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# It's Unfair: Why Customers Who Merely Observe an Uncivil Employee Abandon the Company

Christine Porath<sup>1</sup>, Deborah MacInnis<sup>2</sup>, and Valerie S. Folkes<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

Employees sometimes engage in uncivil behavior in the workplace. We ask (a) How commonly do customers witness an employee behaving uncivilly? (b) What negative effects does customers' witnessing of an employee's uncivil behavior have on customers and firms? (c) Why do these effects occur? The results of three studies suggest that it is not uncommon for customers to witness an employee behaving in an uncivil manner. It occurs in many industries. Moreover, witnessing such behavior makes customers angry and creates desires to get back at the uncivil perpetrator and the firm. These effects occur even when a manager's uncivil comment is aimed at correcting a subordinate's job-related offense and even when it is delivered offstage, outside of the customer servicescape. Finally, we demonstrate that these effects are driven by customers' concerns about deontic injustice from incivility (reaction to a wrongful misconduct that violates fairness standards). These results contribute to the literature on workplace incivility and customer reactions to service encounters as well as the burgeoning literature on customer anger and revenge. We suggest that organizations invest in training programs focusing on employee civility. Managers should receive training in coaching to mitigate against the detrimental effects of incivility.

## Keywords

employee incivility, customer encounters, anger, repurchase intentions, deontic justice

The owner just mocked the service tech with words like “how can you not know how to do this correctly” in a sarcastic tone. Then he pushed the service tech away and did the job himself without explaining how to do it correctly or anything.

The waiter could never get our order right, even after we repeated it. At this time, a more senior waiter with more experience publicly lectured him before sending him off to the kitchen. The [more junior waiter] walked away quietly, obviously distraught.

These consumer anecdotes illustrate a problem that seems to be on the increase—incivility in the workplace. Incivility is defined as all forms of insensitive, disrespectful, or rude behaviors that display a lack of regard directed at another person (Cortina et al. 2001). Within the workplace, a substantial percentage of employees see themselves as targets of such rudeness, and many employees report being frequent witnesses to incivility between other employees (see Pearson and Porath 2009). Indeed, even outside the workplace, incivility seems to be growing, as revealed by concern about uncivil behavior in public forums (as with Internet blogs and uncivil actions directed at eminent persons in public arenas).

Past research confirms that incivility between employees has damaging effects. Employee-employee incivility lowers the morale of other employees, decreases productivity, and increases turnover (Pearson and Porath 2005; Porath and Erez 2007).

However, beyond its human resource impact, incivility between employees also may harm the firm from a services marketing standpoint—*when customers witness it*. When customers observe a boss belittling a subordinate, a salesperson making a sarcastic remark about a fellow employee, or a customer service representative using a derogatory term to describe another employee, customers' evaluations of the firm's other employees and the firm itself may suffer. Moreover, witnessing employee incivility may make customers reluctant to do business with the company again, or worse, desire to get back at the company for its poor treatment of employees.

The present investigation of *customers' witnessing of employee-employee incivility* adds to the services literature in several ways. Specifically, the marketing literature emphasizes employees' interactions *with customers*. However, a customer might have a pleasant interaction with an employee but react

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negatively if the customer witnesses that employee acting uncivilly toward another employee. Such behaviors fall into the category of “social behaviors” in the servicescape (Brady and Cronin 2001). Moreover, while the services literature has examined positive working relationships between employees (Gittell 2002), few studies have examined effects of negative or uncivil working relationships on customers. The most pertinent study (Porath, MacInnis, and Folkes 2010) showed that uncivil relationships among employees anger customers, and, via rumination over the uncivil incident, leads to negative generalizations (about other employees, the firm, and future encounters with the firm).

Our studies provide a stronger foundation for this research by asking three novel questions: (a) How commonly do customers witness an employee behaving uncivilly? (b) What negative effects does observing employee incivility have on consumer behavior in addition to anger and generalizations and, (c) Why does observing incivility induce anger? We show that witnessing incivility is not uncommon, which makes consumers’ angry reactions to it and the cognitions prompting those angry reactions important to understand. Our research builds on previous research by showing that witnessing one employee acting uncivilly toward another prompts vengeful reactions toward the firm as well as toward the perpetrator. Further, the basis for customers’ anger is that incivility violates consumers’ perceptions of deontic justice. As well as contributing to the incivility literature by addressing these fundamental issues, the fact that witnessing incivility prompts desires to get back at the offending employee and firm broadens the study of the “dark side” of service delivery from the focus on reactions to being the victim of service failure. Among these “dark side” outcomes are customer anger (Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2003), rage (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2009), and vengeance/revenge (Bechwati and Morrin 2003; Gregoire and Fisher 2008). The finding that the incivility effects are, in fact, quite significant adds to the more general notion that customer’s perceptions of the service delivery process (not just their outcomes) influence service evaluations (Rust, Lemon, and Zeithaml 2004; Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999). Finally, we contribute to literature on perceptions of fairness and justice as determinants of service evaluation (e.g., Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999).

Below, we describe the incivility construct and briefly review research on its effects. We develop a set of novel hypotheses relevant to the aforementioned research questions and describe a set of studies designed to test them. We describe the theoretical and managerial implications of our results and conclude with future research questions.

## Consumers’ Perceptions of and Reactions to Employee-Employee Incivility

### *The Meaning of Employee Incivility*

As noted above, incivility is defined as all forms of insensitive, disrespectful, or rude behaviors directed at another person that

display a lack of regard (Cortina et al. 2001). Incivility involves “inconsiderate words and deeds that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct” (Pearson and Porath 2009, p. 21). Incivility is a specific form of workplace deviance, which is defined as antisocial behavior that violates norms (Andersson and Pearson 1999).

Although incivility can include another type of deviant behavior, workplace aggression, aggression (defined as efforts by individuals to harm others in organizations; Baron and Neuman 1996), generally characterizes behaviors that are more severe than the insensitive, rude, or disrespectful behaviors that characterize employee incivility. Uncivil behaviors are “low in intensity” compared to many acts of aggression (e.g., stealing or damaging property; cf. Andersson and Pearson 1999). For example, workplace aggression includes behaviors that are physical in nature (e.g., hitting someone), whereas incivility does not. Unlike workplace aggression, which also includes behaviors aimed at organizations, incivility comprises behaviors aimed at one individual from another. Moreover, unlike workplace aggression, incivility need not be prompted by the intention to harm the victim but may merely be insensitive.

