**An Incivility Spiral Spotlight on Societal Deterioration: The Mediating Role of Moral Disengagement**

**Abstract**

This paper provides insights into the primary antecedents of instigated workplace incivility. This is done by adopting a two-pronged approach. Firstly, we analyze acts of incivility that have been experienced or witnessed as predictors of further incivility, taking into account the mediating role of moral disengagement. Secondly, we construct and validate a new reflective measurement scale based on the emotional experience of the target, rather than on the frequency of the uncivil act. The paper reports three consecutive studies. The framework of the study is conservation of resources theory. This can account for the differences between bystander and target perceptions and behaviors in a spiralization process that leads to the instigation of further incivility. Results indicate that both being a target of incivility, and witnessing incivility could predict incivility perpetration. In addition, the spiralization processes of targets and bystanders differ as informed by their interrelations with moral disengagement as a mediator. The paper contributes to the literature by means of its focus on the incivility spiralization process, accounting for the differences between bystanders and targets. Thus far, this viewpoint has been overlooked, although it is rooted in incivility theory. The second contribution relates to the measurement of experienced workplace incivility. Extant studies have relied primarily on formative measures to capture the different aspects of incivility. Although these measures have facilitated empirical research on workplace incivility, they have been focused more on the frequency of uncivil incidents and less on individual emotional experiences that are at the core of the construct. In its totality, the framework of the current study provides a broader viewpoint on incivility as a social problem that is exacerbated by the incivility spiral and secondary spirals.

**Keywords**: Workplace incivility, Perpetrating incivility, Moral disengagement, Measurement, Formative and reflective measurement

# Introduction

In the context of deviant workplace behavior, workplace incivility has been recognized as a unique form of interpersonal misbehavior that is characterized by low intensity and ambiguity (Blau & Andersson, [2005](#Blau2005)). Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of respect for others (Andersson & Pearson, [1999](#Andersson1999): 457). Incivility differs from other forms of deviant behavior such as aggression or violence because it concerns low-intensity manifestations of mistreatment (Tepper & Henle, [2011](#Tepper2011)). With workplace incivility, intent to harm is not necessarily transparent, and hostility is not always deliberate (Andersson & Pearson, [1999](#Andersson1999); Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005)). Some of the most common types of uncivil behavior are condescending or demeaning comments, interrupting others, the “silent treatment,” addressing others in unprofessional terms, or invading the privacy of co-workers (Cortina et al., [2001](#Cortina2013); Gallus et al., [2014](#Gallus2014)).

Despite its lower intensity, previous research has indicated that incivility can lead to several adverse organizational and psychological outcomes (e.g., Cortina et al., [2001](#Cortina2001); Porath & Pearson, [2013](#Porath2013)). Incivility has also been associated with higher turnover intentions (Cortina et al., [2001](#Cortina2001)); diminished commitment and loyalty to the organization (Pearson et al., [2005](#Pearson2005)); decreased work engagement (Chen et al., [2013](#Chen2013)), and negative emotions, such as anger, fear, and sadness experienced at the individual level (Porath & Pearson, [2012](#Porath2012)). Moreover, researchers have indicated that workplace incivility can potentially lead to more violent and aggressive behaviors through primary and secondary spirals (Andersson & Pearson, [1999](#Andersson1999); Bibi et al., [2013](#Bibi2013); Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005)). This can eventually create a hostile organizational culture and workplace incivility should, therefore, not be neglected or ignored.

Nevertheless, as Jex et al. ([2010](#Jex2010)) have emphasized, understanding workplace incivility is challenging owing to several issues, primarily related to the different perspectives from which workplace incivility has been measured. One criticism of extant research on workplace incivility is that it has tended to focus on the experience of targets and the consequences of incivility, with little attention paid to the study of instigators and drivers of incivility from the perpetrator’s perspective (e.g., Blau & Andersson, [2005](#Blau2005); Cortina et al., [2001](#Cortina2001); Schilpzand et al., [2016](#Schilpzand2016); Torkelson et al., [2016](#Torkelson2016)). Gallus et al. ([2014](#Gallus2014)) emphasized that perpetrators and the target-perpetrator relationship have often been the subject of workplace aggression research. However, few studies have addressed the issue of incivility perpetration or drivers thereof. In this respect, additional knowledge could be gained by adopting the bystander’s point of view. Simply observing mistreatment at work (rather than directly experiencing it) can increase an individual’s likelihood of engaging in the same behavior, creating an incivility spiral that can escalate into even more intense mistreatment directed towards the initial perpetrator or third parties (Andersson & Pearson, [1999](#Andersson1999); Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005)).

In addition, several scholars have highlighted the contribution of individual-level constructs related to morals and ethics, the construct of moral disengagement in particular, to the acceleration of deviant behaviors (Fida et al., [2018](#Fida2018); Moore et al., [2012](#Moore2012); Samnani et al., [2014](#Samnani2014)). Although some work does exist, investigations of moral disengagement in organizational settings remain limited and additional studies are needed (Fida et al., [2018](#Fida2018)). In particular, there are very few studies in the field of workplace deviance, although several scholars have indicated its importance for understanding incivility and incivility perpetration (e.g., Detert et al., [2008](#Detert2008); Lee et al., [2016](#Lee2016)). Moral disengagement is a personal propensity that helps individuals to rationalize and morally justify the consequences of their immoral actions, and, as such, can explain why a particular individual might engage in perpetrating incivility.

