**Why do leaders behave uncivilly? A new perspective on workplace mistreatment and power**

**Abstract**

This article’s overreaching goal is to frame incivility, a manifestation of workplace mistreatment, as a leadership behavior. A review of the concept of mistreatment through incivility, and an analysis of data taken in Israel from different populations across time, establish the notion that incivility may be a conscious leadership behavior, and that it is mainly instigated by managers.

The novelty of the paper lies its perspective, since it positions incivility as a leadership behavior and does not set out to blame leaders. Rather, it aims to focus intervention efforts so as to obtain better results, since current mistreatment and incivility interventions are not productive. As this is a conceptual paper, future research should empirically investigate the perspective used in order to validate it.

**Introduction**

Leadership and leader behavior represent two of the most frequently researched issues in management literature. Numerous studies have explored specific traits, behaviors, and leadership styles that enable successful leadership and positive follower outcomes (Schmidt, 2008; Tepper, 2007). The concept of the “full range of leadership” (FRL) introduced by Bass (1997) and Avolio (Antonakis *et al.,* 2003) during the 1990s has strongly influenced leadership theory and practice; the approach has become one of the most widely accepted models of leadership that can optimize organizational effectiveness (Guhr *et al.,* 2019; Smith *et al.,* 2004).

Despite its impact on theory and practice, however, the FRL model has several shortcomings (Einarsen *et al.,* 2007; Jensen *et al.,* 2019; Krasikova *et al.,* 2013). One such shortcoming is that it excludes several aspects of leadership behavior, such as the various leadership behavior characterized as “destructive” (e.g., abusive supervision and petty tyranny). Most existing literature has focused on constructive leader behavior and viewed leadership as being positive by definition (Padilla *et al*., 2007; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). However, in recent decades researchers have acknowledged that there are also negative sides to leader behavior; these have been termed the destructive or dark sides of leadership (Higgs, 2009; Thoroughgood *et al.,* 2018). Such destructive aspects are expressed in various ways that fall within the broader concept of workplace mistreatment.

Workplace mistreatment is a broad term consisting of a wide range of interpersonal harms that employees might experience, potentially from different perpetrators while at work, but most often by leaders (Hodgins *et al*., 2014) compared to other sources (i.e., peers, subordinates, or customers). As noted by Hodgins *et al.* (2014, p. 54):

[Workplace mistreatment] is an extended or overarching term, capturing a range of more specific abuses and insults that workers may encounter, often routinely, in their workplace. It can include indiscriminate discourteous and disrespectful treatment, more targeted, personalized abuse, or more generalized unreasonable treatment where management practices and procedures are offensive, demeaning or used in a way that undermines confidence.

A central characteristic of mistreatment is that it is subjective and depends on the target’s observation and interpretation of the behavior. However, although subjectivity is embedded in the identification of mistreatment, its perception and interpretation by targets is a core mechanism by which it is identified (Itzkovich, 2015). Recent proposals for identifying mistreatment, such as that by Quigley *et al*. (2020), who suggested using video surveillance for the identification of mistreatment, still face problems with subjectivity as they ultimately depend on human interpretation. At its core, mistreatment is a personal experience and the inappropriateness of the behavior in question depends on the target interpreting the behavior as such.

The negative impact of mistreatment at work is unquestionable (Hodgins *et al*., 2014; Itzkovich & Heilbrunn, 2016; Schilpzand *et al*., 2016). Indeed, workplace mistreatment is associated with psychological distress, burnout, anxiety, depression, and general reduced wellbeing, all of which have been referred to by Schilpzand *et al.* (2016) as *affective outcomes*. The authors observed two additional categories of effect. *Attitudinal outcomes* occur when targets of mistreatment become less motivated and less committed than they were prior to the mistreatment, and their satisfaction with coworkers and managers is decreased. These attitudinal outcomes trigger the third category, which consists of *behavioral outcomes*. For example, Itzkovich and Heilbrunn (2016) noted that, in retaliation to mistreatment, employees may damage the organization’s property or production processes.

