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# Incivility as a Veiled Display of Workplace Discrimination: The Intersection of Workplace Incivility and Gender-Based Discrimination

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Incivility as a Veiled Display of Workplace Discrimination:  
The Intersection of Workplace Incivility and Gender-Based Discrimination

by

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### Abstract

Workplace incivility is defined as behavior that is rude, condescending, and/or ostracizing, with unclear intent to harm. Incivility violates workplace norms or expectations of respect but can otherwise appear mundane. Incivility is low impact, but consistent mistreatment can result in a myriad of negative impacts on employees and organizations. Some organizations dismiss incivility and other forms of subtle mistreatment as inconsequential despite scientific evidence showing significant costs. A combination of anti-discrimination laws and social norms have drastically changed the dynamics of workplace discrimination over the last few decades. That is, blatant discrimination is no longer socially or legally acceptable, but biased attitudes against women and minorities have evolved to exist in more covert forms. Using a gender lens, I examine the connection and relationship between workplace incivility and discrimination. Building upon the theory of selective incivility, the central objective of this paper is to bridge the literature between forms of subtle workplace mistreatment, such as workplace incivility and workplace gender-based discrimination. The core argument is that workplace incivility can be a manifestation of gender-based biases and may act as a vehicle for discrimination. Focusing on gender subgroups (i.e., women and non-binary), I examine the connection between workplace incivility and discrimination.

### Introduction

Incivility is a rampant issue that many employees have experienced and will experience. Organizations should be aware of the negative outcomes of incivility and be prepared to intervene if needed. Caza and Cortina (2007) conducted a survey of over 1,000 university students and found that over 75% reported experiencing uncivil behavior in the prior year. Porath and Pearson (2013) polled thousands of workers between 1999 and 2013, and the results were shocking. Nearly all employees (98%) reported experiencing uncivil behavior at some point during their careers. Not only is this a prevalent issue, but it is a growing one. In 1998, a quarter of employees who were polled reported being treated rudely at least once a week. By 2005, the number had risen to almost half of poll respondents. The rates of experiencing incivility are very high, with 96% experiencing it (across the years), and essentially all employees (99%) witness it at some point (Porath & Pearson, 2013). We can think about incivility simply as the absence of civility, which Porath and Pearson (2010) described as “the lubricant that fosters good team work” (p. 66). The effect of incivility on teamwork can be detrimental. Successful teams rely on a climate of civility to foster a collaborative environment where members feel comfortable sharing. Nearly a fifth of survey respondents said that they refused to work with people who had been uncivil to them, even if they were on the same team (Porath & Pearson, 2010).

Workplace Incivility is a form of mistreatment that was first defined by Andersson and Pearson (1999) as low-intensity behavior that is deviant and ambiguous in its intent to harm. Incivility is subtle in comparison to other forms of mistreatment. Early research on counterproductive workplace behavior focused on clear and distinct acts directed toward organizations and did not necessarily consider the impact and significance of interpersonal mistreatment (Tepper & Henle, 2011). Despite subtle acts accounting for the vast majority of acts of mistreatment, subtle mistreatment has historically been studied infrequently (Andersson

& Pearson 1999). Overt forms of workplace mistreatment have been researched extensively, providing evidence of the harmful impact on both victims' well-being and organizational performance (e.g., Aquino & Thau, 2009; Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hershcovis et al., 2007), and in recent years we have seen an increase in research on the subtler forms of workplace aggression, such as incivility (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Caza & Cortina, 2007; Hershcovis, 2011).

Little research has been done to explore the gendered nature of incivility (Cortina et al., 2002; Cortina, 2008), but we do see evidence that men are more likely to be perpetrators of incivility (Pearson et al., 2000), and women are most frequently the targets (Cortina et al., 2001). Men may be more likely to engage in incivility based on situational and contextual factors related to the work environment or the experienced incivility (Gallus et al., 2014). Research has shown men are more likely to act uncivilly based on target characteristics (e.g., gender, appearance), but women are as likely to act uncivilly to any organizational member, regardless of their relative power (Pearson et al., 2000). That is, when men act uncivilly, it is more likely to be influenced by the target's characteristics than when women act uncivilly. To that end, men are more likely to act with rudeness toward somebody with lower organizational power, but the same tendency cannot be said for women (Gallus et al., 2014).

The relationship between workplace incivility and gender have recently been explored by some researchers (e.g., Cortina, 2008; Di Marco et al., 2018). The theory of selective incivility suggests that not all cases of incivility are general or random acts of rudeness, but rather, some are concealed examples of discrimination. This review focuses on gender-based discrimination enacted through incivility; although, I must note that selective incivility theory can also be contextualized within racial discrimination (Cortina, 2008). My work builds upon selective incivility theory to understand the relationship between workplace incivility and gender. I

provide practical implications for organizations to intervene and minimize incivility. The contributions of this work are to assess workplace incivility with a gender lens and explore the construct as a tool for discrimination. Relatively few researchers (e.g., Cortina, 2008; Cortina et al., 2002) have integrated theories of discrimination with the study of workplace incivility. By connecting social psychology theories of modern discrimination with the construct of workplace incivility, this review incorporates social categories of gender in the assessment of incivility.

The general structure of this review begins with an overview of my literature search methodology, including a categorized table of sources used by journal of publication. After explaining workplace incivility and its associated costs, I offer background information on gender-based discrimination in the workplace and its relevance to incivility. Next, I provide a review of selective incivility theory and incivility as gender-based discrimination, as well as possible interventions for organizations and directions for future research.

### **Literature Review Methodology**

For this review, I used research from a variety of disciplines such as *organizational sciences, psychology, and sociology*. I searched for academic peer-reviewed literature using the following key words as well as variations: *workplace incivility, cost of incivility, interpersonal mistreatment, workplace gender discrimination, sexism, modern sexism, modern discrimination, incivility as discrimination, and women in the workplace*.