Another lacuna relates to the nature of existing measures and the assessment methods used to construct and validate these measures. Thus far, the construct of incivility has been measured mainly using formative measurement scales – index-type scales in which each indicator captures a specific aspect of the construct’s domain in such a way that the indicators that construct the scale also form it (Hair et al., [2017](#Hair2017)). These measures assess the frequency of uncivil incidents that form the scale (Schilpzand et al., [2016](#Schilpzand2016)) but overlook the individual experience that is the essence of incivility theory. Alternatively, reflective scales are based on interchangeable items, which represent the effect of the construct. Although this type of measure has been overlooked in the research on incivility, the need to match the measurement tool to the original definition has recently been discussed by Porath and Pearson ([2012](#Porath2012)).

The theoretical framework of the current study is conservation of resources (COR) theory. COR proposes a dynamic model of stress that explains how coping resources function to reduce exposure to stressors (Hobfoll, [2001](#Hobfoll2001); Hobfoll et al., [2018](#Hobfoll2018); Lev-Wiesel et al., [2013](#LevWiesel2013)). Studies have consistently shown that individual psychological differences lead to the adoption of different coping strategies and other emotional and regulatory resources (reference removed for peer review). The underlying assumptions of COR make it appropriate for understanding the process experienced by targets and bystanders. In this sense, it takes into account the dynamism of stress experienced by targets and bystanders and the underlying process. In addition, COR can predict future responses of individuals that are exposed to stress. COR is based on four base assumptions. Firstly, it recognizes that people are motivated by resource loss more than resource gain. Secondly, it postulates that people must invest resources to protect against resource loss, recover from loss, or gain resources. Thirdly, it emphasizes that stress is more pronounced in the context of resource loss. Fourthly, it notes that when their resources are overstretched or exhausted, individuals enter into a self-preservation mode that is often defensive or aggressive (Hobfoll et al., [2018](#Hobfoll2018)). As bystanders and targets differ in terms of the level of stress they experience, COR can account for differences in their motivations; thus, presenting a novel perspective.

Another contribution relates to the measurement of experienced workplace incivility. Studies thus far have relied mostly on formative measures in order to capture the different aspects of incivility. Although these measures have facilitated extensive empirical research on workplace incivility (Schilpzand et al., [2016](#Schilpzand2016)), they have centered more on the frequency of the uncivil incidents and less on the individual experience that is at the core of the construct as defined by Andersson and Pearson ([1999](#Andersson1999)). In the COR framework, an incivility operationalization, centered on the depletion of emotional resources as opposed to the frequency of external events, offers greater validity.

Overall, by accounting for the different motivations of bystanders and targets as understood within the framework of COR theory and supplying an alternate measurement, this study provides further insights into the spiralization of incivility in the workplace.

# Literature Review

## Social Interaction and Experienced Incivility as Drivers of Perpetrating Incivility

Workplace incivility is seen as an interactive social process in which acts of incivility affect the target, the observer, the instigator, and the overall social context (Andersson & Pearson, [1999](#Andersson1999)). Workplace incivility has the potential to create a spiral of reciprocal interpersonal conflicts (Torkelson et al., [2016](#Torkelson2016)) where workplace incivility on the part of one individual leads to a response in the form of further incivility on the part of a second (Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005)). Experiencing incivility may lead the individual to respond with intentional retaliatory incivility or more aggressive and coercive forms of mistreatment, leading to a chain reaction that can spill over and damage the societal environment of the organization. In this way, incivility can become embedded in an organizational culture, as other members of the organization observe and, consequently, adopt similar behaviors (Pearson et al., [2000](#Pearson2000)).

Scholars have proposed that individuals engage in this spiral because they think that retaliating to the source of incivility will give them a sense of relief (Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005); Shoss et al., [2016](#Shoss2016)). For example, Porath and Pearson ([2012](#Porath2012)) found that targets who reported frequent incivility, also reported frequent anger, fear, and sadness and that anger and fear are related to increased direct and indirect aggression against the instigators of incivility. Similarly, Mitchell and Ambrose ([2007](#Mitchell2007)) demonstrated that abusive supervisory behavior was associated with retaliation, not only toward the source of the abuse, but also toward others in the organization – a process Andersson and Pearson ([1999](#Andersson1999)) labelled “secondary spirals.” Gallus et al. ([2014](#Gallus2014)) showed that experienced incivility was a unique predictor of perpetrating incivility. Similar conclusions were reached by Torkelson et al. ([2016](#Torkelson2016)) and Manegold (2014). Interestingly, Gallus et al. ([2014](#Gallus2014)) also reported that 70% of their sample indicated that they had been both targets and perpetrators.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, not only experiencing but also observing incivility in the organizational context can have negative consequences. Several studies have shown that observing incivility could also result in negative consequences in terms of work, physical, and emotional health outcomes (e.g., Lim et al., [2008](#Lim2008); Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005); Porath & Erez, [2009](#Porath2009); Totterdell et al., [2012](#Totterdell2012)). Observed incivility disrupts work patterns and diminishes the effectiveness of its targets and others (Pearson et al., [2000](#Pearson2000)). Observed incivility has also been considered a driver of the incivility spiralization process (Andersson & Pearson, [1999](#Andersson1999); Karabas et al., [2019](#Karabas2019)), in which the individual observer may become a perpetrator (Karabas, Joireman, & Kim, [2019](#Karabas2019)).