Due to the wide-ranging impacts of workplace mistreatment, the academic field that has been dedicated to its study and mapping has provided myriad definitions and research tools by which to understand it. These definitions can be collapsed into two main categories. The first category is directly related to the status of the aggressor, and focuses on power gaps between the aggressor and their target. Such definitions trace back offensive behaviors to a specific class of aggressor: one who ranks higher than their target in the organizational hierarchy. Such interpersonal mistreatment behaviors have been defined in terms of interactional justice, petty tyranny, abusive supervision, toxic leadership, and destructive leadership, among others. As aggressive behaviors often “flow down” the organizational hierarchy (Itzkovich, 2015), these definitions encompass a large portion of offensive interpersonal behaviors.

In parallel, several other theoretical concepts have been put forward to account for a variety of offensive interpersonal behaviors that do not necessarily involve a power gap between perpetrators and targets. These behaviors comprise the second main category of definitions, all of which are focused on the boundaries or content of adverse interpersonal behaviors (Itzkovich, 2015; Itzkovich *et al*., 2020). These definitions include *harassment* (a term coined by Einarsen and Raknes [1997]), *emotional abuse* (Keashly, 2001), and *workplace incivility* (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Schilpzand *et al*., 2016).

Thus, a question arises as to whether the various constructs mentioned above are distinctive, or can be integrated. The main feature that distinguishes the two types of definition mentioned above is that the first type focuses on the source of the perpetration, while the second focuses on the boundaries of the behavior (i.e., on defining the borderline between the abusive behavior covered by the concept and other behaviors outside it).

Despite the abovementioned distinction, the boundaries among the different terms are often blurred. This can be understood by examining the essence of incivility, a subcategory of mistreatment.

**Incivility as a special form of workplace mistreatment**

Incivility can be defined as rude, inconsiderate behavior that damages the target’s willingness to utilize their positive potential within the organizational framework (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Itzkovich *et al*., 2020; Schilpzand *et al*., 2016). It is distinctive from other kinds of mistreatment due to two main theoretical features. First, the intention underlying an uncivil act is defined as ambiguous, while specific other behaviors, such as bullying, are defined as intentional (Itzkovich, 2010; Itzkovich *et al*., 2020). Secondly, incivility is defined as low intensity compared to other acts of mistreatment, such as bullying (Itzkovich, 2015).

Empirically, there are reasons to question these distinctive characteristics. First, existing measures of incivility fail to account for intention, since the perpetrator’s intentions are difficult to operationalize (Itzkovich *et al*., 2020). Second, the low-intensity part of the definition is not operationalized, as the measures of incivility also account for high-intensity behavioral features, such as intimidation and humiliation, which are also considered indicators of more intense misbehaviors, such as bullying (Einarsen *et al*., 2009).

Although incivility can be collapsed to the second type of definition, at least empirically, such differentiation is meaningless: the most frequently used measurements of incivility are indifferent to the source of the perpetration (e.g., supervisor vs. peer). For example, a seven-item scale commonly used to measure incivility, and its upgraded version of 12 items, asks participants to indicate the frequency with which they encounter uncivil behavior from supervisors or coworkers (Cortina *et al*., 2001; Cortina *et al*., 2013), overlooking the status of the perpetrator.

Moreover, although there is theoretical legitimacy for some sources of perpetration, this is hardly the case. To illustrate this, the authors collected a series of seven samples in Israel across populations and in subsequent periods in order to examine the source of the perpetration.

Since extant tools have overlooked the source of the perpetration, the authors of the present study added a question to account for it. Following incivility indicators, respondents were asked to identify the primary source of the behavior associated with their mistreatment experience. The options included the following: respondents’ direct manager/supervisor; colleague in a similar position to the respondent (peer); coworker on a level lower than the respondent in the corporate hierarchy; coworker on a level higher than the respondent in the corporate hierarchy but not direct supervisor, customer, or visitor (Itzkovich, 2010).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 clearly shows that the primary perpetrators of incivility are in positions of power compared to their targets. Thus, incivility can be considered a possible part of leadership behavior, just like other forms of mistreatment. In the case of incivility, which is incorporated in the second type of definition, the distribution of perpetration could be random. However, even when it is not controlled, the findings from the seven different samples show that power underlies incivility. This means that there is a clear asymmetry between the source of the incivility and the target.

