas to solve a work problem in a virtual group of three to five people[1]. For Study 1b, we told participants that they would "stay linked with their group", but would complete a series of timed reaction tasks on their own.

In actuality, all participants were assigned to work with the same two ostensible group members (programmed with names matched to the true participant's gender), and all participants were informed that their role in the brainstorming study would be to evaluate the ideas proposed by these group members. We used time delays in Qualtrics (2005-2013), an online survey design tool, to delay the presentation of group members' ideas to encourage participants to believe that group members were typing during the exercise (we included an equal number of spelling errors in the script; see Appendix).

The ostensible group members stated the same ideas (pretested for quality[2]) in both the Uncivil ($n = 29$) and the Civil ($n = 31$) conditions. In the Uncivil condition, one group member insulted the ideas of the other (e.g., "Umm... that actually sounds really boring..."). In the Civil condition, the group members stated and responded to the ideas in a similar but neutral way (e.g., "Okay, that could be interesting...").

Following the brainstorming task, we asked participants to enter a series of intentionally frustrating alphanumeric keys as quickly as possible (i.e., Study 1b). They were not able to move on in the survey until they had entered the keys correctly. Once the participant had successfully entered three keys, we asked them to rate their enjoyment of the task on a 21 point scale (1 = "disliked very much", 21 = "liked very much")[3].

Participants were then informed that there were 12 more keys to be entered by their group, and it was up to them to decide how many keys each group member had to complete[4]. To help make their decision, they received the ostensible task enjoyment ratings of their group members, both of whom rated the task as "3/21" (i.e., dislike for the task). This design was adapted from Lieberman, Solomon, Greenberg, and McGregor's (1999) aggression paradigm. Participants were informed that their group members would not be aware that participants had allocated the additional keys.

Once participants finished allocating the keys, they were told that, because there had been a great deal of interest in participants becoming research assistants, we were asking participants to evaluate group members on a Research Assistant Evaluation Form. Finally, participants answered questions about the instructions and the manipulation before being debriefed.

Negative affect toward the instigator. We assessed participants' emotional response to the instigator using three items embedded within the Research Assistant Evaluation Form. With reference to the ostensible group member in the instigator role, we asked participants (1) "Did this person make you angry?", (2) "Did this person make you happy?", and (3) "Did this person make you feel comfortable?". Response options were on a five point scale (1 = "Not at all", 2 = "A little", 3 = "Average", 4 = "Quite a bit", 5 = "Extremely"). We reverse coded items (2) and (3) so that higher scores indicated more negative affect toward the instigator. Cronbach alpha = .86.

Work-related evaluation. We asked participants to evaluate each group member in terms of his or her potential to be both a volunteer and a paid research assistant in the research lab (i.e., "Do you think this person should be considered for a volunteer research assistantship?" and "Do you think this person should be considered for a paid research assistantship?"), as well as their

desire to work with him or her again (i.e., "Would you like to work with this person again (e.g.,

in another research study)?"). The questions were also embedded within the Research Assistant

Evaluation Form. Each of these questions was answered on a five point scale (1 = "Definitely

not", 2 = "Probably not", 3 = "Maybe", 4 = "Probably", 5 = "Definitely"). Cronbach alphas = .96

and .87 for work-related evaluation of the instigator and the target, respectively.

Allocation of undesirable work. We used the absolute number of alphanumeric keys the

participant allocated to each of their ostensible group members after being informed that each

group member disliked the key entry task to an equal degree.

Results

Manipulation check. To ensure that participants perceived the incivility condition

correctly, we conducted an independent samples t-test using incivility condition (Uncivil or

Civil) as the independent variable and participants' responses to the question "To what extent do

you feel that your group got along?" as the dependent variable (1 = "Far too little", 2 = "Too

little", 3 = "About right", 4 = "Too much", 5 = "Far too much"). Participants in the Civil

condition ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.34$) perceived that their group got along better than those in the

Uncivil condition ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.77$), $t(37.96^{5}) = 4.92$, $p < .001$; as such, we concluded that

the incivility manipulation was successful.

Tests of hypotheses. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among study

variables appear in Table 1. To investigate the direct effect of witnessed incivility, we conducted

a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) using incivility condition (Uncivil or Civil) as

the independent variable and observers' work-related evaluation of, and number of keys

allocated to, the instigator and target as the dependent variables. The overall test was significant,

$F(4, 55) = 7.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta^{2} = 0.36$; as such we proceeded to examine the between-subjects

effects. We found a significant effect of incivility condition on observers' evaluation of and work allocation to the instigator, $F(1, 58) = 31.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.35$ and $F(1, 58) = 5.15$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$, respectively. Consistent with *H1a* and *H1b*, observers evaluated the instigator less favorably and allocated more work to the instigator in the Uncivil compared to the Civil condition (see Figures 1 and 2). There was no difference between observers' evaluation of or work allocation to the target in the Civil versus Uncivil condition, $F(1, 58) = 3.41$, $p = .070$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$ and $F(1, 58) = 2.78$, $p = .101$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$, respectively. As such, *H3a* and *H3b* were not supported.

To investigate the indirect effect of witnessed incivility, we conducted simple mediation analyses using SPSS macros for bootstrapping indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The macro uses ordinary least squares regression to estimate all paths. The point estimates of the indirect effects as well as the bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) are based on 5000 samples (see Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Consistent with *H2a* and *H2b*, observer negative affect toward the instigator mediated the effect of incivility on their work-related evaluation of as well as their work allocation to the instigator, point estimates = -1.21 and 1.78, *SE*s = 0.27 and 0.73, 95% CIs -1.83 to -0.74 and 0.57 to 3.53, respectively. Participants who witnessed an uncivil interaction had a more negative affective reaction toward the instigator, which results in less favorable work-related evaluations and allocation of more undesirable work compared to non-instigators. Also, consistent with *H4b*, observer negative affect toward the instigator mediated the effect of incivility condition on their work allocation to the target, point estimate = -1.53, *SE* = 0.55, 95% CI -2.80 to -0.59. Participants who witnessed an uncivil interaction had a more negative affective reaction toward the instigator and thus allocated less undesirable work to the target. However, the 95% CI of the indirect effect of incivility condition on observers' work-related evaluation of

the target included zero (point estimate = -0.02, *SE* = 0.23, 95% CI -0.51 to 0.38); as such, *H4a*

was not supported (see Figure 3).