These spiral effects of incivility can be explained by COR (Hobfoll et al., [2018](#Hobfoll2018)). Once incivility is experienced or observed, personal and social resources are threatened and, to some extent, consumed (Itzkovich and Dolev, 2021; Lev-Wiesel et al., [2013](#LevWiesel2013)). In line with COR, individuals who face resource loss are motivated to restore resources consumed by the uncivil experience. Moreover, when resources are exhausted, individuals enter a defensive mode that can be aggressive (Hobfoll et al., [2018](#Hobfoll2018)). These notions have been supported by Penney and Spector ([2005](#Penney2005)) and Shoss et al. ([2016](#Shoss2016)), who stressed that retaliation toward the perpetrator and third parties is motivated by emotional benefits. Following the logic embedded in COR, perpetration by bystanders and targets is likely for two reasons: firstly, to restore lost resources, and secondly, to defend remaining resources.

Based on these notions, the following hypotheses were investigated:

*H1– Experienced incivility is positively correlated with the perpetration of incivility;*

*H2 – Observed incivility is positively correlated with the perpetration of incivility.*

## Moral Disengagement as a Mediator of Perpetrating Incivility

In seeking to explain the motivations of instigators to inflict harm on their targets, studies have overlooked moral disengagement as a potential precursor. Moral disengagement represents a critical self-regulation mechanism that could explain why individuals violate norms of mutual respect and engage in incivility. It presents a social-cognitive construct that addresses a set of mechanisms through which individuals justify and legitimize their misbehavior. By rationalizing specific behaviors that are inconsistent with their moral standards, and diminishing the negative emotions associated with so doing, individuals deactivate their moral self-regulation, and allow themselves to engage in behaviors they would usually consider immoral or unethical (Barsky, [2011](#Barsky2011); Samnani et al., [2014](#Samnani2014); Valle et al., [2018](#Valle2018)). Fida et al. ([2015](#Fida2015)) demonstrated how moral disengagement justification mechanisms allow individuals to engage in deviant and antisocial behaviors without remorse. By redefining the behavior itself, altering the perception of its consequences, obscuring the agency of the perpetrator, and depicting the victim as responsible (Fida et al., [2018](#Fida2018):4), individuals can consider their deviant behavior socially and morally acceptable (Fida et al., [2015](#Fida2015)).

Within the broader literature on deviant behavior, previous research has shown that moral disengagement predicts propensity to make unethical decisions (Barsky, [2011](#Barsky2011); Detert et al., [2008](#Detert2008)), and is positively related to a propensity to undermine coworkers (Lee et al., [2016](#Lee2016)) and organizational deviance (Christian & Ellis, [2014](#Christian2014); Valle et al., [2018](#Valle2018)). Nevertheless, when it comes to incivility, there is a lack of research on the role of moral disengagement in instigating incivility, although scholars have stressed the importance of further investigation and application in the field (e.g. Detert et al., [2008](#Detert2008); Fida et al., [2018](#Fida2018); Samnani et al., [2014](#Samnani2014)). In this regard, Lee et al. ([2016](#Lee2016)) demonstrated how moral disengagement served as a moral justification to harm others. In the framework of COR, it can be postulated that experiencing or witnessing incivility motivates retaliation in order to restore lost resources (Hopfoll et al., [2018](#Hobfoll2018)). However, these targets or bystanders, who are motivated to restore their resources, are morally challenged by the notion that becoming a perpetrator is inconsistent with their moral standards because perpetrating incivility encourages further incivility. In order to resolve this dissonance, these individuals need to deactivate their moral self-regulation and allow themselves to engage in immoral behaviors (Barsky, [2011](#Barsky2011); Samnani et al., [2014](#Samnani2014); Valle et al., [2018](#Valle2018)) – namely, incivility perpetration – utilizing moral disengagement to prevent remorse. In light of this, the following hypotheses were postulated:

*H3 – Moral disengagement mediates the interrelations between experienced incivility and perpetration of incivility;*

*H4 – Moral disengagement mediates the interrelations between witnessed incivility and perpetration of incivility.*

Moreover, bystanders and targets of incivility experience incivility differently. Compared with bystanders, targets are more damaged in the process (Salin & Notelaers [2020](#Salin2020)). Thus, in terms of COR, targets lose more personal/emotional and social resources and are more inclined to perceive incivility as immoral than bystanders. This is because this directly experienced incivility threatens their view of the world as just (Lev-Weisel et al., [2013](#LevWiesel2013)). Thus, when retaliating, targets, compared with bystanders, are more prone to use moral disengagement as a mediator.

