The psychological connections of people with their work range from the drudgery of burnout to the vibrant experience of work engagement. Between these two extremes lies a continuum of experience that encompasses the more commonplace range of dull days and good days at work. A large body of research details a diverse set of environmental conditions that influence that experience. In this chapter we focus on social relationships at work. We consider research on employees’ interactions with one another, with their organizational leaders, and with the larger organization. We consider the impact of unpleasant interactions on employees’ emotional well-being and the benefit of social support at work. We conclude by reflecting on the potential of social relationships as targets for interventions designed to enhance the quality of work life.

3.1 DEFINITIONS AND BACKGROUND

Burnout is a chronic problem reflecting uneasy relationships between people and their work (Maslach & Leiter, 2005). It is a psychological syndrome involving three key dimensions: exhaustion–energy, cynicism–involvement, and inefficacy–efficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Exhaustion captures feeling overextended, including depleted...
physical and emotional resources. Cynicism describes a detached response to various aspects of work. Finally, inefficacy describes feeling incompetent or nonproductive at work (Maslach, 2003). The opposite of burnout is work engagement: an energetic state of involvement with personally fulfilling activities that enhance a sense of personal efficacy (Leiter & Maslach, 1998). This chapter will reflect the second dimension of burnout, cynicism, which involves the interpersonal aspects of work.

3.2 PREDICTORS: DEMANDS, RESOURCES AND VALUES

Burnout relates to several organizational characteristics that we have organized under six key domains: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). This approach asserts that burnout occurs from a mismatch between the person and their workplace, in one or more of these six areas. The concept of a mismatch acknowledges that there is no single perfect work setting. Some people prefer specific direction in their work while others find close supervision to be oppressive. Some prefer busy workdays filled with client contact while others find those days chaotic and upsetting. Organizational surveys confirm this variety in preferences as they consistently demonstrate that workgroups include employees who are pleased with things as they are and employees who are highly dissatisfied or stressed with the current situation. Burnout is not a function solely of a person or of a work setting, but of a poor combination of a person with a specific work context. The six areas of work life are definitive in determining whether people will find matches or mismatches with their work.

Workload aggravates burnout through a mismatch of demands over resources. Employees judge that they lack the time, expertise, equipment or support staff necessary to address the requirements of the job. They feel especially burdened by demands that exceed legitimate expectations within their psychological contracts with work (Semmer et al., 2007), but even legitimate demands become excessive in under-resourced situations. Employees may judge emotional labour as an illegitimate demand when it requires displaying emotions inconsistent with feelings (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). Exerting additional effort to address demands may deplete their physical, cognitive or emotional energy. Of the six areas of work life, workload has the closest relationship to exhaustion.

Control aggravates burnout when individuals lack the capacity to make decisions regarding resources or the authority to work in the most effective manner. A control mismatch is also evident when individuals have responsibilities that extend beyond their authority. The critical issue is whether
individuals or groups have authority and access to resources that are appropriate to their responsibilities.

Reward involves the lack of appropriate compensation or recognition for the work that people do. The critical issues in reward vary with people and with situations. A reward shortfall could be in terms of benefits, social appreciation or intrinsic reward. Lack of reward is most closely related to the dimension of inefficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001).

Community exacerbates burnout when employees lack positive connections with others in the workplace. Connection with others serves as emotional support and instrumental assistance; it also makes the person feel a part of a group with shared values. Some employees feel overwhelmed by too much social contact while others may experience isolation. In this chapter we will explore the community area extensively.

Fairness reflects employees’ perception of organizational justice in their work setting. Fairness involves questions of equity in workload or compensation or even-handed treatment on evaluations and promotions. Fairness pertains to employees’ evaluations about the outcomes of organizational decisions – were they good or bad decisions? It also pertains to procedural justice or whether the process used in the decision reflects qualities of openness and adherence to relevant criteria. Especially important in fairness evaluations is relational justice or the consideration and respect shown during the decision-making process. Employees experience unfair treatment as excluding them from the organizational community. They tend to reciprocate by distancing themselves away from the organization through a cynical approach to work.

Value conflicts have a central role in the model. The primary issue is the extent to which employees believe that their contribution to the organization is furthering the employees’ core values. This positive balance is more likely when organization and employees share core values. Value congruence is not simply a matter of good luck, but of a conscientious process of value development and value clarification in organizational planning and in employees’ integration into the workplace community. Values could involve ethical or moral principles, aspirations or practices (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001).

Leiter and Maslach (2004, 2005) integrated the six areas of work life into a comprehensive model of burnout and work engagement. As displayed in Figure 3.1, the model depicts the core elements underlying burnout as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Scale (MBI–GS; Schaufeli et al., 1996) in positive terms: energy as the positive contrast to exhaustion; involvement as the positive contrast to cynicism; and efficacy as the MBI–GS measures directly. Although other perspectives define work engagement as departing from the exact opposite of burnout, the qualities of vigour,
dedication and absorption in the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) have many similarities with these qualities.