In Study 1, we found that—consistent with the deontic model of justice (Folger, 2001)—

observers punished instigators of incivility by evaluating them less favorably and allocating more

undesirable work to them compared to non-instigators. Further, this effect was mediated by

observers' negative affective reaction toward the instigator. However, in contrast to our

hypotheses that observers would compensate targets of incivility, we did not find any direct

effect of witnessed incivility on observers' evaluation of or work allocation to the target relative

to a non-target. However, we did find that witnessed incivility influenced observers' work

allocation to the target indirectly, via their negative affect toward the instigator.

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate and extend these findings by: (1) investigating these

relationships using live confederates, (2) examining whether observers' negative reaction toward

the instigator extends to non-work-related forms of punishment, and (3) further exploring the

mediating mechanisms that explain observer reactions. In particular, we draw on Affective

Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) to consider whether observers' negative evaluative

reaction toward the instigator is purely affect-driven or whether it is also mediated by observer

attitudes toward the instigator.

Affective Events Theory and Observer Responses to Witnessed Incivility

According to Weiss and Cropanzano's (1996) Affective Events Theory (AET),

workplace events influence employee attitudes and behaviors via their influence on employee

emotions. Specifically, positive events tend to illicit positive emotions whereas negative events

are associated with negative emotions. AET further elaborates that emotions can influence

employee behavior directly (i.e., affect-driven behavior) or indirectly via employee attitudes (i.e., judgment-driven behavior).

AET suggests that events that are goal or value relevant are likely to have affective significance. In a workplace, professional conduct and norms of civility enable employees to work together in a cooperative manner to accomplish work-related tasks. Incivility is counter to valued norms of mutual respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) and is disruptive to a positive work environment. Therefore, witnessing incivility between others is likely to erode observers' perceptions of professional conduct and workplace collegiality, and create uncertainty about the treatment of others and of oneself.

Consistent with the deontic model of justice as applied to workplace mistreatment (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011), observing incivility is likely to have affective significance for observers that will produce a negative emotional response. Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) argue that negative emotion in response to a negative event can lead to negative behavior via two routes. First, as posited above, negative emotions may lead directly to affect-driven behaviors (e.g., punishment of the instigator). However, emotions may also influence behavior along a more cognitive route. Specifically, AET suggests that emotion in response to affective events can influence employee attitudes. Attitudes represent overall evaluations of a focal event or individual (in this case, the instigator), that have either a positive or negative valence. When negative emotions form in response to witnessed incivility, these emotions may color perceptions of the instigator by leading observers to attend to negative information about or actions by him or her, resulting in an overall negative judgment about the instigator. Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) argued that this more deliberate form of processing would primarily influence judgment-driven (i.e., evaluative) responses. Therefore, expanding on the simple mediation proposed in *H2a* and

H4a above, we expect attitudes to further mediate the relationship between affective reactions to incivility and observers' evaluation of both the instigator and the target.

> *H5: The effect of witnessed incivility on observer evaluations will be mediated by observer affect* and *attitudes; observers who witness peer-to-peer incivility will have a more negative affective reaction toward the instigator, which will result in less positive attitudes toward the instigator and in turn less favorable evaluations of the instigator (H5a) and more favorable evaluations of the target (H5b).*

Study 2

Method

Participants. We recruited 50 participants for two ostensibly unrelated studies through the research lab at a large UK university. Participants (students and staff) were paid £10.00 (approximately $15.00 USD) for completing the combined 60 minute studies. We excluded two participants from our analysis (one due to lack of variability in questionnaire responses and one due to a lack of understanding of the instructions). The final sample consisted of 48 participants (22 women, 26 men, M_{age} = 24.00, SD = 6.10, age range: 18 to 44).

Materials and procedure. In the two ostensibly unrelated studies, participants were told that Study 2a examined the effect of lighting on creativity and mood, and that Study 2b examined the relationship between personality and taste preferences. Participants arrived individually at the lab for Study 2a with two other ostensible participants (hired actors) who were matched by gender to the participant. As in Study 1, the group's task was to brainstorm ideas to solve a work problem. Participants were told that two members of the group would be asked to generate ideas while the third group member recorded the ideas. To uphold the cover story of Study 2a, the group was told that they would brainstorm ideas in either normal or bright lighting.

The true participant was always "randomly" assigned to the recorder role and the group was always "randomly" assigned to the normal lighting condition (by drawing slips of folded paper).

The study confederates memorized the same set of scripted ideas used in Study 1, and in both the Uncivil ($n = 19$) and the Civil ($n = 29$) conditions, they stated the same ideas. In the Uncivil condition, one actor undermined the ideas of the other through body language and tone of voice consistent with several items on the Workplace Incivility Scale (Cortina et al., 2001). In the Civil condition, the actors stated and responded to the ideas in a neutral way. Following the brainstorming task, all participants completed a short survey, within which we embedded questions about the participant's attitudes toward each of the confederates (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998).

Once Study 2a was completed, a second experimenter (also a hired actor) arrived to take the confederates and participant to Study 2b. In this study, we again adapted Lieberman et al.'s (1999) aggression paradigm; however, in contrast to Study 1 in which participants allocated undesirable work tasks, in Study 2 participants allocated spicy sauce (a non-contextually relevant form of aggression). All group members filled out a taste preferences inventory, and the two confederates both indicated an equally strong aversion to spicy food ("3/21"). The second experimenter then "randomly" selected the true participant to assist him by pouring sauce for the other two participants in another room. The true participant was given the group members' taste preferences indicating a dislike for spicy food. Participants were then asked to allocate as much spicy sauce as they wanted to the other participants, who would be required to eat all that was provided.

In a preliminary study (reported in an online appendix), we used a public approach to the spicy sauce allocation in which the confederates were seated in the same room. However, we

were concerned that the publicity of the allocation may have biased participants to allocate an

equal amount of sauce to the confederates. Therefore, we subsequently decided to seat the

confederates in separate rooms during the spicy sauce allocation task to ensure that participants

could allocate the sauce in relative privacy. Finally, we asked participants to complete a pen-and-

paper version of the Research Assistant Evaluation Form, explained with the same cover story

used in Study 1.

Negative affect toward the instigator. We used the same measure described in Study 1.

Cronbach alpha = .75.

Attitudes. Participants evaluated each group member (i.e., the confederates) on three

semantic differential pairs adapted from Greenwald et al. (1998) (i.e., "pleasant-unpleasant",

"active-passive", and "good-bad"). Participants were asked to rate each of the confederates on a

7-point scale anchored by these adjective pairs, and values were coded such that higher scores

indicated more positive attitudes. Cronbach's alphas = .71 and .68 for the instigator and the

target, respectively.

