

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORKPLACE INCIVILITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN SABAH

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of this study is to investigate the relationship between workplace incivility and psychological distress in Sabah. The moderating variable of this study was education level. The research design is quantitative in nature. The frequent reports that appear in newspapers and other forms of media in Malaysia shows how prevalent the issue of workplace incivility has been happening in organizations throughout Malaysia. This quantitative study collected data from 240 private and public employees in Sabah using the convenient sampling method. The results show that employees in Sabah perceive a slightly below average level of incivility from their superiors as well as from their peers. The level of incivility received from their superiors was significantly higher than their peers. Females reported higher levels of perceived workplace incivility as compared to the males. The regression analysis found that 59.8 percent of the variance in psychological distress can be explained by workplace incivility both by the superiors as well as peers. Education was found not to moderate the relationship between workplace incivility and psychological distress. The result of this study does support previous studies underlining the importance of management to try to keep the levels of workplace incivility as low as possible in their organizations.

Keywords: Workplace incivility, psychological distress, education level.

Introduction:

The frequent reports that appear in newspapers and other forms of media in Malaysia shows how prevalent the issue of workplace incivility has been happening in organizations throughout Malaysia. Most of these cases of workplace incivility concerns issues involving dishonesty, absenteeism, accident, & employee turnover, bribery, poor work attitude, and industrial accidents. In addition, the seriousness of this issue have brought about a serious focus on workplace incivility by the respective government agencies which involve the Departments in the Ministry of Human Resources, such as the Social Security Organization (SOCSO), Labor Department, and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), (Faridahwati & Rahman, 2006).

Literature Review:

Workplace incivility. In the organizational literature, workplace incivility is defined as, “low-intensity deviant behaviors with an ambiguous intent to harm the target” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 456). Pearson and Porath (2005) estimate that incivility within organizations leads to the turnover of 1 out of 8 affected employees, and have the potential to cost companies an average of \$50,000 per lost employee in terms of productivity, potential litigation, and the hiring of new employees.

More detailed discussion about the concept of workplace incivility appears in a study done by Lim, Cortina, and Magley (2008), where they argued that there are three important features that differentiate incivility from other forms of workplace mistreatment. Those are: violation of workplace norm of respect, less intensity, and ambiguous intention to harm.

In Malaysia, the study carried out by Faridahwati (2003) on workplace incivility in the hotel industry in Langkawi shows that workplace incivility was significant in the industry. It was found that in the hotel industry the workplace incivility takes the form of organizational WDB (WDBO) and interpersonal WDB (WDBI).

Workplace incivility was also found to be absent in teaching professions in Malaysia. In a study done by Abdul Rahim (2002) on factors that influence stress and intention to leave the teaching profession among secondary and primary teacher in Kota Tinggi, Johor, and in another study by Mazlan (2002) on job stress among primary school teachers at Sekolah Rendah Kawasan Zon Tenggara, Kulai, Johor Darul Takzim, indicated that most of the incivility experienced by teachers in their schools originate from the pupil misbehavior which lead to the main cause of psychological distress among teachers.

Most of the studies in Malaysia fall short of investigating the forms of workplace incivility.. As such, this study investigates workplace incivility among employees from the private and government sector in the Kota Kinabalu area. The use of education as a moderator will provide a better and clearer knowledge on the workings of workplace incivility in Malaysia.

Psychological Distress. An individual experiencing workplace incivility usually will suffer various negative outcomes. The support for this can be found from the studies in clinical psychology conducted by Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, (2001). Psychological distress can bring about a serious negative physiological effects on the human body. This may include an increased heart rate and high blood pressure. This in turn may bring about other complications to the human body such as, ulcers, migraines, and heart disease.

Based on previous studies, some researchers reported that workplace incivility sufferers have inferior mental health (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Hjelt-Back, 1994). The workplace incivility tends to help develop negative mental and physical health conditions for them. In contrast chronic stressors tend to be different from workplace incivility stressor in the time duration, where the onset that is difficult to make out and that the offset is also very difficult to be known (Hepburn, Loughlin, & Barling, 1997; Wheaton, 1997).

Moreover, workplace incivility sometimes qualifies as chronic stressors or hassles. These events would bring about “socially noxious environments” (Gottlieb, 1997, p. 5) for employees, which could trigger mental and physical health problems. Gottlieb (1997, p. 10). On the other hand, Lazarus and colleagues termed these experiences workplace incivility, that is, insidious frustrations that become permanent and continuously present in everyday workplace environment (e.g., DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, (1988); Lazarus & Folkman, (1984)).

