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TIT FOR TAT? THE SPIRALING EFFECT OF INCIVILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

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In this article we introduce the concept of workplace incivility and explain how incivility can potentially spiral into increasingly intense aggressive behaviors. To gain an understanding of the mechanisms that underlie an "incivility spiral," we examine what happens at key points: the starting and tipping points. Furthermore, we describe several factors that can facilitate the occurrence and escalation of an incivility spiral and the secondary spirals that can result. We offer research propositions and discuss implications of workplace incivility for researchers and practitioners.

> You should follow honorable mean and vent your wrath on the wicked (Disticha Catoni, *A Medieval Textbook*, as quoted in Elias, 1982: 63).

Civility traditionally has been viewed by society as a source of power in American culture—a means of gaining favor and asserting cultural superiority—an acceptable ploy for attaining social advantage. The spread of civility has served to muffle the issue of class, softening the divisions between rich and poor and employers and employees (Elias, 1982; Morris, 1996). In scholarly work authors have suggested civility serves as the vehicle for providing answers to unanswered questions of conduct (Bellah, 1970) and have linked civility to such related phenomena as the necessity for ritualized behavior in light of divorce (Johnson, 1988), the foundation for human rationality necessary for successful education (Shulman & Carey, 1984), and the courteous treatment of professional colleagues in correspondence and feedback (Roberts, 1985).

Nonetheless, civility is not only functional or instrumental but holds moral implications as well. The basis for civility is love of thy neighbor—a demonstration of respect for fellow human beings (Carter, 1998; Elias, 1982; Wilson, 1993). Carter has referred to civility as "the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake of living together" (1998: 11) and Wilson as "a way of signaling the existence of self-control" (1993: 83). Although manifest in varied ways, norms concerning how people ought to behave in order to live cooperatively can be witnessed in every community and culture (Elias, 1982; Goffman, 1967; Hartman, 1996). Thus, civility, as a moral standard, can be considered a virtue.

According to some social scientists and historians (e.g., Carter, 1998; Chen & Eastman, 1997; Elias, 1982; Erickson, 1962; Goffman, 1967), the need for civility becomes even greater when the interactions among people increase in complexity and frequency. Parties in complex interactions must attune their conduct to that of others by behaving in predictably "civil" ways:

> The web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfill its social function. The individual is compelled to regulate his conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner . . . . This seeks to prevent offenses . . . (Elias, 1982: 232).

As we approach the next millennium, we face the growing challenge of relationships mediated by high-tech, asynchronous, global interaction. With history as counsel, one might assume a need for increased civility in forging and reconciling increasingly complex interactions. Yet, despite the implicit need for increasingly civil interaction, a recent poll of the American public revealed that 90 percent of the respondents

We greatly appreciate the inspiring comments of Blake Ashforth and the three anonymous reviewers on several drafts of this article. Their patience, persistence, and insightful thinking contributed immensely to our conceptualization of incivility in this and related works.

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think incivility is a serious problem (Marks, 1996).

Today—some scholars and social critics believe—we support an ethic of self-expression, and we detest the pretense of civility because we believe it denies our desire for freedom and individuality (e.g., Gordon, 1989; Morris, 1996; Steinberg, 1996; Wilson, 1993). This has been deemed the age of "whatever," implying that no one wants to make a judgment, impose a standard, or call conduct unacceptable (Morris, 1996). Historians may view the dawn of the twenty-first century as a time of thoughtless acts and rudeness: we tailgate, even in the slow lane; we dial wrong numbers and then slam the receiver on the innocent respondent; we break appointments with nonchalance. Indeed, the nineties have been characterized by rudeness to such an extent that "etiquette experts" are proliferating, spreading the gospel of good manners to families, social organizations, and businesses (e.g., Hamilton & Sullivan, 1997; Martin, 1996).

The business world was thought by many to be one of the last bastions of civility. The relationship between coworkers was, for decades, characterized by formality yet friendliness, distance yet politeness. However, business has started to reflect the informality of society at large. Scholars have cited employee diversity, reengineering, downsizing, budget cuts, increased pressures for productivity, autocratic work environments, and the use of part-time employees as causes for the increase in uncivil and aggressive workplace behaviors (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Chen & Eastman, 1997; Neuman & Baron, 1997). As organizations have flattened and gone casual, there are fewer obvious cues as to what constitutes "proper" business behavior (Martin, 1996; Morand, 1998).

Examples of incivility in the workplace abound: answering the phone with a "yeah," neglecting to say thank you or please, using voice mail to screen calls, leaving a half cup of coffee behind to avoid having to brew the next pot, standing uninvited but impatiently over the desk of someone engaged in a telephone conversation, dropping trash on the floor and leaving it for the maintenance crew to clean up, and talking loudly on the phone about personal matters (Martin, 1996). As the complexity of workplace interaction increases, discourteous behavior has more nuances: there are a greater number of ways to show disregard for fellow workers (Carter, 1998; Marks, 1996; Neuman & Baron, 1997).

In the burgeoning stream of research on "deviant behavior," "aggression," and "violence" in the workplace, researchers have focused mainly on physical, active, and direct forms of aggression—those overt types of aggression undoubtedly motivated by intent to harm (e.g., Folger, Robinson, Dietz, McLean Parks, & Baron, 1998; O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996; Perlow & Latham, 1993; Robinson & Bennett, 1995, 1997; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1996; VandenBos & Bulatao, 1996). Data have confirmed that aggression and violence occur in the American workplace. Over 20 percent of the human resource managers participating in a recent study reported that their organizations had experienced workplace violence since 1990, and an additional 33 percent reported that there had been threats of violence in their workplace (Romano, 1994). During a 12-month period ending in 1993, an estimated 2.2 million U.S. workers were victims of physical attacks, 6.3 million were threatened, and 16.1 million were harassed (Northwestern National Life Insurance Company, 1993). It has been estimated that, on the average, there are more than 2 million physical assaults in the workplace per year, and over 1,000 homicides (Segal, 1994).

Little research, however, has been conducted on lesser forms of mistreatment, such as rude comments, thoughtless acts, or negative gestures (Neuman & Baron, 1997). Nonetheless, a survey of 178 employees revealed that a majority of the aggression occurring in work settings is of a less intense form: verbal rather than physical, passive rather than active, indirect rather than direct, and subtle rather than overt (Baron & Neuman, 1996). Several other studies have shown similar findings. In a survey of 338 university employees in Finland, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Hjelt-Back (1994) found that 32 percent of the respondents had observed others being exposed to verbally harassing behavior at work. A survey of first-line American workers revealed that more than half of the 327 respondents reported experiencing acts of mistreatment at work within a 3-year time frame (Ehrlich & Larcom, 1994). Moreover, in a survey of 603 Toronto nurses, Graydon, Kasta, and Khan (1994) found that 33 percent had experienced

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verbal abuse during their previous 5 days of work. Less intense forms of mistreatment in the workplace, such as incivilities, deserve scholarly attention.

Of particular interest is whether these less intense forms of mistreatment can be precursors to more intense, overtly aggressive, and/or violent acts (Baron & Neuman, 1996; MacKinnon, 1994). In the poll of the American public mentioned previously, 91 percent of the respondents surveyed believe that incivility has contributed to the increase in violence in this country (Marks, 1996). Some empirical research has verified this belief. For instance, researchers have shown incivilities to be highly correlated with crime, progressing in an upward-spiraling process to increasingly serious levels (Goldstein, 1994; Taylor & Gottfredson, 1986). In a study of incarcerated males, Felson and Steadman (1983) revealed that the sequence of events leading up to assault invariably begins with an exchange of rude comments, which generates an attack on identity and spirals ultimately to physical attack. Further, Spratlen (1994) found workplace mistreatment in a health care setting to be directly related to interpersonal violence.