The model includes two distinct pathways from the work environment to burnout/engagement. First, manageable workload arising from a sustainable balance of resources to demand has a direct and strong path to energy levels. Second, value incongruity has direct paths to energy, involvement and efficacy. This second route describes the proposition that value congruence with work has diverse implications. First, it builds energy by providing employees with the valuable resources inherent in doing work that reflects their values. Second, value congruence encourages employees to become deeply involved in their work activities. Third, doing work that furthers their core values builds confidence and assurance in themselves. In contrast, value conflicts undermine employees’ psychological relationships with their work.

The model gives a pivotal position to control as shaping employees’ capacity to manage their workloads or to pursue work they value. The intermediary constructs in these pathways include rewards systems, organizational justice as determining fairness, and community. Employees’ interactions with their social environments regarding recognition, fairness or respect and values become integrated in their overall evaluation of value congruity or incongruity at work.

This chapter focuses primarily on the community area of work life: the overall quality of social interacting at work including issues of conflict, mutual support, closeness and the capacity to work as a team (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). When the community dimension is not working properly, problems arise and undermine the workplace climate. People are not happy; they are fighting with one another. Coworkers talk about other coworkers behind their back and blame each other for things that go wrong. A poorly
functioning organizational community adds to employees' burdens at work without contributing anything positive. Poor collegial relationships constitute unnecessary workplace demands. Further, they actively block an essential workplace resource: the support of colleagues and immediate supervisors. In this chapter we will consider research on the social environments of work settings and consider approaches for improving that dimension of work life.

3.3 THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT OF WORK

3.3.1 Key People

The social environment of organizations comprises individuals in interaction with one another. As structured social environments, work settings include people who have equal levels of formal authority and people with unequal authority relationships. Work settings vary in intensity of collegial interaction with some embedded in closely knit teams and others working in relative isolation. Frontline supervisors guide the everyday tasks, while distant management oversees broader operations. In many organizations, the clientele makes up a crucial dimension of the work environment. For example, nurses, lawyers, receptionists, tellers, customer service representatives and teachers maintain ongoing interactions with service recipients throughout their work days.

3.3.2 Types of Interaction

Relationships with people at work have implications for demands, resources and values. On the positive side, people provide major work resources by contributing their time, expertise, effort and social support (Hobfoll, 2002). They assist one another in both organizational and personal objectives at work. The social environment of a workplace can provide one its most compelling attractions to employees (Casciaro & Lobo, 2005).

On the negative side, work relationships have their demanding characteristics. Regarding legitimate demands, supervisors impose tasks and deadlines while subordinates require direction and mentoring. Discussions with colleagues regarding work objectives consume project time. Illegitimate demands strain relationships more intensely. Aggression, abuse and incivility impose emotional pressures that exceed reasonable job requirements (Semmer et al., 2007).

Both positive and negative relationships at work convey values. From an organizational culture perspective (Schein, 1988) employees evaluate values
implicit in their interactions with the people, objects and activities at work. We propose that when colleagues persist in acting uncivilly, employees deduce that incivility serves as a condoned and effective way to contend with the demands within the work setting. Conformity to group norms provides one mechanism for incivility, as individuals blend into the accepted social discourse (Pinnington, 2002; Sechrist & Stangor, 2001). Reciprocity provides a second potential mechanism, as people mirror the tone of the interactions that they receive (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). We propose that as employees encounter incivility from their colleagues, superiors and clients, they tend to respond in kind. Employees may give special considerations to their interactions with individuals in positions of authority when evaluating relationship norms at work. Observing or receiving incivility from supervisors or senior colleagues increases its legitimacy because of their status within the organization’s hierarchies (Schein, 1988). Incivility may be inherent in an organization’s power dynamics when people in authority or with seniority act uncivilly towards lower status people (Keashley, 1998; Vredenburgh & Brender, 1998). Through mechanisms of conformity and reciprocity, we expect employees to align their interpersonal behaviour to be consistent with their understanding of their organization’s culture.

The social cultures of workplaces vary regarding civility, aggression and social support. Civility includes behaviour that preserves the norms of mutual respect at work; it comprises behaviours that are fundamental to connecting with others positively, building relationships and empathizing (Pearson, Andersson & Porath, 2000). Social support has a more active quality, including actions intended to help others (Deelstra et al., 2003). Aggression involves a clear intent for harm, including efforts by individuals to injure others (Baron & Neuman, 1996). Incivility has a less active quality than aggression. It includes rudeness and disregard towards others. It involves three main characteristics: norm violation; ambiguous intent to harm; and low intensity (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). As incivility becomes an accepted part of workplace culture, employees experience uncivil interactions as a value statement regarding their worth within the organizational community.

