

Workplace Incivility and Employee Well-Being and Performance in Formal and Informal Organisations: A Social Work Perspective

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Abstract:

This study examined the relationship between workplace incivility, employee well-being, and performance in formal and informal organisations within Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria. Anchored on Affective Events Theory (AET) and Social Exchange Theory (SET), the research adopted a qualitative design to capture in-depth perspectives. Using purposive sampling, employees across various sectors who had direct experiences and knowledge of workplace incivility were selected. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that workplace incivility manifested in various forms, including verbal disrespect, exclusion from decision-making, intentional withholding of information, and subtle acts of sabotage. These behaviours were found to occur both vertically (between superiors and subordinates) and horizontally (among colleagues). Verbal disrespect emerged as the most prevalent form, while passive incivility—such as withholding critical work-related information—significantly hindered employee performance. The result revealed that workplace favouritism and weak enforcement of organisational conduct policies contributed to the normalisation of incivility. The study concludes that workplace incivility adversely affects employee well-being and productivity, and recommends that organisations implement clear behavioural policies, strengthen enforcement mechanisms, and promote respectful workplace cultures to mitigate its impact.

Keywords: Workplace incivility, employee well-being, employee performance, organisational culture

Introduction

Workplace incivility, often dismissed as minor or inconsequential, has emerged as a pervasive organizational challenge with significant implications for employee well-being and overall performance. Defined as low-intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm, workplace incivility violates norms of mutual respect and professional decorum in the workplace (Soanes & Stevenson, 2005; Grantham, 2019). This includes seemingly minor but persistent acts such as interrupting, ignoring emails, talking down to colleagues, or making sarcastic remarks—all of which cumulatively erode employee morale and create a toxic work environment (Ceban-Muzicantu, 2024). Although less overt than bullying or harassment, the insidious nature of incivility makes it particularly damaging because targets often struggle to recognize or report such behavior, which can lead to psychological distress, disengagement, and eventual burnout (Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016).

Recent reports highlight a surge in workplace incivility across organizations, attributed to stressors such as mass layoffs, return-to-office mandates, and political polarization in the public sphere. For instance, Fore (2025) reports that gaslighting, micromanagement, and public shaming have increased by over 21.5% in early 2025, with the financial cost of such behaviours estimated at \$766 billion annually due to lost productivity and absenteeism. Employees exposed to incivility often suffer from insomnia, anxiety, and disengagement, and are more likely to quit their jobs. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 76% of employees have experienced incivility, and 25% report that they would leave their roles if the issue persists (Dalton, 2018; Woods Rogers, 2024).

The rise of remote and hybrid work models has further complicated workplace interactions. Digital communication, while efficient, has led to increased instances of misinterpretation, dehumanized interactions, and a decline in interpersonal accountability (Dalton, 2018). Moreover, competitive organizational cultures and poor leadership contribute to environments where disrespect becomes normalized. Leadership behavior, in particular, plays a critical role in either curbing or enabling incivility. When leaders themselves exhibit demeaning or dismissive behaviour, it sets a precedent that incivility is tolerable, thereby perpetuating a harmful cycle (Dalton, 2018).

From a social work perspective, the psychological and emotional consequences of incivility fall within the purview of workplace social welfare. Social workers, with their training in human behaviour, conflict resolution, and organizational dynamics, are uniquely positioned to intervene in toxic workplace cultures and advocate for supportive and respectful

environments. Social work practice emphasizes the importance of psychosocial safety, empathy, and advocacy—all essential components in addressing workplace incivility. The profession also calls attention to structural and systemic issues that reinforce incivility, such as power imbalances, poor communication channels, and inadequate conflict resolution mechanisms.

Several literatures on organizational behaviour emphasises the breadth and severity of incivility's impact. Targets of incivility often reduce their organizational citizenship behaviours, demonstrate increased turnover intentions, and experience higher levels of stress compared to their peers (Dalal, 2005; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Porath & Pearson, 2013). Furthermore, as Schilpz and et al. (2016) argue, the ambiguity and ubiquity of incivility necessitate a comprehensive, theoretically grounded approach to understanding its antecedents and effects. Despite the growing body of research, existing studies remain fragmented and lack cohesive frameworks that would enable practitioners and researchers to address the issue systematically.