It has been suggested that, in the workplace, violence is rarely a spontaneous act but more often the culmination of escalating patterns of negative interaction between individuals (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Kinney, 1995). Thus, workplace incivility may very well be a precursor to more intense, overtly aggressive acts in the workplace.

Our aim in this article is to introduce the concept of workplace incivility and examine how it may relate to more intense forms of workplace aggression. To capture some of the less intense forms of organizational mistreatment, we present the concept of workplace incivility. We establish a place for workplace incivility among several of the the other conceptualizations of mistreatment in organizations, portraying incivility as a social interaction. We then explain, building a framework and offering research propositions, how incivility can spiral and potentially escalate into increasingly intense, aggressive workplace behaviors. Finally, we discuss some of the research and practical implications.

DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

Civility and Incivility

The terms *civility* and *incivility* have come into vogue in the past several years. Overused and often misconstrued, both have lost some of their intended meaning. Encompassing everything from etiquette to professional conduct, from civic order to a moral imperative (Carter, 1998; Gladwell, 1996; Martin, 1996; Roberts, 1985), "civility" has transcended its dictionary definition of "courtesy and politeness toward fellow human beings" (*Random House Dictionary*). Civil behavior involves treating others with dignity, acting with regard to others' feelings, and preserving the social norms for mutual respect (Carter, 1998; Elias, 1982; Johnson, 1988; Morris, 1996). Observing formal rules of etiquette has less to do with civility than does being polite and demonstrating a sensibility of concern and regard (Carter, 1998).

Workplace civility, then—as a behavior involving politeness and regard for others in the workplace, within workplace norms for respect—can be distinguished from similar workplace behaviors and values, such as prosocial organizational behavior (e.g., Brief & Motowidlo, 1986), organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Organ, 1988), ingratiation (e.g., Yukl & Falbe, 1990), and concern for others (Ravlin & Meglino, 1987). Like many extrarole behaviors in organizations, civility includes modest, trivial behaviors that do not often invite public scrutiny or official documentation (Van Dyne, Cummings, & McLean Parks, 1995). However, unlike such extrarole behaviors as prosocial organizational behavior and organizational citizenship behavior, workplace civility does not necessarily imply the intent of benefit to the organization. One may be civil with intent to benefit the organization, or one may be civil without intent (e.g., because it is "the right thing to do").

Similarly, one can distinguish civility from the influence tactic of ingratiation—a behavior in which an agent seeks to increase a target's feelings of positive regard in order to get the target to do something (Yukl & Falbe, 1990)—because of the apparent intent to influence that is inherent in such behavior. Further, workplace civility can be differentiated from the work value "concern for others" (Ravlin & Meglino, 1987). Whereas a work value is an intrinsic, enduring perspective of what is right or wrong in a work

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setting, capable of influencing perceptions and behaviors, workplace civility is a behavior that helps to preserve the norms for mutual respect in the workplace. Civility reflects concern for others.

Like civility, "incivility" has taken on a variety of nuances—from breaches of etiquette to professional misconduct, from general civil unrest to moral decay (Carter, 1998; Gladwell, 1996; Johnson, 1988; Martin, 1996; Roberts, 1985). The dictionary definition of incivility is more specific, however. The *Random House Dictionary* defines incivility as "the quality or condition of being uncivil, uncivil behavior or treatment" and uncivil as "without good manners, unmannerly, rude, impolite, discourteous." As the antonym of civility, incivility implies rudeness and disregard for others, in violation of norms for respect in interpersonal relations (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Morris, 1996). In the criminology literature, for example, authors have defined incivilities as "low-level breaches of community standards that signal an erosion of conventionally accepted norms and values" (LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992: 311–312). Whereas civil behavior is expected and often goes unnoticed, uncivil behavior is conspicuous (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Sapir, 1927).

We have established that incivility involves acting rudely or discourteously, without regard for others, in violation of norms for respect in social interactions. It follows, then, that workplace incivility involves acting with disregard for others in the workplace, in violation of workplace norms for respect. Workplace norms are the norms of the community of which one is a part while at work, consisting of basic moral standards and others that have arisen out of the tradition of that community, including those prescribed by formal and informal organizational policies, rules, and procedures (Feldman, 1984; Hartman, 1996). We recognize that particular norms differ across organizations, industries, and cultures, but we posit that in every workplace there exist norms for respect for fellow coworkers—a shared moral understanding and sentiment among the members of the organization that allow cooperation (Hartman, 1996; Solomon, 1998)—and that incivility is in violation of these norms. What is considered to be uncivil in one organization may not be universally considered uncivil, yet we can still hold a common understanding of workplace incivility as behavior that disrupts mutual respect in the workplace.

Incivility and Other Forms of Mistreatment in Organizations

Mistreatment in organizations has been described, modeled, and analyzed in various conceptual forms: as aggressive (e.g., Baron & Neuman, 1996; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996), violent (e.g., Kinney, 1995; VandenBos & Bulatao, 1996), harassing (e.g., Bjorkqvist et al., 1994), physically abusive (e.g., Perlow & Latham, 1993), tyrannical (e.g., Ashforth, 1994), deviant (e.g., Robinson & Bennett, 1995, 1997), and antisocial (e.g., Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997) workplace behaviors. Some of these concepts capture more intense forms of mistreatment—those with obvious intent to harm—yet neglect to include recognition of the less intense forms of mistreatment, in which intent to harm is less obvious. Some represent violation of workplace norms, whereas others do not necessarily involve norm violation. What must be addressed at this point is how the concept of workplace incivility differs from and overlaps with these other conceptualizations of mistreatment in organizations.

Aggressive behavior and violence have received recent attention in the academic and practitioner management literature (e.g., Baron & Neuman, 1996; Folger et al., 1998; Kinney, 1995; Neuman & Baron, 1997; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1996; VandenBos & Bulatao, 1996; Weisinger, 1995). Although there has been some disagreement among social scientists in the fields of criminology, psychology, and sociology as to the definitions of and differences between aggression and violence (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), researchers examining aggression and violence in organizations seem to concur that aggression is attempted injurious or destructive behavior, in violation of social norms, and that violence is a high-intensity, physical form of aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1996; VandenBos & Bulatao, 1996).

A tremendous range and variety of acts constitute workplace aggression, from vandalism and sabotage to harassment, physical abuse, and homicide (Neuman & Baron, 1997). The common aspect of all of these acts of aggression is the obvious intent to harm or injure someone physically or psychologically (Baron & Richardson, 1994; Berkowitz, 1993; Neuman & Baron,

