

PERSONAL POWER AS A BUFFER OF NEGATIVE OUTCOMES OF WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

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“Rude, discourteous, temperamental, and emotionally unresponsive” are just a few of the terms used to describe perpetrators of workplace incivility, or general rudeness at work (Johnson & Indvik, 2001). Unfortunately, the majority of employees are targets of incivility at some point during their working lives. The negative effects of incivility have been found to be detrimental to an individual’s well-being (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Given the toxic nature of such experiences, it is important to consider factors that may act as buffers against their harmful effects. This study asks whether individual traits conceptualized as personal power may shield the target from negative outcomes of incivility. Specifically, we hypothesized that self-esteem and core self evaluations (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003) would buffer the relationships between experiences of incivility at work and strain-related outcomes, including work attitudes and psychological states.

Survey data were collected from three sources to test the hypothesized moderation effect. The samples included 393 employees of a Midwestern municipality, 345 state agency employees, and a 261-person nationwide representative sample of working adults. In support of our hypotheses, high levels of self-esteem buffered the relationship between incivility experiences and somatization for both the Municipality and State Agency samples. A similar buffering pattern was found for anxiety in both the State Agency and Nationwide samples. Our results suggest that not everyone responds the same way to incivility: those with greater perceived personal power were not as affected as those with lesser personal power. This suggests that researchers should consider not only the situation (i.e., incivility), but also the person (e.g., personal power), in order to capture a richer explanation of the process by which incivility harms its targets.

Interestingly, we found that personal power moderates the relationships between experiences of incivility and non-work outcomes such as somatization, depression and anxiety, but not the relationships of incivility experiences with work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction and satisfaction with one’s supervisor. One possible explanation for this may come from the work of Masterson (2000) on social exchange relationships and organizational justice, which suggests that people reciprocate to the source of unfairness. Accordingly, perhaps targets of incivility mainly reciprocate negative attitudes specifically to the perpetrator, rather than the job or other uninvolved parties. Future research should be aimed at understanding if and how work outcomes are influenced by incivility and personal power.

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