I searched multiple databases, including Portland State University's online library database, JSTOR, Sage Premier, EBSCOhost and Google Scholar. The articles I chose to review come from many different journals associated with different disciplines, including *Sex Roles, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Organizational Behavior, American Journal of Sociology, Journal of Interpersonal Violence, and Academy of Management Review*. Table 1 categorizes the literature used in this review based on the journal of publication. The journals

that are most cited in this review include *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *Sex Roles*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, and *Organizational Dynamics*. Table 1 is a breakdown of each source used for this review, and Table 2 shows a count of articles reviewed from each publishing journal.

Table 1. Specific Sources of Literature Reviewed

Author(s)	Source Name	Peer-Reviewed
Andersson & Pearson (1999)	The Academy of Management Review	Yes
Aquino & Thau (2009)	The Annual Review of Psychology	Yes
Bar-David (2018)	Israel Journal of Health Policy Research	Yes
Benokraitis, N. V., & Feagin, J. R. (1995)	Book: Subtle Sexism: Current Practice and Prospects for Change	No
Bowling & Beehr, 2006	Journal of Applied Psychology	Yes
Brett & Stroh (1997)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Yes
Brief & Bradley (2008)	Book: Diversity at Work	No
Caza & Cortina (2007)	Basic & Applied Social Psychology	Yes
Cleveland, Barnes-Farrell (2005)	Book: Gender Discrimination in Organizations	No
Cleveland, et al. (2000)	Book: Women and Men in Organizations	No
Cortina (2008)	The Academy of Management Review	Yes
Cortina et al. (2002)	Law & Social Inquiry	Yes
Cortina et al. (2013)	Journal of Management	Yes
Cortina et al. (2017)	Occupational Health and Psychology	Yes
Di Marco et al. (2018)	Journal of Interpersonal Violence	Yes
Dipboye & Colella (2005)	Book: Discrimination at Work	No
Gallus et al. (2014)	Occupational Health and Psychology	Yes
Güngör et al. (2009)	Sex Roles	Yes
Haig (2003)	Archives of Sexual Behavior	Yes
Heilman (2012)	Research in Organizational Behavior	Yes
Herscovis (2011)	Journal of Organizational Behavior	Yes



Hodgins et al. (2014)	International Journal of Workplace Health Management	Yes
Kabat (2012)	Thesis, PHD (University of Michigan)	Yes
Kanter (1977)	American Journal of Sociology	Yes
Kirk et al. (2011)	Journal of Applied Social Psychology	Yes
Leiter et al. (2011)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Yes
Leiter et al. (2012)	Journal of Occupational Health Psychology	Yes
Lim & Cortina (2008)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Yes
Miner & Eischeid (2012)	Sex Roles	Yes
Miner-Rubino & Cortina (2004)	Journal of Occupational Health Psychology	Yes
Miner-Rubino & Cortina (2004)	Journal of Applied Psychology	Yes
Mizock et al. (2017)	International Journal of Transgenderism	Yes
Moore (2010)	Thesis, PHD (University of Cincinnati)	Yes
Pearson et al. (2000)	Organizational Dynamics	Yes
Pearson et al. (2001)	Human Relations	Yes
Porath & Pearson (2010)	Organizational Dynamics	Yes
Prince (2005)	International Journal of Transgenderism	Yes
Reciniello (1999)	American Behavioral Scientist	Yes
Schilpzand et al. (2016)	Journal of Organizational Behavior	Yes
Schmidt et al. (2012)	Human Resource Development Review	Yes
Schneider (1985)	Population Research and Policy Review	Yes
Sugano et al. (2006)	Aids and Behavior	Yes
Swim et al. (2004)	Sex Roles	Yes
Tepper & Henle. (2011)	Journal of Organizational Behavior	Yes

Udry (1994)	Demography	Yes
Wade & Brewer (2006)	Sex Roles	Yes
Warner et al. (2016)	Nursing Management	Yes
Yang (2016)	Sustainability	Yes
Yang et al. (2014)	Journal of Occupational Health Psychology	Yes
von Hippel et al. (2014)	Psychology of Women Quarterly	Yes

*Table 2. Counts of Literature Reviewed by Source Type*

Source Type	Count
<b><i>Peer-Reviewed Journals</i></b>	
Journal of Applied Psychology	4
Sex Roles	4
Journal of Organizational Behavior	3
Organizational Dynamics	2
The Academy of Management Review	2
American Behavioral Scientist	1
American Journal of Sociology	1
Basic & Applied Social Psychology	1
Carolina Population Center	1
Human Relations	1
International Journal of Transgenderism	1
Journal of Interpersonal Violence	1
Journal of Management	1
Law & Social Inquiry	1
Population Research and Policy Review	1
Research in Organizational Behavior	1
Sustainability	1
Psychology of Women Quarterly	1
Nursing Management	1
The Annual Review of Psychology	1
<b><i>Books / Book Chapters</i></b>	4

I begin by providing a review of incivility and its significance in the workplace. I review the evidence regarding the consequences of incivility for both individual organizational members and the organization as a whole. I then offer practical applications by reviewing interventions that organizations can take to reduce incivility. Following, I review the construct of workplace gender-based discrimination and provide a historical perspective and an explanation of gender

stereotypes and the idea of gendered work. Building up to Cortina's (2002) theory of selective incivility, I offer a review of workplace incivility as a manifestation of modern gender-based discrimination.