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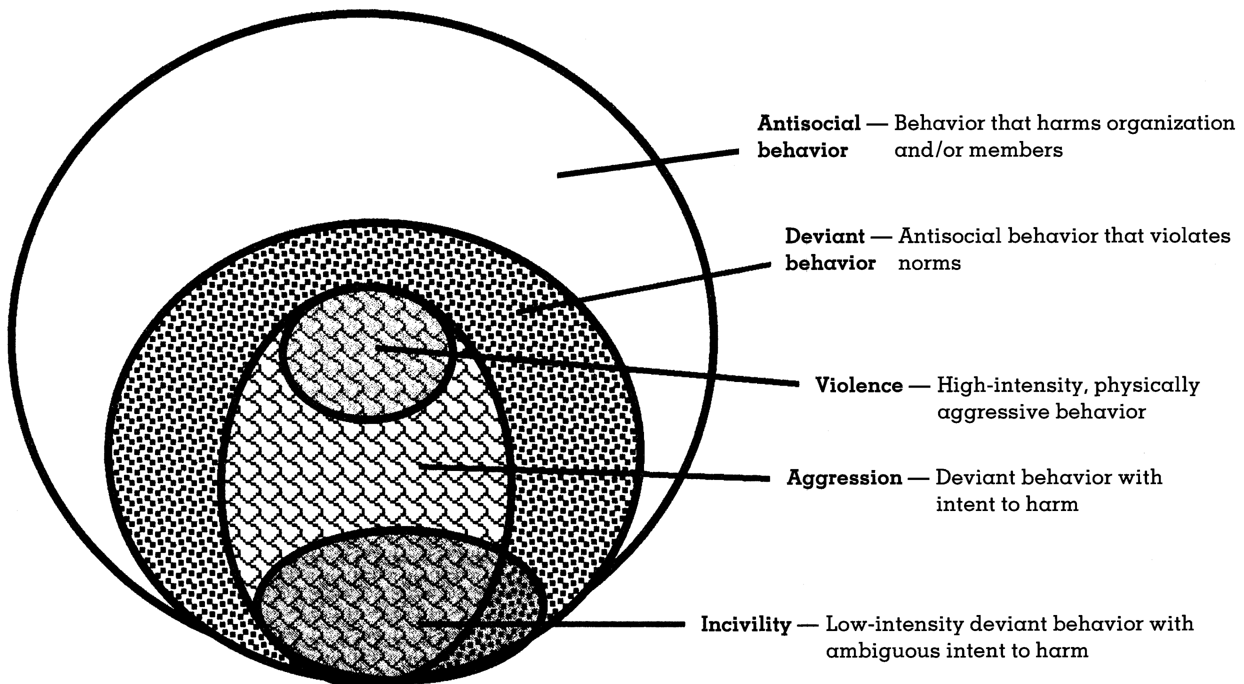
1997; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). A distinguishing characteristic of incivility, however, is that the intent to harm—as perceived through the eyes of the instigator, the target, and/or the observers—is ambiguous. One may behave uncivilly as a reflection of intent to harm the target, or one may behave uncivilly without intent (e.g., ignorance or oversight). Furthermore, the instigator may intend to harm the target, yet he or she may not even be conscious of such intent. Unlike instigators of aggression, instigators of incivility can easily deny or bury any intent, if present, in ignorance of the effect (e.g., "It wasn't meant as an attack"), in misinterpretation by the target (e.g., "I didn't mean to be rude; I was just in a hurry"), or in hypersensitivity of the target (e.g., "Don't take it so personally;" Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997; Kramer, 1994; Morrill, 1992). With incivility, the intent is not transparent and is subject to varying interpretation.

Incivility is similar in intensity to several dimensions of the construct of petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994). Both constructs include behaviors demonstrating a lack of consideration toward others, in which the intent to harm is ambiguous. Petty tyranny, however, is a profile attributed to leaders, referring also to a host of more intense negative behaviors associated with the instigator's abuse of position of authority.

Two other conceptualizations of workplace mistreatment receiving recent attention are the overlapping constructs of deviant and antisocial employee behaviors. Robinson and Bennett have defined employee deviance as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and, in so doing, threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both" (1995: 556). This definition implies a broad range of mistreatment—both of people and of property in organizations, with and without intent to harm—and is inclusive of workplace aggression and incivility. Even more broadly encompassing than employee deviance, and also inclusive of workplace aggression and incivility, is antisocial employee behavior, which Giacalone and Greenberg have defined as "any behavior that brings harm, or is intended to bring harm, to an organization, its employees, or stakeholders" (1997: vii).

To summarize, we can illustrate (as shown in Figure 1) how incivility differs from and overlaps with some of these other forms of mistreatment in organizations. Antisocial employee behavior, as behavior that brings harm to the

FIGURE 1
Incivility and Other Forms of Mistreatment in Organizations



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organization and/or its stakeholders, is inclusive of the other conceptualizations of mistreatment in organizations. Deviant employee behavior is a type of antisocial behavior that violates workplace norms and includes employee aggression and incivility. Aggression is inclusive of violence and of some forms of incivility (e.g., those *with* intent to harm, but in which the intent—as perceived by the instigator, the target, and/or observers—is ambiguous). Yet other forms of incivility (e.g., those *without* intent to harm, but in which the intent is ambiguous, such as those that occur out of ignorance or oversight) lie outside the realm of aggression. Thus, incivility is, like aggression, a deviant behavior, but one that is less intense and ambiguous as to intent to harm.

Thus, based on the previous discussion and in light of the conceptual similarities and distinctions among incivility and existing constructs, we offer the following working definition of workplace incivility:

> *Workplace incivility is low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others.*

Workplace Incivility As a Social Interaction

Incivility is an interactive event—an event in which two or more parties are involved (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Carter, 1998). The instigator(s), the target(s), the observer(s), and the social context all contribute to and are affected by an uncivil encounter. Emphasizing this characteristic of incivility while recognizing its moral implications, we adopt a social interactionist perspective on the concept of incivility and its escalation, just as a recent and prominent theory of aggression—the theory of coercive actions (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994)—takes a social interactionist perspective on the concepts of aggression and violence.

In viewing aggression as a social interaction, Tedeschi and Felson (1994) solve some of the definitional problems inherent in the concept of aggression by integrating the concepts of aggression and violence into the concept of "coercive action," which they describe as an action taken with the intent of imposing harm on another person. Encompassing a fairly wide range of behaviors—from threats (the communication of intention to harm) to maligning insults, violence, and homicide—the term *coercive actions* includes all those moderate- to high-intensity behaviors that occur to deter and compel others, to obtain justice, or to assert and defend one's identity. Because the term corresponds well with our current conceptualization, we have chosen to use "coercive actions" and not "aggression" to describe those more intense behaviors beyond incivility that involve the obvious intent to harm in organizations. Thus, in adopting the social interactionist perspective and the accompanying terminology, we propose that incivilities are exchanged between individuals and that this dynamic interchange can, in turn, emerge into an exchange of coercive actions whereby the obvious intent to harm comes into play.

Unlike much of the recent research in which researchers model workplace aggression and deviance as single acts in time—focusing on the motives of the instigator (e.g., O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996; Robinson & Bennett, 1997)—our social interactionist perspective emphasizes the interpersonal and situational factors involved in the exchange of incivilities and coercive actions. This perspective allows us to examine incivility and coercive action as processes rather than as events—processes affected by a particular set of constraints that make up the situation.

That is not to say that the determination of whether an uncivil or coercive behavior is good or bad is dependent on the situation. We assert that incivility and coercive actions are negative behaviors but that it is important to consider the situation in understanding how the process of exchange between parties unfolds. For example, the situation can sometimes cause instigators to perceive their own incivilities as legitimate or moralistic, potentially perpetuating the exchange of negative behaviors. This does not make incivility "right" or "good;" it merely helps to explain how the negative behaviors continue or escalate. Considering the situation allows us to acknowledge that specific workplace norms do, indeed, vary, at the same time recognizing that in every organization norms for mutual respect are necessary for employees to work together (Hartman, 1996; Solomon, 1998).

In the next section we provide a framework, based on our view of incivility as a social inter-

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action between two or more parties, depicting how incivility spirals begin and how they can potentially escalate into an exchange of coercive actions within an organization.

THE INCIVILITY SPIRAL

> The pleasantries are the first to go: the pleases, the thank-yous, and the excuse-mes. Pretty soon, no one holds a door open, returns a smile, or lets another driver move ahead of them in traffic (Steinberg, 1996: 13).

Spirals or circular patterns have been used to explain several important phenomena in organizations, at varying levels of analysis. For example, scholars have used spirals to explain such phenomena as organizational decline (Hambrick & D'Aveni, 1988; Masuch, 1985), the relationship between efficacy and performance (Lindsley, Brass, & Thomas, 1995), and the perpetuation of tyrannical leadership behaviors (Ashforth, 1994). Defined as a pattern of consecutive increases or decreases (Lindsley et al., 1995), spirals in organizations are created by human actors because they lack adequate understanding of their situation or are unwilling or unable to alter their behavior (Masuch, 1985). In examining the escalation of incivility into coercive action in organizations, one would term the potential spiral *deviation amplifying*, as the negative action of one party leads to the negative action of the second party, which results in increasingly counterproductive behaviors (Masuch, 1985).