Work-related evaluation. We used the same measure described in Study 1. Cronbach

alphas = .87 and .91 for evaluation of the instigator and target, respectively.

Aggression. We used the amount of spicy sauce the participant allocated to each

confederate during ostensible Study 2b, weighed using a highly sensitive digital scale, as an

index of aggression (see Lieberman et al., 1999). The participant was led to believe that both

confederates disliked spicy food to an equal degree, and that the confederates would have to eat

all of the sauce allocated to them.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among study variables are presented in

Table 2. To investigate the direct effect of witnessed incivility, we conducted a MANOVA using

incivility condition as the independent variable and observers' work-related evaluation of, as

well as amount of spicy sauce allocated to, the instigator and target as the dependent variables.

The overall test was significant, $F(4, 41) = 3.80$, $p = .010$, $\eta^2 = 0.27$; as such we proceeded to

examine the between-subjects effects. Consistent with Study 1, we found a significant effect of

condition for observers' evaluation of the instigator, and no effect on observers' evaluation of the

target, $F(1, 44) = 12.88$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.23$ and $F(1, 44) = 1.34$, $p = .253$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$, respectively.

Compared to participants in the Civil condition, participants in the Uncivil condition evaluated

the instigator less favorably (see Figure 4). As such, *H1a* was supported, whereas *H3a* was not.

In contrast to Study 1, there was no effect of condition on observers' spicy sauce allocation to

either the instigator or the target; $F(1, 44) = 0.19$, $p = .664$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$ and $F(1, 44) = 0.08$, $p =$

$.779$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$, respectively (see Figure 5). As such, *H1c* and *H3c* were not supported.

To investigate the indirect effect of witnessed incivility, we conducted both serial (*H2a,*

H4a, and *H5*) and simple (*H2c* and *H4c*) mediation analyses using SPSS macros for

bootstrapping indirect effects, based on 5000 samples (see Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Consistent

with our findings from Study 1, observer negative affect toward the instigator mediated the effect

of incivility on their work-related evaluation of the instigator whereas there was no mediated

effect on their work-related evaluations of the target, point estimates = -0.36 and -.34, *SE*s = 0.16

and .22, 95% CIs -0.76 to -0.11 and -0.82 to 0.04, respectively. Similarly, the indirect effect of

incivility condition on observers' spicy sauce allocation to the target via observer negative affect

toward the instigator was not significant, point estimate = -3.25, *SE* = 4.17, 95% CI -11.09 to

5.32. As such, consistent with Study 1, *H2a* was supported whereas *H4a* and *H4c* were not.

However, in contrast to our Study 1 findings, the indirect effect of observer affect on observers'

spicy sauce allocation to the instigator was also not significant, point estimate = 2.93, *SE* = 4.08,

95% CI -4.17 to 12.16. As such, *H2c* was not supported (see Figure 6).

Finally, consistent with *H5a*, observer negative affect and attitudes toward the instigator

mediated the effect of incivility condition on observers' work-related evaluation of the instigator,

point estimate = -0.18, *SE* = 0.12, 95% CI -0.54 to -0.04. However, the 95% CI for the indirect

effect on observers' work-related evaluation of the target via their negative affect and attitudes

toward the instigator included zero (point estimate = -0.06, *SE* = 0.09, 95% CI -0.28 to 0.09); as

such, *H5b* was not supported.

Discussion

In two studies, we examined how witnessing incivility influences observer behavior

toward instigators and targets. Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that witnessing

incivility negatively influenced observers' work-related evaluations of the instigator. We also

found that—provided they were able to do so in relative privacy (see the online appendix)—

observers were more likely to punish the instigator when the means to do so was work-related

(i.e., allocation of undesirable work) (Study 1), but not when the punishment was non-work-

related (i.e., allocation of spicy sauce) (Study 2). Further, consistent with the deontic model and

AET, observers had a negative affective reaction toward the instigator of incivility, which in turn

led to less favorable work-related evaluation of (Studies 1 and 2) and allocation of more

undesirable work to (Study 1) the instigator. In Study 2, we found that the former effect was

further mediated by observers' attitudes toward the instigator, suggesting that—when evaluating

the instigator—observers engaged in effortful processing of the uncivil event.

The discrepant findings between the two forms of punishment (i.e., allocation of undesirable work versus allocation of spicy sauce) may be due to the latter's lack of symmetry with the initial transgression. According to Tripp, Bies, and Aquino (2002), individuals prefer to maintain symmetry between the consequences of an avenger's retributive action and the original harmdoer's transgression. Given that the instigator's initial transgression was low intensity and ambiguous, observers may have felt that the spicy sauce allocation in Study 2—a paradigm that was expressly designed as a measure of "aggression" (Lieberman et al., 1999)—was "too" aggressive for symmetrical retribution. Instead, although observers had a negative evaluative (Study 2) and attitudinal (Study 2 and the preliminary study [see the online appendix]) reaction toward the instigator only, observers in both Study 2 and in our preliminary study allocated a similar amount of sauce to the instigator relative to the target. This pattern of findings suggests that observers did not view the sauce allocation as a viable means to punish the instigator. The alphanumeric keys, on the other hand, may have been perceived as a more symmetrical consequence relative to the instigator's incivility, as it was less overtly aggressive and more clearly aligned with the work context.

The divergent findings for observers' punishment of the instigator aside, given that workplace incivility occurs so frequently in the presence of others, our finding that observers react negatively toward instigators has important implications. First, though research has focused on the negative outcomes of incivility for targets, this research suggests that outcomes for instigators may also be quite negative. Individuals who behave rudely toward others at work harm their own outcomes in the eyes of an observer. These findings may serve as a deterrent to future incivility, a possibility we elaborate below.

Perhaps most interesting, we found little support that observers react positively towards targets. With the exception of the indirect effect (through affect) of incivility on observers' allocation of undesirable work to the target, observers did not react differently towards targets compared to non-targets. In contrast to previous theory (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011) and research (Lotz et al., 2011) that has noted third-parties' potential preference for compensating a target, observers of incivility do not seem inclined to act to compensate (or punish) a target. This finding may highlight an important distinction between targets of injustice and incivility. Specifically, previous research has shown that witnesses will compensate targets when they are aware that they have experienced distributive injustice (Lotz et al., 2011). The *distributive* nature of this form of injustice suggests that the target received an unfair allocation to begin with, and therefore witnesses may feel an obligation to make up for the unfair distribution. Incivility is interpersonally unfair rather than distributively unfair. Therefore, observers may not have perceived tangible payback as an appropriate form of compensation. In the same vein that Lotz et al. (2011) found that observers responded to distributive injustice with a redistribution, it might be that observers respond to incivility with more civility. Future research should examine to what extent observers treat targets of mistreatment more civilly than non-targets.