In this context, examining workplace incivility from a social work lens is not only timely but necessary. It aims to expand the discourse beyond business and management circles to include the human and relational dimensions of organizational life. Healthier, more inclusive workplaces may be achieved when social work principles like social justice, respect for human dignity and worth, and the value of human connections are incorporated into workplace interventions (Fonri, 2002; Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011). Ultimately, this study aims to explore how workplace incivility affects employee well-being and performance, and to propose strategies for intervention grounded in social work principles.

Statement of the problem

Workplace incivility is a persistent and increasingly recognized challenge that undermines individual performance, erodes team cohesion, and hinders the achievement of organizational goals. Often manifesting through subtle behaviors such as rudeness, dismissiveness, sarcasm, or exclusion, incivility may appear trivial in isolation but accumulates to create a toxic environment. More concerning is its contagious nature—it spreads from person to person, fostering a culture of disrespect and psychological insecurity. Despite growing awareness of its high emotional, social, and financial costs—including decreased employee engagement, increased turnover, reduced productivity, and damaged organizational reputation—workplace incivility remains pervasive. Many organizations either downplay its seriousness or lack structured mechanisms to address it. The challenge lies not only in recognizing incivility when it occurs but also in

understanding the structural and behavioural factors that allow it to thrive. This study seeks to uncover why workplace incivility continues to persist across diverse organizational contexts, and to explore its impact on employee motivation, job satisfaction, productivity, and perceptions of leadership. The findings will aim to guide the development of sustainable strategies and leadership practices that can foster a more respectful and psychologically safe workplace.

Objectives

- Examine the prevalence and common forms of workplace incivility experienced by employees across different organizational levels and sectors.
- Assess the psychological, emotional, and professional impact of workplace incivility on employee well-being, productivity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.
- Evaluate current organizational policies and practices for addressing workplace incivility and determine their effectiveness.
- Recommend evidence-based, social work-informed strategies and interventions aimed at promoting respectful communication, emotional safety, and a healthy work environment.

Theoretical framework

Affective Events Theory (AET)

This study is anchored on Affective Events Theory (AET), developed by Howard Weiss and Russell Cropanzano (1996), which emphasizes that the significance of emotional experiences in shaping employees' attitudes, behaviours, and well-being in the workplace. AET posits that workplace events—especially affect-laden events—trigger emotional reactions that, in turn, influence work attitudes such as job satisfaction, motivation, organizational commitment, and ultimately performance outcomes. These events can be either discrete (e.g., verbal abuse, public criticism) or continuous (e.g., chronic disrespect or hostile work climate), both of which are central to the experience of workplace incivility.

In the context of this study, workplace incivility is considered a negative affective event that disrupts emotional stability and psychological safety among employees. According to AET, such events evoke emotions like frustration, anger, humiliation, and stress, which adversely affect an employee's job satisfaction and performance (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Repeated exposure to incivility may result in emotional exhaustion, reduced morale, and withdrawal behaviours, including absenteeism and turnover intentions (Porath & Pearson, 2013).

Moreover, AET aligns with the social work perspective by emphasizing the need for organizations to address not only systemic factors but also interpersonal dynamics that influence worker well-being. Social work frameworks advocate for supportive environments that uphold dignity and promote emotional resilience. Therefore, applying AET through a social work lens encourages proactive intervention—such as employee counselling, organizational training, and policy development—to reduce the incidence and impact of incivility (Gitterman & Germain, 2008).

The theory also suggests that positive emotional events, such as recognition, respect, and support, foster engagement and productivity. Conversely, negative events like incivility can diminish an individual's emotional state, leading to disengagement and compromised performance (Fripp, 2023). As such, AET provides a robust framework for understanding the emotional mechanisms linking workplace incivility with employee well-being and job performance.

Furthermore, the theory's relevance is amplified by its practical implications. It not only explains the psychological impact of negative experiences but also recommends organizational strategies to improve the emotional climate. These include fostering respectful relationships, recognizing employee contributions, promoting work-life balance, and addressing grievances (Fripp, 2023). Such strategies are consistent with social work values that advocate for social justice, empowerment, and institutional change to enhance individual and collective functioning.