*H5 – Experienced incivility is a better predictor of moral disengagement than witnessed incivility.*

## Second Research Aim: Contrasting Reflective and Formative Models for Measuring Workplace Incivility

In social science, a key challenge pertains to the enormous number of constructs that need to be acknowledged and analyzed to describe and understand particular phenomena (Simonetto [2012](#Simonetto2012)). Traditionally, interrelations between these theoretical constructs (latent variables) were the focus of research.

More recently, recognizing that inaccurate measurement models could lead to statistical and conceptual misinterpretations (e.g., Coltman et al., [2008](#Coltman2008); MacKenzie et al., [2005](#MacKenzie2005)), researchers have shifted their focus toward the nature of the constructs and their operationalization – for example the analysis of the relationship between constructs and their indicators (Christophersen & Konradt, [2012](#Christophersen2012); Diamantopoulos et al., [2008](#Diamantopoulos2008)). Accordingly, depending on the direction of the relationship between the construct and its indicators, scholars have recognized two main measurement models – formative and reflective – depending on whether “the direction of the relationship is either from the construct to the measures (i.e., reflective measurement) or from the measures to the construct (i.e., formative measurement)” (Diamantopoulos et al., [2008](#Diamantopoulos2008):1204).

Theoretical frameworks and underlying theoretical concepts determine whether a formative or a reflective model is more appropriate for a particular measurement. However, for various constructs, both measurement models can be applicable, provided that justifications for each approach can be found in the underlying theory (Christophersen & Konradt, [2012](#Christophersen2012)).

Reflective measurement models emphasize the construct as the cause of measures, so that a variation in the construct leads to a variation in its measures (Christophersen & Konradt, [2012](#Christophersen2012); Simonetto, [2012](#Simonetto2012)). These models are termed “reflective” as they indicate reflections of a particular construct (Edwards & Bagozzi, [2000](#Edwards2000)). Because reflective indicators pertain to the same underlying construct, they should all have the same antecedents and consequences, and be conceptually interchangeable (MacKenzie et al., [2005](#MacKenzie2005)). Alternatively, formative indicators represent different dimensions of a particular construct. This means that a formative construct is derived from its measures (MacKenzie et al., [2005](#MacKenzie2005)). A formativeconstruct, which typically takes the form of a ranking or index, presents a summation of the observed variables with which it is associated and emphasizes the role of indicators as predictors, rather than predicted variables (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, [2006](#Diamantopoulos2006)). In other words, the phenomenon is defined by, or is a function of, the observed variables (Simonetto, [2012](#Simonetto2012)).

Formative conceptualization is appropriate for many constructs in organizational and behavioral research. When considering measurement models of workplace incivility a formative scale captures observable indicators, each of which deals with specific forms of incivility, whereas reflective indicators capture the evaluation of consequences and target perceptions that are at the core of the definition of incivility. The application of formative measures in workplace incivility research has made it possible to integrate different forms of incivility into one scale (Ellwart & Konradt, [2011](#Ellwart2011)). As such, formative scales are valuable to quantify the impact of multiple dimensions associated with incivility. Thus, they allow its multidimensionality to be captured.

Increased interest in this field has produced several measures of incivility. Most studies have utilized formative measures, seeing incivility as a latent variable composed of all of its indicators, and as an index of the frequency of different forms of incivility. Thus far, the three main formative measures commonly used to capture incivility are the Workplace Incivility Scale (WIS), consisting of seven items (Cortina et al., [2001](#Cortina2001)); the updated WIS, consisting of 12 items (Cortina et al., [2013](#Cortina2013)); and the Uncivil Workplace Behavior Questionnaire, consisting of 20 items (Martin & Hine, [2005](#Martin2005)).

Nevertheless, some scholars have called for additional measurement validations (Matthews & Ritter, [2016](#Matthews2016)). The main reason for this is that the WIS – the most widely used instrument – has never been used in its original form and its various versions have not been validated (Kunkel et al., [2015](#Kunkel2015)).

Moreover, as Kunkel et al. ([2015](#Kunkel2015)) emphasized, extant instruments tend to capture content that goes beyond the scope of incivility. The specific nature of incivility, which is primarily concerned with target perception and individual consequences (Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005)), calls for an alternative, more reflective, approach that is in line with its nature. Indeed, while Porath and Pearson ([2012](#Porath2012)) used four reflective indicators to measure incivility based on the definition and description of incivility, they did not explain how they constructed the items and did not report measures taken to ensure the validation of the scale. Moreover, they did not use the assessment protocol for reflective scales as indicated by Hair et al. ([2017](#Hair2017)).