Theoretical and practical implications

This research makes a number of theoretical and practical contributions. First, our focus on observer responses to targets is important. Previous research on third-party reactions to mistreatment and injustice has focused almost exclusively on observers' own well-being (e.g., Schat & Kelloway, 2003) or their punishment of the instigator (e.g., Turillo et al., 2002). We are aware of only one study that has examined observers' compensatory responses to targets of injustice (Lotz et al., 2011), and that study examined an overt incident of distributive injustice.

The present study examined observer reactions towards targets of a much more common and less overt form of mistreatment. Importantly, we found little support for our hypotheses that observers would engage in positive behavior toward targets. As we noted above, this may be a function of the type of "compensation" examined; however, this may also suggest that observers of this ambiguous form of mistreatment may not offer the kind of support expected from observers of injustice. Consistent with Latané and Darley's (1970) seminal work on bystander intervention, observers may not perceive ambiguous mistreatment as important enough to warrant target-focused intervention. This perhaps highlights the need for training to help employees identify incivility and its adverse outcomes.

Second, in a literature dominated by studies on target outcomes (e.g., Penney & Spector, 2005; Sakurai & Jex, 2012), our studies highlight the potential costs of incivility for *instigators*. Our finding that observers react negatively to instigators of even low intensity and ambiguous forms of mistreatment opens up some interesting questions about other adverse consequences for these actors. For instance, in the same vein that social undermining research implies that over time uncivil treatment may erode a target's reputation and social relationships (Duffy et al., 2002), do instigators experience similar consequences? Our research suggests that observers have an immediate negative reaction towards instigators, but not targets, which implies that instigators may have much more to lose by behaving badly than targets have to lose by being mistreated. Relatedly, although incivility seems to be too weak a form of mistreatment to move observers to help targets, it is strong enough to elicit observer negative affect and instigator punishment. Therefore, observed incivility may, as suggested by Andersson and Pearson (1999), precipitate secondary or "spin-off" spirals of incivility between observers and instigators.

Third, we found that observers' negative reactions towards instigators of incivility are mediated by their affective reaction to the instigator. This finding is consistent with AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), as well as the deontic model of justice (Folger, 2001). The mediating effect of observer negative affect toward the instigator is important because it highlights the important role of emotion in observer reactions. Previous research has found that there is an emotional toll of mistreatment for targets (e.g., Crossley, 2009). Our research suggests that not only does this emotional toll extend to those who witness an act of low intensity mistreatment, but that these emotions influence observer attitudes and can motivate them to action toward the instigator.

Finally, our findings suggest that—consistent with Tripp et al. (2002)—observers may discriminate between symmetrical and asymmetrical consequences for an instigator's uncivil behavior, as observers only "punished" the instigator when they could do so in a reasonable (and private; see the online appendix) work-related manner. Tripp et al. (2002) argued and found that individuals judge avengers' acts of revenge less harshly when the consequences (but not the method) of retribution are symmetrical to the harm caused by the original offense. Although additional research is needed, our findings suggest that this trend may extend to deontic acts of retribution as well.

There are also important practical implications of this research. First, managers need to be vigilant to low level forms of mistreatment. If employees develop negative attitudes towards and engage in retributive action toward their colleagues following a single incident of witnessed incivility, the potential for increasingly pervasive (and possibly escalating; Andersson & Pearson, 1999) forms of aggression could be high.

Second, given that observers did not react negatively towards targets, observers may be a potential resource for intervention research. That is, observers may be more motivated to intervene on behalf of targets under some circumstances. Future research should investigate how observers might be integrated into workplace incivility intervention strategies. However, this research will need to recognize the constraints imposed by organizational schemas and established social structures (see Morrill, 1995).

Limitations and future directions

As with all research, our studies have several limitations. First, to establish a baseline for observer reactions, observers in this study had no preexisting relationship with the instigator or the target, and we held gender constant. Therefore, we sacrificed some ecological validity to establish internal validity. This makes way for follow-up research that examines how organizational schemas and social structures (Morrill, 1995), as well as the relationships, power dynamics, and gender composition of the observer-instigator-target triad influence observer reactions.

Second, we found that—provided they were able to react in relatively privacy (see the online appendix)—observers only engaged in task-related aggression towards the instigator. In Study 2, observers did not allocate more spicy sauce to instigators even though they evaluated them negatively. Although symmetry of the punishment might explain these discrepant responses, there may be other factors at play. It could be that the task allocation decision was a more conscious choice, whereas the spicy sauce allocation—because it was so removed from the uncivil interaction—was less conscious.

Third, we argued that the observer's negative job evaluation of the instigator is a form of punishment. However, observers may have perceived that instigators were lower performers

(despite equivalent idea quality) as a result of their bad behavior. Regardless of interpretation, the finding suggests that observers develop negative evaluations of instigators. However, future research should probe different negative observer responses to determine the boundary conditions of observer reactions.

Conclusion

Instigators and targets of incivility are surrounded by other members of their workplace who are likely to bear witness to the interactions between them. Our study reveals that observers' emotions as well as their attitudes and behaviors are influenced by negative interactions between instigators and targets. As research on workplace incivility continues to advance, observers will be important players to consider and may become powerful agents of intervention once their role is more fully understood.

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Footnotes

[1] The instruction regarding the potential variation in group size was included because the total number of participants in each session was not always divisible by three.

[2] A separate group of undergraduate students ($N = 55$) evaluated the overall quality of a number of ideas (1 = *extremely low quality* to 7 = *extremely high quality*) in exchange for partial course credit. We chose 14 ideas and created seven idea pairs that were matched based on quality ratings and divided between confederates. See the table below for the *t*- and *p*-values of the final idea pairs.

Equivalence of instigator and target ideas in the brainstorming task.

		t	p
Instigator idea 6	Target idea 1	-0.33	.746
Instigator idea 1	Target idea 7	-0.94	.354
Instigator idea 5	Target idea 2	1.15	.256
Instigator idea 2	Target idea 4	1.18	.245
Instigator idea 4	Target idea 3	-0.63	.532
Instigator idea 3	Target idea 6	0.55	.588
Instigator idea 7	Target idea 5	0.09	.930

[3] The 21-point scale was selected following the procedure outlined in Lieberman, Solomon, Greenberg, and McGregor's (1999) aggression paradigm. Specifically, this range allowed us to emphasize the ostensible participants' dislike for the key allocation task (i.e., their ostensible rating of 3/21, which was subsequently provided to the participant).

