

Incivility to Burnout: Coworker Support Makes the Difference

Saba Zer Naz Hafsa¹, Dr. Anis ul Haque²

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

² Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.

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Abstract

Workplace incivility has become a prominent issue within organizations due to its detrimental effects on employee health and overall organizational performance. This study investigated the connection between workplace incivility and burnout, while also examining the moderating influence of coworker support among professionals in the human services sector. Utilizing the Stressor–Strain Model and the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) framework, workplace incivility was defined as a job stressor potentially leading to burnout, whereas coworker support was identified as a job resource that could mitigate this adverse effect. A cross-sectional correlational research design was utilized, gathering data from 545 human service professionals, including university faculty and medical practitioners, employed in both public and private institutions in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Standardized tools were employed to assess workplace incivility, burnout, and coworker support. Correlation analysis indicated a positive association between workplace incivility and burnout, while coworker support exhibited a negative correlation with burnout. Furthermore, moderation analysis revealed that coworker support significantly moderated the relationship between workplace incivility and burnout, diminishing the negative impact of incivility. These findings emphasize the protective function of coworker support in alleviating burnout and highlight the necessity of cultivating supportive workplace environments to counteract the adverse effects of incivility.

Keywords: Workplace Incivility, Burnout, Social Support, Coworker Support

Introduction

The issue of workplace incivility has gained increasing attention due to its well-documented detrimental effects on employees and organizational performance. It is linked to significant economic and human costs, including decreased productivity, increased employee turnover, burnout and a decline in psychological well-being (Porath & Pearson, 2013). Studies highlighted the harmful repercussions of incivility across various professional domains (Carmona-Cobo & Lopez-Zafra, 2022; Vahle-Hinz et al., 2019).

Evidence indicates that empirical research on incivility remains scarce in Pakistan, China, South Korea, and Sweden, despite the pressing need for a contextualized understanding and intervention (Vasconcelos, 2020). Importantly, incivility is frequently under-reported in Pakistan, yet it is widely experienced, and limited research has focused on protective buffering mechanisms such as social support and grit (Manzoor, Manzoor & Khan, 2020).

Workplace incivility is generally manifested through low-intensity verbal or nonverbal behaviors that breach norms of mutual respect. Andersson and Pearson (1999) initially defined it as subtle and ambiguous negative behavior, such as dismissive remarks or neglecting colleagues. Later researchers broadened this definition to encompass actions like gossiping or invading personal privacy (Alruwaili et al., 2022; Alqarni et al., 2023;

Workplace Incivility and Burnout

Incivility at the workplace has serious consequences like reduced wellbeing, job satisfaction, turnover intentions and sleeping problems, reduced job performance, turnover intention (Rahim, & Cosby, 2016), employee burnout and absenteeism (Sliter, & Boyd, 2015), low self-efficacy, avoid performance goal orientation (Ali et al. 2016) less creativity and knowledge sharing activities, effect both individuals and teams within organization (Sharifirad, 2016).

Workplace incivility reduced job satisfaction with high problem focused coping (Welbourne et al. 2016), brings negative effects on creativity due to both emotional exhaustion and reduced intrinsic motivation (Hur et al. 2016). Workplace incivility has been proved as an antecedent in declining the performance of individual and also leads to the behavior of distrust among employees, as a result it contributes in the high employee turnover intentions (Abubakar, 2018). Workplace incivility can lower job satisfaction (Marchiondo et al., 2018) decrease job performance of front line employees, perceived work ability decreases (Arasli et al., 2018), increased turnover intention (Mackey et al., 2019), influence helping behavior (De Clercq et al., 2019), burnout increases due to experienced workplace incivility (Trent & Allen, 2019). Incivility effects life satisfaction, work family conflict, job satisfaction, burnout (He et al. 2021).

Workplace incivility is less reported but widely experienced at workplaces in Pakistan. Additionally, limited research has examined the influence of factors like effort perseverance and social support on mitigating the negative effects of workplace incivility (Manzoor et al. 2020)

Employees who experienced workplace incivility might experience emotional exhaustion, work related exhaustion, affective burnout and burnout (Kim & Qu, 2019; Pu et al. 2022). Uncivil behavior (ostracism, privacy invasion) is positively related to burnout among employees (Mohamed & Kotb, 2021). Workplace ostracism or exclusion positively related with burnout (Qian et al. 2019).