For this reason, in addition to analyzing the process of incivility spirals, this paper questions a hidden assumption concerning the application of formative measurement models for measuring incivility. In the framework of this paper, a reflective measurement instrument for perceived incivility – the Reflective Workplace Incivility Scale (RWIS) – was constructed, tested, and validated through empirical research, and by using assessment protocols supported by contemporary measurement theory (Hair et al., [2017](#Hair2017)).

The research model is presented in Figure 1 below.

# INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

# Methods

## Participants

The research samples consisted of three separate studies. In the first study we aimed to gather the reflective scale indicators. The second study tested the research model assumptions (H1–H5). In the third study we further evaluated the convergent and discriminant validity of the newly developed scale.

### Study One

The first study included five interviewees from Israel who had been identified as targets of mistreatment. These individuals included two men and three women with an average age of 31.

### Study Two

The second study surveyed 591 employees, of whom 354 were Israeli, 231 were Croatian, and six were of unreported nationality. The sample for this study was composed of 41% men and 59% women. The mean age of participants was 36.1 (*SD* = 11.8). The participants’ average tenure at work was 8.6 years. The sampling method used in this study was convenience sampling, which is a non-probabilistic sampling technique that is frequently used in quantitative studies (Creswell, [2008](#Creswell2008)).

### Study Three

In the third study, the sample included 107 preschool teachers from Israel who answered a survey administrated through their union. Ninety-two percent of the sample were women with an average age of 39.5.

# Data analysis

### Instrumentation

### Study One

To construct a reflective scale to measure incivility, reflective indicators were collected. For this purpose, five in-depth interviews with Israeli employees who experienced frequent incivility at work were conducted. As part of the interviews, participants were asked to describe how they felt as a result of the frequent incidents of incivility they experienced at work. Although the participants were exposed to different forms of interpersonal misconduct, only descriptions that were considered by experts as uncivil, as opposed to those qualified as bullying, were considered. Two raters analyzed the overall observations. Following this procedure, 16 items were formulated as one-word items describing emotional reactions following experiences of incivility. Some examples of these items were, “hurtful,” “insulting,” and “unpleasant.” Four items (“frightening,” “abusive,” “disregarding,” and “threatening”) were removed owing to low content validity as evaluated by two independent experts.

### Study Two

The research model was evaluated using the measures described in the following paragraphs.

#### Moral disengagement (MD).

This eight-item scale, developed by Moore et al. ([2012](#Moore2012)), was used as a higher-order factor. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. An example of these items was: “Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt.”

#### Perceived incivility: Reflective scale.

The twelve items that were identified and evaluated in the first study were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *nearly never* to 5 = *most of the time*. The leading question was: “During the past year, have you been in a situation where the interpersonal relationships with your superiors or coworkers were…”. Examples of possible responses are “disrespectful” and “offensive.” The items were distributed to the research participants with all other scales.

Following this process, the construct validity and internal consistency of the newly developed 13-item reflective scale for measuring incivility were assessed. As can be seen in Table 1, the factor analysis procedure indicated one factor with sufficient item loading.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Following Hair et al.’s ([2017](#Hair2017)) guidelines, the reflective measurement models (i.e., the newly reflective scale and the moral disengagement [MD] scale) should indicate sufficient convergent validity, internal consistency, and discriminant validity.

As can be seen in Table 2, convergent validity, internal consistency, and discriminant validity were achieved, except for relatively low AVE scores of moral disengagement. Nevertheless, as the loading of all MD construct items were above the minimum threshold of 0.40 and contributed to the theory, it is acceptable to include them in the model, in line with Hair et al.’s ([2017](#Hair2017)) guidelines.

In addition, as can be seen in Table 3, convergent and discriminant validity were confirmed as per Hair et al.’s ([2017](#Hair2017)) guidelines; the interrelations between the formative and reflective scales of incivility exceeded the threshold, reflecting sufficient convergent validity, whereas the interrelations between perceived and observed incivility fell below the threshold, reflecting insufficient discriminant validity.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

The three other scales were treated as formative, based on Hair et al.’s ([2017](#Hair2017)) guidelines, and confirmatory tetrad analysis test results.

#### Perceived incivility: Formative scale

This seven-item scale was designed by Cortina et al. ([2001](#Cortina2001)) to measure the perceived frequency of incivility. Scale indicators were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = *almost never* to 5 = *most of the time*. Participants were asked to indicate the following: “During the past year, have you been in a situation where any of your supervisors or coworkers....”. Example responses included “made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you” and “put you down or were condescending to you.” Although the original scale used a 1–4 range, scholars have also used a 1–5 version of the scale (Lim & Lee, [2011](#Lim2011)).

#### The perceived incivility bystander scale

This scale was an adapted version of the formative scale of perceived incivility, as previously used in many studies (e.g., Blau & Andersson, [2005](#Blau2005)). The main change was the leading question. Participants were asked the following: “During the past year, how often have you been in a situation where you have observed an organizational member (any of your superiors or coworkers) doing one of the following?” Examples of the responses were, “Talking to another employee in a condescending manner” and “Paying little attention to another employee’s statements or showing little interest in his/her opinion.”