3.4 INCLUDING SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT INTO RESEARCH MODELS OF BURNOUT AND ENGAGEMENT

The social environment plays a vital role in a model of burnout and work engagement, in terms of its benefits such as social support (Harris, Winskowski & Engdahl, 2007; Kinnunen, Feldt & Mäkikangas, 2008; Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002; Elfering et al., 2002; Bakker et al., 2007; Etzion, 1984; Russell, Altmaier & Van Velzen, 1987), as well as its risks.
such as aggression of working within a social environment, (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Kaukiainen et al., 2001; Schat & Kelloway, 2000, 2003; Dupré & Barling, 2006; Baron & Neuman 1996), and incivility (Pearson, Andersson & Porath, 2000; Cortina et al., 2001; Lim, Cortina & Magley, 2008; Cortina, 2008). As indicated by the wealth of literature on this question, social environments have received considerable attention within organizational research.

3.4.1 Research on Social Support

Social support provides a job resource with implications that span personal and organizational outcomes, such as job tenure or turnover intentions (Harris, Winskowski & Engdahl, 2007; Kinnunen, Feldt & Mäkikangas, 2008), productivity (Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002), back pain (Elfering et al., 2002) and most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, job burnout and work engagement (Bakker et al., 2007; Etzion, 1984; Kinnunen, Feldt & Mäkikangas, 2008; Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002; Russell, Altmaier & Van Velzen, 1987). These studies confirm that supervisor and coworker social support are crucial to a successful work environment, although there are various pathways to finding this effect.

3.4.2 Job Tenure/Turnover Intentions

Social support constitutes an important feature of the work environment with several pathways through which support may influence work-related outcomes. Harris, Winskowski and Engdahl (2007) investigated the impact of four types of social support on job tenure. Hill et al. (1989) defined these types as task support (the sharing and exchanging of work assignments and ideas), career mentoring (parent-like or adviser relationships with other individuals who have more experience), coaching (teaching organizational/professional rules and goals, including organizational politics), and collegial social support (sharing friendships, personal problems and confidences). They argued that each type provided valuable resources with implications for employees’ success and well-being at work.

Harris et al. (2007) studied employees of two training hospitals in the USA to demonstrate that certain types of workplace social support predicted job tenure. Specifically, they found that coaching and task support predicted job tenure but career mentoring did not. Furthermore, they found that task support positively predicted job tenure whereas coaching negatively predicted job tenure. They explained the negative relationship between job tenure and
coaching as arising from new employees seeking coaching to increase their familiarity with organizational rules and goals.

Kinnunen, Feldt and Mäkikangas (2008) considered three factors – perceived organizational support, effort–reward imbalance, and over-commitment – regarding their effect on turnover intentions and work engagement among Finnish managers. They found organizational support to be related negatively to turnover intentions and positively to work engagement. Overall, the study showed that organizational support was more important in determining the level of job attitudes and occupational well-being as compared to effort-reward imbalance or over-commitment. Together, these two studies provide consistent evidence that social support is an important resource which promotes work engagement and the decision to remain in the organization.

Thompson and Prottas (2005) focused on support for families as a specific organizational support for employees. They used data from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce to investigate relationships between the availability of formal organizational family support (benefits and alternative schedules), job autonomy and informal organizational support (work–family culture, supervisor support and coworker support) on the dependent variables of perceived control, employee attitudes and well-being. Overall, formal organizational support, such as benefits and alternative schedules, had a minimal impact on the outcome variables, however, they found informal organizational support and job autonomy to have a large impact on the outcome variables. Specifically, informal social support and job autonomy related positively to job, family and life satisfaction as well as to positive spillover between job and home. They negatively related to stress, intentions to quit and work–family conflict. Further, perceived control was found to mediate the relationships between informal organizational support and job autonomy with the outcomes of turnover intentions, stress, job, family and life satisfaction, as well as work–family conflict. Employees with high informal organizational support and job autonomy had greater perceived control, which led to positive work and life outcomes. This study maintained the importance of social support at work to buffer negative work outcomes such as turnover intentions, stress and work–family conflict and to support satisfaction at home and at work.

### 3.4.3 Productivity

A recent trend in social support research is complementing its relevance to employees’ well-being by considering its implications for productivity. Some research, (e.g., Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002) supplemented self-reports of social support with other sources of information in a study of New York
City traffic enforcement agents. Overall, agents who felt well supported by all sources of support had moderate levels of burnout and job satisfaction. Results showed that family and unit supervisor support correlated negatively with burnout; the relationships between coworker support and immediate supervisor support with burnout were also negative, but non-significant. All forms of support were positively related to job satisfaction. Only immediate supervisor support was positively associated with productivity: immediate supervisor support accounted for almost 7% of the variance in productivity, after controlling for enforcement group and control variables.