The existence of interpersonal conflict spirals has been well documented. A number of researchers have demonstrated the relation between perceived wrongdoing and subsequent aggressive actions that escalate into a spiral of conflict (e.g., Bies & Tripp, 1995; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Youngs, 1986). One person mocks another; the second responds with an obscene insult. The first shoves; the second hits. And the conflict escalates until one person is seriously wounded. Examining 70 transactions that ended in murder, Luckenbill (1977) found that all involved a transaction in which the victim issued what the offender deemed an offensive move; the offender retaliated with a verbal or physical challenge; a working agreement favoring the use of violence was forged with the victim's response; and a battle ensued, leaving the victim dead or dying. The use of coercion usually leads to countercoercion, resulting in an escalating spiral. As the escalation of coercion progresses, the stakes of the dispute seem to rise for both sides, and inhibitions about hurting the other side are reduced (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Despite strong evidence of the existence of these spirals, however, scholars have devoted relatively little theoretical and empirical attention to the mechanisms that underlie the escalation of coercive behavior (Kim & Smith, 1993).

Baron and Neuman (1996) have posited that, in organizations, acts of "aggression" that are verbal and/or less intense in nature serve as the initial step in an upward spiral that leads to physical and/or more intense forms of aggression. Thus, we address this question in the following paragraphs: What sort of social interaction transpires prior to the more overt acts of aggression, before obvious intent to harm comes into play? We propose that an important aspect of workplace incivility is that it can be a factor in the formation and escalation of conflict spirals in organizations—that incivility may be a precursor to the exchange of coercive actions. In an attempt to understand the mechanisms that underlie these incivility spirals, we examine what happens at key points in the spiral: the starting and tipping points. Furthermore, we describe some of the factors that can facilitate the occurrence and escalation of an incivility spiral, as well as the secondary spirals that can result. Figure 2 presents a conceptual framework summarizing this potential spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. Although incivility spirals can take numerous forms, involving varying numbers of parties and diverse types of uncivil and coercive behaviors, we show a *sample* incivility spiral depicting a possible dyadic interaction in Figure 3.

The Starting Point

In a study of the sequence of events in aggressive interactions, Felson (1982) found that violent incidents usually begin when someone believes that a norm has been violated. Incivility, as a breach of norms for mutual respect, can engender perceptions of interactional injustice (Bies, in press; Bies & Moag, 1986). When norms concerning demeanor, consideration, and politeness are not met, perceptions of unfairness concerning interpersonal treatment (interactional

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FIGURE 2
Conceptual Framework for the Spiraling Effect of Incivility in the Workplace