Previous research has shown a relationship between workplace incivility and psychological distress and well-being (Cortina et al., 2001). The current study was designed to look at workplace incivility caused by peers and superiors in private and government sectors in the Kota Kinabalu area and to see how it influence psychological distress. This study also examine whether demography will moderate the relationship between workplace incivility and psychological distress. This moderator is intended to test a different variable as compared with previous research on incivility that uses gender as a moderator, since it is assumed that women and men have different incivility experiences and perceptions. The objectives of this study are:

- i. To identify the level of workplace incivility among private and public employees in Sabah.
- ii. To examine the relationship between workplace incivility and psychological distress
- iii. To identify the differences in perceived workplace incivility between males and females.
- iv. To investigate whether education level moderates the relationship between workplace incivility and psychological distress

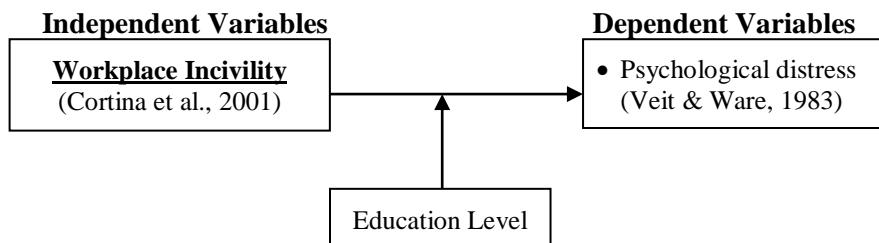
Methodology:

The research design is quantitative in nature. The study populations are the working adults in private and government sectors in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The quantitative method (questionnaires) was applied to determine the findings of the questionnaire which involves the analysis of numerical data and provides precise results. A total of 240 working adults were surveyed for this study. A convenient sampling method was used for data collection.

The Workplace Incivility Scale (WIS) proposed by Cortina et al., 2001 was adopted for this study. The Workplace Incivility Scale (WIS) is a twelve item scale using a 5 point likert scale. The measure has a strong reliability and construct validity since Cortina et al. (2001) reported an alpha coefficient of .89 for the Workplace Incivility Scale and found that it is correlated .59 with Donovan, Drasgow, and Munson's (1998) Perception of Fair Interpersonal Treatment Scale.

Psychological distress was measured using the general well-being scale from the study of Veit & Ware, 1983. These questions are about how respondent feel, and how things have been with them mostly during the past few months. A 5-point likert scale 1 = None of the time, 2 = A little of the time, 3 = Some of the time, 4 = Most of the time, and 5 = All of the time was used for this measure. The scale asks the question such as: "How often did you feel depressed?" "How often did you feel lonely?", and "How often did you feel tired out for no good reason?"

Research Framework:



Hypothesis 1

Workplace incivility has a significant relationship with Psychological distress

Hypothesis 2

There is a significant difference in the perception of workplace incivility between men and women.

Hypothesis 3

Education level significantly moderates the relationship between workplace incivility and Psychological distress

Results:

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents. The questionnaire has been distributed to workers in the private and government sector in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. From 300 questionnaires, only 253 were returned. All these questionnaires were screened and only 240 questionnaires were usable.

From the sample collected, 46.7 percent respondents are males (N=112), and 53.3 percent respondents are females (N=128). In terms of job position, most of the respondents are working as general employees (38.3 percent, N=92), followed by lower management with 27.9 percent (N=67), other job position with 16.3 percent (N=39), and middle management with 11.7 percent (N=28). Lastly, top management has the lowest number of respondents at 5.8 percent (N=14).

On respondent's education level, most of the respondents have their diploma (29.2 percent, N=70), 20 percent (N=48) of respondents have their SPM, 19.2 percent (N=46) has Degree, 17.9 percent (N=43) respondent has STPM, 5.8 percent (N=14) has PMR, 4.6 percent (N=11) has Master's Degree, and 2.9 percent (N=7) has other education certificates. PHD level qualification recorded the lowest number of respondents with 0.4 percent (N=1).

The Cronbach's alpha for workplace incivility is 0.896 which is high reliable and very strong. No items have been dropped. The cronbach's alpha for superior(s) is 0.767 which is considered acceptable because the coefficient is greater than 0.6, but less than 0.8, as advised by Sekaran (2003). On the other hand, peer(s) have a high reliability of 0.909 with no items dropped.

The Cronbach's alpha is for psychological distress is 0.828, and with no items dropped. It is considered as having a high reliability which is more than 0.8. (Sekaran, 2003)

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of variables

Variable	Mean	Standard. Deviation
Workplace Incivility	1.9250	0.58004
• Superior(s)	• 1.9646	• 0.64127
• Peer(s)	• 1.8854	• 0.64212
• Psychological Distress	• 2.1463	• 0.60312

Here workplace incivility contains 2 subsets which were workplace incivility perceived from their superior(s) or from their peer(s). The mean value 1.9646 for superior(s) and mean value 1.8854 for peer(s), shows that superiors show a slightly higher perceived incivility scores from their peers.

Most of the respondents agree that they suffer moderate psychological distress (Mean=2.1463, standard deviation = 0.60312) at work.

Table 2: Model Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	F	Sig.(F)
1	.773 ^a	.598	.597	354.378	.000

As depicted from the table 2 above, the result of the multiple linear regression models can be seen that at 5 percent significant level, with F = 345.378; Sig. = .000, the model R Square is at 0.598, meaning that 59.8 percent of the variance in psychological distress is explained by workplace incivility both by the superiors as well as peers.

Table 3: T-test for Male and Female

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	F	P-value
Mean Workplace Incivility	Male	112	1.8467	.49853	.04711	10.968	0.001
	Female	128	1.9935	.63702	.05631		

*P>0.05

Independent Sample T-Test was also conducted to analyze the significant difference in perception of workplace incivility between men and women. From Table 3 above (see Appendix), the results revealed

there are significant differences in perception of workplace incivility between males and females where the $F= 10.968$, and the $P= 0.001$ ($p < 0.05$). From the "group statistics", the mean value for men (1) is 1.846 and the mean value for female (0) is 1.9935. This result show that, female perceive higher workplace incivility than men. These results support the Hypothesis 2.

Table 4: Education Level with Independent Variables

Variables	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
Workplace Incivility	.717	.000	.710	.000	.659	.000
Education Level			.036	.036	-.073	.246
Moderator1(WkpExp*Edu)					.051	.072
R^2	.773		.778		.782	
Adj R^2	.597		.602		.606	
Sig. F Change	.000		.036		.072	

From Table 4 result shows that R^2 at step 2 and 3 are at .778 and .782 respectively. The Sig. F Change value for step 2 is significant with Sig. F Change value .036, while step 3 (.072) is not significant which is more than 5 percent significant level. This result indicates that education level does not significantly moderate the relationship between workplace incivility and individual outcomes.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the findings, workplace incivility has significant relationship with psychological distress at the 5 percent significant level, $t = 18.825$; $Sig. = .000$. Furthermore, according to the Unstandardized Coefficients, the independent variable which is workplace incivility is equal to .717. The result shows that the independent variable in this study is positively related to the model.

According to previous literature, several consequences of workplace incivility have been noted including such affective consequences as negative mood or affect, irritation, depression, and increased emotional strain (Johnson & Indvik, 2001; Pearson et al., 2001; Grandey, 2004). Other consequences include job dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction with supervisors, and coworkers (Burnfield, Clark, Devendorf & Jex, 2004).

Supported by Pearson et al. (2000) study, reported that workplace incivility affected respondents' behavior in terms of their performance. MacKinnon (1994) also mentioned that following workplace incivility employees stopped engaging in Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB's), such as helping new hires, participating in committees, and assisting coworkers.

The finding in this study which found significantly higher perceived work incivility from superiors than from peers is in line with Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The theory suggests that hostility and aggression between social groups is likely to follow a hierarchical path from the top down, such that members of the dominant group are more likely to abuse and mistreat members of the subordinate group (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

In order to reduce experiencing workplace incivility among management line, organizations should communicate clearly its expectations, provide sufficient opportunities for their managers to move to higher positions in the organizational hierarchy, and build cohesive cross functional work teams.

Interestingly this study found that women perceived higher workplace incivility than men. This finding is consistent with the past literature on perceptions of workplace incivility and supported by the work of Young et al. (2003) and Montgomery et al. (2004) where they mentioned that women and men who experience a similar situation may perceive them differently, and that women may be more likely to label a negative interaction as offensive compared to men. This finding supported by Montgomery et al. (2004) where they theorized that personal norms of respect and propriety vary along gender lines, due to women's heightened sensitivity to the nuances of social behavior.

Empirical studies have documented harmful effects of workplace incivility on targeted employees. Pearson, Andersson, and Porath (2000) for example, found that qualitative evidence of impaired

concentration, productivity decline, and turnover cognitions among employees who had faced incivility at work; 12% ultimately quit their jobs. Similarly, Cortina et al. (2001) reported that workplace incivility experiences were associated with increased job withdrawal, lower job satisfaction, and greater psychological distress. Supporting these previous studies, this study, found a significant relationship between workplace incivility and psychological distress.

It is imperative that senior management make a concerted effort to minimize workplace incivility or if possible to stamp it out entirely from their organization due to its significant impact on negative employee behavior as well as overall employee well-being. It is on a positive note to report as well that the level of workplace incivility is below average in Sabah, Malaysia.

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