Finally, average unit ratings of the supervisor did not predict burnout or job satisfaction. However, average unit ratings of immediate supervisor support were positively associated with productivity. This study strengthens the literature on social support by providing multi-source data supporting the contribution of social support to productivity, indicating the necessity of positive social support, specifically from the immediate supervisor, to the success of the organization.

### 3.4.4 Back Pain

Using an innovative perspective, Elfering et al. (2002) investigated constellations of social support from employees’ closest colleagues and supervisors as predictors for back pain in 46 individuals with no previous back pain symptoms. Participants took part in a medical and psychological assessment at the onset including assessments on pain and disability, depression, biomechanical workload, social support and an MRI scan, and were retested after five years. Using this longitudinal design, they found supervisor support to be negatively related with the undesirable outcomes, and support from the closest colleague to be positively related with all of the outcome variables except one. The constellation involving high support from a close colleague and low support from the supervisor was found to predict the development of pain. The authors explained the discrepancy between supervisor and coworker social support by proposing that close colleagues may be more likely to empathize with the individual, showing sympathy and understanding that may inadvertently reinforce the complaint behaviour or create a dependency. This study maintained that support from supervisors is the most important predictor of positive work outcomes.

### 3.4.5 Work Engagement/Burnout

Social support has also been implicated in studies of work engagement and burnout. For example, Bakker et al. (2007) examined the relationship
between pupil misbehaviour and teacher job resources on job engagement/burnout. Job resources included job control, supervisor support, information, organizational climate, innovativeness and appreciation. The study demonstrated that supervisor support, innovativeness, information, appreciation and organizational climate buffered the relationship between negative pupil behaviour and work engagement (and with job burnout). Specifically, findings suggest that pupil misbehaviour was less damaging to teachers who were receiving organizational or coworker support. The authors reasoned that support serves as a coping resource for teachers. This study clearly indicates the need for offering teachers support when they are facing demanding conditions such as pupil misbehaviour.

Similarly, Russell, Altmaier and Van Velzen (1987) investigated the relationship between job-related stressful events and various aspects (attachment, social integration, reassurance of worth, guidance, reliable alliance and opportunity for nurturance) and sources of social support (supervisors, coworkers, spouses and friends or relatives) among teachers at elementary and secondary level. They found social support from supervisors to be the only source of support that predicted burnout. Supervisor support also resulted in less exhaustion, more positive attitudes toward students and a greater sense of personal accomplishment in teachers. In terms of aspects of social support, assurance of worth and having a reliable alliance were found to be important dimensions in predicting burnout.

Etzion (1984) examined the role of social support in buffering the relationship between stress (life and work) and burnout in men and women among Israeli managers and social service professionals. Results showed a positive relationship between stress (life and work) and burnout, and a negative relationship between social support (life and work) and burnout. Social support moderated the effect of work stress (but not life stress) on burnout. Men benefited from different sources of support than did women. Specifically, supportive relationships in their work environment moderated men’s work stress, whereas non-work sources of support moderated women’s stress. The authors postulated that women talk more about their stress; therefore may speak to others outside of their work. In contrast, men speak less about their stress; therefore may speak to a support at work immediately, and not bring it up again. This study shows further support of social support in buffering burnout; and indicates a sex difference in the source of this support.

Together this research demonstrates the benefits of having positive social support from supervisors at work. Such clear implications of the positive outcomes of supervisor supports and the buffering of negative outcomes argues for targeting supervisor support in interventions aimed at decreasing burnout and increasing engagement at work. The cost of non-intervention may manifest itself through increased levels of burnout (Bakker et al., 2007;
Etzion, 1984; Kinnunen, Feldt & Mäkikangas, 2008; Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002; Russell, Altmaier & Van Velzen, 1987), decreased satisfaction at work and in life (Thompson & Prottas, 2005), increased turnover intention (Harris, Winskowski & Engdahl, 2007; Kinnunen, Feldt & Mäkikangas, 2008), decreased productivity (Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002) and increased sick time due to back pain and other work problems (Elfering et al., 2002).

3.4.6 Research on Aggression

Aggression is a serious type of workplace hazard with clear negative implications for the target of the behaviour, as well as the organization (i.e. Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Research has considered these negative outcomes (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Kaukiainen et al., 2001), factors that prevent or ameliorate aggression (Schat & Kelloway, 2000, 2003; Dupré & Barling, 2006), and its incidence in comparison to lesser forms of conflict, namely, incivility (Baron & Neuman 1996).