### *The Prevalence of Customers’ Witnessing Employee Incivility*

Within the workplace, incivility is commonly experienced and witnessed by employees (Cortina et al. 2001; Pearson and Porath 2005). Pearson and Porath (2005) found that 10% of their surveyed employees report witnessing incivility daily within the workplaces; 20% claim to be targets of incivility at work at least once per week. Another study found that one fourth of respondents reported witnessing incivility at work daily, and half said that they were the direct targets of incivility at least once per week (Pearson and Porath 2005). Across studies of 9,000 employees, Pearson and Porath (2009) found that 96% of sampled employees had experienced, while 99% had witnessed, incivility in the workplace (see also Cortina et al. 2001).

Although prior research shows that an employee’s rude or discourteous behavior toward a *customer* induces consumer anger (Rose and Neidermeyer 1999), we know little about the relevance, prevalence, and consumer impact of *witnessing one employee acting rudely toward another employee* on consumers in a services context (Porath, MacInnis, and Folkes 2010). Perhaps, customers rarely witness employee-employee incivility. Companies may ensure that incivility among employees is rarely observed by hiring and retaining employees who are trained for positive social skills. Frontline service employees who have a strong customer orientation (e.g., who enjoy pampering their customers and get pleasure out of developing a personal relationship with customers) have greater job satisfaction and are evaluated more positively by their supervisors (e.g., Brown et al. 2002). Service effectiveness is related to the employee’s being thoughtful and sociable (Hogan, Hogan, and Busch 1984), suggesting that discourteous employees may not remain in positions in which they are exposed to customers. For that reason alone, observing uncivil

behavior among employees is likely to be far less common than civil behavior, and may, in fact, not be observed.

Yet, the prevalence of workplace incivility also makes it possible that customers have ample opportunity to witness uncivil interactions between employees. Indeed, incivility of an employee toward another may occur even when employees are attempting to operate in the best interests of the firm. A manager who uncivilly criticizes a poorly performing subordinate may think he or she is conveying the importance of high service standards to customers.

It is also possible that customers witness employee-employee incivility as frequently as they do employee incivility directed at customers. A recognized peril of being a frontline service provider is job burnout and stress, partly from the emotional labor the job requires (Singh 2000). Inability to cope with stress may manifest itself in incivility toward customers or toward employees. Furthermore, the increasing prevalence of uncivil behavior in general suggests that employees may not limit their incivility to other employees but may also behave uncivilly toward customers as well (Rose and Neidermeyer 1999). Hence, customers may report witnessing uncivil employee-employee behavior as frequently as witnessing uncivil employee-customer behavior.

These latter ideas suggest that whereas incivility is counter-normative and should be more unusual than civility, regardless of whether the target is a customer or another employee, witnessing employee incivility may not be any more unusual than witnessing incivility from employee to customer, and neither may be regarded as infrequent service encounter incidents. Based on the discussion above, we hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 1:* Customers report that (a) witnessing an employee acting in an *uncivil* manner is less prevalent than witnessing *civil* behavior. However, (b) employee incivility is not infrequent and it is equally prevalent, regardless of whether it is delivered toward another employee, another customer, or the customer himself or herself.

### *Effects of Witnessing Employee-Employee Incivility*

Porath, MacInnis, and Folkes (2010) found that witnessing employee-employee incivility makes customers angry, leading them to ruminate about the incident and make negative generalized inferences about the firm and people who work for it. However, that work did not examine whether incivility causes vengeful behavior directed at the uncivil employee or the firm. Understanding whether such effects occur would add to the pragmatic value of studying incivility since these behaviors can ultimately harm the firm economically.

There is reason to link incivility and anger to vengeful behavior. Emotions that arise from appraisals have adaptive value, allowing the individual to cope with events that evoke them (Lazarus 1991). Different emotions suggest different action tendencies that specify how the individual can deal (cope) with negative emotions. Enactment of these action tendencies dissipates the emotion's intensity, allowing a return to a neutral

emotional state. With anger the action tendency is antagonistic, involving a desire to inflict harm by punishing the anger-arousing entity (Roseman, Wiest, and Swartz 1994). Attribution theory (e.g., Folkes 1984) and other theoretical work (Andersson and Pearson 1999) similarly suggest that angry people are likely to attempt to punish perpetrators for their actions (Schoefer and Diamantopoulos 2008). In marketing, Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg (2003) found that anger over service failure predicted desires to get revenge against the firm, with angry consumers being more likely to switch brands, complain, and engage in negative word-of-mouth (WOM) and third party complaining. These results suggest that beyond anger, incivility may also induce other negative outcomes, including desires to seek revenge against the perpetrator and the firm (Bechwati and Morrin 2003; Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2003; Gregoire and Fisher 2008; McColl-Kennedy et al. 2009).

*Revenge against the perpetrator.* Revenge may be emotionally based or cognitively driven (Bies and Tripp 1996; Crossley 2009). Anger at the source of harm is likely to provoke consumers to seek revenge (e.g., Roseman, Wiest, and Swartz 1994) as a means of punishing the perpetrator (Turillo et al. 2002). Several studies suggest that those who witness unfair behaviors punish wrongdoers even if their retribution requires self-sacrifice (e.g., Fehr and Gächter 2002; O'Gorman, Wilson, and Miller 2005). For example, Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler (1986) and Turillo et al. (2002) found that participants who learned that their anonymous partner had behaved unfairly toward another partner were likely to punish the unfair partner even though they lost money in the process. Thus, we anticipate that in addition to its effects on anger:

*Hypothesis 2:* Witnessing an employee acting in an uncivil (vs. civil) manner toward another employee causes customers to seek revenge against the uncivil perpetrator.

*Revenge against the firm.* Just as victims of incivility in the workplace feel less commitment to their organizations (Pearson and Porath 2005), customers who witness employee-employee incivility may also feel less commitment to the organizations they patronize. Specifically, beyond its effects on the uncivil perpetrator, the anger arising from incivility may also lead to vengeful behaviors against the firm. Customers may feel that the organization does not have the procedures or policies to punish uncivil employees, and therefore feel it is their duty to punish the firm (Aquino, Tripp, and Bies 2006).

