Workplace Incivility, Employee Silence, and Organizational Performance

[1]Dr. Saad Jalal
[2]Hurain Wadood

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[1]Dr.Saad Jalal
[2]Hurain Wadood

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Corresponding Author:
*** Dr.Saad Jalal**

Abstract

Workplace incivility, defined as low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm, is common in organizations and is often dismissed as trivial. Yet small acts of disrespect may have large organizational consequences if they teach employees that speaking up is risky or pointless. This paper develops a conceptual model linking workplace incivility to organizational performance through employee silence. Drawing on conservation of resources theory, organizational silence research, and psychological safety, we propose that incivility reduces psychological safety and depletes emotional resources, which in turn increases acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial forms of silence. Silence then impairs information flow, error detection, and learning, thereby lowering organizational performance. We further propose that leader openness, civility climate, and employee power distance orientation condition these relationships. The paper presents a table of constructs, a typology of silence, a flowchart of the proposed process, a research design, and practical implications.

Keywords: workplace incivility, employee silence, voice, psychological safety, organizational performance, conservation of resources

[1]PhD Scholar, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.
[2]Assistant Professor, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.

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INTRODUCTON:

Most organizations worry about overt misconduct such as harassment and violence, yet research shows that milder forms of disrespect are far more frequent. Cortina and colleagues (2001) found that a large share of employees reported experiencing rude, condescending, or dismissive treatment at work. Because the intent behind such acts is ambiguous, they are often ignored by managers and shrugged off by perpetrators, even as targets bear costs.

Parallel research on organizational silence highlights that organizations depend on employees to speak up about problems, errors, and ideas (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). When employees withhold such input, leaders make decisions with incomplete information, and small problems can grow into serious failures. Silence is not simply the absence of voice; employees may stay silent for different reasons, including resignation, fear, or concern for others (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003).

Although both literatures are well developed, they have rarely been combined. We argue that incivility is a daily signal about how safe and valued speaking up is, and that employee silence is a central mechanism through which everyday disrespect affects performance. This paper addresses three questions:

1. Does workplace incivility increase employee silence, and through what psychological mechanisms?
2. How does employee silence transmit the effects of incivility to organizational performance?
3. Which leadership and cultural conditions weaken these effects?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Workplace incivility

Andersson and Pearson (1999) define workplace incivility as low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms of mutual respect. Examples include interrupting, ignoring, belittling comments, and withholding credit. Reviews show that incivility is associated with lower job satisfaction, higher stress and turnover intentions, and reduced performance and helping behavior (Pearson & Porath, 2005; Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016). Incivility can also spiral, as targets retaliate or withdraw, escalating into more intense conflict (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Experimental work suggests that even brief exposure to rudeness can impair performance and helping (Porath & Erez, 2007).

2.2 Employee silence and voice

Employee silence is the intentional withholding of work-related ideas, information, or opinions (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Van Dyne et al. (2003) distinguish three forms: *acquiescent silence* (withholding because one feels input will not matter), *defensive silence* (withholding to protect oneself from perceived threat), and *prosocial silence* (withholding to benefit others or the organization). Brinsfield (2013) further identifies motives such as fear, futility, and deviance. Employees often hold implicit theories that speaking up to superiors is dangerous or

[1]PhD Scholar, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.
[2]Assistant Professor, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.

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pointless, and these beliefs are shaped by everyday interactions (Detert & Edmondson, 2011).

2.3 Why incivility may produce silence

Two complementary mechanisms link incivility to silence. The first is **psychological safety**, the shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999). Repeated disrespect signals that errors, questions, and dissent may be punished or mocked, lowering safety and encouraging defensive silence. The second is **resource depletion**. Conservation of resources theory holds that people strive to protect valued resources, and that resource loss is stressful (Hobfoll, 1989). Incivility drains emotional energy; exhausted employees conserve resources by reducing discretionary, effortful behaviors such as voice, producing acquiescent silence. Targets may also lose trust that their input will matter.