*The perceived incivility perpetrating scale*

This scale was also an adapted version of the formative scale of perceived incivility. The main change here was also the leading question. Participants were asked to answer the following: *“*During the past year, have you been in a situation where you did one of the following to any of your coworkers?” A sample item was “Put them down or were condescending toward them.”

Formative scale evaluation requires additional measurement model assessment criteria. According to Hair et al. ([2017](#Hair2017)), when assessing formative measurement scales, the convergent validity of formative measures, collinearity, and the relevance of indicators should be assessed. It is not necessary to measure reliability, as indicators may not be interchangeable. The results of this study indicate no collinearity issues. In line with Hair et al. ([2017](#Hair2017)), the indicators of all three measures either made a significant contribution to the constructs or their loading was sufficient (> .50).

### Study Three

To further evaluate the convergent and discriminant validity of the reflective scale in the third sample, the negative affect scale was measured with the observed and formative scales used in the second study. The negative affect scale is part ofthe positive/negative affect scale (PANAS), developed by Watson et al. ([1984](#Watson1984)), which includes 20 items. The original scale consists of 10 words describing negative emotions (e.g.,“sad,” “upset,” “guilty” etc.) and 10 words describing positive emotions (e.g., “interested,” “enthusiastic,” “proud” etc.). In this study, only the 10 words describing negative emotions were used Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 *= not at all* to 6 *= very much*, to what extent they had experienced the 10 emotions in the past six months.

## Procedure

### Study One

Five in-depth interviews were conducted to collect reflective indicators of the newly developed reflective scale. The employees were identified through a snowball sampling method, which started with the aid of an anti-bullying nongovernmental organization (NGO) operating in Israel. The NGO helped identify targets who expressed a willingness to participate in the research. After that point, the NGO was no longer involved in the research.

### Study Two

Questionnaires were administered to employees in various organizations by students who were engaged in a seminar in Croatia and in Israel. Before obtaining the participants’ consent, it was specified that the questionnaire was anonymous and that there would be no consequences for returning an incomplete questionnaire. Finally, participants were assured that no specific identifying information about the organizations would be processed.

### Study Three

Preschool teachers were invited by their union to participate in research aimed to understand their experiences during work. Similar to the second study, participants’ consent was obtained and anonymity was assured.

# Results

## Study Two

Following the item collection of the reflective scale in the first study, the research model in Figure 2 was constructed to assess the hypotheses. Data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al., [2017](#Hair2017)). This method was chosen due to its ability to distinguish between formative and reflective measurement scales and evaluate them based on solid measurement theory.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

As shown in Figure 2, based on the theoretical model paths were specified between: formative and reflective measures of perceived incivility; the reflective measure and moral disengagement; the reflective measure and the bystander scale; the reflective measure and the perpetration scale; the bystander scale and moral disengagement; and both moral disengagement and the bystander scale and the perpetration scale.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the *R2* result for moral disengagement was rather weak (0.108), whereas the *R2* values of the perpetration scale (0.314) and bystander scale (0.409) were moderate. The *R2* score (0.601) of the reflective scale can be considered as high (Hair et al., [2017](#Hair2017)). In addition to measuring the *R2* values, the change in the *R2* value when a specified exogenous construct is omitted from the model should be used to evaluate its impact on the endogenous constructs. This measure is referred to as the *f2* effect size, for which values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35, respectively, represent small, medium, and large effects (Hair et al., [2017](#Hair2017)).

 According to the results, the reflective scale of perceived incivility had a strong effect on the bystander scale (0.710), the formative measure of perceived incivility had a strong effect on the reflective scale (1.508), and the reflective incivility scale also had a weak effect on the moral disengagement scale (0.034). The bystander scale had a below-threshold effect on moral disengagement (0.011) and a weak effect on incivility perpetration (0.071), but exceeded the effect of the reflective scale on perpetration (0.019). A weak effect of moral disengagement on incivility perpetration (0.102) was also noted.

 The blindfolding procedure was used to assess the predictive relevance (*Q2*) of the path model. Positive values suggest that the model has predictive relevance for a specific endogenous construct (Hair et al., 2017). The *Q2* values showed predictive relevance of all endogenous scales: the bystander scale (0.261), the reflective scale (0.379), the perpetration scale (0.132), and the moral disengagement scale (0.038).

Significance analyses of the direct and indirect effects are specified in Table 3.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

As can be seen in Table 3, all paths were significant. The indirect effects presented are the specific effects. As shown in Table 3, the two specific indirect effects through moral disengagement and the specific indirect effect through the bystander scale were all significant.

Because the reflective scale had a significant indirect effect, and because the reflective measure simultaneously had a direct impact on the perpetration of incivility, it can be noted that both moral disengagement and the bystander scales partially mediated the relationship between the reflective incivility scale and the perpetration scale according to the guidelines produced by Hair et al. ([2017](#Hair2017)). In addition, the reflective scale’s indirect effect through moral disengagement was stronger than the bystander scale’s indirect effect through moral disengagement. Nevertheless, the direct relationship of the reflective scale was weaker than the direct relationship between the bystander scale and the perpetration scale.