Keeping in view the above cited literature it was evident that there is a big enough room available to investigate the Burnout as outcome of workplace incivility. Because mostly scholars in the past took emotional exhaustion as their outcome variable in relation with workplace incivility like supervisor incivility, coworker incivility and customer incivility (for example; Hur & Moon, 2021). Researchers had little focus on burnout as a whole as outcome variable of workplace incivility. As burnout can trigger many serious consequences for organization like turnover, less job embedded, decreased citizenship behavior etc. Only a few scholars considered both variables emotional exhaustion and burnout as important outcomes of workplace incivility like Taylor et al., 2017.

Role of Coworker Support in Workplace Incivility-Outcome Relationship

Social support is the support received from the following role senders (1) from *supervisor*, (2) social support from others at work or social support from *coworkers*, (3) social support from wife, friends and relatives/ social support from family (Caplan, 1979).

Social support has the potential to buffer the negative effects of stressors. Importantly, it is most likely that social support functions as a buffer in the stressors–strain relationship when the support available matches “the specific need elicited by a stressful event” (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Daniels & de Jonge, 2010). Beyond individual traits, organizational-level factors such as supervisor and coworker support also play a crucial role in shaping the negative consequences of workplace incivility.

Two prominent types of social support within the workplace are supervisor support and coworker support, both of which have been demonstrated to lessen the adverse impacts of workplace incivility. Coworker support pertains to the perceived assistance and resources exchanged among colleagues (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Research has found that coworker support (Holtz et al., 2018) can effectively diminish the negative consequences of workplace incivility on burnout, turnover intentions, and health issues. For instance, work

related support acted as a moderator in the relationship between workplace incivility and burnout, indicating that higher levels of work support weakened this relationship. Similarly, Holtz et al. (2018) found that coworker support buffered the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intention, weaker relationship observed when coworker support was high.

Holtz et al. (2018) found that coworker support moderated the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intention, such that the relationship was weaker when coworker support was high. This suggests that employees who experience high levels of coworker support may be less likely to intend to leave their organization in response to workplace incivility.

Theoretical Framework

Following theoretical perspectives utilized in present study.

Stressor–Strain Model.

The Stressor–Strain model provides a foundational understanding of how work-related pressures affect employee well-being. According to Spector and Jex (1998), the model explains that workplace stressors such as excessive workload, interpersonal mistreatment, or role conflict represent harmful external demands that employees must manage. These stressors act as environmental pressures that interfere with an individual’s ability to perform optimally.

Strain represents the resulting internal reactions of employees to these stressors. These reactions can manifest emotionally, cognitively, or physically. Common forms of strain include burnout, psychological fatigue, anxiety, reduced job satisfaction, intention to quit, and deterioration in physical health. Within this framework, workplace incivility functions as a social stressor, draining employees’ emotional resources and contributing to psychological strain.

In the context of the present study, workplace incivility serves as a stressor that can provoke negative employee responses most notably burnout when experienced persistently or without adequate social support mechanisms. The Stressor–Strain model therefore provides a theoretical basis for understanding how subtle acts of incivility can escalate into substantial negative outcomes for employees over time (Spector & Jex, 1998).

Job Demands–Resources Framework.

The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model complements this perspective by identifying two major components of the work environment: job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to aspects of the job that require sustained physical, emotional, or cognitive effort and are thus associated with physiological and psychological costs. High job demands such as emotional labor, time pressure, workload intensity, or interpersonal conflict can deplete employees’ energy reserves and contribute to adverse outcomes such as chronic stress, exhaustion, and eventually burnout. In present study coworker support is the job resource and workplace incivility act as job demand.

Conceptual Framework

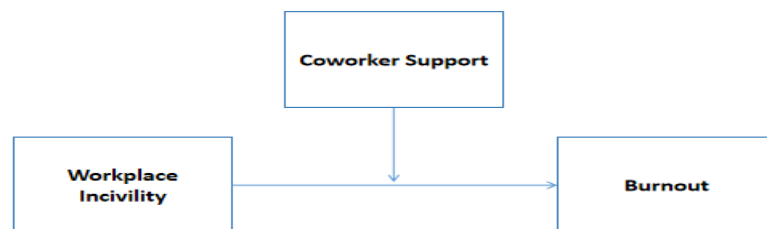


Figure 1. Coworker Support is moderating the relationship between Workplace Incivility and Burnout among Human Service Professionals.

Method

Research Design

A cross-sectional correlational research design was utilized to fulfill the aims of the present study. Data were gathered from human service professionals at one specific moment using a purposive convenient sampling method.

Objective

1. To examine the relationship between workplace incivility, burnout and coworker support among human service professionals.
2. To examine the role of co-worker support in relationship between workplace incivility and burnout among human service professionals.