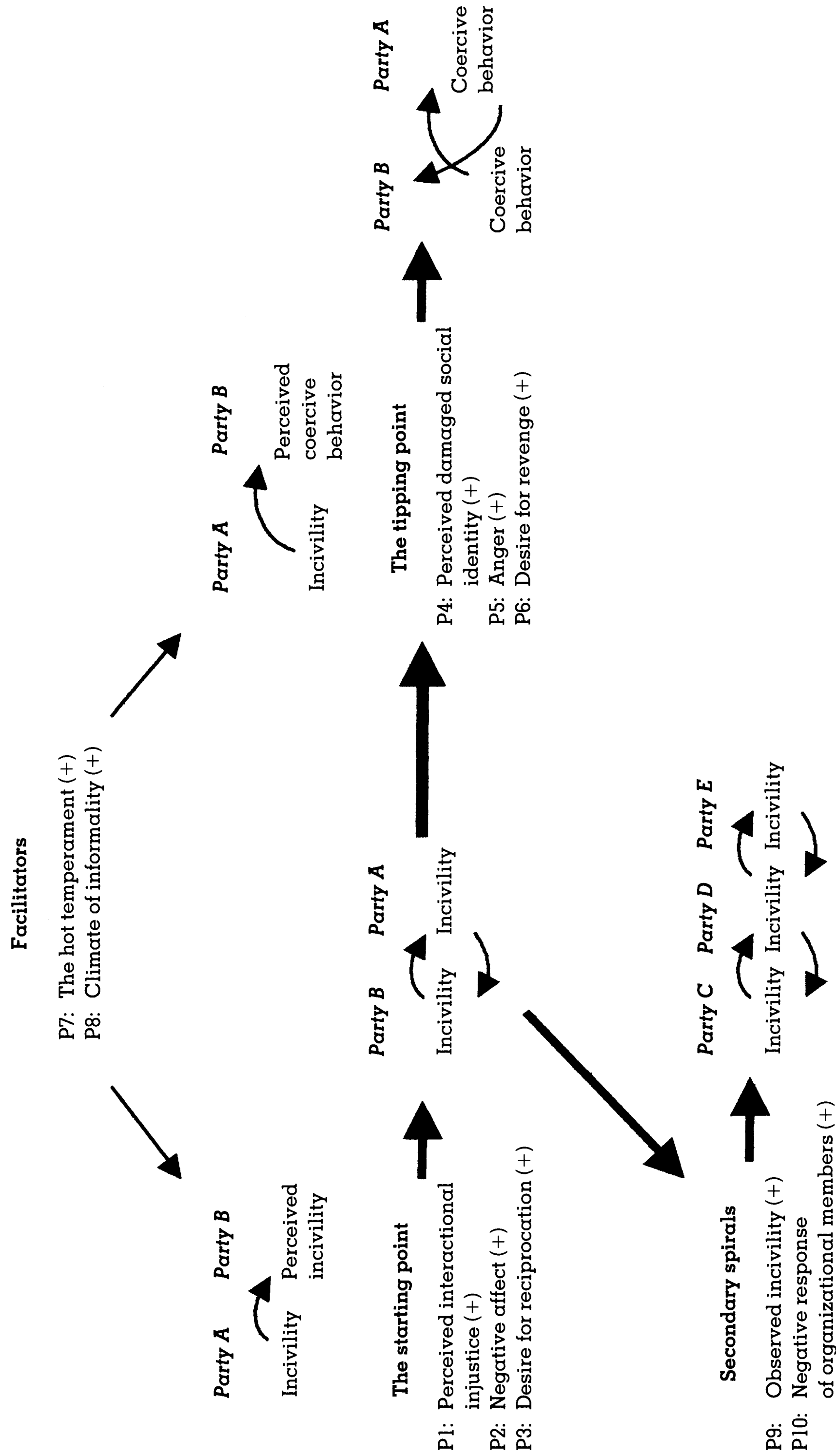

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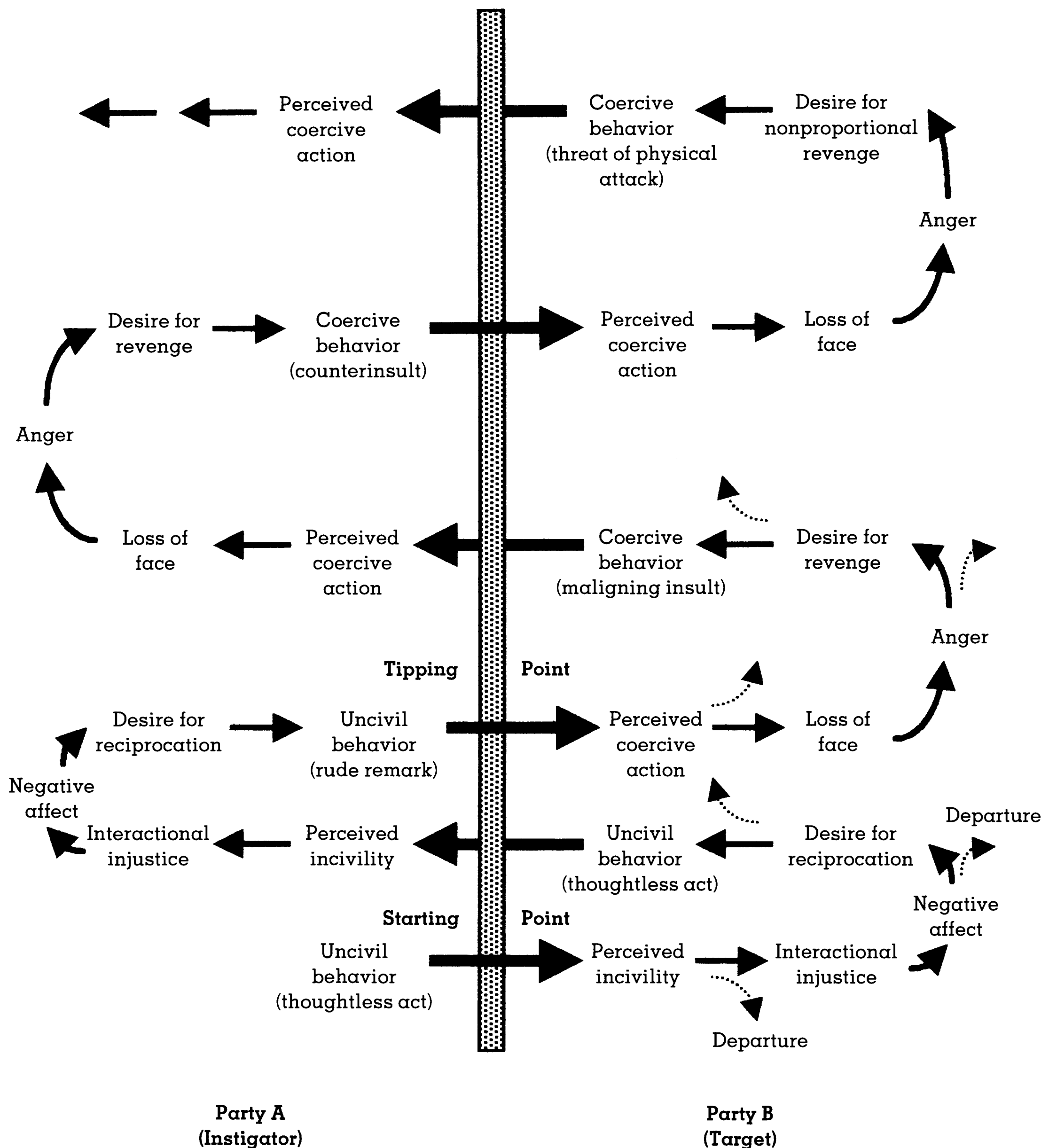
FIGURE 3
Sample Incivility Spiral



injustice) occur (Bies, in press; Bies & Moag, 1986; Solomon, 1998). Perceptions of interactional injustice then create negative affect and stimulate a desire to reciprocate the perceived unfair act (Berkowitz, 1993; Bies & Tripp, 1995; Donnerstein & Hatfield, 1982; Kim & Smith, 1993; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Negative affect can cause an individual to be less attentive to politeness norms and less inhibited by future costs of various action alternatives (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). The most commonly employed means of releasing negative affect and restoring fairness in this situation is to reciprocate with further unfairness (Donnerstein & Hatfield, 1982; Kim & Smith, 1993), which, in turn, may lead to similar perceptions and reactions by the other party, thus potentially resulting in a cycle of injustice (Patterson, 1982).

In the workplace an incivility spiral may begin when an employee or group of employees

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(Party A) performs an uncivil act toward another employee or group of employees (Party B). As depicted in the sample incivility spiral in Figure 3, Party B perceives the incivility and may cognitively interpret it as an interactional injustice. This cognition may result in negative affect, which can stimulate in Party B a desire to reciprocate. This desire to reciprocate may not reflect intent to psychologically or physically harm Party A, but merely to display the negative affect that has been aroused. Party B then performs an uncivil act in response to Party A, who perceives the incivility, attributes it to Party B, and goes through the same cognitive, affective, and behavioral response sequence experienced by Party B.

Either party to the uncivil interaction may choose departure as an alternative to continuing the uncivil interaction: an uncivil behavior may be ignored by one of the parties at any time, or even if one party perceives an interactional injustice, he or she may choose not to respond in kind, releasing the emotional energy (negative affect) without reciprocating (Bies et al., 1997). For example, Party B may depart from the spiral by ignoring Party A, giving Party A the "benefit of the doubt," or deeming Party A unworthy of further attention (Bies & Tripp, 1995; Shriver, 1995); or Party A may apologize, deny intent, and/or offer an excuse for the uncivil behavior (e.g., I'm sorry; I didn't mean to be rude, I was under a lot of stress"), prompting Party B to forgive Party A. In such situations the incivility spiral will end. Several of the potential points of departure for Party B are illustrated by the dashed arrows in Figure 3.

Although Figure 3 shows only two parties, in reality any number of parties can be involved in this exchange of incivilities. For example, Party A's incivility may be perceived by Parties B and C, who, in turn, act uncivil. Party A may then reciprocate in response solely to the incivility of Party B, or may reciprocate in response to the multiple incivilities of Parties B and C. In whatever form it takes, incivility represents a violation of norms of mutual respect. As a consequence, such interactions are inherently disruptive to the social equilibrium, whether of a group or an organization (Goffman, 1967).

The arguments in this section suggest the following propositions (shown in Figure 2):

Proposition 1: Perception of interactional injustice by the target in a social interaction will increase the probability of the occurrence of an incivility spiral.

Proposition 2: Feelings of negative affect by the target in a social interaction will increase the probability of the occurrence of an incivility spiral.

Proposition 3: Desire to reciprocate the incivility by the target in a social interaction will increase the probability of the occurrence of an incivility spiral.

The Tipping Point

In a classic article Gouldner (1960) postulated a generalized positive norm of reciprocity, stipulating that (1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not harm those who help them. Extending this premise, Helm, Bonoma, and Tedeschi demonstrated that a *negative* norm of reciprocity exists: the "frequency of reciprocated (counteraggression) was a direct and linear function of frequency of initial aggression delivered" (1972: 97). Further, they found that when initial aggression is perceived by the target as unprovoked, the target employs counteraggression for revenge, rather than as a counterdeterrence. Thus, Helm and associates discovered that, in revenge, punishment may be more severe than the crime. This finding was replicated by Youngs, who concluded that "one of the keys to the explosiveness of some (interaction) spirals may be the size of the deviation involved in overmatching during the initial stages of conflict" (1986: 545). In this manner an ordinary conflict situation can suddenly develop into a crisis.

Epidemiologists have used the term *tipping point* to describe how an infectious disease suddenly escalates into epidemic proportions (e.g., Gladwell, 1996). Others have also used the term to describe social phenomena, such as crime, denoting the point at which seemingly trivial problems like petty crime and graffiti can escalate into widespread serious crime (Brown, 1978; Gladwell, 1996; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Perhaps the most famous social science research on the tipping point is Zimbardo's (1969) "broken window hypothesis," which posits that a single bro-

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ken window, if left unrepaired, can serve as a tipping point to more heinous crimes: the relatively trivial signal suggests to potential instigators that no one cares enough about the property to replace the window, thus signaling that inflicting additional damage in the area will not warrant reprimand (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). The term *tipping point*, therefore, is analogous to the transformation of water into steam with the application of heat; it can refer to a change in scope (escalation), as well as a change in composition (alteration of form).

The concept of the tipping point can be applied to individual-level phenomena as well. For example, an individual may experience the "straw that breaks the camel's back": the point at which the last small injustice in a chain of injustices suddenly invokes a strong punitive response (Morrill, 1992; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). A recovering alcoholic attempting to self-regulate her intake of alcohol at a party may sneak one drink, activating a "snowballing pattern" that involves her consuming ten more drinks during the course of the party (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). In the workplace an employee may experience one incident after a series of aggravating encounters that acts as a "triggering mechanism," causing the employee to arrive at work the next morning with a gun (Kinney, 1995). Each of these examples—the "straw that breaks the camel's back," the lapse in self-regulation leading to the "snowballing pattern," and the "triggering mechanism"—demonstrates a tipping point at which the individual suddenly feels threatened by an adverse situation and somehow loses the motivation to maintain control over his or her actions.