Additionally, the second study showed evidence to support the validity of the newly developed reflective scale. A convergent validity test was conducted only between the formative and new reflective scale of perceived incivility. In order to assume that convergent validity was obtained, the strength of the path coefficient between the reflective measurement scale and the formative measurement scale must exceed the threshold of 0.70. In the current model, as can be seen in Figure 2, the path coefficient was equal to 0.778, thus proving the convergent validity of both scales (formative and reflective) to measure perceived incivility.

## Study Three

The third study was designed to validate the reflective scale further. As both the reflective scale and the formative scale are supposed to assess experienced incivility, a path was created between the formative and reflective scale. The reflective scale consists of emotional reactions to poor quality interpersonal relations. These are assumed to be different from the negative affectivity trait that demonstrates negative emotional responses beyond the emotional experience resulting from the interpersonal relations at work. For this reason, the negative affectivity scale was used to account for discriminant validity. The experience of observing an act of incivility differs from experienced incivility, so the observed incivility scale was also used to account for discriminant validity. Thus, paths were created between the reflective scale and both the negative affect scale and the observed incivility scale. As can be seen in Figure 3, the path between the reflective and formative scale was above the threshold of 0.7, showing that convergent validity was achieved in the third study too. The paths between the reflective scale and both the Negative Affect scale and observed incivility scale demonstrated that the reflective scale can be discriminated from the negative affect trait and from observing an act of incivility.

# Discussion

Since Andersson and Pearson ([1999](#Andersson1999)) introduced the concept of workplace incivility, it has received significant interest from researchers and practitioners. This is due in large part to the significant and cost-associated consequences of incivility, at both the individual and organizational levels. However, despite substantial attention having been paid to this subject in the literature (see Schilpzand et al., [2016](#Schilpzand2016)), there is a need to extend research to capture drivers, processes, and outcomes of incivility in greater depth. This is especially true given the potential spiral effect of incivility (Gallus et al., [2014](#Gallus2014)).

Furthermore, several researchers have called for reconsideration of the measurement instruments used to assess experienced incivility. For this reason, this study was designed to (1) assess drivers of incivility, to analyze potential differences between bystander and target spirals as informed by COR theory; and (2) to build and validate a new reflective measurement scale that operationally corresponds with COR as a measure of emotional resources. In line with this notion, experienced and witnessed incivility were measured as potential contextual drivers of instigated incivility. In parallel, moral disengagement as a personal propensity driver of instigated incivility was tested in the same model as a mediator. Although the role of moral disengagement as a precursor to different forms of mistreatment has been recognized (Fida et al., [2015](#Fida2015)), to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to have included as a potential driver of instigated incivility and as a mediator informing potential differences between targets and bystanders in terms of the spiralization of incivility.

Our results indicate that moral disengagement, experiencing incivility, and observing incivility are interrelated with perpetration of incivility. These results are consistent with previous research on experienced or witnessed incivility (see Gallus et al., [2014](#Gallus2014); Manegold, [2014](#Manegold2014); Torkelson et al., [2016](#Torkelson2016)), and other research on interpersonal deviance and moral disengagement (e.g., Barsky, [2011](#Barsky2011); Christian & Ellis, [2014](#Christian2014); Detert et al., [2008](#Detert2008); Lee et al., [2016](#Lee2016); Valle et al., [2018](#Valle2018)). In addition, moral disengagement mediates the relationship between experienced and perpetrated incivility and between witnessing incivility and perpetration.

However, analysis of the direct and indirect specific effects indicated that while the direct effect between witnessing as opposed to experiencing incivility as a target is stronger for bystanders, the indirect effect through moral disengagement is stronger for targets.

To some extent, these findings confirm the contagious nature of incivility and emphasize its social roots (Torkelson et al., [2016](#Torkelson2016)), specifically the interrelations between experiencing, witnessing, and perpetrating incivility. Relying on COR, these differences can be rationalized and add to the understanding of incivility spirals.

Whereas targets have one major notable role – they are the targets of the uncivil experience – bystanders have several potential roles beyond being victims by proxy (Ng et al., [2020](#Ng2020)). Relying on previous findings, theory has suggested that bystanders can take an active part in perpetration (Niven et al., [2020](#Niven2020)), motivated by retaliation (Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005); Shoss et al., [2016](#Shoss2016)), which can be directed not only at the perpetrator but also at third parties (Mitchell & Ambrose, [2007](#Mitchell2007)). In this regard, targets are also prone to retaliate (reference removed for peer review).