Hypotheses

1. Workplace incivility is positively associated with burnout whereas; coworker support is negatively associated with burnout among human service professionals.
2. The more coworker support, the weaker the relationship between workplace incivility and burnout among human service professionals.

Sample

This cross-sectional study involved a sample of 545 human service professionals, which included university faculty and medical practitioners, who were recruited from both public and private sector institutions located in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The sample consisted of 184 males and 358 females, with 3 individuals not providing gender information ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 0.47$). Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 50 years ($M = 31.95$, $SD = 6.82$). The inclusion criteria mandated that participants possess at least one year of professional experience. Those undergoing psychotherapy, receiving long-term medication, or diagnosed with a medical condition, on long leaves like maternity and freelancers were excluded from participation in the study.

Conceptual and Operational Definitions of Variables

Workplace Incivility

Andersson and Pearson (1999) defined incivility as low-intensity deviant acts, such as rude and discourteous verbal and nonverbal behaviors directed to co-workers with ambiguous intent to harm the target. High scores on the workplace incivility scale indicate high workplace Incivility and vice versa.

Burnout

A state of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion caused by a long involvement in emotionally demanding situation (Maslach-Pines, 2002). High score on BSM-10 reflects high physical, emotional and mental exhaustion and low scores indicate low level of exhaustion.

Coworker Support

Coworker support is the support received from the others at work or social support from coworkers (Caplan et al. 1975). High scores on Coworker support index indicate high social support (from coworkers) and low scores indicate low social support from the same.

Instruments

Following instruments employed in present study.

Workplace incivility scale.

Newly developed workplace incivility scale based on the definition provided by Martin and Hine (2005) was used in present study. It has forty items with six dimensions. Professional disparagement has eight items depicted $\alpha = 0.88$, Workplace disruption with four items yielded $\alpha = 0.81$, Communication Misconduct has seven items in it with $\alpha = 0.88$, workplace discourtesy has eight items show $\alpha = .89$, Workplace Disrespect includes nine items depicted $\alpha = 0.91$, Intrusive behavior has four items depicted $\alpha = 0.79$. WIS show good reliability. All items were scored positively. Scale has five point response options (Never=1 to very often=5). It has score ranged from 40-200.

Burnout Short Measure (BSM-10) short version.

It was developed by Maslach-Pines (2005). It has 10 items with five point response options (Never =1 to Always = 5). Alpha reliability was reported as 0.87 previously. It is unidimensional. In current study alpha reliability was also reported as 0.87. No item was negatively scored. Score range from 10-50.

Social Support Index Scale

Social Support Index Scale published by NIOSH (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health) developed by Caplan et. al (1975). This scale has three dimensions social support from supervisor index, social support from co-workers index, and social support from family or friends index. This scale comprised of twelve items in total out of which four items measure social support from co-workers (items no, 2, 5, 8 & 11). It has five point response options (5= very much, 4= somewhat, 3= a little, 2= not at all, 1= don't have such person). Coefficient alpha for the co-worker support was .79 (Repeti & Cosmas, 1991).

Procedure

After finalization of the instruments, a total of 545 human service professionals, comprising both male and female participants (including teachers at the college, school, and university levels, as well as professionals from the medical field such as doctors, nurses, medical technicians, and dentists), were conveniently recruited from various public and private educational institutions and medical facilities located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. Before the commencement of data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from each participant. The data collection utilized the workplace incivility scale, the burnout short measure (BSM-10) and the grit short scale (Grit-S). Participants were instructed to respond to each question as honestly and accurately as possible. They were also assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. The data collection process took approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

Results

In order to meet study objectives, Pearson correlation, and moderation analysis carried out using SPSS and Process-Macro developed by Andrew Hayes. The Workplace Incivility Scale exhibited excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .96$), signifying a very high level of reliability. The average score was 92.39 (SD = 35.82), with observed scores varying from 40 to 195. The skewness (.75) and kurtosis (.03) values fell within acceptable ranges, indicating an approximately normal distribution. All subscales related to workplace incivility also demonstrated good to excellent reliability:

Table 1

<i>Sr no</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>
1	Workplace Incivility	-	.91**	.74**	.87**	.88**	.91**	.68**	-.22**	.36**
2	Professional Disparagement		-	.63**	.78**	.77**	.80**	.55**	-.19**	.32**
3	Workplace Disruption			-	.54**	.61**	.66**	.51**	-.11**	.33**
4	Communication Misconduct				-	.73**	.74**	.56**	-.23**	.31**
5	Workplace Discourtesy					-	.77**	.50**	-.24**	.25**
6	Workplace Disrespect						-	.56**	-.18**	.34**
7	Intrusive Behavior							-	-.08*	.31**
8	Coworker Support								-	-.10*
9	Burnout									-

Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant positive relationship between workplace incivility and all its dimensions. This suggests that an increase in incivility correlates with a rise in uncivil behaviors within the workplace. Furthermore, workplace incivility and its various dimensions exhibited significant positive correlations with burnout levels, implying that greater exposure to incivility is associated with elevated levels of burnout. Conversely, workplace incivility demonstrated a significant negative correlation with coworker support, and similar negative associations were found between coworker support and most dimensions of incivility. This indicates that higher instances of uncivil behavior in the workplace are linked to a diminished perception of coworker support.