[4] According to Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, and Gee (2002), although third-parties to injustice are motivated to engage in retributive behavior toward a justice rule violator, they may be unwilling to do so if it means that they have to behave unjustly themselves. To account for the possibility that observers would not punish the instigator if it meant that the observer had to behave unfairly (i.e., allocating keys unevenly), we manipulated the number of recipients the observer was able to allocate to in Study 1. Specifically, some (n = 33) participants were asked to allocate the alphanumeric keys to the instigator and target only whereas others (n = 27) were asked to allocate the task among the instigator, target and themselves (see Turillo 2002, Study 2).

Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to allocate the keys either between the ostensible instigator and target only (i.e., "Allocate X **ALPHANUMERIC KEYS** to **EDDIE** [**NICKI**]; Allocate X **ALPHANUMERIC KEYS** to **TOM** [**LAURA**]") (emphasis in original), or among the ostensible instigator, target, *and themselves* (i.e., "Allocate X **ALPHANUMERIC KEYS** to **EDDIE** [**NICKI**]; Allocate X **ALPHANUMERIC KEYS** to **TOM** [**LAURA**]; Allocate X **ALPHANUMERIC KEYS** to **YOURSELF**"). We then provided participants with a number of allocation options within each condition.

To test whether the number of allocation recipients influenced the results, we conducted a MANOVA using the number of allocation recipients (Two or Three) and the incivility condition (Uncivil or Civil) as the independent variables. Although we did find a main effect of number of allocation recipients on the absolute number of keys observers allocated to the target, $F(1, 56)$ = 11.31, p = .001, η^2 = 0.17, this was not entirely surprising: observers allocated fewer keys to the target when they were able to allocated them among the instigator, target and themselves (M = 3.19, SD = 3.00) compared to when they allocated the keys between the instigator and target only (M = 5.33, SD = 1.78). The main effect of number of allocation recipients was not significant for

observers' key allocation to the instigator or evaluation of either the instigator or the target, $F(1,$

$56) = 3.53$, $p = .065$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$, $F(1, 56) = 0.39$, $p = .534$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$, and $F(1, 56) = 0.78$, $p =$

$.381$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$, respectively. Further, the interaction between number of allocation recipients and

incivility condition was not significant for any of the outcomes (key allocation to the instigator:

$F(1, 56) = 2.52$, $p = .118$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$; key allocation to the target: $F(1, 56) = 0.19$, $p = .665$, $\eta^2 =$

0.00; evaluation of the instigator: $F(1, 56) = 0.01$, $p = .936$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$; evaluation of the target:

$F(1, 56) = 0.03$, $p = .860$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$). Therefore, we concluded that the effect of the number of

allocation recipients on participants' reactions toward the instigator and target was insufficient to

warrant inclusion of the variable in our analysis. As such, we collapsed these groups in our main

analysis.

[5] Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was significant ($F = 17.90$, $p < .001$). As

such, we did not assume equal variances and instead report the adjusted t-value. The effect was

significant regardless of whether equal variances are ($t(58) = 5.04$, $p < .001$) or are not assumed.

Table 1

Study 1: Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations.

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Negative affect toward the instigator	2.97 (1.11)	(.86)				
2. Undesirable work allocation to the instigator	6.10 (2.96)	.45***	-			
3. Undesirable work allocation to the target	4.37 (2.62)	-.39**	-.57***	-		
4. Work-related evaluation of the instigator	3.09 (1.21)	-.82***	-.52***	.45***	(.96)	
5. Work-related evaluation of the target	3.35 (0.88)	-.17	.02	-.05	.31*	(.87)

Note: Cronbach alphas along the diagonal where applicable. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Table 2

Study 2: Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations.

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Negative affect toward the instigator	2.26 (0.75)	(.75)						
2. Attitude toward the instigator	5.89 (0.96)	-.60***	(.71)					
3. Attitude toward the target	6.09 (0.71)	-.25	.69***	(.68)				
4. Spicy sauce allocation to the instigator	29.33 (22.44)	.04	-.06	-.16	-			
5. Spicy sauce allocation to the target	27.22 (21.21)	-.10	.01	-.12	.48**	-		
6. Work-related evaluation of the instigator	3.89 (0.71)	-.71***	.64***	.35*	.17	.24	(.87)	
7. Work-related evaluation of the target	4.09 (0.71)	-.43**	.33*	.20	.02	.11	.66***	(.91)

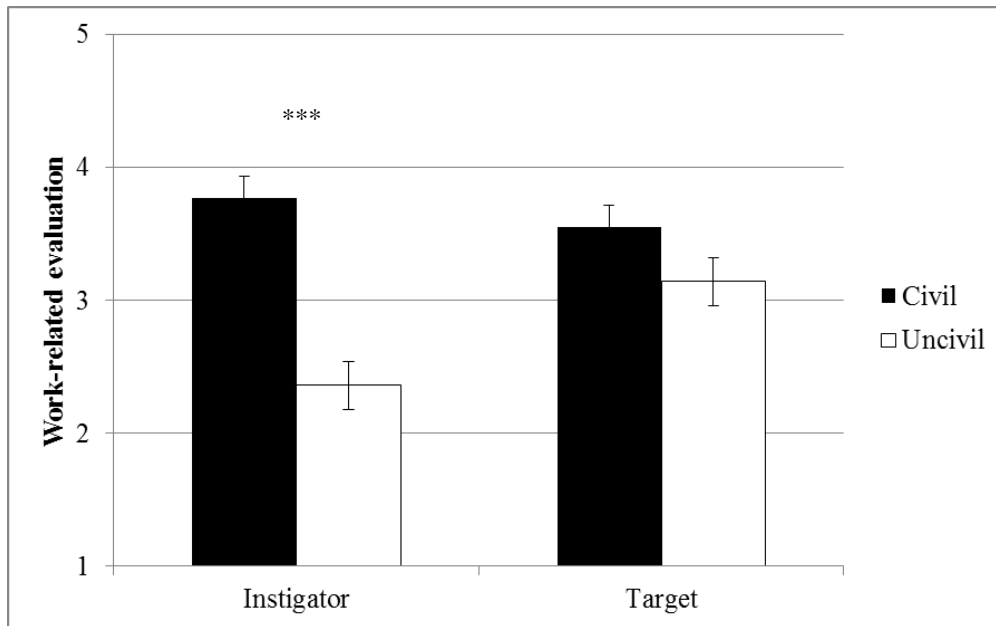Note: Cronbach alphas along the diagonal where applicable. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Figure 1. Study 1: Favorability of participants' work-related evaluations of the instigator and