We use the notion of the tipping point in this article to describe the relatively infrequent occasion in which an exchange of incivilities escalates into an exchange of coercive actions. We postulate that when at least one of the parties involved in an exchange of incivilities perceives an identity threat, the tipping point is reached, prompting a more intense behavioral response by the threatened party (Helm et al., 1972; Youngs, 1986) so that it escapes the confines of incivility (in which the goal of inflicting harm on the target remains ambiguous) and crosses into the realm of coercive action (in which the goal of inflicting harm to the target becomes obvious). This is the point at which an incivility spiral becomes a deviation-amplifying spiral—an exchange of increasingly counterproductive behaviors—each with the obvious intent to harm the other party (Masuch, 1985). Because of one particularly offensive incivility or the accumulation of incivilities over a period of time, one party perceives an identity threat or a loss of face, and the spiral suddenly escalates (Felson, 1982).

Identities play an important role in the escalation of coercive encounters (Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977). One's desired identity—one's social face—is the combination of attributes (e.g., smart, capable, or strong) and social identities (e.g., gender or race) that one wants to present in a given situation (Erez & Earley, 1993). In times of conflict, an image of strength becomes very important to the identity of the individual (Tjosvold, 1983). Schlenker (1980) states, in his self-presentation theory, that individuals engage in protective self-presentation (coercive actions) when their desired identities are challenged or threatened. Thus, the perception of an incivility as destructive criticism, an insult, or a threat—as an attack on one's desired identity—can lead to the use of coercive behavior (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994).

Field and laboratory studies have revealed the effects of identity threats on aggressive behavior. For example, in their study of incarcerated males who committed homicides and assaults, Felson and Steadman (1983) showed that attacks on identity led to an exchange of threats and, ultimately, to physical attacks. Furthermore, in a field study of former mental patients, former criminal offenders, and the general population, Felson (1982) found that individuals are more likely to act aggressively when they have been insulted.

The affective response to perceived loss of face is usually anger (Averill, 1983; Berkowitz, 1993; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994); the behavioral response can be revenge (Bies & Tripp, 1995; Bies et al., 1997; Felson, 1982; Morrill, 1992). Anger, which increases the propensity for various forms of aggression (Allcorn, 1994; Anderson, Deuser, & DeNeve, 1995; Weisinger, 1995), can breed a particularly unconstrained urge to seek revenge. Revenge, as the expression of perceived loss of face and anger, is a claim by an individual that he or she has socially valued attributes and is deserving of respectful behavior. Revenge, unlike mere desire for reciprocation, obviously is intended to have harmful con-

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sequences (Bies et al., 1997; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), and the taking of revenge can serve to restore one's degraded sense of self-worth—to reinstate a favorable identity (Kim & Smith, 1993; Tjosvold, 1983).

The level of revenge administered by an individual is a function of the perceived severity of harm to identity and the importance of the norm that has been violated (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Revenge can act as a deterrence function, warding off future conflict. If this were always the case, however, revenge would reduce, rather than escalate, conflict. Hard feelings would end once the score was evened. But research shows that conflict escalation is frequently the result of nonproportional revenge (e.g., Felson & Steadman, 1983; Helm et al., 1972; Youngs, 1986). Revenge produces counterattacks because one party has subjective and often exaggerated assessments of the severity of the harm to his or her identity. When one party's revenge is an overreaction, it creates the groundwork for a fresh attack on identity, and it grants victim status to the other party, resulting in both parties believing they are victims (Kim & Smith, 1993; Youngs, 1986). One party's nonproportional revenge may provoke the other party's nonproportional counterrevenge, causing an escalating spiral of revenge and counterrevenge (Bies & Tripp, 1995; Kim & Smith, 1993; Youngs, 1986).

At the tipping point in the sample incivility spiral shown in Figure 3, the incivility performed by Party A may or may not be intended as the first step in an aggressive attack, yet it is perceived as a coercive act by Party B (Baumeister et al., 1994). Party B may cognitively interpret the situation as a loss of face (Felson, 1982; Masuch, 1985; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), which then may result in the affective state of anger. Together, loss of face and anger can stimulate a desire for revenge, potentially of a magnitude nonproportional to the act performed by Party A (Helm et al., 1972; Youngs, 1986). Party B may then respond with the first coercive act, perhaps a maligning insult, thereby eliciting a similar cognitive, affective, and behavioral response sequence from Party A that seems to justify an even more coercive subsequent move by Party B (Bies & Tripp, 1995; Kim & Smith, 1993; Youngs, 1986). In this manner the spiral escalates.

As implied earlier, reaching the tipping point is not inevitable. At various points during the exchange of incivilities, either party can depart from the situation. Furthermore, even after reaching the tipping point, either party can refrain from entering into an exchange of coercive actions. Rather than engaging in the scenario described above, for example, Party B could choose to depart from the situation by ignoring the perceived coercive action or by cognitively reinterpreting the situation (Bies et al. 1997; Masuch, 1985). Or, after experiencing a loss of face and anger, Party B could choose to release his or her anger without revenge behavior, venting to others about the situation, choosing a de-escalating action alternative, or doing nothing (Bies & Tripp, 1995; Bies et al. 1997; Shriver, 1995). It is also possible that Party A may apologize for the behavior, prompting Party B to forgive Party A. We illustrate several of the potential points of departure after the tipping point for Party B by the dashed arrows in Figure 3.

Based on this discussion, we extend the following propositions (shown in Figure 2):

> *Proposition 4: Perception of a damaged social identity by the target in a social interaction will increase the probability of the escalation of an incivility spiral.*
>
> *Proposition 5: Feelings of anger by the target in a social interaction will increase the probability of the escalation of an incivility spiral.*
>
> *Proposition 6: Desire for revenge by the target in a social interaction will increase the probability of the escalation of an incivility spiral.*

Facilitators of the Spiral

The social interactionist perspective we take emphasizes that the interaction between two parties is not the only factor that comes into play in an incivility spiral. Prominent researchers viewing aggression as a social interaction (e.g., Bandura, 1973; Baron & Richardson, 1994; Berkowitz, 1993; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994) have found that certain characteristics of the individuals involved in the interaction, as well as certain features of the social context, can inhibit or facilitate an aggressive exchange. These researchers have studied and proposed a wide array of variables—from physical features and personality traits of individuals to the social

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network and physical environment in which the aggressive exchange takes place. In summarizing and borrowing from this research, we focus on two facilitators: (1) the "hot" temperament of an involved party and (2) a workplace climate of informality. We believe these facilitators are particularly important in determining whether an exchange of incivilities will occur and whether it will escalate into an exchange of coercive actions in today's organizational setting.

The "hot" temperament. Temperament refers to characteristics of behavior that, through life, remain relatively unchanged. One's temperament conveys the way in which one tends to respond to life situations. Classic aggression researchers (e.g., Berkowitz, 1993; Buss, 1961; Lorenz, 1966) long have recognized several dimensions of temperament that help to determine the likelihood an individual will respond with some form of aggressive behavior when provoked or subjected to stressful situations. Likewise, consultants and security experts analyzing incidents of workplace aggression have suggested that individuals who perform aggressive or violent acts at work tend to fit a particular temperamental profile (e.g., Allcorn, 1994; Kinney, 1995; Segal, 1994). Self-regulatory capacity, emotional reactivity, and rebelliousness are three key dimensions of temperament that, together, can be used to help determine whether or not an individual will be likely to use uncivil and coercive behaviors.