These findings can be explained through a threefold model suggested by Tepper *et al*. (2017), who posited that leaders may assert their power negatively due to three mechanisms: social learning, identity threats, and self-regulation impairment. Social learning refers to the socialization process of leaders who see a role model assert power over their subordinates, and thus learn to do so themselves. The authors also noted that a negative assertion of power can arise as a leader’s reaction to identity threat, which can be caused by a subordinate being seen to jeopardize the leader’s goal attainment due to the subordinate’s low performance. Lastly, the authors identified that adverse power assertion can be based on leaders’ personality traits and, specifically, leaders’ self-regulation impairment.

These findings correspond with Aquino and Thau’s (2009) call to integrate all existing definitions of offensive interpersonal behaviors under a single term, “victimization,” which focuses on targets’ perceptions and not the perpetrator’s characteristics or any specific quality of behavioral expressions.

Despite its well-grounded rationale, a unified conceptualization focused solely on the target’s perception cannot capture the essence of any form of mistreatment (i.e., incivility, bullying, etc.) comprehensively. First, it does not account for the prevalence of power gaps between the two parties to the adverse interaction (Itzkovich *et al*., 2018), which is prominent in a large portion of these behaviors. Second, it does not account for differences in the impact these power gaps can generate compared to mistreatment between equals, or to bottom-up mistreatment (Itzkovich, 2014). More importantly, although a unified concept could mitigate and overcome theoretical overlaps, the issue at hand is much broader than the boundaries of the abovementioned discussion. From this broader perspective, the question pertains not only to the unity of terminology but to its centricity and framework. Discussions on the similarities and differences among constructs might place some terms in preferential positions and lead to their investigation falling under a framework of deviant behavior (Robinson & Bennet, 1995)—a model used to map all interpersonal deviancies, including corporate deviancies. On the other hand, accounting for the centricity of power gaps embedded in such interactions can shift the discussion to a more centralized theme, namely leadership behaviors. Such a conceptual change would strengthen the legitimacy of the discussion, and in turn enhance willingness among firms to deal with and mitigate these behaviors.

Overall, little research has discussed workplace mistreatment and incivility specifically within the framework of leadership (Hoel *et al*., 2011; Lee & Jensen, 2014). Most extant efforts have instead focused on leadership in general, or specific leadership models that consider the full range of leadership and the relationship between leadership facets and types of mistreatment (Lee & Jensen, 2014). To address this gap, Einarsen *et al*. (2007) and Itzkovich *et al*. (2020) suggested theoretical models that account for leader misbehaviors.

**Why now more than ever before? When pressure and opportunity meet?**

Incivility is costly to both individuals and organizations, and efforts to understand it are more needed than ever. After years of stability and security that have characterized the foundations of employment, employees and employers are facing new work arrangements in which secure employment is less attainable. Employees encounter poor-quality and relatively insecure jobs across many sectors (Fiorito *et al*., 2019). Many work arrangements have also become more precarious during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented employees with increased financial pressure, isolation from their social environment, fear of illness, and fear of potential unemployment (Shaw *et al*., 2020).

Studies have indicated that these and other stressors, which reflect an imbalance between job demands and available resources with which to deal with these demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), constitute emotional and behavioral responses that might be counterproductive (Roberts *et al*. 2011). Indeed, Oyeleye *et al*. (2013) found that stress is related to job conflict. In the same vein, Roberts *et al*. (2011) showed that stress often leads to the perpetration of incivility.

In this vein, as managers control the distribution of incentives and rewards that allow them to influence followers (Michel *et al.,* 2011), it is likely that in stressful times, their more powerful position can lead to their mistreatment of followers for two reasons. First, followers are unlikely to retaliate, as retaliation will increase their risk of losing more resources (Itzkovich, 2014). Second, leaders want to alleviate the negative emotions that can arise from stressors during troublesome times. Mistreating subordinates is one such possible alleviating mechanism (Roberts *et al*., 2011). These explanations are complementary to those by Tepper *et al*. (2017) mentioned above.