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory (SET), originally proposed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), provides a valuable lens through which to understand the dynamics of workplace relationships, including incivility, and their effects on employees' well-being and performance. At its core, SET posits that social behaviour is driven by the pursuit of rewards and the avoidance of costs. Individuals engage in interactions where they assess potential benefits against the efforts or sacrifices required—much like economic transactions (Redmond, 2015). Within workplace contexts, SET helps explain why employees may disengage or underperform when they perceive an imbalance in their interactions, particularly when they invest effort, cooperation, or respect and receive incivility or disrespect in return.

According to Blau (2017), relationships within organizations are built on a foundation of reciprocal exchanges that involve not only material rewards but also intangible benefits such as respect, recognition, and support. When these social exchanges are perceived as fair and equitable, employees are more likely to remain committed and motivated. However, incivility disrupts this balance. Acts of disrespect, exclusion, or rudeness

can violate the implicit expectations of mutual respect, leading to negative emotions and reduced organizational commitment (Emerson, 1962). The perceived inequity in these exchanges fosters psychological distress, lowers morale, and diminishes performance, especially when the costs of enduring incivility outweigh the anticipated rewards (Molm, 2010).

Moreover, SET emphasizes that individuals constantly evaluate the comparison level (CL) and the comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt}) when deciding whether to maintain or terminate social relationships (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In the workplace, this translates into employees gauging whether their current job environment offers better outcomes than potential alternatives. If incivility is persistent and unaddressed, employees may seek alternative employment or disengage psychologically—leading to absenteeism, reduced productivity, or turnover (Cook & Emerson, 1978).

Social Exchange Theory is particularly relevant from a social work perspective, as it underscores the importance of relational equity and mutual respect—core values in social work practice. Social workers within organizational settings often play a critical role in restoring balance in these social exchanges, advocating for fair treatment, emotional well-being, and respectful workplace environments. Furthermore, SET's insights into power dynamics—where those with the ability to provide or withhold rewards exert influence—highlight how incivility by supervisors or peers can be institutionalized unless addressed through organizational change (Lawler & Yoon, 1993). SET serves as a robust theoretical foundation for examining the causes and consequences of workplace incivility. It offers a framework to understand how imbalances in social interactions can deteriorate employee well-being and performance and highlights the importance of restoring reciprocity, respect, and fairness in organizational relationships (Homans, 1958; Redmond, 2015; Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2009). These ideas can inform both organizational policies and social work interventions aimed at promoting a more civil and supportive work environment.

Theoretical synthesis

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates Affective Events Theory (AET) and Social Exchange Theory (SET) to comprehensively understand how workplace incivility influences employees' well-being and performance. AET highlights the critical role of emotional experiences triggered by workplace events, where negative affective incidents such as incivility evoke emotions like frustration and stress that impair job satisfaction and motivation (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Porath & Pearson, 2013). Simultaneously, SET explains workplace interactions as reciprocal social exchanges in which employees seek equitable rewards—tangible or intangible—relative to the costs incurred (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Blau,

2017). When incivility disrupts this balance, it generates perceived inequity and psychological distress, undermining organizational commitment and prompting disengagement or turnover (Molm, 2010; Emerson, 1962). Both theories emphasise the emotional and relational mechanisms by which workplace incivility deteriorates employee outcomes, providing complementary perspectives: AET focuses on the emotional reactions to discrete and chronic negative events, while SET addresses the broader social dynamics of fairness, power, and reciprocity that sustain or erode workplace relationships. From a social work standpoint, these frameworks emphasize the need for interventions that promote emotional resilience, equitable treatment, and supportive organizational cultures, aligning with social work values of dignity, empowerment, and social justice to foster healthier work environments and optimize employee well-being and performance (Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Lawler & Yoon, 1993).

Methods and design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of workplace incivility and its effects on employee well-being and performance from a social work perspective. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the complex social dynamics, emotional impacts, and organizational factors related to incivility, as reported by employees themselves.