Some empirical evidence supports the idea that customers' judgments of standards of behavior among employees influence their actions toward the firm (Rust, Lemon, and Zeithaml 2004). For example, Bechwati and Morrin (2003) found that consumers angered over being treated rudely developed a desire to seek revenge against the firm. They were more likely to avoid purchasing the firm's products even if it meant switching to an inferior product marketed by a competitor. These customers also indicated a psychological desire for revenge; they wanted to get even with the firm and make them regret what

they had done. Gregoire and Fisher (2008) similarly observed that customers who were angry at the firm for betraying relational norms exhibited retaliatory behavior, like vindictive complaining against the firm. They complained to seek publicity for the firm's actions and engaged in negative WOM. In another study, customers who observed unjust layoffs were motivated to restore justice via retribution directed toward the organization (Skarlicki, Ellard, and Kelln 1998). Importantly, these retaliatory actions need not be short-lived. Some research shows that once consumers develop a grudge against the firm for negative actions, they hold the grudge over time (Gregoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009). Thus, we hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 3:* Witnessing an employee acting in an uncivil (vs. civil) manner toward another employee causes customers to seek revenge against the firm compared to witnessing civility.

### Cognitions Underlying Employee-Employee Incivility Effects on Customers

We also aim to understand why employee-employee incivility might lead to anger and the effects predicted in Hypotheses 2 and 3. Although prior research supports the growing problem of workplace incivility and deviance (i.e., sabotaging the organization; Harris and Ogbanna 2002) and shows that witnessing employee-employee incivility makes customers angry (Porath, MacInnis, and Folkes 2010), direct evidence as to why these effects occur is unclear. Porath, MacInnis, and Folkes (2010) speculate that incivility induces anger because it evoked an appraisal of unfairness, a critical appraisal dimension underlying anger. Although their results are consistent with this possibility, they did not measure the unfairness appraisal nor did they investigate why an employee's uncivil behavior provoked anger or to whom uncivil behaviors were viewed as unfair (e.g., unfair to the customer or unfair to the victim). Our research investigates these issues.

*Deontic justice perceptions: unfairness to the victim.* Incivility may impact perceptions of unfairness because it is regarded as unfair to the victim. People are moral watchdogs (Folger and Skarlicki 2005). They classify another's action based on the extent to which it conforms to beliefs about what they believe is fair (Cropanzano, Goldman, and Folger 2003), comparing an actual action to an ideal or "ought to be this way" state. One of those "oughts" is that individuals deserve respect from others (Durkheim 1858; Vidmar 2000). An uncivil, disrespectful act conflicts with this value system and so seems morally wrong, unfair, or unjust. Deontic justice is a *judgment* about the morality of an outcome, process, or interpersonal interaction (Cropanzano, Goldman, and Folger 2003) grounded in the belief that "people value justice simply because it is moral" (Colquitt and Greenberg 2001, p. 221). That is, consumers may believe that an uncivil encounter is unfair to the victim because such behavior is inconsistent with the way people should be treated. The intrinsic, exogenous nature of a deontic response is based in the notion that "virtue is its own reward" (Turillo

et al. 2002). This distinguishes deontic injustice from exchange-based injustices examined in previous services marketing studies (e.g., Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999).

*Harm to the customer experience.* Incivility may also evoke anger because the uncivil behavior is perceived to be an offense against the customer—that is, it *harms the customer experience*. Instead of focusing on a pleasurable customer experience, witnesses of incivility are likely distracted by the employee's incivility. Blaming the uncivil employee for inserting an unpleasant element in an otherwise pleasant experience should lead to anger directed at the employee (Folkes 1984). Hence, employee incivility may vex witnesses because of the harm done to them personally. This contrasts with deontic justice, which angers observers without regard to the offense's harm to them personally.

*Violations of normative expectations.* Finally, incivility may make consumers angry simply because it is counternormative; it *violates norms* for appropriate service employee conduct. According to dramaturgical theories of impression management, people expect employees to constrain their behaviors to be consistent with "onstage" roles. Hence, impolite and discourteous "onstage" behaviors toward other employees are unexpected in a service encounter (Buss and Briggs 1984). Negative exchanges between employees would be tolerated if enacted offstage, outside of customers' views. Witnesses of incivility may therefore feel anger because of counternormative unpleasantness in the service setting.

*The relationships among the three processes.* The process explanations noted above are noncompeting, and any or all may be consequences of witnessing frontline service providers' incivility. However, we predict that perceptions of unfair treatment (i.e., deontic justice) will be more likely to explain why witnesses experience anger and seek revenge compared to perceived violations of normative expectations or harm to the customer's experience.

Whereas traditional economic theories assume that most people are driven by self-interest, a growing body of evidence suggests that people are also concerned with the well-being of others (see Kollock 1998). Studies have shown that those who witness unfair behaviors (to unknown others) punish wrongdoers even if their retribution requires self-sacrifice (i.e., money) (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1986; Turillo et al. 2002). Further, our reasoning is consistent with prior work that shows that witnessing incivility (Porath and Erez 2009) and observing the unfair treatment of others (De Cremer and Van Heil 2006) induce negative emotions, especially anger and hostility. These findings suggest that injustice and anger stemming from witnessing unfair treatment may be tied most strongly to deontic justice. Based on the conceptual logic described above, we predict that:

*Hypothesis 4:* Compared to witnessing civility, witnessing incivility between employees induces customers'



perceptions that the uncivil encounter (a) violates deontic justice expectations, (b) harms the customer experience, and (c) is counternormative. However,

*Hypothesis 5:* The effect of witnessing employee-employee incivility on customer anger and revenge seeking behaviors is most strongly mediated by deontic justice perceptions.

## Overview

Below we describe three studies designed to test the hypotheses. Study 1 tests Hypothesis 1 using a critical incident methodology to investigate the prevalence of incivility. Study 2 examines the effects of incivility on anger and one indicator of revenge: reduced patronage intentions (Hypothesis 3). It also examines potential boundary conditions of incivility's effects. That is, we examine whether incivility has negative effects on customers even when it might be perceived as justifiable. The study of incivility becomes even more compelling if it is observed even when delivered by a manager who is trying to correct a service delivery infraction outside of the customer's purview. Study 3 expands on the range of dependent variables we examine to determine if incivility propels customers toward revenge at the uncivil manager (Hypothesis 2) and the firm (Hypothesis 3) through the mediating process of deontic justice perceptions (Hypotheses 4 and 5).

## Study 1

To gain insight into the prevalence and potential effects of customers' witnessing incivility among employees, we conducted a critical incident survey that asked respondents to recall incidents in which they had witnessed an employee's incivility toward another employee in their role as customer. We included two conditions in which the employee acts in an uncivil manner toward customers: one in which the target was the customer himself or herself and a second in which the target was another customer. These conditions served as baselines against which to compare the incidence and effects of customers' witnessing incivility between employees. We also included a second baseline comparison by asking about employees' *civil* behaviors. Inclusion of this baseline is similar to Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault's study (1990) comparing recall of particularly satisfying service encounters with recall of particularly dissatisfying service encounters. Finally, we asked about behaviors that previous research has linked to revenge seeking, including negative WOM and future purchase intentions (e.g., Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2003; Gregoire and Fisher 2008; McColl-Kennedy et al. 2009).