In terms of COR, both bystanders and targets are exposed to a behavior (incivility) that threatens their personal and social resources (Lev-Wiesel et al., [2013](#LevWiesel2013)). Consequently, they retaliate by directing uncivil behavior toward the perpetrator or others in the organization (reference removed for peer review). Andersson and Pearson ([1999](#Andersson1999)) identified this retaliation process as a secondary spiral, in which bystanders and targets may direct their anger toward others. These complementary routes can explain the first two predictions of the current study and support the secondary spiral theory of incivility.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that moral disengagement will mediate the relationship between witnessing incivility as a bystander and experiencing it as a target. If targets and bystanders serve as victims and victims by proxy, respectively, they acknowledge the immorality of incivility that threatens their beliefs in a just world (Lev-Weisel et al., [2013](#LevWiesel2013)). In order to use the same mechanism for resource gain (i.e., perpetration) they need to disengage from their moral standards, as engaging in perpetration means they effectively allow incivility to continue (Ng et al., [2020](#Ng2020)). At the same time, other bystanders and targets learn that perpetration is a mechanism for resource gain or resource restoration. These individuals will not need to disengage as they believe their behavior to be legitimate and driven by a sense of retaliation to gain resources (Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005); Shoss et al., [2016](#Shoss2016)). This explains the support found for Hypotheses 3 and 4.

The most interesting findings show that, compared with bystanders, targets disengage more. In addition, the direct link between experiencing or witnessing incivility and perpetration is stronger for bystanders. In terms of COR, bystanders lose fewer personal and social resources or none at all (Ng et al., [2020](#Ng2020)). Thus, they are more inclined to perceive incivility as immoral as it threatens their view of the world as just (Lev-Weisel et al., [2013](#LevWiesel2013)). Following this logic, compared with targets, bystanders are more likely to frame perpetration as an instrumental mechanism for resource gain with no need to disengage from their moral values.

Finally, it was found as part of the scale validation process (i.e., test of discriminant validity) that being a target of incivility can predict witnessing it. This result was not predicted. This can be explained through COR and the theory of psychological contracts. As COR is an ongoing process, it can also account for future events unrelated to the current incident. Recently, Salin and Notelaers ([2020](#Salin2020)) showed that being a bystander to bullying can be seen as a violation of a psychological contract. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the process underlying psychological contract violation will explain a bystander’s future reactions. In her illuminating model, Rousseau (1995) suggested that once the contract has been violated, hypervigilance is triggered in the individual who experienced the violation. This triggers future bystanding according to the individual’s level of sensitivity to future violence, and, thus, more incidents are expected to be observed.

Besides providing evidence on drivers of perpetrated incivility, the additional goal of this study was to develop and validate a reflective measure for assessing incivility by mapping reflective indicators of perceived incivility. This scale focuses on the core characteristics of incivility rather than on the frequency of the experience. Findings of this empirical research reveal that the reflective measure – the RWIS – demonstrated internal consistency, and convergent and discriminant validity over two separated samples. The new scale is based on emotional resources that are lost or gained in the process of experiencing incivility as a target. As previously noted, individuals engage in this spiral because they expect emotional benefits (Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005); Shoss et al., [2016](#Shoss2016)) motivated by resource loss. Measuring incivility in line with COR and the foundations of incivility theory that focus on target’s experience, and not on the frequency of the act, helps validate the incivility measurement. In addition, by providing a new reflective scale for the measurement of incivility, a new line of research can emerge and stimulate further attention to measurement models, assessment alternatives, and the accuracy of measurement protocols.

The contributions of the current study and its results should also be seen in the light of certain limitations related to the sample data and the data collection process. In the current study, a convenience sample was used. Although the method has been supported in previous studies (e.g., Gallus et al., [2014](#Gallus2014); Penney & Spector, [2005](#Penney2005)), it is possible that a self-serving bias occurred, with students delivering the survey to their network of friends, family, and others who are similar to them. Still, our sample was quite diverse, with employees of different profiles, and, as Gallus et al. ([2014](#Gallus2014)) highlighted, this reduces the potential response bias. Our study was also cross-sectional and was conducted only at one time point. Future research should use longitudinal methods to trace the process of incivility and study how the target–perpetrator or bystander–perpetrator relationships develop. In addition, some studies (e.g., Torkelson et al., [2016](#Torkelson2016)) have indicated a unique role of the source of incivility (coworker or supervisor). It would be interesting for future studies to carefully analyze perpetrator and target characteristics in terms of organizational position, power, tenure, and so on.

Despite the abovementioned limitations, this paper provides some additional insights on incivility spiral theory. Moreover, it provides a new reflective scale for measuring incivility, offering a novel approach for incivility assessment. Overall, the current study presents a social perspective on incivility in line with the approach taken by Andersson and Pearson ([1999](#Andersson1999)). Thus, it implies that organizations must foster civility within the organizational culture and promote working environments with no tolerance for rude, discourteous, or disrespectful behavior.

# Declarations

The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

The corresponding author confirms that the study was approved by the institute’s ethics committee (the name is added to the title page for blind review purposes).

The corresponding author confirms that datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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**Appendix 1**

*The completely newly developed RWIS*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| During the *past year*, have you been in a situation where the interpersonal relationships with your superiors or coworkers were: | **Almost never** | **Rarely ever** | **Sometimes** | **Often**  | **Most of the time** |
| Offensive | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Insulting | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Rude | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Humiliating | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Unpleasant | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Frustrating | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Annoying | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Hurtful | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Sad | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Stressful | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Shaming | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Disrespectful | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |