Modelling Workplace Incivility as a Social Process Towards Sustainable Workforce in the Malaysian Context

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ABSTRACT

Twenty years since the concept of workplace incivility has been introduced, research has been conducted in a variety of directions. While the literature has been expanding and it has been reported that as many as 96% employees have experienced workplace incivility and 99% have seen it, we still do not know how employees interpret of workplace incivility. Given that such an interpretation of the social process can affect the future thought and behavior of people, this information is important to understand workplace incivility beyond behavioral description. Although we have a comprehensive conceptual understanding of workplace incivility, without understanding the employees' beliefs about incivility, we cannot effectively develop an integrative model of workplace incivility. This study aims to develop a model on workplace incivility as a social process that includes interaction during and after the occurrence of incivility at the workplace. In addition, this research also aims to create awareness about workplace incivility; as well as employees' preferences on how to address incivility at work and who should handle it. This qualitative study will investigate workplace incivility to understand incivility from the perspective of employees, refine the theoretical understanding of workplace incivility construct, and collecting data to develop the integrative model of workplace incivility. Employees will be asked to answer open-ended survey questions about the characteristics of workplace incivility and questions about why it happens. Responses will be analyzed with the phenomenological method. This research can also ease the development of practical strategies to manage and prevent workplace incivility. Therefore, the findings of this study can serve as a basis for specific prevention and intervention techniques that can be built in the future. This is because, it is important to uncover effective strategies to manage workplace incivility to improve employee well-being, which in turn would influence organizational performance.

Keywords: *Workplace Incivility, Workplace Mistreatment, Workplace Bullying, Workplace Ostracism, Social Undermining*

INTRODUCTION

Since the past two decades, workplace incivility has occurred as an important topic in the organizational behavior literature. A lot of research has examined how diverse types of workplace incivility affect the well-being of employees and organization outcomes. Those studies have shown that the victims of workplace incivility experience more stress than their coworkers (Bowling &

Beehr, 2006). Examples of workplace incivility are; talking down to other people, making hurtful and demeaning comments, and ignoring the person who is talking to them (Porath & Pearson, 2013). The main description of the workplace incivility features distinguishes it from other negative interpersonal workplace behavior concepts in terms of its low intensity (bullying, aggression and violence are more brutal) and the ambiguous intention to hurt other people (Schilpzand et al., 2016).

The related concepts of bullying, aggression, and abusive supervision are more obvious; hence victims of these negative behaviors can easily understand that it is intentional. However, the intention of workplace incivility is more difficult to interpret. Another factor that helps to distinguish workplace incivility from other negative workplace behavior such as abusive supervision is the specific cause of the negative demeanor (Schilpzand et al., 2016). Workplace incivility is not limited to only by people in the top management, but also by other employees and customers. These characteristics are essential because workplace incivility cause emotional trauma, different feelings, and behaviors towards the victims compared to other negative workplace behavior. Furthermore, it is likely that the predictors of workplace incivility differ from those that provoke more dangerous and/or intentional negative workplace behaviors (Schilpzand et al., 2016).

Workplace incivility is universal (Schilpzand et al., 2016). It has been assessed that 98 per cent of employees encounter workplace incivility, with 50 per cent suffering such demeanor on a routine basis (Porath & Pearson, 2013). The detrimental effects in terms of financial are alarming, indicating that workplace incivility affects employees' ability to perform; which in turn would have a large effect on the organizations that they work for (Porath & Pearson, 2010; Schilpzand et al., 2016). In addition, the damage by the victims who experience workplace incivility is also severe. For example, they may be having emotional trauma, worry, withdrawn from work (C. Porath & Pearson, 2013), stress that could lead to depression if they have experienced it for a very long time, and even take their frustrations out on their family.

To this point, studies on the predictors and outcomes of workplace incivility have not been reviewed extensively. One research that has incorporated some of the studies on workplace incivility is Hershcovis's (2011) study that investigated how different types of workplace incivility relate to target outcomes. Hershcovis (2011) examined research that used the Workplace Incivility Scale (L. M. Cortina et al., 2001). However, the literature on workplace incivility still does not have a strong conceptual underpinning because research is quite fragmented (Schilpzand et al., 2016). The comprehensive and varied existing body of knowledge on workplace incivility makes it hard for researchers and practitioners alike to integrate and understand the results of this negative workplace behavior (Schilpzand et al., 2016). Without a strong understanding of the existing effort, some potential workplace incivility researchers may be discouraged to study this topic; and practitioners may not be able to integrate the knowledge gathered from research in their organizational practices. This is because the literature on workplace incivility is not consistent enough to test the overall effects (Schilpzand et al., 2016).

This study aims to develop a workplace incivility framework as a social process that includes interaction during and after the occurrence of incivility at the workplace. This research can also ease the development of practical strategies to manage and prevent workplace incivility. Therefore, the findings of this study can serve as a basis of specific prevention and intervention techniques that can be built in the future. This is because, it is important to uncover effective strategies to manage workplace incivility to improve employee well-being, which in turn would influence organizational performance. In addition, this research also aims to create awareness about workplace incivility; as well as employees' preferences on how to address incivility at work and who should handle it.

Problem Statement

Workplace incivility is becoming common in the workplace and it is very destructive for employers, employees, and organizations (Porath & Pearson, 2010). Workplace incivility is defined as "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect," including rudeness, discourtesy, and a lack of respect or other people (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). It does not include more severe mistreatment such as bullying or physical aggression (Yang, Caughlin, Gazica, Truxillo, & Spector, 2014). Although this is a well-established academic description of workplace incivility, how do individuals describe this phenomenon at the workplace? One effective means of finding such evidence is by examining employees' interpretation of workplace incivility.

Employees spend most of their time at their workplace. Spending more than eight hours a day in an environment where they feel undermined, not valued, not appreciated, or being bullied can make their life stressful (Anjum & Ming, 2018). If employees are stressful most of the time, it may lead to health problems, which could hinder organizational success. If a manager is ignoring the phenomenon of workplace incivility, the perpetrator would perceive this as okay to continue mistreating other employees in such a way that would rid them of their worth and dignity.

Although the literature has been expanding and it has been found that as many as 96% individuals have experienced incivility at their workplace and 99% have seen it (Porath & Pearson, 2010), we still do not know how employees interpret of workplace incivility. Given that such interpretation of social process can critically affect the future thought and behavior of individuals, this information is important to understand workplace incivility beyond behavioral description. Therefore, although we understand workplace incivility; without understanding how employees interpret workplace incivility and how they want it to be managed, we cannot effectively develop an integrative model of workplace incivility. This is because fragmentation has prevented (Hershcovis, 2011) the progress of research in workplace incivility. In addition, only a few research have investigated the effect of incivility at the workplace in Asia; especially Malaysia (Ghosh, 2017). Moreover, those research have mostly used instruments and measurements that have been developed in Western countries (Cortina et al., 2001; Ghosh, 2017).

The Western countries have already done a lot of studies on workplace incivility; however, people in South East Asia still view this phenomenon as taboo. We do not talk about it for fear it would offend someone at the top. When some people do talk or complain about it, the top management turns a deaf ear and become a sort of denial about this matter. If this is the case, how are we going to address employees' psychological health? Usually, if any employee with a predisposition to a mental health concern but still can work, they can still perform without much issue. However, if they must cope with bullying or incivility at their workplace, they might lose their ability to cope; hence reducing their productivity. Therefore, we believe that although the top management might see this issue as not important, we still need to address workplace incivility so that we can come out with a set of policies or a set of good conduct among employees. Before we can do that, we need to create awareness that this problem does exist, and it cannot go away on its own.

Research Objective

The purpose of this study is to develop a workplace incivility framework as a social process that includes interaction during and after the occurrence of incivility at the workplace. The reason is to develop an integrative conceptual model to address how the various organizational setting might prompt or shield the impacts of incivility at the workplace. In addition, the study aims to investigate why certain factors would lead to workplace incivility. This research also aims to create awareness about workplace incivility; as well as employees' preferences on how to address incivility at work and

who should handle it. By creating an awareness of this phenomenon, this could be the first step towards addressing and reducing workplace incivility to reduce employee stress and anxiety to improve the quality of work life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace Incivility

Nowadays, we have a good comprehension of the dynamics related to workplace incivility including the traits of individuals who instigate and the victim, the negative implications of workplace incivility, the mechanisms that relate workplace incivility and the consequences, and the boundary situations that influence these relationships (Miner et al., 2018). However, no research has been conducted to study the underlying conceptual assumptions of incivility at the workplace. In addition, no research has been conducted to study this harmful workplace phenomenon to develop policies and strategies to prevent the incident and the effect towards the victims and witnesses of workplace incivility (Schilpzand et al., 2016). This is because workplace incivility is a costly and persistent behavior at the workplace that have negative effects on the victims. Andersson and Pearson (1999) proposed a theory of how workplace incivility develops over time, implying that cases of workplace incivility are interactive processes between two or more employees, where the perpetrators, victims, witnesses, and social context shape (and are formed by) the workplace incivility. Therefore, when a perpetrator behaves in an uncivil manner towards a target (or a victim), the target may perceive this behavior negatively, which may lead the victim to retaliate, starting a feedback spiral of workplace incivility. The wish to retaliate against incivility that has been directed towards a target, could be misdirected and affect other individuals; thus dragging other people into the spiral (or observers who happen to know about the case) could engage in incivility by observing other people who are behaving that way (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Workplace incivility can also be devious and portrayed by the perpetrator either with or without intention; as well as with or without an intention to harm the victim (Samosh, 2019). However, the causes of incivility at the workplace are usually ambiguous and open to subjective interpretations (Cortina et al., 2001). Perpetrators can deny alleged intent by claiming that they did not mean any harm towards the target, that they did not know about its consequences, that the victim misunderstood the action, or that the victim was too sensitive (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Therefore, we cannot figure out the long-term effects of coworkers who have been uncivil towards the victim, which is commonly related to emotional exhaustion. However, much of this concept is still conceptual; such that there is not much that is known about employees' beliefs on workplace incivility.

Andersson and Pearson (1999) have explained the spiralling effect of workplace incivility; with individuals witnessing the incivility of other people in a social setting like the workplace, and then behaving disrespectful and rude themselves towards the victims because they are insensitive towards deviant behavior. Doshy and Wang (Doshy & Wang, 2014) conducted exploratory research on 11 employees by considering their perspectives on workplace incivility. They asked participants for perspectives about how workplace incivility that has been experienced as a victim and how the incident affected them. They found that workplace incivility is enacted within the power structures where supervisors or employees who are close to the supervisors are uncivil towards the targets; organizations often did not address incivility at the workplace, and employees chose not to report about it for fear of retaliation against them by the perpetrators. Eventually, the authors called for a more specific phenomenological study to address the complexities of this phenomena. Therefore, this study will employ a larger sample and aims to provide a better understanding of what is workplace incivility from the employees' perspectives; and how does it happen.

Definitional and Behavioral Components of Workplace Incivility

Currently, there is not much that we know about the common definition of workplace incivility and assume that the research respondents agree with the academic definition of incivility at the workplace; but is this always the case – whereby the definition of workplace incivility is the same with the victims' interpretation? In accordance with the academic definition, uncivil behaviors are passive verbal and nonverbal actions (Pearson & Porath, 2011), and exclude more harmful behaviors of workplace mistreatment such as threatening, yelling, or physical violence (Yang et al., 2014). Workplace incivility is defined as low intensity because it represents a negative attitude such as rudeness, unprofessional behavior such as being childish, and a lack of courtesy. It involves ambiguous intent because observers cannot be certain that the uncivil behavior was done specifically to harm the target or for some other reasons; for example, the perpetrator could claim that s/he did not realize that the behavior could hurt the victim. Nevertheless, incivility at the workplace involves violating workplace norms of respect towards each other (Samosh, 2019).

In addition, workplace incivility involves rudeness or discourtesy because it can include behaviors that are insolent, unfair, and lack of transparency (Pearson et al., 2001). However, we still do not know whether employees' understandings of what workplace incivility is the same with scholarly conceptualization. Moreover, some examples of workplace incivility include managers or supervisors scolding employees for minor issues in front of everyone in the office (Pearson & Porath, 2011). Therefore, beyond the detailed analysis of the definitional characteristics of workplace incivility, more detail investigation of examples in the Malaysian context would be valuable.

Individual Roles in Workplace Incivility

The roles played by a person and others in the social process are the main part of this study. A significant amount of workplace mistreatment studies have been conducted from the perspectives of the victims and the perpetrators (Hershcovis, 2011), with examples of the workplace incivility, include both as the actor and the victims of incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2011). Andersson and Pearson (1999) also proposed the significance of the role of the observer (witness), given that incivility may be seen by other employees at the workplace; their theory has been supported by other studies (Pearson & Porath, 2011; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015). Beyond these hypothetical roles, incivility has been researched with perpetrators and victims that come from within the organization (managers and coworkers).

Events following Workplace Incivility

Workplace mistreatment has been related to many negative psychological outcomes (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Following workplace incivility, victims may understandably engage in coping techniques to deal with victimization (Samosh, 2019). Cortina and Magley (2009) classified five major summaries of coping with workplace incivility, including behavioral and cognitive technique, along with non-coping. Explaining what happens after the occurrence of incivility at the workplace can also consider a conflict management viewpoint (Samosh, 2019). Blake and Mouton (1967) developed the original dual-concern model of conflict management. Since then, variations of the model have developed; although the most call for two elements leading to four or five conflict management strategies (Sorenson et al., 1999). Rahim's (1983) conceptualization considered elements of concern for self and concern for others, both ranging from low to high. When integrated, there are five conflict management styles: avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating (Rahim & Magner, 1995). Some people might use the avoiding style, which is withdrawal, turn a deaf ear on issues, and handing off issues to someone else to take care. Meanwhile, some individuals might use the competing style, which refers to a forceful behavior to get what one wants. In addition, accommodating style is when a person would try to satisfy the concerns of other people. Whereas other individuals might use the compromising style, whereby they would try to settle

by giving up something to get another thing – these individuals would settle with, you win some, you lose some. Another conflict management style is the collaborating style, in which they will try to find a solution that is acceptable to both parties.

Cases of workplace incivility may also be reciprocal, creating a feedback loop of growing mistreatment (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Andersson and Pearson (1999) have noticed that; in the most severe circumstances, this tit-for-tat behavior can increase in continuous cycles to the point of shouting matches, indirect threats, or even physical aggression. Constructively preventing and managing workplace incivility with leadership is not common (Samosh, 2019) because they do not believe that such incivility occurs at the workplace. Therefore, the victims of incivility may feel that it is impossible to get help; which might prolong the ongoing incivility at the workplace (Elliott et al., 1999). It has also been observed that when confronted with incivility, the supervisor would predictably choose to support the perpetrators; leaving targets feeling as though they are working against them (Namie & Namie, 2009).

Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2009) found that, from over 70% of the occasions, the participants thought that the supervisor either made the situations worse by telling lies on behalf of the perpetrators or did nothing to address the incivility at the workplace. In addition, Doshy and Wang (Doshy & Wang, 2014) mentioned about the "willful blindness" of organizations who choose to turn a deaf ear regarding incivility at the workplace. Therefore, the possibility that leadership might be on the side of the perpetrators will be investigated in this research; along with the others – detailed above. Not only they ignored the behavior, but they help the perpetrators and thus, affects the victims psychologically. For example, a study by Al-Zyoud and Mert (2019) found that coworker incivility predicts higher levels of psychological distress of the victims.

METHODOLOGY

This study will use the qualitative phenomenological method. Purposive sampling will be used for this study. Qualitative research design is used to explore the phenomenon of workplace incivility. This method will be conducted by the description of human experience, asking research questions to examine the meaning that can be obtained from experiencing a phenomenon. The victims of workplace incivility and people from the top management would be the main samples for this study. This is because a phenomenological inquiry such as this is important to help us understand the real reason why this is an issue still lingers on and why the top management is still in denial of the fact.

The participants will be screened so that they can be determined to be (a) employees in an organization; (b) have an immediate supervisor; (c) have at least two other coworkers, and (d) must have been the target of incivility at the workplace. This study will take a bigger approach by asking about incivility at the workplace more generally to avoid leading the respondents to any possible imposed presumptions. Samples of interview questions are as follows:

- What are the definitional characteristics of workplace incivility represented in the Malaysian context?
- What are examples of uncivil behaviors at the workplace in the Malaysian context?
- Who is involved in incivility and how?
- What happens after the episodes of incivility at the workplace?
- How do you want incivility to be managed and prevented in the future?

CONCLUSION

This research intends to study why individuals engage in uncivil behavior at their workplace with the hope to help reduce workplace incivility. It is also hoped that we can understand the range of symptoms of workplace incivility in Malaysian organizations. Therefore, in the future, we can develop a strategy to prevent and address workplace incivility; for example, having a policy of zero-tolerance to workplace incivility. This study is important because it has been proven that organizational performance depends on employee performance. However, if the employees are experiencing psychological distress due to incivility at the workplace, how are they going to achieve organizational goals? Thus, it is imperative for managers to take preventive measures for incivility at the workplace. Exploring employees' interpretation, including their predicted patterns of the social process during and after occurrences of incivility, is useful to understand beliefs of, and responses to, workplace incivility (Samosh, 2019). This method of studying workplace incivility addresses a major gap in the body of knowledge within the area of incivility.

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