## Method

Study 1 used a 2 × 3 between-subjects design, which asked respondents to report on either civil or uncivil actions by an employee and on either actions that had been directed at

themselves, other customers, or another employee. Two hundred forty-four undergraduate students (53% male) enrolled in a senior-level business course at a large university participated in the study in exchange for course credit. An advantage of examining effects of incivility among young versus older people is that their more casual and less formal standards of personal interaction and etiquette should make them more tolerant of incivility. Researchers document that younger generations tend to be more accepting of disrespect, while older generations are more frustrated and bothered by disrespectful or uncivil behavior (Pearson and Porath 2009). Negative effects of incivility may be even greater among older customers.

*Procedure.* Respondents seated at a lab computer workstation were asked to complete an electronic survey. Sessions ranged in size from 20 to 30 students. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of six conditions that manipulated (a) the civility of an employee in a service encounter (uncivil vs. civil) and (b) the target of the employee's uncivil or civil action (another employee; another customer; and the respondent himself or herself).

*Dependent variables.* Respondents were asked to recall situations in which an employee acted in an uncivil (civil) manner toward another employee, themselves, or another customer. They were then asked to indicate in what industries the uncivil (civil) behavior had been observed or experienced by checking from a list of industries (see Table 1). They were also asked to indicate how frequently the behavior had occurred (once or twice a month or more, less than once, or twice a month).

Respondents were then asked "Thinking back on your own personal experiences, try to remember as vividly as you can one episode in which you experienced an employee behaving in a particularly (im)polite and (un)civil way toward you (another customer, another employee). Try to provide as much detail as you can so as to re-experience in your own mind what happened and how you felt about it. Think about this episode while you answer the questions below." Respondents described the episode in an open-ended format and were then queried about its impact.

To provide preliminary insight into issues relevant to the outcomes of incivility, we asked whether the episode made them feel angry and upset (1 = *disagree strongly*; 7 = *agree strongly*;  $\alpha = .95$ ). They were also asked whether and to whom they would spread positive or negative WOM about the uncivil incident, the extent to which the incident made them more (7) or less willing (1) to use future products promoted by the firm and the extent to which the experience made them more (7) or less willing (1) to learn more about the company's products in the future. These items were designed to provide some preliminary evidence that incivility would make customers desire to seek revenge by spreading negative WOM and boycotting the company. Nevertheless, they are not perfect measures of revenge seeking. For example, less willingness to learn about and to use the firm's products can imply avoidance rather than the "acting against" characteristic of revenge.

**Table 1.** Prevalence of Employee Incivility Compared to Employee Civility When Directed at Another Employee, at Other Customers or at the Self

Measure	Incivility			Civility		
	Toward Another Employee (%)	Toward Other Customers (%)	Toward Me Personally (%)	Toward Another Employee (%)	Toward Other Customers (%)	Toward Me Personally (%)
Industry						
Restaurants	83	79	83	48	89	89
Retail	66	62	70	61	76	76
Government	45	60	56	25	8	8
Airlines	38	28	43	65	60	60
Entertainment	36	28	35	29	32	32
Universities	35	35	50	81	62	62
Health Care	21	30	35	61	57	57
Banks	17	17	28	52	81	81
Gyms	16	17	10	35	51	51
Frequency <sup>a</sup>	38	50	38	87	100	92
n	58	40	47	32	30	37

Note. <sup>a</sup> Proportion who reported experiencing (in)civility once or more per month.

## Results

**Prevalence of witnessing incivility among employees.** The results in Table 1 show that respondents reported incidents of employee incivility and civility among all targets and across a wide range of industries. Representative incidents of employee-employee incivility are reported in Appendix A.

All respondents witnessed an employee-employee incivility incident, 73.2% ( $n = 41$ ) describing an employee reprimanding another employee. The employee's uncivil communication typically revolved around the victim's incompetent job performance (75% of respondents,  $n = 42$  mentioned incivility from such causes). Only 7.14% ( $n = 4$ ) indicated that the uncivil behavior occurred "offstage." The most common setting for the uncivil employee behavior was in a restaurant (37.5%,  $n = 21$ ).

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the frequency of incivility shows a main effect of incivility ( $F = 86.39, p < .001$ ). That is, incidents of civility were more frequent ( $M = .93$ ) than incidents of incivility ( $M = .42$ ). These results support Hypothesis 1a. Consistent with Hypothesis 1b, witnessing uncivil behavior of an employee targeted at another employee is perceived to be just as frequent ( $M = .38$ ) as uncivil behavior of an employee targeted at another customer or at the self ( $M = .50$  and  $.38$ , respectively,  $p = ns$ ). Hence, witnessing incivility toward employees seems to be at least as prevalent as witnessing incivility toward other customers and toward the self.

**Impact of incivility.** A set of  $2 \times 3$  ANOVAs on measures of anger, purchase intentions, and refusals to learn about future products promoted by the firm showed strong main effects of incivility. A main effect for civility indicates that incivility by employees generated substantially more anger from customers ( $M = 5.18$ ) than did civil acts by employees ( $M = 1.76; F = 520.86, p < .001$ ; Table 2). An interaction between civility and the target showed that customers were most angry when the uncivil action was targeted at

themselves ( $M = 5.67$ ) and least angry when the civil action was targeted at themselves ( $M = 1.44; F = 7.59, p < .001$ ). Nevertheless, and as expected, incivility targeted at another employee still generated substantial anger ( $M = 4.87$ ).

An ANOVA on repurchase intentions also showed a main effect of incivility ( $F = 245.40, p < .001$ ). Respondents had lowered repurchase intentions ( $M = 3.07$ ) when an employee acted in an uncivil versus civil manner ( $M = 5.35$ , see Table 2). Customers were just as likely to have lowered intentions to do business with the firm in the future when the uncivil action was directed at another employee ( $M = 3.25$ ) as at themselves ( $M = 2.70$ ). Similarly, an ANOVA on interest in the firm's products and services revealed a civility main effect and an interaction ( $F = 196.36, p < .001$ , and  $F = 16.39, p < .01$ , respectively). Incivility decreased interest in learning about the firm. Additionally, customers were more likely to have lowered intentions to learn more about new products and services offered by this company when the uncivil action was directed at another employee ( $M = 2.60$ ) than themselves ( $M = 3.30$ ).