target in the Civil versus Uncivil condition.
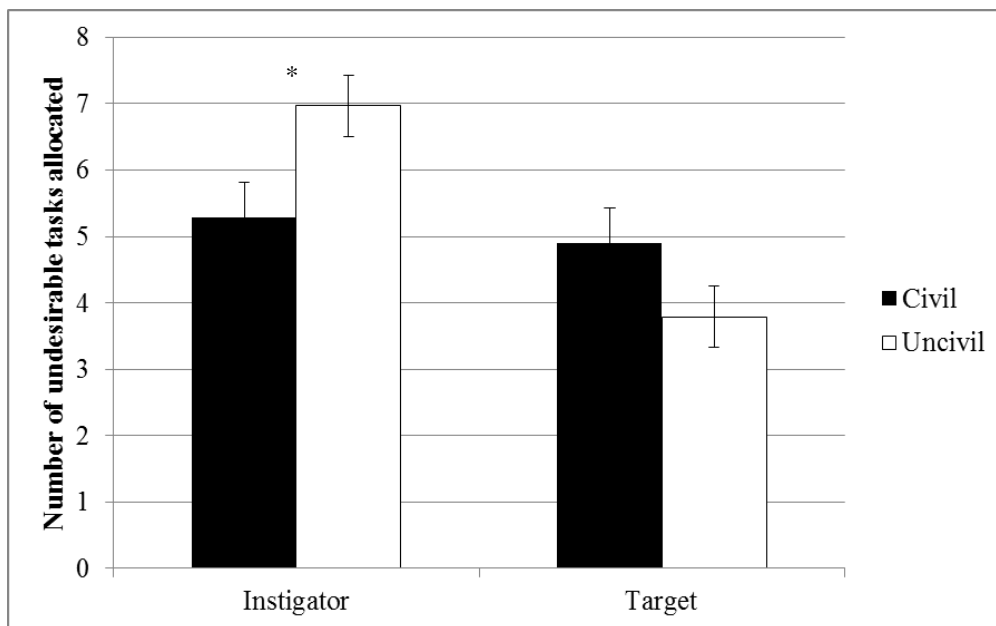
***p < .001.

Figure 2. Study 1: Absolute number of alphanumeric keys participants allocated to the instigator

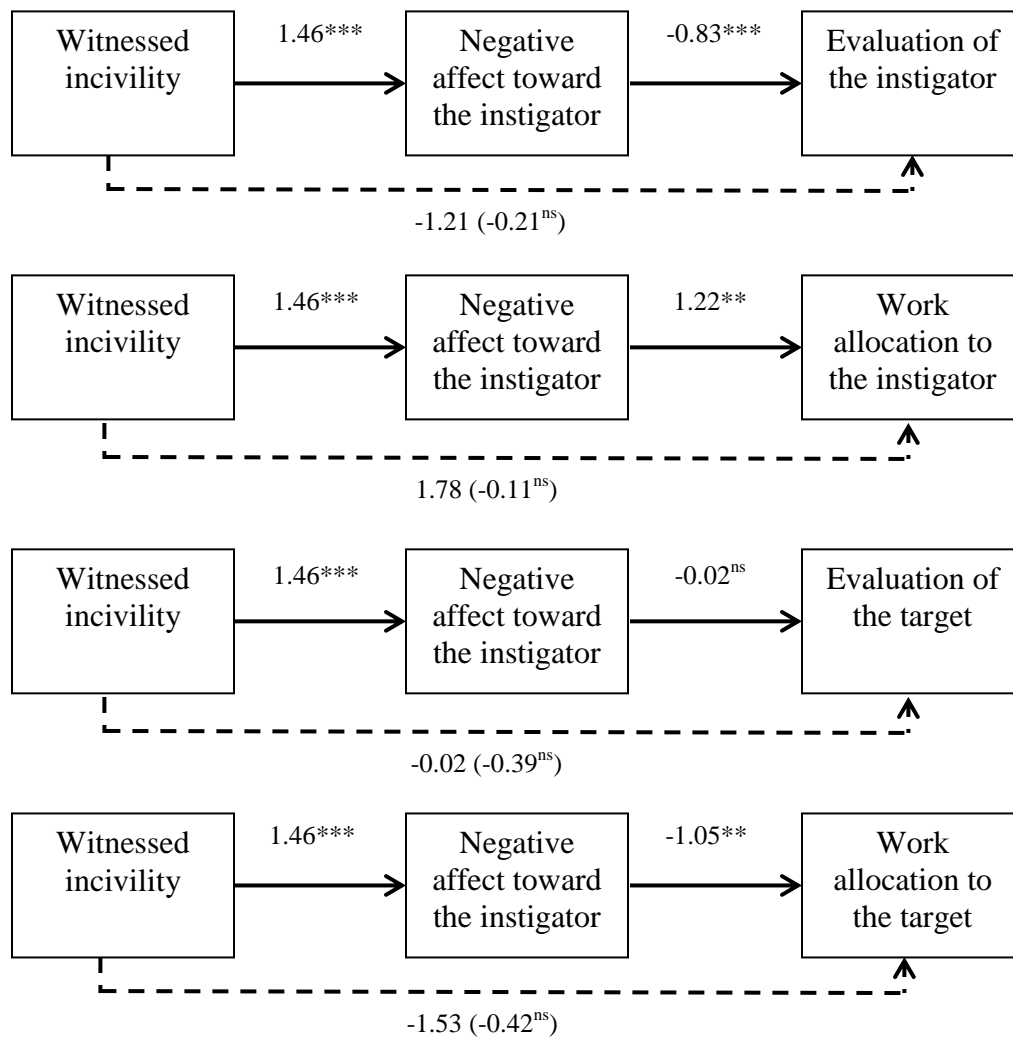and target in the Civil versus Uncivil condition.

*p < .05.

Figure 3. Study 1: Mediating effects of negative affect toward the instigator.