### **Workplace Incivility**

*Workplace incivility* includes low intensity acts, such as rude or discourteous verbal or non-verbal behaviors, that violate the norms of respectful behaviors established in a particular environment and that characteristically have ambiguous intent to harm (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Hershcovis, 2011). Some examples of behaviors that may be seen as uncivil include being sarcastic or rude, ignoring or excluding somebody, making jokes at a colleagues' expense, ignoring emails or phone messages, or speaking to subordinates in condescending tones (Di Marco et al, 2018; Porath & Pearson, 2010). This definition of workplace incivility reflects the interpretations that people make about how actions make them feel, regardless of the perpetrator's intent to harm – or as Porath and Pearson (2010) described: “[Workplace incivility] is not an objective phenomenon [...] While the offender or even third parties may claim the behavior was unintentional or harmless, it is defined in the eyes of the beholder” (p. 64). It is unclear whether an instigator of incivility intends to be harmful or if the behavior was accidentally harmful.

A key defining piece of incivility is its ambiguous intent to harm. Incivility differs from other forms of workplace aggression (e.g., mobbing, identity threat) because of its subtle nature and because of the ambiguous intent to harm (Aquino & Thau, 2009). It can be difficult to identify and distinguish between intent to harm and accidentally harmful behavior. I approach incivility from a target's perspective because targets of incivility will react based on their own perceptions and interpretations of the situation and behavior, regardless of whether their

perception is accurate (Hershcovis, 2011). Regardless of the intent of the perpetrator, perceived incivility has negative consequences for both employees and the organization as a whole.

From a social interactionist theory perspective, workplace incivility can be conceptualized as a process rather than a single event, as interpersonal and situational factors are involved in the exchange of uncivil acts (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Furthermore, an act of incivility initiated by an individual may inspire a retaliatory act of incivility by another, resulting in a circular, back-and-forth pattern and potentially escalating to more frequent and more severe counterproductive behaviors – a process that is referred to as an “incivility spiral.” This spiraling of uncivil behavior between and across individuals may escalate into coercive actions, thereby enhancing the likelihood of employees’ subsequent exposure to incivility as well as negative consequences for them and their organization (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

### **Costs and Consequences of Workplace Incivility**

Research has shown that workplace incivility is pervasive across industries, and the effects can be costly and damaging at the employee and organizational level (Porath & Pearson, 2010). Employees may experience negative consequences such as excessive stress or worry (Cortina et al., 2002). These negative individual consequences may contribute to organizational consequences like increased turnover and lower productivity (Porath & Pearson, 2010). Additionally, some have found costs associated with organizational members witnessing instances of incivility at work, even if they were not directly targeted themselves (Chui & Dietz, 2014).

**Employee level.** Previous research has found links between incivility and consequential individual outcomes (e.g., Porath & Pearson, 2010). Namely, targets of incivility tend to report higher job stress, psychological distress, lower job satisfaction, higher turnover rates, excessive worry, and loss of sleep (Cortina et al., 2002; Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000; Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001). Research also suggests that employees who are exposed to uncivil behavior are more likely to experience cognitive distraction and lower creativity (Cortina, 2008).

While incivility may be subtle, it can seriously impact employee outcomes. As Pearson and colleagues (2000) explained, “the subtleties of incivility—the ambiguity of intent and the suspense about what may happen next— can create additional associated cognitive and affective reactions in targets, such as confusion, fear, or even a sense of panic” (p. 130). Targets of incivility have reported the impact of experiencing incivility linger for a decade or more (Pearson et al., 2000).

The implications of incivility may differ depending on the role of the perpetrator, and future research should consider those differences (Schilpzandi et al., 2016). A study of a student sample in an educational setting found that top-down incivility (i.e., incivility perpetrated by a faculty, staff, or administration member) is perceived as more unjust than lateral incivility between individuals with similar status or power levels (Caza & Cortina, 2007). Another study explored different sources of incivility and showed that supervisor incivility decreased after intervention, but coworker incivility did not (Leiter et al., 2011). Ultimately, more research is needed to investigate the extent to which outcomes of incivility vary by characteristics of the source (e.g., supervisor vs. coworker vs. customer). Some have hypothesized that incivility from supervisors may be more harmful than incivility from a different source, because supervisors are responsible for evaluations and rewards and, thus, wield greater power (Leiter et al., 2011).

Furthermore, experiencing incivility from a coworker may be more harmful than incivility from a customer because the target would likely have to interact with the coworker over and over again, whereas the customer would likely not have any lasting relationship with the target (Schilpzand et al., 2016).

An interesting consideration is how other organizational members might be impacted by witnessing acts of incivility at work. Some research has explored what it means to observe uncivil behavior at work (e.g., Chui & Dietz, 2014; Miner & Eischeid, 2012; Porath & Erez, 2009, Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007). One study suggested that the target's reaction to the act of incivility was a predictor of the observer's perceived level of harm experienced by the target, reporting that targets who reacted by crying were perceived as more upset/hurt than those who responded neutrally or with laughter (Chui & Dietz, 2014). The level of harm that an observer of incivility perceives may also influence their motivation to step in and prevent the incivility from continuing.

Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2004) found that witnessing uncivil behavior towards women in the workplace is related to lower health satisfaction for observers. A later study by Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2007) extended that witnessing the mistreatment of women at work may result in negative consequences because the acts of incivility can lead observers to harbor negative attitudes about the organization. More specifically, employees may suffer if they perceive that women are not well-treated, respected, or valued in the workplace. Porath and Erez (2009) found that subjects who witnessed uncivil behavior from another organizational member (i.e., peer, authority figure) had lower performance on both routine and creative tasks; furthermore, these employees engaged in fewer citizenship behaviors.

**Organizational level.** Although sometimes viewed as trivial or inconsequential, incivility can be a major cost to organizations. Employees who experience incivility tend to stay

quiet about it due to fear of potential repercussions and sounding “soft,” so organizations are often unaware of these consequences (Porath & Pearson, 2010). As reviewed by Porath and Pearson (2010), in response to experiencing workplace incivility, employees tend to intentionally cut back on their effort, the quality of their work, and time spent on their work. Furthermore, job satisfaction and organizational commitment tend to diminish when exposure to incivility is higher. The results of a large, diverse national sample of managers and employees demonstrated that 80% of respondents who had experienced incivility reported lost work time worrying about the incident, and additionally, 78% reported a decline in commitment to the organization, and 12% reported leaving the organization as a result (Porath & Pearson, 2010).

Finally, the consequences of incivility can be costly for organizations. Organizations have no choice but to absorb the cost associated with incivility. Some examples of costs associated with incivility include employee distraction and discontentment, job accidents, substance abuse, sick leave, work team conflict, productivity decline, and turnover (Cortina, 2008).

### **Workplace Gender-Based Discrimination**

Discrimination and its implications have been studied extensively in the social sciences (e.g., psychology, sociology). However, the topic has received less attention in management literature (Brief, 2008). *Workplace discrimination* refers to the unfair behavioral biases demonstrated against outgroup members (Dipboye & Colella, 2005), and exists when members of a certain group are adversely affected by processes used to make decisions and workplace practices (Cleveland & Barnes-Farrell, 2005). In this review, I focus on gender-based discrimination and specifically discrimination toward women.

An important distinction must be made between the terms *male* and *man* and between *female* and *woman*. I distinguish between the terms *gender* and *sex* differentiate between these terms. First, the term *sex* refers to one’s biological and medically designated sex at birth, which



is typically described using the male versus female binary. In contrast, the term *gender* refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men, women, or other genders (Udry, 1994). For example, the term *female* can be considered a sex category, while the term *woman* can be considered a gender category.

Many disciplines – such as the social sciences, arts, and humanities – have seen increased use of the term *gender* (as opposed to *sex*) in academic works in recent decades (Haig, 2003). Although many people use the terms *sex* and *gender* interchangeably in colloquial language, they are not in fact synonymous (Prince, 2005). Central in feminist theory, the distinction between *sex* and *gender* helps to conceptualize the social and cultural implications of *gender*, separate from biological differences associated with primary or secondary sex characteristics (e.g., sexual reproductive organs). In this review, I intentionally use the words *man* and *woman* in defining *gender* discrimination, rather than *male* and *female*, to distinguish *gender* from *sex* and to emphasize that the focus of this review is on *gender* – not *sex* – when conceptualizing and explaining *gender*-based discrimination.

### **Definition of Gender-Based Discrimination**

*Gender-based discrimination* refers to the mistreatment of members based on their *gender* expression or identity. It is important to note that one's biological *sex* may be different from the *gender* they identify with and express. It is especially important to understand this distinction in context of *gender*-based discrimination at work when we consider transgender and *gender* non-conforming employees. For example, somebody may be considered biologically male but identify as a woman. That person may be a target for *gender*-based discrimination because of their *gender* expression and identity, despite their biological *sex*.

Transgender and *gender*-diverse individuals face stigma from the general public and in the workplace, and experience significantly higher unemployment rates compared to the general

public (Mizock et al., 2017). A major limitation of this review is the small core literature transgender-related issues. An examination of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people in the human resource (HR) development literature revealed that HR professionals have primarily served in a reactive role rather than being leaders on these issues (Schmidt et al., 2012). That is, the role of HR doesn't typically take initiative to act on transgender-related issues, but rather waits to react to issues when they arise. Further, there is virtually no research that has investigated transgender or gender-nonconforming identities in context of workplace incivility.

It is also worth making the distinction between gender-based discrimination and transphobia, as there are similarities between these two sets of behaviors and attitudes. Sugano et al. (2006) defined transphobia as “societal discrimination and stigma of individuals who do not conform to traditional norms of sex and gender” (p. 217). Both gender-based discrimination and transphobia are fundamentally based on gender as a social construct that is dictated by expectations of behavior and appearance. Future research on workplace mistreatment, and specifically incivility, should consider implications of transgender and non-binary gender identities.

Next, it is important to note that the term *sexism* is used commonly to describe gender-based biases, prejudices, or discrimination. According to the New Oxford American Dictionary (2010), sexism is defined as “prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex.” Interestingly, the definition refers explicitly to “sex” (i.e., a biological characteristic) but then suggests that “women” (a gender category) are typically the targets. I suggest that a more appropriate term to describe this phenomenon would be gender-based discrimination. Nonetheless, I draw from works that explore sexism because the definitions of these constructs overlap. Although the word sexism may imply discrimination based on one's

sex, in fact, it represents underlying gender-based discrimination in most instances and not mistreatment based on one's biological sex. Although gender-based discrimination can be perpetuated against anybody, regardless of their gender, it is important to recognize that sexism is defined by its tendency to disadvantage women and gender minorities.

It is necessary to approach gender as more than just biology, as gender differences are perpetuated through the social construct of gender that has been created, reinforced, and upheld by the notion of a gender binary. Further, Cleveland and Barnes-Farrell (2005) use the term *developmental perspective on discrimination* to describe the “lifetime process of the acquisition and socialization of gender roles, views on gender, values placed on paid work, perspectives on child rearing, and beliefs about the respective roles of men and women” (p.160). This view is useful for conceptualizing gender-based discrimination as consistent and small differences in treatment between men and women in the workplace. Finally, although anybody, regardless of what their gender is, could be targeted by gender-based discrimination, I chose to focus this review on non-men because those who do not identify as men tend to be more likely to experience gender-based disadvantages or discrimination.

### **Historical Perspective on Gender-Based Discrimination**

In understanding persistent gender disparities, it can be helpful to understand the historical perspective of women in work. Women have been historically disadvantaged in the workplace in many different ways. Namely, “gender bias in recruitment, selection, and development opportunities is a critical predecessor to gender differences in access to many other types of organization outcomes (e.g., salary, promotion)” (Cleveland et al., 2005, p. 153). Furthermore, women have been found to advance slower in organizations, hold less prestigious and influential jobs, and are less likely to benefit from job changes than men (Brett & Stroh, 1997). It is important to recognize the historical and cultural significance of women's current

role in the workforce. Reciniello (2012) explains that “[...] women’s place in the field of work has only recently changed from being almost exclusively in support of and subordinate to men” (p. 302).

Before the American industrial revolution, women were politically and socially limited by English common law. After the industrial revolution, women began working outside of the home, but the women who worked were typically lower status, as having a stay-at-home wife was an indicator of status (Reciniello, 2012). This was a significant cultural shift in which women adopted newfound independence. Women have unarguably made powerful progress the workforce, but we still see instances of women’s disadvantage. For example, women may be particularly harmed by the societal expectations of motherhood. One study found that women who are mothers are viewed as less available to work compared to men who are fathers (Güngör & Biernat, 2009). Additionally, historic underrepresentation of women in many workplaces has led to some women in leadership roles being tokenized, heightening the salience of their gender in that context, and increased performance pressure and more stereotyping (Kanter, 1977).

### **Gender Stereotypes**

A historical perspective of women in the workforce and is useful in understanding how gender stereotypes exist today and influence our work experiences. Gender stereotypes can be thought of as beliefs shared about the characteristics, traits, skills, or other attributes that are expected from men and women (Cleveland et al., 2000). These stereotypes influence the way we behave and interact in everyday contexts. An example of gender stereotypes is the idea that women experience more happiness, fear, embarrassment, shame, and guilt, for example, while men are thought to experience more anger, contempt, disgust, and pride (Kabat, 2012). These gender stereotypes are powerful forces that can influence how people perceive each other.

Stereotypes may also influence the interpretations of others we make, what we infer about them,

and even the pieces of information that we remember about others (Heilman, 2012). When we understand the societal stereotypes associated with womanhood (i.e., being caregivers, mothers), we can begin to understand the disadvantage that women may face in pursuing a professional career. On the other hand, working men may benefit from gender stereotypes in the workplace (e.g., strength, leadership, assertiveness) (Cleveland et al., 2005).

### **Gendered Work and Segregation of Occupations**

Gender-based discrimination has been partly attributed to gendered work and gender segregation of work roles. Cleveland et al. (2000) reported that about half of all working women are employed in occupations that are more than 75% women. This notion that there are certain jobs that are implicitly defined as women's work (e.g., librarians, day care workers) raises concerns when we consider that these jobs tend to involve less technical skills and responsibility. Furthermore, these jobs are typically not valued as highly as other jobs by organizations. (Cleveland et al., 2005).

The experience of work typically differs between men and women (Cleveland & Barnes-Farrell, 2005). One of the most familiar and commonly examined differences in the work experience is the sexualization of work environments for employees who identify as a woman. According to Meriam-Webster (2019), making something sexual or becoming aware of one's sexuality can be considered sexualization. Workplace sexualization can be conceptualized as a combination of unwanted and permitted sexual behavior (i.e., sexual harassment and consensual sexual relationships) (Schneider, 1994). Several studies have found that a large proportion of women report having experienced some form of sexual harassment at work (Cleveland et al., 2000). Based on Title VII of the U.S. Civil Rights Act, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) prohibits harassment as a specific form of discrimination and frames sexual harassment as a specific form of workplace harassment. The EEOC defines sexual

harassment as unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature (Cleveland et al., 2000).

Under U.S. law, it is possible for a person of any gender to be targeted by sexual harassment, but more than 90% of reported cases involve men as harassers and women as targets (Cleveland et al., 2000). Incident rates of lower-intensity manifestations of sexual harassment (e.g., sexual jokes, teasing, remarks about women) were higher than higher-intensity forms of harassment (e.g., sexual bribery, rape). Although incident rates varied significantly, findings demonstrate that subtle forms of harassment may be a serious issue faced by non-men in the workforce.

### **Modern Gender-Based Discrimination**

Although the U.S. has made progress towards eliminating more overt forms of discrimination, we still see examples of racial and gender inequalities. Despite anti-discrimination legislation, gender disparities still exist. Because overt demonstrations of bias are no longer acceptable, many social psychologists look to covert forms of discrimination to explain these disparities. To help in understanding the persistence of these disparities, social psychologists have explored the idea of modern discrimination.

Briefly, theories of modern discrimination extend that some people hold negative attitudes towards women and people of color, but still actively endorse egalitarianist values (Cortina, 2013). Research shows that “modern” sexists subscribe to values of equality and even publicly condemn sexism, and they identify as nonprejudiced; yet, at the same time, they may possess implicit negative feelings toward and perceptions of women. This can result in the unfair treatment of women in a way that’s rationalized by the perpetrator and difficult to identify as biased (Cortina, 2013; Swim et al., 2004).

Social psychologists explain this persistence with theories of modern discrimination. In context of gender, some have coined terms like *subtle sexism*, *modern sexism*, and *neosexism* (Benokraitis, 1997; Martínez, 2013; Swim et al., 2004), most of which have slight differences in conceptual definitions but explore the idea of modern forms of discrimination. According to Swim et al. (2004), subtle forms of gender-based discrimination represents unfair treatment of women, but it's not often recognized as discrimination. Furthermore, Swim et al. (2004) extends that these forms of discrimination are not always intentionally harmful. An example of subtle sexism is sexist language, which can reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotypes, but can be considered a linguistic habit, and unintentionally harmful as such (Swim et al., 2004). This suggests that the ambiguous nature of incivility could make it an effective conduit through which gender-based discrimination may be enacted, as I describe next.

### **Incivility as Gender-Based Discrimination**

The literature exploring workplace discrimination has developed for the most part separately from research on other forms of mistreatment and aggression at work. While it is possible for one to be randomly targeted by incivility, it is also important to explore the relationship between group membership (e.g., gender, race) and experiences of incivility to understand how mistreatment and discrimination overlap. Recently we have seen more attention given to the relationship between workplace mistreatment and discrimination, with an emphasis on two fundamental questions: (a) power differentials between aggressors and their targets, and (b) justice perceptions (Wood et al., 2013). In efforts to help explain the gender inequalities in experiencing incivility, Cortina (2008) developed selective incivility theory.

In the context of selective incivility theory, Cortina (2008) uses the term “modern racist” to explain how prejudiced beliefs can be justified as fair, and to also extend the notion to gender-based discrimination: “this explicit rejection of overt bias – combined with implicit antiminority

(or antifemale) beliefs – yields subtle, often unintentional and unconscious forms of discrimination” (p. 59). This suggests that gender-based discrimination exists in more covert and concealed forms than in the past. Cortina (2008) points to the rise of taboos, policies, and laws to prevent discrimination as an explanation for the evolution of discrimination from overt and obvious to more covert and subtle forms. That is, obvious efforts to ostracize women and minorities aren’t typically tolerated (Cortina, 2008). Although we see persistent gender (and race) disparities today, the changes over the last few decades are still very significant and important, and we’ve seen a radical decline in the public expression of prejudiced beliefs (Cortina, 2008).

Selective incivility theory is an important stride in understanding ways that biases manifest at work, explaining that acts of incivility in some cases are not “general” (as previously believed) but rather represent gender- and racial-based discrimination (Cortina 2008). In some cases, incivility may be a representation of implicit bias that the instigator is unaware of. In line with intersectionality theory, women have reported experiencing more incivility than men, with black women reporting the highest levels of incivility, suggesting that the intersection gender and race heightens the implications of incivility (Cortina et al., 2013).

Selective incivility posits that some employees are at higher risk of being exposed to incivility based on their social power. In some cases, selective incivility can act as a concealed version of discrimination, which can obstruct organizational diversity and inclusion and result in adverse impact for minorities. One underlying cause of gender-based discrimination is gender stereotypes, as explained earlier in the review. As such, efforts to reduce gender stereotyping may be valuable for organizations.



### **Preventing and Reducing Incivility and Gender-Based Discrimination**

With high costs and consequences associated with workplace incivility and gender-based discrimination, efforts to prevent and reduce incivility are important. In addressing these issues, legal protections may not always be realistic, as incivility is defined by ambiguous intent to harm and therefore may be difficult to prove as discriminatory using formal mechanisms like legislation. Furthermore, organizations can implement strategies to prevent and reduce incivility through a variety of methods, including training programs. In addressing the gendered nature of incivility in some contexts, organizations can integrate civility-promotion trainings with organizational efforts to prevent discrimination.

#### **Legal Protections**

With respect to gender-based discrimination, in the United States, there are mechanisms in place to prohibit overt or blatant discriminatory behavior. From a legal perspective, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) protects individuals against sex-based discrimination and defines it as follows:

Sex discrimination involves treating someone (an applicant or employee) unfavorably because of that person's sex. Discrimination against an individual because of gender identity, including transgender status, or because of sexual orientation is discrimination because of sex in violation of Title VII.

Title VII of the U.S. Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination and harassment in the workplace on the basis of sex, and the EEOC definition of sex is expansive and subsumes biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

However, the implication of formal legislation and legal policies is not as simple for incivility as it may be for other forms of obvious mistreatment. In context of incivility, it can be difficult to identify behavior as discriminatory and even more difficult to prove in the court of

law, especially when considering that incivility is defined by its ambiguous intent to harm. As such, legal repercussions may not be the most effective method for thwarting incivility. The ambiguous and subtle nature of incivility make it a phenomenon that is not only difficult to recognize, but also difficult to control (Cortina, 2008). That is, radical reform and legislation that once helped us “drive out” overt discrimination cannot be as effective in addressing something like incivility. As Cortina (2008) describes it, “Rather, gender discrimination now is so deeply embedded in organizational life as to be virtually indiscernible” (p. 58). Incivility is inherently difficult to recognize and therefore challenging to reduce.

Because incivility is defined by intentionality that is ambiguous, it is unclear whether legal grievance systems would offer a solution to the issue of selective incivility (Cortina, 2008). Instances of workplace incivility would typically not be considered as violations of Title VII. Employees are unlikely to report uncivil behavior, and if they do there is no guarantee that the claim will be upheld in a legal court (Cortina, 2008). Therefore, legal protections may not be applicable in many cases of incivility. Because of the inherent subtle and ambiguous nature of incivility, “traditional, reactive, and legalistic approaches to combating blatant discrimination may not be effective for managing subtle biases in the form of selective incivility” (Cortina, 2008, p. 71). Regardless of the legal implications, organizations should understand the costs be concerned about the impact of incivility.

### **Reducing Gender Stereotypes**

As I mentioned earlier, gender stereotypes are prevalent social expectations and norms for men and women. In contexts where women are an organizational minority, women leadership can help reduce the negative impacts of gender stereotypes (von Hippel et al., 2014). Especially within male-dominated fields such as finance, celebrating women as leaders may help dampen

the threat of stereotypes (von Hippel et al., 2014). Perhaps having role models in leadership positions could reduce the implications of stereotypes for women in the workplace.

### **Organizational Incivility Interventions**

As organizations have begun to recognize incivility as a costly and detrimental problem that needs a solution, there have been efforts to promote civility and reduce incivility and its consequences. An underlying assumption here is that increased civility is associated with decreased incivility (Leiter et al., 2012). As such, incivility interventions are typically twofold, integrating anti-incivility training with civility-promotion.