Individuals who are impulsive—those with a weak capacity to self-regulate their behavior—are more likely to use verbal slurs and coercive actions than individuals with a strong capacity to self-regulate (Baumeister et al., 1994; Hynan & Grush, 1986). Impulsives have less inhibition than those with stronger self-regulatory capacity to prevent them from acting out their current emotional state and intentions (Baumeister et al., 1994). Likewise, individuals who are emotionally reactive—highly sensitive to insults, easily offended, and who perceive threats in seemingly innocent exchanges—are more likely to experience feelings of interactional injustice, loss of face, and negative emotions, increasing the likelihood that they will commit uncivil or coercive acts (Berkowitz, 1993; Buss, 1961; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). These individuals have a more intense reaction in response to stimuli that would elicit only mild agitation in most people (Berkowitz, 1993; Buss, 1961). Furthermore, individuals who are rebellious—those who value independence, desire self-sufficiency, and resist group pressures—are more likely to use uncivil or coercive behaviors. Because of experienced societal pressures for conformity and submission, rebellious individuals perceive more irritants in their everyday interactions, thereby increasing the likelihood of an uncivil or coercive reaction (Buss, 1961).

Individuals who are impulsive, emotionally reactive, and rebellious—those who fit the profile of the hot temperament—tend to handle stress by reacting discourteously or aggressively (Baumeister et al., 1994; Buss, 1961). In today's stressful workplace, which is full of circumstances (e.g., diversity, reengineering, downsizing, or temporary work) conducive to role ambiguity, role conflict, situational constraints, and heavy workload, the stimuli for igniting those with a hot temperament are numerous (Carter, 1998; Chen & Spector, 1992; Neuman & Baron, 1997). Moreover, individuals with this hot temperament are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs while at work, causing them to lose yet more inhibition and to become even more likely to use uncivil and coercive behaviors (Baumeister et al., 1994; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Thus, we propose (as portrayed in Figure 2) that if at least one of the parties involved in a social interaction can be characterized by this hot temperament, it is more likely that an incivility spiral will occur and/or escalate into an exchange of coercive actions:

> *Proposition 7: The probability of the occurrence and/or escalation of an incivility spiral is enhanced if one or more parties in a social interaction has a hot temperament.*

Climate of informality. Organizational climate refers to the observable practices and procedures that compose the surface of organizational life (Schneider & Reichers, 1983). In attempting to stimulate creativity and innovation, level status, and promote free-flowing communication, many organizations today have assembled a set of practices and procedures that create a casual and informal workplace—a "climate of informality" (Martin, 1996; Morand, 1998). The degree of formality/informality in an organization can be expressed through dress, word choice, conversational patterns, postural and

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nonverbal cues, emotional expression, and modes of decor and architecture (Morand, 1998). For example, one could describe an organization in which members wear formal business attire, address superiors by title, use deliberate and regulated speech patterns, exhibit emotional restraint, and reside in neat offices with businesslike decor as having a formal climate. In contrast, one could describe an organization in which members wear shorts and T-shirts, address one another by nicknames, engage in lively banter about their personal lives, freely express their emotions, and reside in comfortable and personally decorated offices as having an informal organizational climate.

Despite the atmosphere of open communication and innovation it can foster, a climate of informality may inadvertently encourage employees to behave in ways that are disrespectful of fellow coworkers (Morand, 1998). When the organizational climate is more formal, there is little ambiguity regarding what is acceptable interpersonal behavior, and employees follow unspoken rules of politeness and professionalism in their relationships with one another (Elias, 1982; Martin, 1996; Morand, 1998). Moreover, when employees have to pay attention to mode of dress, enunciation, and conversational cues, they are forced to pause and think before they act. Without the trappings of formality to routinize interactions and control for deviations, employees may have trouble maintaining their professional distance and objectivity (Goffman, 1967; Morand, 1998). In an informal setting it is more difficult for employees to discern acceptable behavior from unacceptable, both in others and in themselves, thereby creating greater potential for misinterpretation and subsequent deviant behavior (Elias, 1982; Erickson, 1962; Robinson & Bennett, 1997; Wouters, 1990). Furthermore, manifestations of informality, such as casual dress and nicknames, can signify that employees do not have to "be on their best behavior"—that they can "let down their guard" while at work (Martin, 1996; Morand, 1998; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993).

Therefore, in a climate of informality, employees may be more likely to engage in uncivil behaviors. Likewise, researchers have suggested that an informal climate may contribute to escalation to more intense deviant behaviors, such as coercive actions (Berkowitz, 1993; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Therefore, we predict (as portrayed in Figure 2) that an incivility spiral will be more likely to occur and/or escalate into an exchange of coercive actions in an organization with a climate of informality:

> *Proposition 8: The probability of the occurrence and/or escalation of an incivility spiral is enhanced if the social interaction takes place in an organization that has an informal climate.*

Secondary Spirals

Norms for civil behavior in an organization often become eroded as organizational members experience or witness incivility spirals (Carter, 1998). Frequently, an incivility spiral between two parties spawns secondary incivility spirals, ultimately spreading incivility throughout the organization (Masuch, 1985). The incivility spiral perpetuated by Parties A and B, for example, may be observed by Party C, who, in turn, may model that behavior and initiate an incivility spiral with Party D. Or Party A may misplace her desire to reciprocate, directing an incivility at Party C rather than at Party B. These patterns may fuel further incivility, spreading the phenomenon throughout the organization and enabling incivility to become the new organizational norm.

Secondary spirals are not only spawned by experienced and witnessed incivilities but also by the general negative response to incivility and coercive acts within the organization. Employees become aware of the mounting incivility, and their response can be increasing levels of negative affect, distrust, and fear (Carter, 1998; MacKinnon, 1994). The loss of civility changes employees' expectations of one another. The irritable, intolerant, or fearful employee is then unwilling to extend the minimal courtesies and the tolerance of others that constitute day-to-day civility, thus creating further spirals of incivility (LaGrange et al., 1992; MacKinnon, 1994).

We offer the following propositions (shown in Figure 2):

> *Proposition 9: Observation of an incivility spiral by other members of the organization will increase the probability of a secondary incivility spiral.*

> *Proposition 10: Observation of negative response (negative affect, distrust,*

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and fear) to uncivil behavior within the organization will increase the probability of a secondary incivility spiral.

Can so many spirals form that an organization actually becomes an "uncivil organization?" Again using the analogy of the tipping point, this time at the organizational level, we hold that an organization may become "uncivil" once the number of incivility spirals reaches a critical threshold. At that critical threshold, "explosive clusters" of incivility may occur, whereby dozens of incivility spirals are triggered simultaneously, each feeding off the other (Masuch, 1985). This critical threshold may be reached when employees, involved potentially in multiple spirals at once, perceive loss of identity as members of the organization and feel that the organization is coercive or "out to get them." When a majority of employees believe that the organization intends to harm or discount them, the organization itself may become an uncivil entity (Kamp & Brooks, 1991).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The overwhelming majority of acts of mistreatment in organizations are more subtle than those involving physical violence (Neuman & Baron, 1997). Researchers studying deviant and aggressive behavior in the workplace (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 1997; Robinson & Bennett, 1995, 1997) have given the rude comments, thoughtless acts, insinuating glances, and negative gestures that transpire within organizations little attention. Here we have introduced a new concept—workplace incivility—to account for these lesser forms of mistreatment in organizations in which the intent to harm is ambiguous. Defined here as behavior characterized by rudeness and disregard for others in the workplace, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect, workplace incivility represents one of the less intense forms of deviant workplace behavior.