3.4.7 Negative Outcomes

Aggression in the workplace causes considerable problems for the target and the organizational environment. Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) investigated the relationship between aggression and three targets of deviance: deviance directed towards the supervisor, towards the organization, and towards coworkers among individuals called for jury duty by a circuit court in the Southeastern United States. They also factored in negative reciprocity beliefs (tendency to return negative treatment with negative treatment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), to examine its mediating role in the relationship. Although reported abusive supervision rates were found to be quite low among participants, it had powerful implications: abusive supervision was found to predict deviance at all three levels: supervisor-directed, organizational and interpersonal. Furthermore, negative reciprocity beliefs strengthened the relationship between supervisor abuse and supervisor-directed deviance. The results of this study indicated that abuse from a supervisor is extremely dangerous for an organization because it affects not only the target of this abuse, but undermines an organizational environment as well.

Kaukiainen et al. (2001) examined various types of aggression regarding their impact on employee well-being in mostly female, mostly male, or mixed work environments. Specifically, they investigated direct overt aggression (aggressor and perpetrator face to face; intention to harm is quite obvious); indirect manipulative aggression (perpetrator tries to cover his/her
identity); **covert insinuative aggression** (perpetrator makes an effort to hide his/her intentions by applying strategies); and **rational-appearing aggression** (wrapping aggressive intentions into normal communication to disguise their harmful implications). They found direct aggression to be uncommon in everyday work settings and indirect manipulative and rational-appearing aggression to be the most common. They found being a target of aggression to be negatively related to well-being, especially among men. This result was evident regardless of the type of aggression: covert forms of aggression were found to have as great a negative impact as direct aggression. For male employees, but not female employees, rationale-appearing aggression had the strongest negative relationship to well-being. This study indicates the considerable negative effect of aggression on individuals as well as on the organization.

### 3.4.8 Preventing/Ameliorating Aggression

Knowing aggression’s detrimental effects on employee well-being, the following research considered approaches to prevent or ameliorate the incidence of aggression in the workplace. Schat and Kelloway (2000) explored the role of employees’ perceptions of control in ameliorating the negative outcomes associated with the experience of violence at work in a hospital setting. Results showed that perceived control did not offset the relationship of violence with fear, or the relationship of fear with emotional well-being, somatic health and neglect. However, they did find perceived control to be related directly with emotional well-being and indirectly to somatic health and neglect (job withdrawal). Therefore, the authors recommended that training to enhance control would be effective in organizations where violence is known to be a problem. Unfortunately, they did not test this prediction with an intervention.

Schat and Kelloway (2003) investigated the role of **informational** (training) and **instrumental** organizational support (direct support following an incident) as buffers between workplace violence (physical violence, psychological aggression and vicarious violence) and outcomes for both the individual as well as the organization. They found instrumental support to moderate the effect of workplace violence on emotional well-being, somatic health and job-related affect, but not fear or job neglect. They also found informational support to moderate the effects of workplace violence on emotional well-being. Furthermore, results suggested that when employees experience workplace aggression or violence, the availability of both of these types of support were associated with fewer negative consequences. Importantly, neither type of support was able to moderate the relationship between workplace violence and fear or job neglect.
Dupré and Barling (2006) investigated factors related to the onset and prevention of workplace aggression towards supervisors using a sample of doctoral students and correctional service guards. The study found that employees’ sense of interpersonal injustice towards their supervisor partially mediated the relationship between supervisory control over work performance and psychological workplace aggression. They also found that psychological workplace aggression partially mediated the relationship between interpersonal injustice and physical workplace aggression. Of considerable importance for organizations, the results indicated that perceived organizational sanctions moderated the relationship between interpersonal injustice and workplace aggression. Therefore, although perceived injustice predicted aggression, the relationship was minimized when policies were in place to punish people for their aggressive acts. These findings demonstrated that employees deduce organizational values concerning working relationships from the organization’s reactions to aggressive events.

As can be seen by these studies, aggressive behaviour in organizations leads to a variety of negative outcomes for the target and organization alike. These studies propose a number of factors such as improving employees’ sense of control, providing instrumental and informational support to employees, and implementing organizational sanctions as potential responses to aggressive behaviour. The actual impact of these strategies to prevent or ameliorate the negative effects of violence and aggression at work remain untested.

3.4.9 Aggression and Incivility

Although the outcomes of aggression are clearly detrimental to employees and the entire organization, studies assert that the incidences of such behaviours are fairly low among coworkers (i.e. Kaukianen et al., 2001) and supervisors (Mitchell & Ambrose; 2007). Baron and Neuman (1996) proposed that, although extremely distressing, physical acts of aggression and violence are a small component of a larger problem which is “verbal, passive and indirect rather than physical, active and direct” (p. 164). Furthermore, they predict that changes to organizations such as downsizing and increased workplace diversity may lead to conditions which contribute to incidences of workplace aggression. Results partially supported the first hypothesis; participants reported more verbal and passive forms of aggression than active and physical forms. Contrary to predictions, participants reported direct forms of aggression to be more frequent than indirect forms. Support for the second hypothesis was found: specifically, the study found more aggression when organizations had experienced recent disruptions.
Potentially disruptive changes included pay cuts, budget cuts, hiring freezes, increased use of part-time employees, changes in management, increased diversity, computer monitoring of performance and reengineering.

Verbal, passive and direct aggressive behaviours, such as failing to return a phone call or giving someone the silent treatment, are much more common than overt aggression in organizations (Baron & Neuman, 1996). They fall more under the category of incivility which includes rudeness and disregard towards others (Pearson, Andersson & Porath, 2000). In contrast, aggression includes efforts by individuals to harm others with whom they work or the organization itself (Baron & Neuman, 1996). The defining difference between the two behaviours is the intent to harm.

3.4.10 Research on Incivility/Civility

The everyday, rude, demeaning and neglecting behaviour of incivility seems to be a main culprit that causes people to dread and dislike their jobs. Violations of basic rules of kindness and respect are pervasive (Cortina et al., 2001). Much of research into what Pearson, Andersson and Porath (2000) deem the basic rules of interpersonal demeanour and social intelligence pertains to its potential instigators and targets. More recently it has focused on incivility’s consequences for organizational and individual functioning (Lim, Cortina & Magley, 2008; Cortina et al., 2001) and its potential causes (Cortina, 2008).

3.4.11 Instigators and Targets of Incivility

Cortina et al. (2001) examined the incidence, targets, instigators and impact of incivility among employees of the US Eighth Circuit federal court system. Results of their study indicated that instances of incivility occurred at an extremely high rate in this study with 71% of employees in this sample reporting some experience with workplace incivility in the previous five years. Further, women experienced a higher rate of incivility than men. Employees in certain job positions experienced less incivility than others (secretaries and attorneys). Overall, those who experienced rude and disrespectful behaviour at work were less satisfied with their jobs, were more likely to consider quitting, and reported experiencing more psychological distress. This study provided clear evidence of the relationship between interpersonal mistreatment at work and psychological distress.
3.4.12 Impact

Lim, Cortina and Magley (2008) developed a theoretical model of incivility and its impact on occupational and psychological well-being. They also introduced the concept of workgroup incivility. They considered the impact of incivility occurring among members of the workgroup on individual employees’ well-being. Results of this two-part study showed that experiences of incivility were associated with lower supervisor, coworker and overall work satisfaction. Supervisor and work satisfaction was associated with increased turnover intentions and decreased employee mental health. Incivility also related directly to turnover intentions. Personal incivility was found to be associated with decreased mental and physical health. Workgroup incivility had a negative impact on job satisfaction and mental health. Further, job satisfaction and mental health were found to mediate the relationship between workgroup incivility with turnover intentions and physical health. These findings emerged above and beyond the effect of job stress. In conclusion, the impact of incivility to a member of the workgroup extends beyond the target to other members of the workgroup.

Leiter et al. (November, 2008) investigated incivility among health care providers. Respondents reported coworker incivility to have more prevalence than supervisor incivility. Although all types of incivility were consistent with a more negative experience of work life, the less frequent supervisor incivility related more strongly with exhaustion, cynicism and turnover intention than did coworker incivility. The study found that the more serious events noted in the supervisor incidents and coworker incidents scales (including abuse, physical assault and sexual assault, as well as incivility) were similarly associated with burnout and turnover intention. Although these infractions violate norms more seriously, they occurred less frequently. The consistency among the various measures of incivility conveys that incivility from anyone at work, including oneself, reflected a negative experience of work life.

3.4.13 Causes

Cortina (2008) advanced a theory of incivility as an obscure form of sexism and racism among people at work. She drew from social psychological research on discrimination in order to create a model of selective incivility. She proposed that incivility, racism and sexism are one in the same representing “covert manifestations of gender and racial bias in the workplace” (p. 57). Cortina proposes that selective incivility could take place through personal and organizational discrimination including policies, leadership and
local social norms, as well as affective and cognitive factors such as outgroup aversion, mild negative emotions towards members of the outgroup, differential esteem, social categorization and stereotyping. This position is consistent with Baron and Neuman’s (1996) findings that increased diversity in the workplace relates positively with witnessed and experienced aggression. The proposed theory and evidence raise possibilities for future research on the intersections of incivility, sexism and racism.

Together, these studies highlighted some of the growing literature on incivility, including its negative impacts on workers (Cortina et al., 2001) and organizations alike (Lim, Cortina & Magley, 2008). Although the expression and appearance of incivility seems to be less serious in its nature than aggression, the harm to the individual and organization remains considerable (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim, Cortina & Magley, 2008) and its relatively mild appearance may even prevent the extent to which its instigators are reprimanded for their actions. As Kaukiainen et al. (2001) argued, perpetrators in work settings engage in aggressive acts that disguise their identity and motives as is the case with indirect manipulative and rational-appearing aggression. Therefore, the perpetrators avoid confrontation, the incivility continues, and harm to the individual and organization deepens.

3.5 PROPOSED MODEL AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Why do some people behave rudely when at work? How can people justify behaviours that have proven to be so detrimental to the people they work with and the organization? Several theories and biases may contribute to this unprecedented behaviour. Specifically, the attribution theory is a social psychological theory that describes how people assign responsibility for certain positive or negative behaviours and actions (e.g. Lagnado & Channon, 2008). The self-serving bias is a type of attribution that involves the tendency for people to evaluate reality in a manner that justifies their own actions while casting doubt on the motivations of others (Charness & Haruvy, 1999).

A need to make sense of the world and, specifically, to make sense of outcomes shape attributions about the self. People use attributions to understand the extent of their responsibility for events in their environment (Sheppard, Malone & Sweeny, 2008). Self-serving bias is a type of attribution with a tendency for people to evaluate reality in a manner that makes their actions seem competent if not admirable (Charness & Haruvy, 1999). This bias is implicated in organizational research on attribution of successes or failures (e.g. Giola & Sims, 1985; Campbell & Swift, 2006) and the relationship of rewards and effort (Charness & Haruvy, 2000). No research to date has
investigated the role of attribution theory, and specifically self-serving bias, in the attribution of blame for uncivil behaviour at work.

This section begins with considering why people are self-serving in their attributions. This discussion introduces a new model of the attributions people use to assign responsibility when they have acted uncivilly towards others at work. It concludes with research questions concerning the role of attributions and biases in the relationship between incivility and negative workplace outcomes.

3.5.1 Bases for Self-Serving Bias

Sheppard, Malone and Sweeny (2008) reviewed two types of explanations for self-serving bias. They labelled the first type, motivational-driven, proposing that people strive to attribute responsibility in ways that are consistent with self-enhancement (Snyder, Stephen & Rosenfield, 1976) and self-presentation (e.g. Schlenker et al., 1974). Self-enhancement (or egotism) is to present oneself in a positive light, preserving self-esteem (Snyder, Stephan & Rosenfield, 1976). Specifically, people tend to take credit for actions that make them look good and attribute blame to others for actions that make them look bad. Similarly, self-presentation (Schlenker et al., 1974) is to present oneself as complying with social norms and attributing blame to others for behaviour that contravenes those norms.

The second type of explanation for self-serving bias is labelled cognitively-driven explanations. These types of explanations avoid the question of intention. The bias is not part of a strategy to deceive people. Instead, cognitively-driven explanations explain self-serving attributions as arising from implicit biases in cognitive processing of information (Sheppard, Malone & Sweeny, 2008). Reflections on one’s behaviour filter out any information that is inconsistent with a positive self-image. Sheppard, Malone and Sweeny (2008) acknowledge that motivational and cognitive mechanisms only partially account for self-serving biases.

3.5.2 Social Rationales

From a perspective that emphasizes sense-making as an important motive (Weick, 1995), Leiter et al. (November, 2008) identified rationales that employees use to justify their rude and disrespectful behaviour to coworkers. These rudeness rationales attribute blame when they have acted rudely or uncivilly to another person. They allow the perpetrators of such uncivil acts such as ignoring someone, talking behind someone’s back, or talking down to
someone, to present themselves as behaving according to personal or shared social norms, despite exhibiting behaviour that is inconsistent with these norms. The rationales include pressure, toughness and sensitiveness.

Pressure rationales justify incivility by attributing one’s behaviour to the situation: the perpetrator of the uncivil behaviour experienced strain that prompted uncharacteristic behaviour. Pressures may include pending deadlines, work overload or demanding clientele. A pressure rationale acknowledges behaving in a manner that contradicts personal or shared social norms. Attributing the cause of this behaviour to a transient situation permits one to maintain a positive self-image and public image. To the extent that members of one’s social group accept this rationale, it perpetuates incivility within pressure situations.

The second rationale, toughness, justifies incivility by attributing one’s behaviour to the recipients of incivility. A toughness rationale reflects a view that people, or at least some people, require harsh treatment. Perhaps they are lazy, inattentive or unmotivated. Tough rationales are consistent with a highly authoritarian leadership style. From this perspective, speaking rudely to subordinates, clients or colleagues reflects dedication to organizational goals and objectives. The behaviour is not actually inconsistent with social norms: when there is work to be done, it is necessary to put civility aside.

The third rationale, sensitive, denies that one’s behaviour was uncivil. This perspective depicts one’s behaviour as within accepted social norms. It characterizes the recipients who complain of the behaviour as excessively sensitive. Perhaps they lack a sense of humour or are simply too fragile to endure the reasonable demands of working relationships. Regardless of their specific shortcomings, the problem is not the behaviour about which they are complaining.

Health care providers acknowledged the presence of incivility, from supervisors, coworkers and themselves, showing that instances of incivility were very much present in their work environment (Leiter et al., November, 2008). The frequency of incivility related positively to aspects of burnout, most strongly, exhaustion and cynicism and incivility at work was found to relate positively with turnover intention. Furthermore, respondents endorsed all three rationales, to varying extents. Importantly, the use of these rationales or attributions of blame was found to buffer the relationship of incivility with exhaustion and turnover intention.

Of the three types of rationales, respondents endorsed sensitive and tough rationales more strongly than they endorsed pressure rationales. The lower frequencies for pressure rationales may reflect the greater personal responsibility implied in that perspective. That is, pressure rationales accept that one acted in a manner contrary to one’s ideals. In contrast, tough rationales argue that rudeness is an acceptable if not a preferred mode of interaction in some
work situations and sensitive rationales deny that incivility ever occurred. Pressures rationales, however, do provide comfort to instigators by assigning blame to unreasonable demands in the workplace rather than to personal shortcomings.

An alternate explanation is that organizational cultures condone some rationales and discourage others. Tough rationales may fit the leadership style of organizations with a strong authoritarian culture while pressure rationales are better suited to an organization that cherishes self-sacrifice. Sampling across a variety of organizational cultures would help to explain the relative popularity of these three rationales and other ways of justifying incivility within workgroups.

Leiter et al. (November, 2008) presented evidence of rudeness rationales sustaining incivility at work. First, nurses’ endorsement of all three rationales positively related to the frequency of their instigated incivility. That is, greater use of rationales was associated with more frequent incivility towards colleagues. Second, rationales moderated the relationship of social stressors with instigated incivility. Specifically, nurses who endorsed rudeness rationales were much more likely to instigate incivility towards colleagues when experiencing incivility from others. In contrast, nurses who did not endorse the rationales maintained a low level of instigated incivility regardless of whether they experienced incivility from others.

3.5.3 Incorporating Social Rationales into a Conceptual Model

The social environment of work provides a complex set of demands and resources with implications for employees’ perceptions of organizational values. Qualities of social relationships contribute to their intensity. Social interactions have an inherent potential to be emotionally charged. At work, people interact about issues of considerable importance both professionally and personally. Some interactions have implications for identity as well as for one’s potential to fulfil career aspirations. We propose that not only do employees experience social relationships at work as sources of support and of demands, but they interpret the quality of those relationships as indicative of personal and organizational values.

Our summary of existing research acknowledges the demanding and the supportive dimensions of working relationships. Research has identified positive contributions from both supervisor support and coworker support. It has also identified aggressive and abusive interactions from supervisors, coworkers or service recipients as major demands in work life. A distinctive quality of abuse or incivility at work is that employees challenge their legitimacy as
a workplace demand. As noted by Semmer et al. (2007) the legitimacy of demands can be a crucial factor in employees’ experience of stress or burnout. Incivility lacks legitimacy in that it constitutes a demand that makes no contribution to pursuing the organizational mission: rudeness among nurses does not help hospitals to provide better care. While nurses may consider incivility from patients to be part of the job, they consider incivility from colleagues to be an illegitimate burden (Leiter, 2005).

For employees, the prevalence of workplace incivility challenges the sincerity of management’s commitment to organizational values. They perceive a tolerance of incivility as inconsistent with a valuing of supporting employees. Being aware that incivility diverts their time and energy away from providing services, they doubt management’s commitment to productivity or customer service.

A potential focus for future research is contrasting processes with which people react to workplace incivility. Employees may perceive work life as having a distinct set of rules governing social relationships. The terms, ‘business etiquette’, ‘collegiality’ and ‘professional relationship’ imply that there are distinct ways of interacting within the workplace. When entering a setting with pervasive incivility, employees may fit into the predominant mode of discourse. For some, incivility is a matter of routine. For others, their instigated incivility prompts reflection that requires justification through a rationale that aligns their uncivil conduct with reasonable codes of conduct. It may be that for people with firm and clear personal values regarding social relationships, incivility at work poses a value conflict with their employer. Neither tolerating nor participating in incivility constitutes an acceptable option. Each of these positions has implications for employees’ social behaviour, their well-being and their productivity.

REFERENCES