Table 2

Moderating effect of Coworker Support between Workplace Incivility, its Subscales (Professional Disparagement, Workplace Disruption, Communication Misconduct, Workplace Discourtesy, Workplace Disrespect, Intrusive Behavior) and Burnout (N=545).

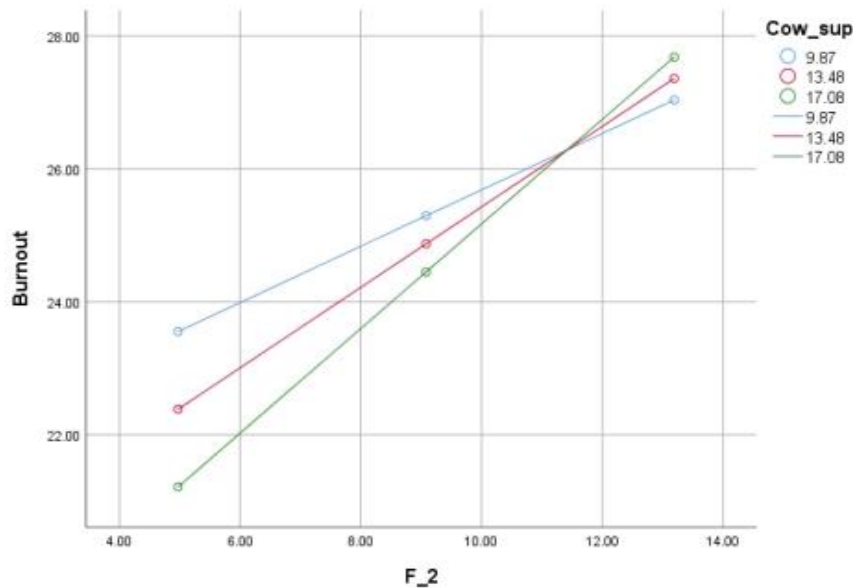
	Variables	Burnout		CI 95%	
		B	SEB	LL	UL
1	Constant	24.73	3.03	18.78	30.68
	Professional Disparagement	.08	.19	-.29	.45
	Coworker Support	-.39	.21	-.81	.02
	Interaction Effect	.02	.01	-.00	.05
	R^2	.11			
	F	21.89***			
2	Constant	27.11	2.80	21.61	32.62
	Workplace Disruption	-.07	.29	-.64	.49
	Coworker Support	-.57**	.19	-.96	-.19
	Interaction Effect	.05*	.02	.01	.09
	R^2	.12			
	F	25.43***			
3	Constant	26.03	2.87	20.39	31.67
	Communication Misconduct	-.01	.19	-.39	.36

	Coworker Support	-.47*	.19	-.86	-.08
	Interaction Effect	.03*	.01	.00	.06
	R^2	.11			
	F	21.44***			
4	Constant	30.98	3.04	25.01	36.95
	Workplace Discourtesy	-.37	.19	-.76	.02
	Coworker Support	-.75**	.21	-1.17	-.33
	Interaction Effect	.05**	.01	.02	.08
	R^2	.08			
	F	16.49***			
5	Constant	26.56	2.88	20.90	32.22
	Workplace Disrespect	-.04	.15	-.34	.26
	Coworker Support	-.53**	.19	-.92	-.14
	Interaction Effect	.03*	.01	.00	.05
	R^2	.13			
	F	26.68***			
6	Constant	24.28	2.94	18.49	30.06
	Intrusive Behavior	.32	.32	-.31	.94
	Coworker Support	-.37	.21	-.78	.04
	Interaction Effect	.02	.02	-.02	.07
	R^2	.11			
	F	21.75***			
7	Constant	26.06	3.24	19.68	32.44
	Workplace Incivility	-.01	.04	-.09	.07
	Coworker Support	-.61**	.22	-1.05	-.16
	Interaction Effect	.01**	.00	.00	.01
	R^2	.14			
	F	29.95***			

The findings suggest that the majority of workplace factors did not have a direct predictive relationship with burnout; nevertheless, coworker support consistently appeared as a significant negative predictor, signifying that increased support correlates with reduced burnout. Interaction effects were found to be significant, illustrating that coworker support serves as a moderator in the relationship between various domains/ factors of workplace incivility and burnout. In particular, coworker support mitigated the effects of workplace disruption, communication misconduct, discourtesy, disrespect on burnout. The regression analyses accounted for 8% to 14% of the variance in burnout and were statistically significant. In summary, the results underscore the protective function of coworker support in alleviating burnout within demanding workplace settings.