Clearly defining guidelines and expectations for interpersonal interactions is important in facilitating a civil work environment (Pearson et al., 2000). Employees should understand the organization's standards for interpersonal interactions and also be educated on the negative impacts of incivility. Pearson and colleagues (2000) offered other strategies for reducing incivility: (a) integrating incivility training throughout orientation, and (b) encouraging feedback through tools like anonymous 360-degree surveys (Pearson et al., 2000).

On the personal level, Cortina (2008) suggests modifying the environment to “influence individual cognition and affect, which could ultimately inhibit discriminatory behavior” (p. 69). On the organizational level, some ways to promote civility include: senior management modeling civil behavior, include civility statement in mission statements and policy manuals, include questions about interpersonal behavior in new employee reference checks, and provide civility training to all new employees (Cortina, 2008). In efforts to thwart uncivil behavior and its associated costs, organizations should collect data and encourage employees to report incivility.

**Training interventions.** Many organizational efforts to reduce incivility have focused on increasing awareness and recognition of negative behaviors. (e.g., Stoddard, 2017). Hodgins et

al. (2014) described these efforts as coaching people to respond differently to negative behaviors. This can be a valuable intervention, especially if many organizational members do not recognize the prevalence of incivility. Training interventions do tend to result in a higher level of organizational awareness of incivility, but this approach, focusing on the individual-level, may not be as beneficial as a more integrated approach that incorporates individual, job, organizational, and societal factors (Hodgins et al., 2014). A training intervention approach may be a good place to start, but it will not solve the issue of incivility. After awareness of incivility has been established within an organization, other strategies can be used to combat the prevalence of incivility (Warrner et al., 2016).

Workplace incivility can be described as a problem of interpersonal behavior (Hodgins et al., 2014). One study by Beverley Kirk and colleagues (2011) suggested that emotional intelligence (EI) may be associated with incivility, and that because higher EI is associated with better interpersonal relationships (Lopes et al., 2004), interventions designed to increase EI may also be effective at reducing incivility. As such, the study assessed a group of employees on multiple dimensions, including workplace incivility, before and after an expressive-writing intervention. This intervention entailed participants spending 20 minutes daily writing about deep thoughts for three or four consecutive days. The study looked at both victimization and perpetration of incivility and found that participants scored significantly lower on workplace incivility perpetration after the intervention (Kirk et al., 2011). These results suggest that increased EI may be positively associated with reduced incivility. There are other interventions available for addressing incivility within organizations, such as cognitive rehearsal, where employees practice and prepare for instances of incivility.

**Cognitive Rehearsal.** Workplace incivility is prevalent within healthcare, and much of the research on reducing incivility and its negative effects have come from nursing literature

(e.g., Felblinger, 2008; Longo, 2017; Stoddard, 2017). Cognitive rehearsal allows employees to prepare how they will respond to uncivil behaviors. This has been researched as a possible reducer of incivility in healthcare settings and is another possible approach to addressing and reducing incivility. There are three parts to cognitive rehearsal: (a) participation in didactic instruction through some sort of training program aimed at raising awareness and recognition of incivility; (b) learning and practicing specific phrases to use in response to incivility; and (c) practicing or rehearsing the responses. Longo (2017) suggests that this approach allows targets of incivility to respond in a way that is not perceived as retaliatory.

**Civility, respect, and engagement in the workplace (CREW).** Some specific intervention programs have been developed to minimize the consequences and costs of workplace incivility. One of the most widely used incivility intervention method is called Civility, Respect, and Engagement in the Workplace (CREW), which aims to make workplaces and work relationships healthier and more beneficial. The underlying goal of the CREW method is to “interrupt the dominant, dysfunctional nature of relationships, permitting work groups to establish constructive alternatives” (Leiter et al., 2011, p. 1270). The CREW approach can be tailored for an organization’s specific needs and may take different forms. CREW is a series of exercises, led by a facilitator, designed to allow participants to explore and understand social relationships in their workplace, and particularly identify civil and uncivil communication (Hodgins et al., 2014). In their review of bullying and incivility interventions, Hodgins et al. (2014) explained, “The intervention commences with preparatory work engaging organization leaders and management, building a learning community of leaders and facilitators, training facilitators and communicating management buy-in to employees” (p. 64). The program can range in length, but typically spans between six and 12 months. The CREW approach is built upon several fundamental ideas:

(a) building civility through required direct conversations on the issue guided by accurate assessments of the groups' social environment (i.e., receiving feedback about the group level of incivility); (b) driving the process through exercises that help participants explore new ways of interacting; (c) moving participants out of established patterns of social behavior through leadership from facilitators; (d) receiving explicit support for the process from management as essential to the program's success; and (e) encouraging employee ownership of the process in order for it to be successful. (Leiter et al., 2011, p. 1260)

A study of health care workers showed that intervening with the CREW approach can help organizations increase levels of civility and respect, as measured by the CREW civility scale (Leiter et al., 2011). Additionally, the study found that CREW intervention resulted in other positive outcomes, such as greater trust, reduced burnout, and more positive attitudes toward work. (Leiter et al., 2011). This intervention resulted in reduced absenteeism, saving hospitals significant costs (Leiter et al., 2011). A follow-up study evaluated the sustaining impact of the CREW approach (Leiter et al., 2012). Participants were surveyed at three different time points: before the CREW intervention, after six-month CREW intervention (12 months from first survey), and again after 24 months from the first survey. The researchers also used a control group, consisting of participants who did not go through CREW training. The results showed a sustained improvement in civility and respect, suggesting that the CREW approach can reduce incivility and its associated negative effects.