Note: Indirect (direct) effect of incivility condition presented along broken line.
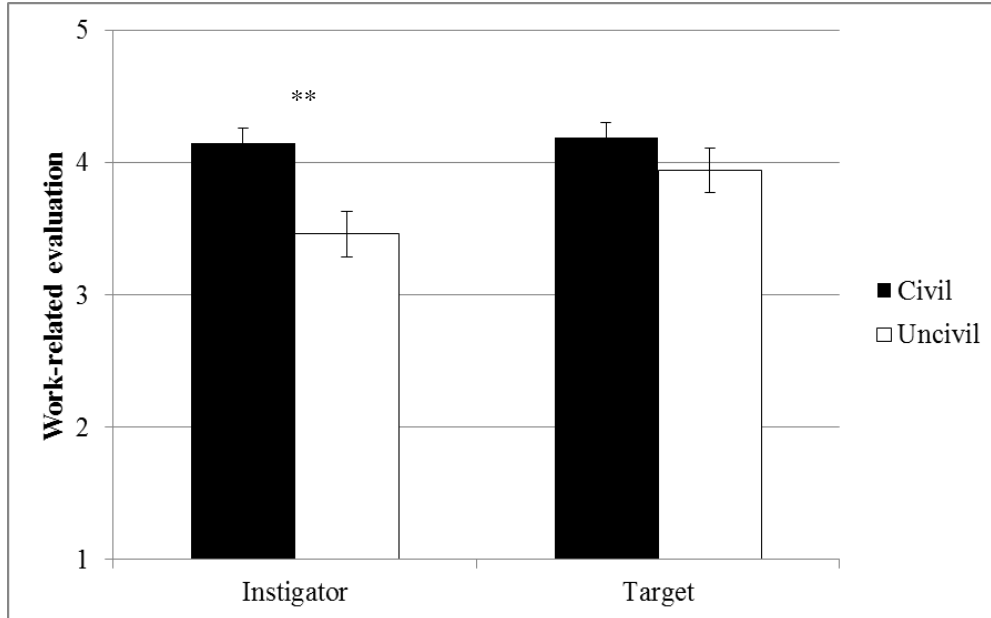
$**p < .01.$ $***p < .001.$

Figure 4. Study 2: Favorability of participants' work-related evaluations of the instigator and

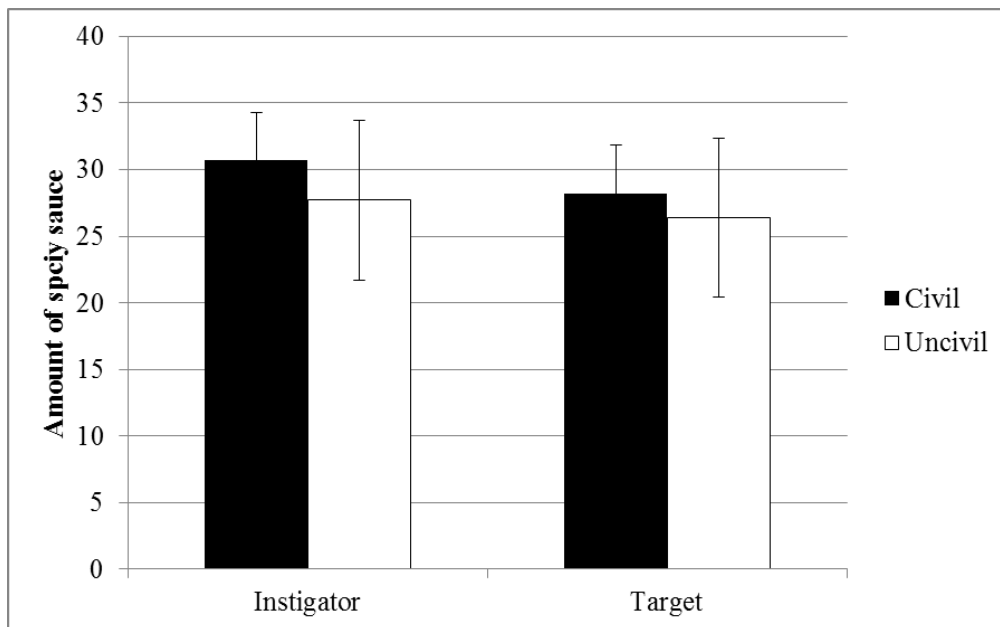target in the Civil versus Uncivil condition.

**$p < .01$.

Figure 5. Study 2: Amount of spicy sauce participants allocated to the instigator and target in the
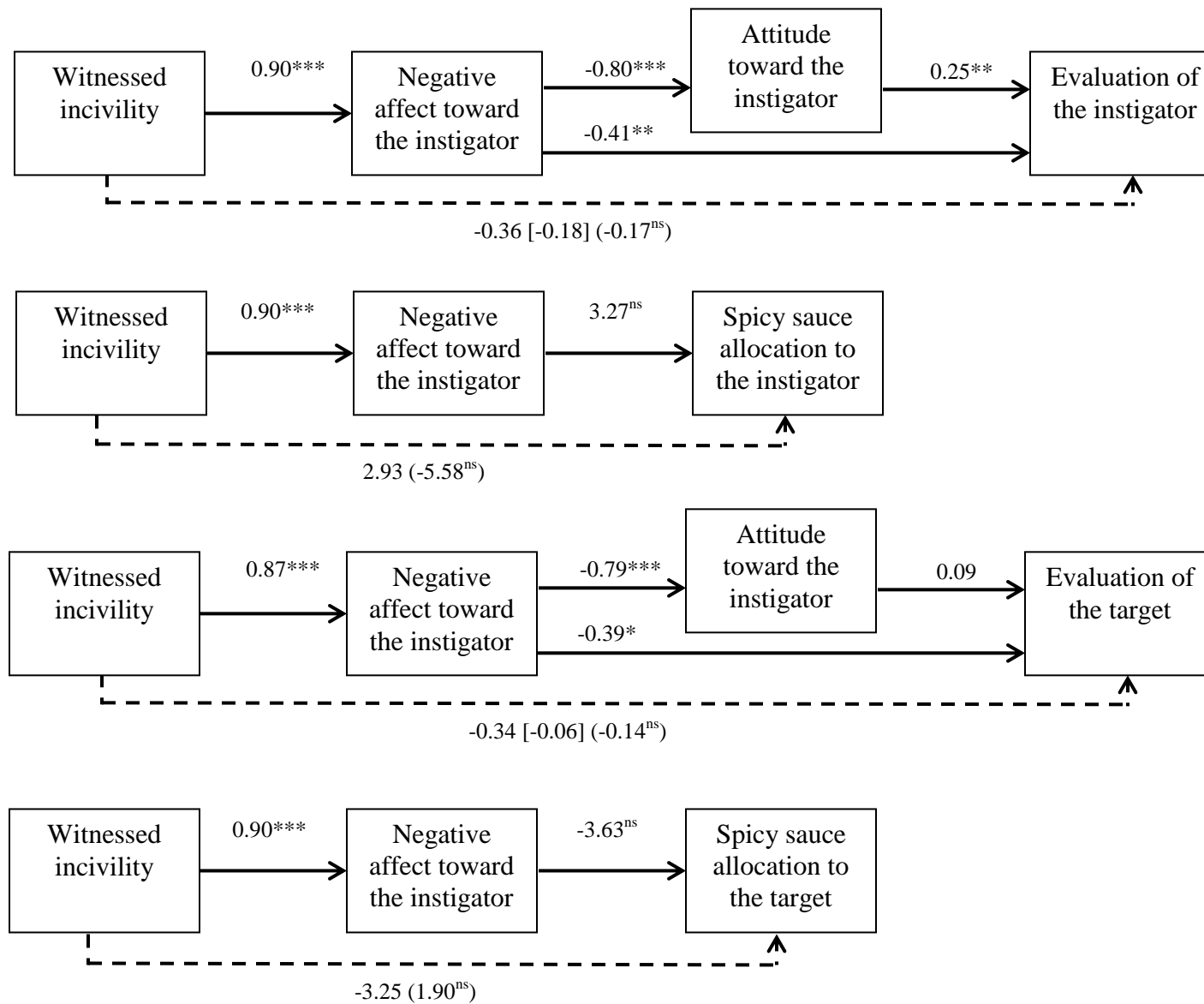
Civil versus Uncivil condition.