2.4 Silence and organizational performance

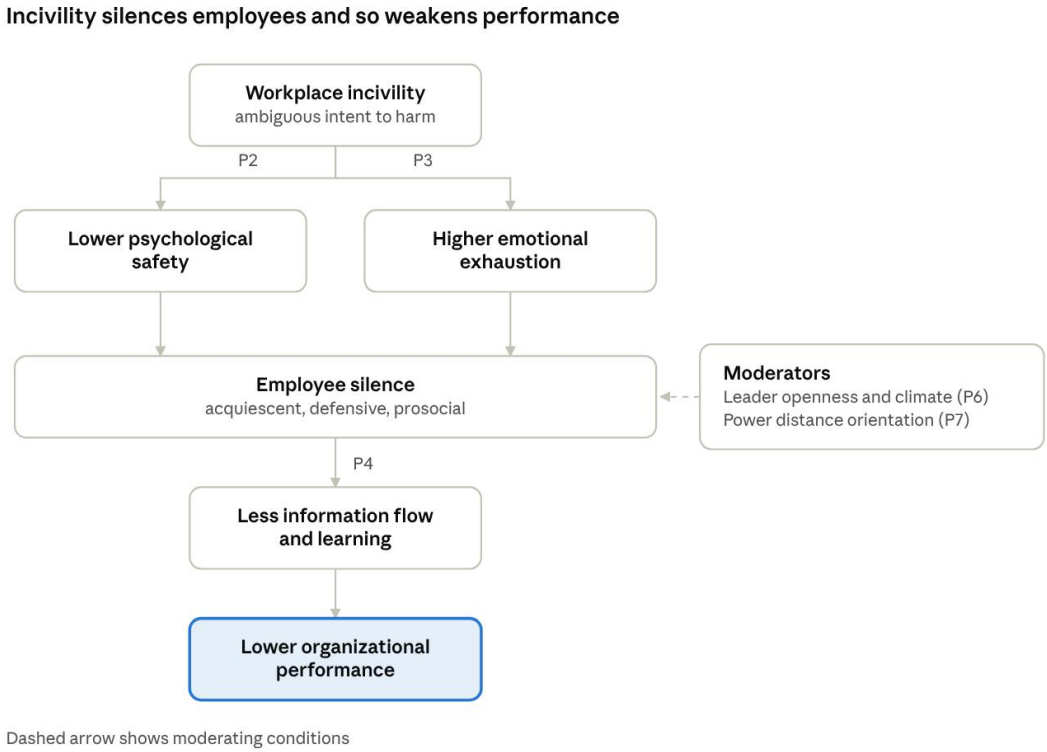
Silence undermines performance by cutting off the information that organizations need to detect errors, learn, and innovate (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). When frontline employees do not report problems, defects persist, risk goes unmanaged, and decision quality falls. Silence can also reduce commitment, increase turnover, and weaken coordination. Incivility may additionally harm performance through direct channels such as lost time, reduced effort, and customer-facing spillovers (Porath & Pearson, 2013), which is why we treat silence as a partial rather than complete mediator.

3. Conceptual Model and Propositions

We propose that workplace incivility (the independent variable) lowers psychological safety and raises emotional exhaustion. These two states increase employee silence, which reduces information flow and learning and hence organizational performance. Leader openness, civility climate, and power distance orientation moderate the process. Figure 1 depicts the model and Table 1 defines the constructs.

[1]PhD Scholar, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.
[2]Assistant Professor, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.

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incivility-silence-performance model · 2 mediators, 2 moderators

Figure 1. Incivility lowers psychological safety and raises exhaustion, both of which increase employee silence, reducing information flow and organizational performance; leader and cultural conditions moderate the silence response.

P1 (Incivility and silence). Workplace incivility is positively related to employee silence, controlling for job satisfaction and workload.

P2 (Psychological safety). Psychological safety partially mediates the relationship between incivility and silence, especially defensive silence.

P3 (Emotional exhaustion). Emotional exhaustion partially mediates the relationship between incivility and silence, especially acquiescent silence.

P4 (Silence and performance). Employee silence is negatively related to organizational performance, through reduced information flow, error detection, and learning.

P5 (Serial mediation). Incivility has a negative indirect effect on organizational performance through psychological safety and exhaustion, then silence, then impaired information flow.

P6 (Leader openness). Leader openness and a strong civility climate weaken the relationship between incivility and silence, in part by restoring psychological safety.

P7 (Power distance). Employees with high power distance orientation are more prone to silence when incivility comes from superiors, whereas incivility from peers has a stronger effect on those with low power distance orientation, who expect equal treatment.

[1]PhD Scholar, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.
[2]Assistant Professor, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.

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4. Constructs and Their Roles

Construct	Role in the model	Definition	Key source
Workplace incivility	Independent variable	Low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm	Andersson & Pearson (1999)
Psychological safety	Mediator 1	Shared belief that interpersonal risk taking is safe	Edmondson (1999)
Emotional exhaustion	Mediator 2	Depletion of emotional resources from strain	Hobfoll (1989)
Employee silence	Mediator 3	Intentional withholding of work-related ideas and concerns	Morrison & Milliken (2000)
Information flow and learning	Mediator 4	Extent to which problems, errors, and ideas reach decision makers	Morrison & Milliken (2000)
Organizational performance	Dependent variable	Quality, efficiency, innovation, and error management outcomes	Schilpzand et al. (2016)
Leader openness and civility climate	Moderator	Leader receptiveness to input and shared norms of respectful conduct	Detert & Edmondson (2011)
Power distance orientation	Moderator	Acceptance of unequal power distribution in organizations	Van Dyne et al. (2003)

Table 1. Constructs in the incivility-silence-performance model.

5. A Typology of Silence Under Incivility

The three forms of silence differ in motive and in how incivility is likely to produce them. Table 2 links each form to its dominant mechanism and its organizational risk.