Considering the many consequences of incivility, there is a need to understand it and, to the greatest extent possible, mitigate it. However, it seems that according to the reported interventions of mistreatment, this notion becomes much more critical. Thus far, little research has measured the effect of active interventions into different forms of mistreatment (Hodgins *et al*., 2014; Howard & Embree, 2020). Specifically, Hodgins *et al*. (2014) showed via a systematic review that only 14 intervention processes have been identified, and that only two studies have considered the organizational level, although this level has been noted as crucial for intervention processes to be successful (Hodgins *et al*., 2014; Olsen *et al*., 2020; Simpson *et al*., 2020). In a seminal review of mistreatment interventions, Hodgins *et al*. (2014) showed that it is not only the organizational level that has been overlooked with regard to mitigating mistreatment; power holders—that is, leaders—are also absent from most intervention plans. As incivility, a central manifestation of mistreatment, is mainly perpetrated through leaders, as shown above, mitigation efforts should address power holders in particular; yet this has not been the case in any of the interventions reported. Thus, it is not surprising that researchers have reported the ineffectiveness of most interventions. To increase effectiveness, interventions must focus on leaders’ behavior. To this end, incivility must be seen from the perspective of leadership rather than as a deviant, peripheral phenomenon. Especially in times of increasing challenges and multiple stressors, such a change in perception is not only desirable but imperative.

The abovementioned conceptualization goes beyond its theoretical contribution as it demonstrates leadership behaviors that organizations must avoid or deal with, on an ongoing basis, in practice. These leadership behaviors are demonstrated, among other manifestations, through active and passive leader behaviors such as ignoring, mocking, degrading, or blaming employees. In turn, the prevalence of perpetration by those positioned in leadership roles promotes different types of deviant and withdrawal behaviors by employees who wish to retaliate (Itzkovich & Heilbrunn, 2016; Itzkovich *et al*. 2020). Thus, it is crucial to develop processes that (1) identify such leadership behaviors, (2) recognize the prevalence of adverse leadership behaviors, and (3) intervene when these leadership behaviors are identified as having been enacted.

Therefore, from a practical point of view, the following actions are suggested:

1. Identifying: In line with viewing context as a significant driver of adverse organizational climate (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2018), top management should identify contextual indicators such as level of pressure, power distribution in organizational units, and other contextual factors that can increase the probability of leaders’ uncivil behaviors. Once these structured conditions are identified, human resource (HR) practices should be utilized in order to defuse these contextual drivers. For instance, if the level of pressure in a particular unit is higher than in other units, HR professionals can work to balance this with the help of the unit’s management. This notion follows the logic of Zhang and Bednall (2016), who noted that supervisors who regularly experience organizational stress abuse their subordinates as a coping strategy to alleviate the negative affect and stress they experience from upper levels. These findings are also supported by Lam (2016), who noted that stress-reduction intervention programs reduce supervisors’ emotional exhaustion and their subsequent abusive supervision.
2. Prevention: Generally, promoting positive interactions and opportunities to interact among workers and managers can decrease conflicts (Foulk *et al.,* 2016; Visintin *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, the organization can proactively raise awareness among staff in order to convey the message that the organization will not tolerate such behaviors. In parallel, organizations can encourage employees to stand up for themselves or report on others when they observe mistreatment. As a complementary preventive step, organizations can strive to develop managers’ and employees’ socio-emotional competencies. Specifically, organizations, as part of their organizational development plans, can enhance managers’ empathy toward others. Among other competencies, increasing empathetic concerns toward subordinates has been found to reduce abusive behaviors based on the instrumental logic of managers, notably managers who assume that abusive conduct will increase productivity (Watkins *et al.,* 2017).
3. Intervention: The organization should act against perpetrators as part of a comprehensive organizational zero-tolerance policy for mistreatment. The lack of such a policy can lead employees to assume that the organization condones adverse acts; thus, retaliatory behavior by employees will be directed at the organization (Itzkovich & Heilbrunn, 2016). Although incivility is subjective, the organization can, through the establishment of a code of ethics and a code of conduct, reassure employees that abusive behaviors are not tolerated. Another option could be to use conflict-management techniques; for example, creating a framework that facilitates talking about experiences of incivility. In this way, perpetrators can be invited to express their regret and apologize, and all involved persons can discuss solutions for preventing future incidents of incivility, or at least to make them less likely.

Incivility as a manifestation of mistreatment is costly to both individuals and organizations, and viewing incivility in the context of a leadership framework can help to reduce it. Focusing on identification, prevention, and mitigation as means for reducing incivility and other forms of mistreatment will allow organizations and individuals to flourish. This is not an easy task, but if efforts are directed to leaders as the main perpetrators, the success of such mitigation efforts will increase.

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