Ninety-two percent of customers who witnessed employee-employee incivility spoke negatively about the firm to others based on this incident. Most told many people, with 77% of respondents speaking about the incident to friends, 58% to family, 15% to coworkers, 15% to other customers, and 15% to other employees or supervisors (Table 2). In contrast, witnessing episodes of employee-employee civility generated far less (positive) WOM, suggesting that incivility is both negatively communicated and newsworthy.

## Discussion

Study 1 supports Hypothesis 1 and provides preliminary support for Hypothesis 3. Although customers' witnessing of employee-employee incivility is less common than witnessing

**Table 2.** Consumer Reactions to Employee Incivility Compared to Employee Civility When Directed at Another Employee, Other Customers or at the Self When Describing a Critical Incident

Measure	Incivility			Civility		
	Toward Another Employee	Toward Other Customers	Toward Me Personally	Toward Another Employee	Toward Other Customers	Toward Me Personally
Anger	4.87 <sup>a</sup>	4.99 <sup>a</sup>	5.67 <sup>b</sup>	1.87 <sup>c</sup>	1.97 <sup>c</sup>	1.44 <sup>c</sup>
Repurchase	3.25 <sup>a</sup>	3.25 <sup>a</sup>	2.70 <sup>a</sup>	5.27 <sup>b</sup>	5.27 <sup>b</sup>	5.52 <sup>b</sup>
Interest In Firm	2.60 <sup>a</sup>	3.29 <sup>b</sup>	3.30 <sup>b</sup>	4.90 <sup>c</sup>	5.73 <sup>d</sup>	4.57 <sup>c</sup>
Word of Mouth to						
Friends	77%	55%	58%	57%	23%	57%
Family	58%	38%	55%	57%	19%	57%
Coworkers	15%	15%	13%	8%	7%	8%
Other Customers	15%	7%	18%	22%	7%	22%
Other Employees	15%	7%	10%	7%	7%	3%
No One	8%	28%	17%	16%	71%	16%

Note. <sup>abc</sup> Means with different superscripts are different at  $p < .05$ .

employee-employee civility, incivility is witnessed in numerous industries. Moreover, every respondent in the “witnessing uncivil behavior among employees” condition was able to report on an incident of employee incivility. Although customers’ witnessing of employee-employee incivility is not the norm, it is not the exception either. Over 40% reported frequently witnessing or experiencing uncivil behavior from employees. Moreover, incivility angers customers and it encourages them to engage in behaviors that may reflect a desire for revenge, such as discussing the uncivil encounter with others and boycotting the firm and information about its products.

Although Study 1 documents that customers do witness employee-employee incivility and provides some preliminary evidence of its detrimental impact on firms, the retrospective nature of the task suggests caution in drawing strong conclusions about the effects of incivility. Study 2 was designed to replicate these effects of incivility on anger and revenge against the firm (here through reduced patronage intentions as a proxy for revenge), so as to avoid the potential retrospective reporting bias that may characterize Study 1’s methodology.

Study 2 was also designed to test whether incivility induces anger even when it might be considered justifiable. Another drawback to Study 1’s retrospective methodology is that it may overstate the anger inducing effects of incivility. Memory biases favoring extreme events may have led respondents to recall and report egregious and anger-provoking incivility incidents. Perhaps incivility is perceived as normative in some contexts and so fails to induce anger. The context in which incivility would be likely to be perceived as normative is when a manager reprimands a subordinate for incompetence. Since companies are expected to train employees to behave in a manner that conforms to job expectations, consumers may tolerate incivility if it comes from a superior who attempts to correct a subordinate’s behavior. If witnessing employee-employee incivility is tolerated by customers, we would not expect to replicate previous

results (Porath, MacInnis, and Folkes 2010) that examined incivility among employees at the same level.

Second, customers may tolerate a manager’s incivility if it involves a reprimand of a subordinate’s job-related infraction (vs. something tangential to the job). Since employees are expected to be competent on the job, customers may appreciate managers’ attempts to call a poorly performing employee on his or her performance and encourage better future performance. Effects of witnessing employee-employee incivility on anger would be particularly persuasive if we observed negative effects *even when* it is delivered by a manager toward an employee, and even when it is designed to correct a subordinate’s job performance.

## Study 2

### Method

Study 2 used a 2 (uncivil vs. civil comment by a manager) × 2 (delivered on-stage vs. off-stage) × 2 (for a job relevant vs. irrelevant offense) between subjects design. Two hundred twenty-two undergraduate students (53% male) participated in Study 2 for course credit. Respondents were seated at a computer workstation and were asked to complete an electronic survey. Sessions ranged in size from 10 to 25 students.

Because Study 1 found that consumers recalled mostly incidences of uncivil reprimands, Study 2 scenarios involved a reprimand of an employee by a manager and varied whether it was delivered in a civil or an uncivil manner. A reprimand is defined as a reproof or rebuke of one individual by another for behavior deemed inappropriate. Importantly, reprimands are not the same as incivility since reprimands can be delivered in a constructive and civil manner. Although the reprimand’s uncivil content was the major way we manipulated incivility, we also varied the context in which the reprimand was delivered. Since incivility involves “inconsiderate words and deeds



that violate conventional norms of workplace conduct” (Pearson and Porath 2009, p. 21), a manager who delivers a reprimand “onstage” in front of customers should be perceived as less respectful than one who delivers a reprimand “offstage” outside of a customer’s view. Offstage delivery may be perceived as less likely to violate expectations of what is appropriate behavior since reprimands, if delivered, are likely to be perceived as best given privately.

**Procedure.** Study 1 results prompted us to select a restaurant context, with respondents being asked to think about a restaurant that they frequented and then imagine that they were dining at the restaurant with friends. They were also told to imagine that the waitress had delivered an extra entrée to their table. At this point, respondents were told to imagine an uncivil or civil reprimand of the waitress by the restaurant manager. In the *competence relevant conditions*, the waitress was reprimanded because she brought an extra entrée to the table. In the *competence irrelevant conditions*, the waitress was reprimanded because she parked in the wrong spot in the employee parking lot. In the *uncivil reprimand conditions*, the manager said to the waitress, “C’mon, what are you stupid? Can’t you be more careful?” In the *civil reprimand condition*, the manager said to the waitress, “I understand that mistakes happen. But, please try to be careful.” In the *onstage conditions*, respondents were told to imagine that the uncivil or civil reprimand was delivered in front of the customer, at his or her table. In the *offstage conditions*, the respondent was told to imagine that they overheard the manager delivering the reprimand as he or she passed by the kitchen on the way to the restroom.