We have argued that workplace incivility can spiral, beginning with one party's perception of an incivility and reciprocation with a counterincivility, which can potentially escalate to an exchange of coercive actions when one party reaches a tipping point (i.e., perceives an identity threat). Further, we have argued that involved parties with a hot temperament and an organizational climate of informality may facilitate the formation and escalation of such spirals and that these spirals may spawn secondary spirals, which can permeate an organization. Potential relationships between incivility and more intense forms of mistreatment, captured in the present spiral framework, should be of great interest to researchers studying aggressive behavior in organizations, as well as to managers determined to prevent workplace aggression and violence. We now discuss some of the specific research and practical implications of this important workplace behavior.

Research Implications

In alignment with recent research on aggression in the workplace (e.g., Folger et al., 1998; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1996), our perspective views incivility and coercive actions as stemming from social interactions. Much of the recent conceptual research on workplace aggression (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 1997; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996), however, focuses on classifying types of aggressive behavior in organizations, rather than on detailing the process of how aggression evolves. Moreover, in much of the recent research on workplace aggression, researchers have attempted to model aggression as a single act in time—not as a process systemically linked with social interactions occurring prior to the aggressive act (e.g., Baron & Neuman, 1996). Our perspective is unique in that it not only defines a behavior that may be a precursor to aggression but also proposes that the various forms of mistreatment in organizations are related, as part of one system. The conceptualization of an incivility spiral as a system is important in bridging the gap between the behavior of individual participants in the spiral and the behavior of the organization as a whole.

The research propositions we offer in this article await empirical testing. Tests of these propositions, however, will require that a valid and reliable measure of incivility be constructed. We envision the process of development of the incivility measure and testing of the propositions to be a multimethod endeavor, consisting of a combination of inductive and deductive methodologies. First, to grasp the complex-

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ities and subtle ambiguities of workplace incivility, we believe the use of interviews, field observations, and small group discussion would be beneficial. These techniques would allow access to the nuances of experience that constitute an uncivil interaction, granting a depth of understanding of the construct and enabling the development of a "laundry list" of behaviors that employees consider to be uncivil. Next, a survey instrument focusing on critical incidents of incivility and more intense deviant workplace behaviors could be administered, preferably to several different samples that are known or likely to experience such behaviors. This would allow for a preliminary understanding of the dimensions and boundaries of the construct.

More rigorous survey research, in which the researcher analyzes the dimensions of incivility espoused in this article (rude and discourteous behaviors, ambiguous intent to harm, and violation of workplace norms for mutual respect), as well as other dimensions that emerge from research, would be warranted before a universal definition and measure of workplace incivility could be accepted. A key objective at this stage of research would be to empirically distinguish incivility from similar workplace behaviors. Laboratory and field experiments, often useful in providing valid first tests of a new construct, probably would not be useful in the case of incivility, since it would be difficult to simulate, and possibly unethical to generate, the intensity of affect and behavior under contrived conditions.

Once the incivility measure is honed, one could perform survey research that samples employees from a diverse range of organizations and hierarchical levels in order to test the propositions. To capture the possibility that incivility spirals occur over varying lengths of time, the researchers should employ longitudinal methods. Alternatives to self-report measures should also be developed, as employees may be hesitant to report on their own use of such a socially undesirable behavior as incivility. To combat this potential bias, one could use content analyses of employee e-mail and telephone conversations, for example, to complement self-report measures. Furthermore, one should consider the varying perspectives of the multiple parties involved in a uncivil interaction. Ideally, all of the participants involved in a spiral could be surveyed and interviewed, at various points in time, as the spiral progresses. Perhaps a sample of employees could be asked to track uncivil incidents that they experience or witness while at work, maintaining a detailed diary as the incidents occur.

Beyond testing of the propositions, it is our hope that this article will provoke further research into the construct of workplace incivility, its antecedents and consequences, and its facilitators and inhibitors. We have not attempted to describe or model the possible antecedents of incivility that may stem from the organizational environment, nor have we addressed how incivility may affect certain organizational outcomes. For example, the following questions are pertinent to incivility in today's workplace: How might the fast-paced and global nature of today's work environment spawn incivility? How might incivility affect client/network relationships and temporary workers? Further, we have not predicted how the facilitators of incivility and coercive actions (the hot temperament and a climate of informality) may interact, or how other features of the organizational context may facilitate or inhibit incivility. It would be interesting, for example, to examine whether an individual with a hot temperament would be more likely to "explode" in a very informal or a very formal organizational climate. Finally, the specific behaviors that make up workplace incivility likely differ somewhat among cultures and, possibly, even industries and organizations; thus, it would be fascinating to examine workplace norms across cultures and discover if baseline norms for mutual respect in the workplace are, indeed, universal.

Practical Implications

There is a market in doing business considerately: people choose to do business with those who grant them respect and make them feel good (Martin, 1996; Solomon, 1998). A certain level of civility is fundamental to the operation of any business. When civility is absent, work relations can become frayed. An organizational climate characterized by rudeness can make workers miserable on the job, resulting in aggressive behavior, higher turnover, lower productivity, and lost customers (Kamp & Brooks, 1991; Neuman & Baron, 1997). Thus, incivility not only makes the office unpleasant but may negatively impact a company's bottom line.

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Incivility spirals, like other deviation-amplifying spirals in organizations, can be dangerous: they can damage organizations, careers, and people (Masuch, 1985). The spiral framework presented here provides managers with a starting point for assessing factors in their organizations that may contribute to incivility and its escalation into aggressive behaviors. In addition, the examination of two of the individual and organizational contextual characteristics that contribute to an incivility spiral is relevant to managers, because it suggests the types of individuals who are more likely to commit uncivil and aggressive acts, as well as the organizational policies that might inhibit an uncivil encounter.

To begin, managers might evaluate how their own behaviors could contribute to a norm for incivility. Correcting subordinates by pounding one's fist, swearing, or personally debasing them sets an uncivil tone. Similarly, interactions between managers that are discourteous, resulting in loss of face, negatively impact not only those in direct confrontation but also those who witness or hear about the incident. As noted, these bystanders may then re-enact similar encounters with their own subordinates, peers, or customers.

If curtailing incivility and aggression is important to an organization, the organization should attempt to recruit and hire people whose characteristics may be expected to facilitate polite, courteous interaction. Practical means of achieving this outcome include (1) conducting multiple interviews of applicants by a wide representation of future associates and then listening to and acting on the feedback from those interviewers; (2) building internship programs during which prospective permanent hires can gain realistic job/culture previews while the potential employer and coworkers gain a more accurate sense of prospects' fit; and (3) scrupulously following through on reference checks, including contacts from applicants' more distant past, from which there are no immediate pressures on referents to "help" the employee move on (Neuman & Baron, 1997).

Finally, organizations that wish to curtail incivility must address acts of interpersonal rudeness swiftly and justly. To do otherwise corrodes expectations and norms for the organization at large. Condoning nasty interaction increases the possibility that it will become more intense and that it will permeate the organization. In the worst case an organization that condones rudeness and aggressive behavior will attract others who act similarly, potentially causing increased turnover among the more considerate members of the organization and increased anger among others.

Those who instigate uncivil behavior must be held accountable, regardless of their hierarchical prestige or special talents. Setting policies and reinforcing norms that inhibit the occurrence and escalation of uncivil interaction, such as zero tolerance for shouting matches, could reduce the likelihood of witnessed rudeness and secondary incivility spirals. In addition, the provision of such stress release options as corporate fitness centers, human resource hot lines, or conflict mediators might encourage employees to develop means of releasing pent-up emotions without displacing them on other employees.

Incivility is of increasing concern in American society (Carter, 1998; Marks, 1996; Morris, 1996). Incivility in the workplace seems to be spreading as the complexities of competition, technology, and globalization intermingle. Workplace incivility, as a negative behavior with moral implications and as a potential precursor to increasingly aggressive acts, deserves more scholarly attention. The ways in which incivility affects organizational productivity and employee well-being have yet to be tested. Organizations have much to gain by understanding the factors that disrupt mutual respect and prompt aggression; likewise, organizations have much to lose when uncivil, tit-for-tat interactions occur and escalate.

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