Form of silence	Motive	Dominant mechanism from incivility	Main organizational risk
Acquiescent	Resignation: input will not matter	Emotional exhaustion and loss	Disengagement and hidden

[1]PhD Scholar, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.
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Form of silence	Motive	Dominant mechanism from incivility	Main organizational risk
		of trust	improvement opportunities
Defensive	Fear: speaking up may bring ridicule or retaliation	Low psychological safety	Concealed errors and unreported risks
Prosocial	Concern: protect colleagues or the organization	Weaker identification and fear of conflict escalation	Uncorrected misconduct and distorted decisions

Table 2. Forms of silence, motives, mechanisms, and risks.

6. Proposed Research Design

Sample and design. A three-wave field study of employees and their supervisors across several organizations, with waves separated by about three months. Incivility and the mediators are reported by employees at appropriate lags, while performance indicators come from supervisor ratings and archival records such as error reports, quality metrics, and suggestion systems.

Measures. Incivility: the Workplace Incivility Scale (Cortina et al., 2001), with source (supervisor or coworker) distinguished. Psychological safety: Edmondson's team scale. Emotional exhaustion: the exhaustion subscale of a standard burnout inventory. Silence: Van Dyne et al.'s multidimensional silence scale. Moderators: leader openness, civility climate, and power distance orientation scales.

Analysis. Multilevel structural equation modeling to test parallel and serial mediation (P1-P5); moderated mediation with bootstrapped confidence intervals (P6-P7). Researchers should control for workload, job satisfaction, tenure, and negative affectivity.

Complementary designs. Experience-sampling studies can capture how a single uncivil episode affects the same day's willingness to speak up, and scenario experiments can manipulate incivility source and leader response.

Proposition	Relationship tested	Method	Expected result
P1	Incivility to silence	Multilevel regression	Positive relationship
P2	Role of psychological safety	Mediation with bootstrapped CIs	Partial mediation, stronger for defensive silence
P3	Role of emotional exhaustion	Mediation with bootstrapped CIs	Partial mediation, stronger for acquiescent silence
P4	Silence to organizational performance	Multilevel SEM	Negative relationship
P5	Serial pathway	Serial mediation	Significant negative

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Proposition	Relationship tested	Method	Expected result
			indirect effect
P6	Leader openness and civility climate	Moderated mediation	Weaker incivility-silence link
P7	Power distance by incivility source	Moderated regression	Source-by-orientation interaction

Table 3. Testing plan for the propositions.

7. Discussion

7.1 Theoretical contributions

First, the model connects the incivility and silence literatures, showing that everyday disrespect can silence employees through both safety and resource pathways. Second, it differentiates forms of silence and matches them to mechanisms, which helps explain mixed findings about incivility and voice. Third, it moves beyond individual outcomes to organizational performance by specifying the information-flow channel.

7.2 Practical implications

- **Treat small disrespect as a performance issue.** Track and address interruptions, dismissiveness, and exclusion before they harden into norms.
- **Model and reward openness.** Leaders who thank people for bad news and respond without blame rebuild safety.
- **Set explicit civility norms.** Clear behavioral standards and consistent consequences strengthen civility climate.
- **Create low-risk channels.** Anonymous reporting, structured retrospectives, and small-group check-ins provide alternative routes to voice.
- **Support depleted employees.** Workload relief, recovery time, and access to support reduce the resource drain that produces acquiescent silence.

Warning sign	Recommended action	Proposition addressed
Meetings dominated by a few voices, with interruptions tolerated	Facilitate turn-taking and call out dismissive behavior	P1, P2
Errors surface late or only after external complaints	Introduce blameless reviews and near-miss reporting	P4, P5
Rising fatigue and withdrawal in teams	Review workload and provide recovery support	P3
Leaders react defensively to feedback	Coach leaders in receptive listening	P6
Respectful norms differ across units	Define shared civility standards and monitor them	P6

Table 4. From warning signs to managerial actions.

7.3 Limitations and future research

This paper is conceptual and the propositions require empirical testing. Future studies should examine cultural differences in how incivility is interpreted, the role

[1]PhD Scholar, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.
[2]Assistant Professor, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.

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of remote and hybrid work in making incivility less visible, the effects of witnessed (as opposed to experienced) incivility, and whether interventions that restore voice also repair performance over time. Longitudinal work should test the reverse pathway, in which chronic silence in a team breeds further disrespect.

8. Conclusion

Workplace incivility may look minor in any single episode, but its cumulative signal is that speaking up carries a social cost. Employees respond by withholding the information organizations need, and performance eventually suffers. Organizations that take everyday respect seriously, and that build leaders and climates where voice is welcomed, protect not only people's wellbeing but also the flow of information on which performance depends.

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[1]PhD Scholar, School of Management Sciences, Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology, Topi, Pakistan.

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