The study population consisted of employees working at University of Calabar (UNICAL), University of Cross River State (UNICROSS), Author Jarvis, Fidelity Bank, and Leadway Pensure within Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria. Using purposive sampling, participants who had direct experience or relevant knowledge of workplace incivility were selected to provide diverse perspectives. Efforts were made to include individuals from different organizational hierarchies, departments, and both public and private sectors to ensure a broad representation. The sample size was determined by data saturation, which was reached after interviewing 25 respondents.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed information on the prevalence and forms of incivility experienced, its psychological and professional impacts, perceptions of organizational policies addressing incivility, and recommendations for social work-informed interventions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face based on participant availability and preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts systematically. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework,

the researcher first familiarized themselves with the data, generated initial codes, and then identified and reviewed emerging themes. This process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how workplace incivility affected employees' well-being and performance, as well as the effectiveness of organizational responses and potential strategies for improvement.

Findings and discussion

The study on workplace incivility was conducted using interviews with selected participants, giving accounts of their lived experiences within the organization. Transcribed interview were grouped in themes and interpreted.

Prevalence and forms of workplace incivility in academia

The findings reveal that workplace incivility within an organisation is common but often subtle phenomenon. Respondents reported experiencing and observing forms of incivility such as dismissive comments, exclusion from collaborations or meetings, intellectual dismissiveness, and nonverbal disrespect like being ignored during discussions. This aligns with previous studies which highlight that incivility in academic environments often manifests in covert and non-confrontational behaviours rather than overt aggression (Pearson & Porath, 2009; Leiter et al., 2010). Incivility was particularly prevalent during competitive situations such as grant applications, promotions, or leadership appointments. Departments with leadership struggles or hierarchical tensions exhibited more frequent incidents, confirming findings by Schilpzand et al. (2016), who noted that workplace competition and power dynamics exacerbate uncivil behaviour. Gender and employment status further influenced incivility experiences. Junior and adjunct faculty reported feelings of exclusion and condescension by senior staff, while female workers noted gender-based incivility through interruptions, exclusion from informal networks, and credit theft. These observations echo the documented challenges of marginalization faced by women and non-permanent staff in academia (Fox & Stallworth, 2010; O'Connor, 2018).

Psychological, emotional, and professional impact

Workplace incivility had significant emotional and psychological consequences. Respondents described feelings of anxiety, frustration, and isolation, impacting confidence and emotional well-being. Such effects are consistent with literature identifying workplace incivility as a chronic stressor that undermines psychological health (Cortina et al., 2001; Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Incivility also negatively influenced motivation and engagement. Many participants reported withdrawing from collaborative or voluntary activities, focusing instead on isolated tasks such as research or teaching. *“At some point, it affected my enthusiasm to contribute in faculty discussions. I just focused more on my research and teaching”* (**excerpt**

response from academician). This reaction supports findings by Lim and Cortina (2005) that incivility reduces organizational citizenship behaviours and engagement.

The impact extended to interpersonal relationships, with many respondents becoming cautious, reserved, or distrustful of colleagues who exhibited uncivil behaviour. *“Yes, I tend to avoid certain senior staff unless necessary. I maintain cordial relations but with caution” (excerpt response from junior banker)*. These strained relationships reduce opportunities for collaboration and collegial support, critical elements in academic success (Raver & Barling, 2008). Finally, experiences of incivility influenced career decisions. Several participants considered transferring institutions, avoiding leadership roles, or leaving their jobs due to feelings of marginalization and lack of support. This aligns with research linking workplace incivility to increased turnover intentions and job dissatisfaction (Pearson et al., 2000; Kavaklı, & Yıldırım, 2022; Namin, Øgaard, & Røislien, 2022; Faheem, Ali, Akhtar, & Asrar-ul-Haq, 2023; Islam, Parray, & Shah, 2024).

Organizational policies and effectiveness

Most respondents indicated a lack of specific policies targeting workplace incivility, relying instead on general conduct or anti-harassment codes. These policies were perceived as largely ineffective and poorly enforced, leading to a culture where incivility is tolerated or ignored. Specifically, it was noted from the interview that *“I am not aware, but if there any, I have not seen it before”*. This lack of awareness suggests inadequate communication or absence of clear policies addressing workplace incivility. This finding mirrors broader evidence that many organizations fail to implement proactive strategies to combat incivility (Schilpzand et al., 2016; Leiter et al., 2010). Limited formal support systems were reported, with many incidents left unresolved or dismissed as rivalry or differences in opinion. Barriers to addressing incivility included fear of retaliation, hierarchical protection of senior staff, lack of confidential reporting channels, and normalized cultural behaviours. Such challenges are consistent with literature emphasizing the difficulty of addressing incivility in hierarchical and political work environments like academia (Fox & Stallworth, 2010; O'Connor, 2018).

Social work-informed strategies and interventions

Respondents suggested integrating social work principles such as empowerment, advocacy, and emotional support into workplace interventions. Recommended strategies included clear, specific codes of conduct, confidential reporting mechanisms, mandatory training on ethics, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence, and embedding counselors or peer support groups within academic institutions. These suggestions align

with contemporary research advocating for comprehensive, systemic approaches to reducing workplace incivility by fostering psychological safety and inclusive cultures (Leiter & Day, 2013; Porath & Pearson, 2013). The emphasis on mentorship, especially for junior and marginalized staff, also reflects best practices in academic settings to promote equity and inclusion (O'Connor, 2018). Finally, leadership and human resource were identified as key actors responsible for modelling respectful behaviour, enforcing policies, and providing safe spaces for reporting and support. This reflects findings that effective management and human resource involvement are critical for reducing workplace incivility and enhancing employee well-being (Pearson et al., 2000; Schilpzand et al., 2016).

Summary/Conclusion

The study examined workplace incivility and its impact on employee well-being and performance in formal organisations. It was anchored on Affective Events Theory (AET) and Social Exchange Theory (SET). A qualitative research design was employed, with the study population comprising employees working at various levels across different sectors within Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria. Using purposive sampling, participants with direct experience or relevant knowledge of workplace incivility were selected to provide diverse perspectives. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis was applied to systematically examine the interview transcripts.

The findings revealed that incivility manifested in multiple forms, including verbal disrespect, exclusion from decision-making, intentional withholding of information, and subtle acts of sabotage. These behaviours originated both from colleagues and from superiors, indicating that workplace incivility occurs not only in hierarchical (vertical) relationships but also among peers (horizontal). Participants identified verbal disrespect—such as dismissive remarks, public criticism, and derogatory jokes—as the most common form. Several respondents reported that withholding vital work-related information by colleagues hindered their ability to perform effectively. This behaviour aligns with what Pearson and Porath (2005) describe as *passive incivility*, where non-cooperation indirectly undermines a colleague's work.

Additionally, some participants noted that workplace favouritism in resource allocation, promotions, and committee appointments contributed to a toxic environment and reinforced incivility. A notable finding was that organisational culture and weak enforcement of workplace conduct policies were perceived as enabling factors. Where leadership failed to address incivility, such behaviours became normalised, creating long-term negative effects on employee well-being and overall organisational performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study on workplace incivility and its impact on employee well-being and performance, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Organizations should create explicit policies defining acceptable and unacceptable workplace behaviours, including clear consequences for acts of incivility. These policies should be effectively communicated to all employees and strictly enforced to deter misconduct.
2. Leaders and supervisors should receive targeted training on ethical leadership, conflict resolution, and early intervention strategies. By modelling respectful behaviour, leaders can set the tone for workplace interactions and reduce tolerance for incivility.
3. Management should foster an organizational culture that values respect, inclusivity, and collaboration. This can be achieved through team-building activities, recognition programs, and employee engagement initiatives that encourage mutual respect.
4. Organizations should establish safe and confidential channels for employees to report incidents of incivility without fear of retaliation. Anonymity will encourage victims and witnesses to speak up, enabling timely intervention.
5. Regular workshops on emotional intelligence, active listening, and constructive feedback can help employees manage conflicts productively and reduce misinterpretations that often escalate into incivility.
6. Organizations should invest in mental health support services, stress management programs, and counselling for employees affected by incivility to mitigate its negative impact on well-being and performance.
7. Periodic surveys and assessments should be conducted to track workplace civility levels and identify emerging issues. Continuous monitoring will help in refining policies and interventions over time.

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