**Mistreatment climate.** There may be additional efforts that organizations can make to impact the overall climate of mistreatment. Mistreatment climate can be conceptualized as employees' perceptions of attributes associated with mistreatment (Yang, Caughlin, Gazica, Spector, & Truxillo, 2014). If organizations can improve the climate of civility, the underlying

assumption is that the negative effects of incivility could be minimized. Additionally, one study found an indirect negative association between a climate of incivility and perceived support for innovation (Yang, 2016). Civility climate has been measured in different ways. Yang and colleagues' (2014) meta-analysis on the effects of mistreatment climate cite three measurement scales for civility climate: CREW civility climate (Meterko, Osatuke, Mohr, Warren, & Dyrenforth, 2007), perceived workplace civility climate (Ottinot, 2008, 2010), and work-group climate for civility (Walsh et al., 2012). Using survey items, organizations can ask their employees about perceptions of civility to understand the current climate. Evidence was found to suggest that better civility climates can lead to reduced incivility exposure, lower turnover intentions, and higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Yang et al., 2014). Fostering an aggression-inhibition climate may reap organizational benefits, but not to the same extent as civility climate can. That is, creating an organization climate of civility can have greater positive impacts (e.g., job satisfaction, organization commitment) than those associated with an aggression-inhibition climate (Yang et al., 2014).

### **Discussion**

Incivility is a prevalent problem that many organizations and employees face. Research has shown high costs of incivility for organizations and individuals. We have also seen that some employees are more likely to experience incivility than others. For example, women report higher rates of experiencing incivility than men (Cortina et al., 2001). Selective incivility theory (Cortina, 2008) helps explain the gendered difference in experiencing incivility by extending that incivility in some cases is representative of biases, and that those with less social power may experience higher rates of incivility. Although there are legal mechanisms to prevent overt discrimination, the ambiguous intentionality of incivility makes it challenging to prevent and control. Organizational interventions may be valuable, such the CREW training program which

aims to improve interpersonal relationships and communication in the workplace. Efforts to improve civility climates can also help thwart costs of incivility. Additionally, when considering the gendered and racial nature of incivility in some cases, organizations can integrate anti-discrimination efforts with civility-promotion programs.

### **Implications**

The review addresses workplace incivility as a subtle manifestation of discrimination. Theoretical implications of this work include the connection between social psychology theories of modern discrimination (e.g., subtle sexism) with organization theories of workplace incivility. Specifically, I connect selective incivility theory with theories of modern discrimination to extend that the unclear intent to harm inherent in incivility is aligned with unintentional harm caused by modern discrimination. Therefore, incivility can be a form of subtle gender-based discrimination.

Furthermore, this review offers practical implications for organizations. Organizations should be concerned about incivility, and if there is a prevalent problem, interventions can be made. Preventative measures are also valuable, which can include civility statements in policies, or senior-level management modeling ideal behavior. Because organizations may not automatically be aware of incivility issues, they should actively seek that information through employee surveys and/or exit interviews. In recognizing that incivility can sometimes be representative of discrimination, civility-promotion programs can be integrated with anti-discrimination efforts that may already be in place.

### **Limitations**

This review is not without limitations. First, a major limitation of this review is the small core literature transgender-related issues. In context of gender, those who identify as transgender experience higher levels of workplace discrimination (Dietert & Dentice, 2009), suggesting that



these individuals may also be at higher risk for experiencing incivility as a manifestation of discrimination. Second, the majority of the reviewed research is quantitative, which is valuable and insightful, but may not offer as much in-depth nuance on process as qualitative methods might. A majority of the research that exists on incivility relies on quantitative measures (e.g., employee survey with scale items). Increased use of qualitative methods could improve our understanding of the nuances of these experiences.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future research in incivility can help answer questions relating to the salience of identity in the particular instance. Incivility researchers could gain insightful information regarding identity-ambiguous (e.g., incivility, ostracism) and identity-salient mistreatment (e.g., sexual harassment, racial/ethnic harassment) (Cortina, 2017). Research and literature on sexual harassment has been around longer than that of incivility, so there may be some overlaps in terms of practical implications and organizational responses.

Future research should avoid victim precipitation, a theory borne out of the field of criminology over 75 years ago, which explains abuse or mistreatment through the characteristics or behaviors of the target. This theory has previously been used to blame victims of violent crimes and has seen increased use within organizational literature over the last decade (Cortina et al., 2017). Incivility research should avoid using victim precipitation in understanding incivility and instead focus on the theory of *perpetrator predation* to explain instances of incivility without blaming the victim.

Additionally, future research on workplace mistreatment and incivility should explore transgender and non-binary gender identities. Incivility research can benefit from considering transgender employees in the workplace. Because it can be a gendered phenomenon, it would offer insight to understand the connection between transgender employees and incivility. As

such, research in the future should aim to understand the implications of incivility on transgender and gender minority employees.

Organizational literature could benefit from future research exploring a variety of workplaces. A large amount of literature exists looking at incivility within healthcare organizations (e.g. Bar-David, 2018; Felblinger, 2008). There may be heightened levels of incivility within healthcare organizations because of high-pressure work environments (Bar-David, 2018), so research is particularly relevant here. Other research has looked at city government, law enforcement, and U.S. military (Cortina et al., 2013). Research in the future should address other work environments. Increased attention to non-traditional and less studied workplace environments may offer new insights into incivility.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review explores the connections between workplace incivility and modern forms of gender-based discrimination, such as incivility. Building up to the theory of selective incivility (Cortina, 2008), this paper extends that incivility can sometimes act as a vehicle for gender-based discrimination. Selective incivility may be a manifestation of discrimination that is rooted in power-differences within organizations. To support these claims, I offered a historical perspective of women in the workforce, an explanation of gender stereotypes and their relevance in the workplace, and theories of modern discrimination, which is different from previous, overt forms of discrimination. Furthermore, a review of civility interventions is offered as a practical implication for organizations. This work helps us move toward a better understanding of persistent gender disparities and potential solutions.

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