Figure 1

Graphical Representation of the Moderating Effect of Coworker Support between Workplace Disruption and Burnout..



The slope analysis provides insight into the interaction between workplace disruption and burnout at various levels of coworker support. First, we assessed whether workplace disruption predicted burnout at a low level of coworker support. At low level of coworker support, workplace disruption was a significant predictor of burnout: $B = 0.42, p < .001$. At moderate level of moderator, effect is significant, $B = 0.60, p < .001$. At a high level of coworker support, the impact increases further, $B = 0.78, p < .001$. This would then point out that the more coworker support exists, the stronger the relationship between workplace disruption and burnout; thus, higher coworker support makes the effect of workplace disruption on burnout stronger.

Discussion

The current research aimed to explore the connection between workplace incivility, burnout, and coworker support within the realm of human service professionals, as well as to assess the moderating influence of coworker support on the relationship between workplace incivility and burnout. The overall results provided partial support for the proposed hypotheses.

In alignment with Hypothesis 1, correlational analysis demonstrated that workplace incivility and its various dimensions were positively correlated with burnout, while coworker support exhibited a negative correlation with burnout. These results imply that increased levels of incivility are associated with heightened emotional exhaustion, whereas supportive relationships with coworkers are linked to lower levels of burnout. This trend is consistent with stress and social support theories, which highlight the protective function of interpersonal resources in challenging work settings.

Concerning Hypothesis 2, moderation analyses indicated that coworker support significantly moderated the relationship between multiple dimensions of workplace incivility (such as workplace disruption, communication misconduct, discourtesy, disrespect, and overall incivility) and burnout. The interaction effects and slope diagram suggest that burnout escalated with rising levels of incivility; however, this escalation was less pronounced when coworker support was robust. Therefore, coworker support acted as a buffering element, could stop alleviating the negative effects of incivility on burnout.

These results align with contemporary studies that demonstrate how support from peers and colleagues alleviates the detrimental effects of workplace mistreatment on employees' emotional well-being and work perspectives (Cortina et al., 2022). The interaction effects identified in the moderation models indicate that support from coworkers diminishes the intensity of the relationship between incivility and burnout, offering empirical support that social resources can bolster resilience in human service professionals who face negative interpersonal interactions.

Although not all direct effects of the dimensions of incivility reached statistical significance in the regression models, the overall model fit indices were significant, with explained variance ranging from 8% to 14%, indicating a meaningful predictive capacity. The moderation results particularly underscore the vital role of social support from colleagues in alleviating occupational stress among human service professionals. In summary, the study highlights the harmful effects of workplace incivility on burnout and stresses the necessity of cultivating supportive coworker relationships.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, the current study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to establish causal conclusions regarding the relationship between workplace incivility, coworker support, and burnout. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may have heightened the risk of common method bias and social desirability effects. Third, while significant moderation effects were identified in several models, not all dimensions of workplace incivility exhibited consistent direct or interaction effects, indicating that other contextual or individual factors may affect burnout. Finally, the sample was comprised exclusively of human service professionals, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other occupational groups.

Future Directions

Future studies ought to implement longitudinal or experimental methodologies to more effectively determine the causal links between workplace incivility and burnout. Additionally, researchers might investigate further moderating and mediating factors, including emotional intelligence, resilience, organizational climate, or leadership style, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that drive these relationships. Broadening the sample to encompass a variety of occupational categories and cultural backgrounds would improve the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, qualitative research could yield richer insights into how employees interpret and manage incivility in actual workplace environments.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the findings illustrating that support from coworkers can relieve the adverse effects of workplace incivility on burnout. Furthermore, this study adds to the expanding body of literature on workplace mistreatment by emphasizing the varying impacts of different dimensions of incivility. On a practical level, the results underscore the necessity for organisations, particularly in human service environments, to implement training programs that focus on respectful communication, conflict resolution, and interpersonal awareness to help curb negative behaviours in the workplace. Moreover, promoting a culture of peer support through team-building initiatives, mentorship programs, and collaborative work environments may act as a protective factor against burnout.

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