**Measures.** Respondents completed two 7-point scaled items, indicating whether they agreed that “the manager was respectful” and “the manager was considerate” (1 = *disagree strongly*; 7 = *agree strongly*;  $\alpha = .95$ ). These items served as the manipulation check for incivility. Respondents also indicated the extent to which they thought that “the waitress was competent” (1 = *disagree strongly*; 7 = *agree strongly*). This item served as a manipulation check for job competent behavior (for the waitress).

Respondents used two 7-point scales to indicate the extent to which they felt angry and upset (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *a great deal*;  $\alpha = .90$ ) at the reprimanding employee (the manager). They used the same 2 items to indicate the extent to which they were angry at the waitress ( $\alpha = .61$ ). *Repurchase intentions* were measured by asking respondents whether they “would be willing to come back to this restaurant in the future” (1 = *disagree strongly*; 7 = *agree strongly*).

## Results

**Manipulation checks.** An ANOVA showed that respondents viewed the manager as less respectful in the uncivil ( $M = 1.78$ ) than in the civil employee condition ( $M = 4.24$ ;  $F = 261.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Managers were also viewed as less civil when they delivered the reprimand on versus offstage ( $M = 2.61$  vs.  $3.42$ ;  $F = 27.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ). An interaction between incivility and

onstage behavior ( $F = 3.73$ ,  $p = .05$ ) showed that reprimands were least likely to be regarded as uncivil when they were delivered in a civil manner and offstage ( $M = 4.80$ ) compared to the other three conditions ( $M_{\text{civil/onstage}} = 3.70$ ,  $M_{\text{uncivil/offstage}} = 2.03$ , and  $M_{\text{uncivil/onstage}} = 1.52$ ,  $p < .05$ ) for each comparison). An interaction between incivility and competence ( $F = 5.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ) showed that reprimands were most likely to be regarded as uncivil when they were delivered in an uncivil manner toward a person performing competently ( $M = 4.64$ ) compared to the other three conditions ( $M_{\text{uncivil/incompetent}} = 3.88$ ,  $M_{\text{civil/competent}} = 1.79$ , and  $M_{\text{civil/incompetent}} = 1.73$ ,  $p < .05$  for each comparison). Still, these smaller two-way interactions did not qualify the strong main effect of incivility on perceptions of incivility.

An ANOVA showed that respondents viewed the waitress as less competent in competence relevant ( $M = 3.78$ ) versus competence irrelevant conditions ( $M = 4.56$ ;  $F = 23.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The waitress was viewed as less competent in the uncivil ( $M = 3.97$ ) versus civil ( $M = 4.38$ ;  $F = 6.59$ ,  $p < .01$ ) condition and more competent in the onstage ( $4.42$ ) versus offstage ( $M = 3.93$ ;  $F = 9.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ) condition. There were no interaction effects.

**Effects on outcomes.** The results showed that the effects of incivility are powerful. ANOVA’s showed main effects of incivility on feelings of anger at the manager ( $F = 199.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 2.01$ ;  $M_{\text{civil}} = 4.86$ ) and on repurchase intentions ( $F = 39.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 4.79$ ;  $M_{\text{civil}} = 3.62$ ). There was also a main effect of onstage behavior on anger at the manager. Customers were angrier with the manager when the reprimand was delivered onstage versus offstage ( $F = 4.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $M_{\text{onstage}} = 3.64$ ;  $M_{\text{offstage}} = 3.22$ ). No other main effects or interactions were observed. The lack of interactions suggests that consumers are intolerant of employee-employee incivility even when it occurs offstage by a manager and when it involves managers’ attempts to correct a subordinate’s job-related behaviors.

Incivility did not affect anger at the waitress ( $F = .36$ ,  $p = ns$ ), though customers were more angry at the waitress when the reprimand was given offstage versus onstage ( $F = 8.43$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $M_{\text{onstage}} = 1.43$ ;  $M_{\text{offstage}} = 1.80$ ). No other main effects were found for anger at the waitress. These dissociations between anger at the waitress and anger at the manager offer some evidence against a halo effect interpretation of our results.

## Discussion

Study 2 shows that incivility affects anger and one indicator of vengeance against the firm (reduced patronage). It also shows that the effects of incivility are robust. Customers do not tolerate an employee who acts uncivilly toward another employee, even if it is delivered by a superior whose uncivil comments relate to the employee’s job-related behaviors. The fact that incivility delivered offstage and for competence-related behaviors still angered consumers suggests that negative reactions are not attributable only to incivility being unusual in the servicescape.

**Table 3.** Confirmatory Factor Analyses Loadings for Study 3 Process Variables

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
<b>Deontic Justice (<math>\alpha = .91</math>):</b>			
It's morally wrong for a person to treat someone like that shown by the manager	-.80		
The manager's actions were ethically appropriate (reversed)	.60		
The manager was right to speak to the waitress the way he did (reversed)	.85		
The waitress deserved her treatment from the manager (reversed)	.81		
The manager behaved in a fair way (reversed)	.91		
I felt uncomfortable about how the waitress was treated	-.81		
I felt bad for the waitress	-.65		
<b>Harmed the Customer's Service Experience (<math>\alpha = .93</math>):</b>			
The manager's behavior harms customers' dining experience		.84	
The manager's actions ruin the atmosphere for customers		.95	
The manager's actions disturbed my dining experience		.91	
<b>Normative Inappropriateness (<math>\alpha = .78</math>):</b>			
I should not be made to see the manager reprimanding another employee			.86
Customers should not be made to hear the manager using that tone			.80
The manager should have reprimanded the waitress for her conduct in the back room, away from customers			.51

The next step is to (a) provide additional support for our hypothesized effects of witnessing employee incivility on vengeance toward the offending employee and the firm (Hypotheses 2 and 3) using more direct indicators of revenge and (b) enhance our understanding of the processes underlying incivility's negative effects (Hypotheses 4 and 5). We hypothesize that incivility is repugnant primarily because it violates the customer's sense of deontic justice. Although uncivil comments may harm the customer experience and be counternormative, these latter explanations are not believed to fully account for its insidious impact. If we are correct, we should see that incivility influences outcomes related to deontic justice; that is, incivility should lead to a desire to exact revenge. Moreover, we should see that deontic justice perceptions, more so than alternative mechanisms, like perceptions of harm to the customer experience or violations of normative expectations, mediate the impact of incivility on these outcome measures.