Figure 6. Study 2: Mediating effects of negative affect (and attitudes) toward the instigator.

Note: Indirect via affect only [indirect via affect and attitudes] (direct) effect of incivility condition presented along broken line.

**p < .01. ***p < .001.

Appendix

Uncivil condition

Eddie (nicki): Okay… well hi. So what about holdnig some kind of speaker night or s/t? Instructors talk about their departments and students can ask questions.

Tom (Laura): Umm... that actually sounds really boring. Why don't we suggest somehting fun? Like holding a snooker tounament at the Hurricane Room?! students from different depts could play each other

Eddie (nicki): Okay. How about doing s/t with a "reality show" theme?

Like Britain's Got Talent??
studens and staff can show off hidden talents?

Tom (Laura): really?? I can imagine how painful that would be. No thanks.

If staff are invlved it would hvae to be more formal. Maybe a School-wide party one night. With nice wine and cheese?

Eddie (nicki): Or for staff we could organise an inter-dept mixer thing? Where staff from diff departmnts could meet and plan research colalborations?

Tom (Laura): That doesn't sound like fun. Why do you keep sggesting these??

How about doing an inter-dept "20 qs" game? Students can have to guess the answers to questions like "which deptarment am I in"?

Eddie (nicki): For students we could get them togther to do a team getting to know you session? like getting them to build s/t together or somtehing like that.

Tom (Laura): We could maybe create an inter-departmental sports team where instead of one dept playing against another, people from diffrent depts could be on teams playing together.

Both students and instructors could be on the teams.

Eddie (nicki): OH! We could hold monthly movie nihgts?! each time a diff departmen gets to choose the movie!

Tom (Laura): that's ridiculous. How would watching a film in the dark help people to get to know each other???!!

Eddie (nicki): Well maybe we could have some kind of meet and mingle before the movie starts.

Tom (Laura): God. you're ful of bad ideas.

Fine, then. How about organising a kareoke night on campus? Depts could come up with ridiculous "departmental songs"

Eddie (nicki): We could mybe organise some kind of treasure hunt? where teams from diff departments get together and search for things on campus.

Each team could have to include at least one staff member?

Tom (Laura): FAIL. okay...

How about doing something worthwhile?? Like orgnaising a fund raiser competition between depts to raise money for a local cuase?!

Eddie (nicki): How about if we could arange for students in one department to give tours of their building to students from other departmnets who are intarested?

Tom (Laura): Would you seriosly want to do that??!

How about like a big Wii tourmanent? people could compete against each other on Wii sports!

Eddie (nicki): That would be fun, but I geuss it would be hard to get a lot of people involved in that.

Tom (Laura): I don't know, I think we could do it

Civil condition

eddie (nicki): Okay… well hi. So what about holdnig some kind of speaker night or s/t? Instructors talk about their departments and students can ask questions.

Tom (Laura): Okay, that could be interesting. Maybe we should suggest somehting a little more fun though? Like holding a snooker tounament at the Hurricane Room?! students from different depts could play each other

eddie (nicki): Okay. How about doing s/t with a "reality show" theme?

Like Britain's Got Talent?? studens and staff can show off hidden talents?

Tom (Laura): Yeah, okay. That could be fun (maybe a little painful though!)

If staff are invlved it would hvae to be more formal. Maybe a School-wide party one night. With nice wine and cheese?

eddie (nicki): Or for staff we could organise an inter-dept mixer thing? Where staff from diff departmnts could meet and plan research colalborations?
 Tom (Laura): That sounds like it could be fun. Keep these sggestions coming!

How about doing an inter-dept "20 qs" game? Students can have to guess the answers to questions like "which deptarment am I in"?

eddie (nicki): For students we could get them togther to do a team getting to know you session? like getting them to build s/t together or somtehing like that.

Tom (Laura): We could maybe create an inter-departmental sports team where instead of one dept playing against another, people from diffrent depts could be on teams playing together.

Both students and instructors could be on the teams.

eddie (nicki): OH! We could hold monthly movie nihgts?! each time a diff departmen gets to choose the movie!

Tom (Laura): okay. But how would watching a film in the dark help people to get to know each other?

eddie (nicki): Well maybe we could have some kind of meet and mingle before the movie starts.

Tom (Laura): Yeah. Okay. You'v got an answer!

How about organising a kareoke night on campus? Depts could come up with ridiculous "departmental songs"

eddie (nicki): We could mybe organise some kind of treasure hunt? where teams from diff departments get together and search for things on campus.

Each team could have to include at least one staff member?

Tom (Laura): cool. okay…

How about doing something worthwhile? Like orgnaising a fund raiser competition between depts to raise money for a local cuase?!

eddie (nicki): How about if we could arange for students in one department to give tours of their building to students from other departmnets who are intarested?

Tom (Laura): People might seriosly want to do that.

How about like a big Wii tourmanent? people could compete against each other on Wii sports!

eddie (nicki): That would be fun, but I geuss it would be hard to get a lot of people involved in that.

Tom (Laura): I don't know, I think we could do it