## Study 3

### Method

Study 3 used a one factor (uncivil vs. civil comment by a manager toward an employee) between subjects design. Participants were 113 undergraduate students (60% male) who received course credit for responding. Respondents were seated at a computer workstation and were asked to complete an electronic survey. Sessions ranged in size from 10 to 25 students. The procedure was similar to Study 2's incompetent civil and uncivil conditions in its use of both the restaurant scenario and the manager's comments toward the waitress. That is, after the waitress brought the extra entrée to the table, the manager in the *uncivil reprimand condition* said to the waitress, "C'mon, what are you stupid? Can't you be more careful?" In the *civil reprimand condition*, the manager said to the waitress, "I understand that mistakes happen. But, please try to be careful." As a manipulation check, respondents indicated whether they agreed that "the manager was respectful" (1 = *disagree strongly*; 7 = *agree strongly*).

Seven items assessed *deontic justice* (1 = *disagree strongly*; 7 = *agree strongly*). Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed that "it's morally wrong for a person to treat someone like that shown by the manager," "the manager's actions were ethically appropriate" (reversed), "the manager was right to speak to the waitress the way he did" (reversed), "the waitress deserved her treatment from the manager" (reversed), "the manager behaved in a fair way" (reversed), "I felt uncomfortable about how the waitress was treated," and "I felt bad for the waitress," ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Three items assessed the extent to which the manager's actions *harmed the customer's service experience*: "the manager's behavior harms customers' dining experience," "the manager's actions ruin the atmosphere for customers" and "the manager's actions disturbed my dining experience" (1 = *disagree strongly*; 7 = *agree strongly*;  $\alpha = .93$ ).

Three items were combined to measure perceptions of the reprimand's *normative inappropriateness*. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed that they "should not be made to see the manager reprimanding another employee," that "customers should not be made to hear the manager using that tone," and that "the manager should have reprimanded the waitress for her conduct in the back room, away from customers" (1 = *disagree strongly*; 7 = *agree strongly*;  $\alpha = .78$ ).

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the three process variables: deontic justice, harm to the customer's experience, and normative inappropriateness. The 13-item, 3-factor model produced a satisfactory fit with a comparative fit index (CFI) of .86, a Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) of .82, an Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) of .10, and a  $\chi^2$  of 384.14 ( $df = 62, p < .001$ ). In this model, the loadings were large and significant ( $p < .01$ ), the average variance extracted (AVE) equaled or exceeded .50 for all constructs, and Cronbach's alpha's were greater than the .7 guideline (see Table 3 for alphas). Results indicated a significantly better fit with the three hypothesized factors than a one-factor model ( $\Delta\lambda^2 = 75.86, p < .001, \Delta df = 2$ ) or a two-factor model (with deontic justice as one factor, and harmed the customer's experience and normative

**Table 4.** Confirmatory Factor Analyses Loadings for Study 3 Dependent Variables

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2
Desire for revenge against the perpetrator ( $\alpha = .91$ )		
I wanted the manager to get what he deserved	.54	
I wanted to get even with the manager	.70	
I wanted to take action to get the manager in trouble	.87	
I wanted to punish the manager in some way	.95	
I wanted to inconvenience the manager	.89	
I would complain about the manager	.65	
I would complain to give a hard time to the manager	.70	
I would complain to the restaurant to make the manager suffer for his services	.67	
Desire for Revenge Against the Firm ( $\alpha = .95$ )		
I would spread negative word-of-mouth about the restaurant		.81
I would denigrate the restaurant to my friends		.84
When my friends were looking for a restaurant, I would tell them not to go there		.89
I would spend less money at the restaurant		.84
I would stop going to the restaurant		.91
I would go to the restaurant less often		.89
I would take my business to another restaurant		.93

**Table 5.** Study 3 Means and Significant F's for Measures Comparing Incivility to Civility in Study 3

	Uncivil	Civil	F	$\alpha$
Manipulation check				
Employee civility	1.93	4.89	149.96*	
Processes				
Deontic justice	5.42	2.95	175.78*	.91
Harms experience	6.03	3.40	143.48*	.93
Normative appropriateness	5.94	4.65	31.73*	.78
Outcomes				
Anger toward the Manager	5.09	2.24	110.17*	.91
Anger toward the Waitress	3.20	2.97	ns	.89
Revenge against the Manager	3.60	2.24	46.05*	.91
Revenge against the Firm	4.82	3.02	55.01*	.95

Note. \*F is significant at  $p < .001$ .

inappropriateness as a second factor) ( $\Delta\lambda^2 = 16.76$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\Delta df = 1$ ). Overall, the CFA models indicated that our theorized process constructs possessed satisfactory psychometric properties. As a result, construct scores were calculated and included in data analyses (Table 3).

*Anger at the manager* and *anger at the waitress* were measured using the same scales used in Study 2. *Desire for revenge* against the perpetrator and the company was measured by a set of items designed to show that customers who witness incivility wish to get back at the uncivil perpetrator and/or the company for their uncivil treatment of employees. *Patronage reduction* was measured using the 4 items from Gregoire and Fisher (2006). *Negative WOM* was measured using the 3 items from Gregoire and Fisher (2006). To measure *desire for revenge* (at the manager) and *vindictive complaining* (about the manager), we adapted the items from Gregoire and Fisher's (2008) and Gregoire, Tripp, and Legoux's (2009) scales to be directed specifically at the manager. These items, which were measured on 7-point scales with 1 = *disagree strongly* and 7 = *agree strongly*, are noted in Table 4.

A CFA on the combined set of "revenge" items revealed an excellent fitting two-factor model comprised of (a) desire for revenge against the perpetrator (indicated by desire for revenge against the manager and vindictive complaining about the manager) and (b) desire for revenge against the firm (indicated by patronage reduction and negative WOM about the firm; see Table 4). This 15-item, two-factor model was a significantly better fit than a one-factor model ( $\Delta\lambda^2 = 965.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\Delta df = 8$ ). The two-factor model produced a satisfactory fit with a CFI of .95, a TLI of .95, an RMR of .08, and a chi-square of 259.73 ( $\Delta df = 89$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In this model, the loadings were large and significant ( $p < .01$ ), the AVE equaled or exceeded .50 for all constructs, and Cronbach's alpha's were greater than the .7 guideline. In addition, the covariances were significantly less than one. Overall, the CFA models indicated that these constructs possessed satisfactory psychometric properties. Thus, we created construct scores and used them in data analyses.

## Results

A set of ANOVAs examined the effect of incivility on the four outcome variables (anger toward the manager, anger toward the waitress, desire for revenge against the perpetrator, and desire for revenge against the firm) and the three process variables (deontic justice, harms experience, and normative expectations). Table 5 summarizes these results.

**Incivility manipulation check.** Supporting the incivility manipulation, respondents viewed the manager as less respectful in the uncivil ( $M = 1.93$ ) than in the civil employee condition ( $M = 4.89$ ;  $F = 149.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Effects on outcomes.** The results also supported Hypotheses 2 and 3. Main effects for incivility revealed that consumers were angrier at the manager ( $F = 110.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in the uncivil

**Table 6.** Standardized Betas When Modeling Effects of Deontic Justice, Harm to the Customer’s Experience, Failure to Meet Normative Expectations, Anger at Manager, Revenge Directed at the Manager, and Revenge Directed at the Firm

	Models with a Single Predictor					
	Model 1 Deontic Justice	Model 2 Harm	Model 3 Norms	Model 4 Manager Anger	Model 5 Manager Revenge	Model 6 Firm Revenge
Incivility	.78***	.75***	.47***	.71***	.54***	.58***
	Models with Multiple Predictors					
	Model 7 Manager Anger	Model 8 Manager Revenge	Model 9 Firm Revenge	Model 10 Manager Anger	Model 11 Manager Revenge	Model 12 Firm Revenge
Incivility				.25*	.13	.08
Justice	.66***	.55***	.41**	.54***	.49***	.37**
Harm	.15	.20	.31*	.04	.13	.27
Norms	-.03	-.18	.00	.02	-.16	.01

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

( $M = 5.09$ ) than civil ( $M = 2.24$ ) condition. Consumers had a greater desire for revenge at the manager when reprimands were uncivil ( $M = 3.60$ ) versus civil ( $M = 2.24$ ;  $F = 46.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Table 5). They also had a greater desire for revenge at the firm when reprimands were uncivil ( $M = 4.82$ ) versus civil ( $M = 3.02$ ;  $F = 55.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The nature of the reprimand had no effect on anger at the waitress ( $F = .53$ ,  $p = ns$ ;  $M_{uncivil} = 3.20$ ;  $M_{civil} = 2.97$ ). These results support Study 1 and Study 2, which found that customers who witness an act of incivility of one employee toward another are angry and that they wish to get back at the perpetrator and the firm for the uncivil action.

**Effects on the process measures.** Consistent with Hypothesis 4, all three process variables were affected by incivility. Main effects for incivility revealed that consumers were more likely to believe that deontic justice perceptions had been violated ( $F = 175.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ) when the employee encounter was uncivil ( $M = 5.42$ ) versus civil ( $M = 2.95$ ). They also perceived greater harm to the customer experience ( $F = 143.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) when the employee encounter was uncivil ( $M = 6.03$ ) versus civil ( $M = 3.40$ ). Furthermore, they felt the employee encounter was more inappropriate ( $F = 31.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ) when it was uncivil ( $M = 5.94$ ) versus civil ( $M = 4.65$ ; see Table 5).

**Mediating effects of the three process explanations.** A set of regression analyses tested the mediating effect of the three process explanations on the three outcome variables (see Table 6). The analyses used contrast codes which preserved the original manipulation of incivility (1 = civil; -1 = uncivil; Irwin and McClelland 2001). For each dependent variable, three models were tested: (a) one in which incivility was used as the predictor variable, (b) a second in which the three process measures were used as independent variables, and (c) a third in which all variables (incivility and the mediators) were included in the analysis. Testing all process measures simultaneously is the most correct method for examining mediation since the three

process measures are significantly correlated ( $r = .77$  between deontic justice and harms experience;  $r = .43$  between deontic justice and normative expectation violations;  $r = .66$  between harm experience and normative expectation violations). Evidence for mediation (and support for Hypothesis 5) would be shown by finding that (a) incivility affects deontic justice and the dependent variables, (b) deontic justice affects the dependent variables, and (c) the effect of incivility on the dependent variables disappears (full mediation) or is significantly reduced (partial mediation) when the process variable (deontic justice) is included, and yet the process variable remains significant.

Consistent with the ANOVAs, Models 1–3 confirm that incivility impacts deontic justice perceptions ( $b = .78$ ,  $t = 13.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ), harm to the customer experience ( $b = .75$ ,  $t = 11.98$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and normative expectations ( $b = .47$ ,  $t = 5.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Table 6). Likewise, and consistent with the ANOVAs, Models 4–6 show that incivility impacts anger at the manager ( $b = .71$ ,  $t = 10.50$ ;  $p < .001$ ), revenge against the manager ( $b = .54$ ,  $t = 6.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and revenge against the firm ( $b = .58$ ,  $t = 7.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Table 6).

Consistent with our predictions that anger and revenge result from deontic justice violations, Models 7–9 show that the more deontic justice perceptions have been violated the angrier consumers feel ( $b = .66$ ,  $t = 6.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the more they want to exact revenge on the manager ( $b = .55$ ,  $t = 4.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the firm ( $b = .41$ ,  $t = 3.63$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, models 10–12 support the mediating role of deontic justice violations on the relationship between incivility and anger/revenge. Model 10 shows that effect of incivility becomes greatly reduced ( $b = .25$ ,  $t = 2.42$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while the effect of deontic justice violations remain significant ( $b = .54$ ,  $t = 4.94$ ;  $p < .001$ ) in its impact on anger. Moreover, Models 11–12 show that the effect of incivility on revenge against the manager and revenge against the firm is completely mediated by deontic justice perceptions. That is, the effect of incivility goes to zero significance for both dependent variables, while the effect of deontic justice violations remain significant ( $b = .49$ ,



$t = 3.51, p < .01$  for revenge against the manager and  $b = .37, t = 2.88, p < .01$  for revenge against the firm).

We conducted Sobel (1982) tests to further examine the mediating effect of deontic justice on the relationship between incivility and our three outcomes. In these Sobel tests, we included each of the three processes as mediators. Sobel tests showed that deontic justice fully mediated the effect of incivility on each of these three outcomes. Specifically, deontic justice mediated incivility and anger at the manager ( $z = 4.62, p < .001$ ), revenge against the manager ( $z = 3.39, p < .001$ ), and revenge against the firm ( $z = 2.81, p < .01$ ). Consistent with the contrast code results, harms experience, and normative expectation did not significantly mediate incivility and anger at the manager ( $z = .28, p = ns; z = .17, p = ns$ , respectively), revenge against the manager ( $z = .84, p = ns; z = -1.33, p = ns$ ), or revenge against the firm ( $z = 1.82, p = ns; z = .12, p = ns$ ) when included in the same Sobel test with the other processes. These results support Hypothesis 4.

## Discussion

Study 3 shows that incivility affects a wide range of outcomes that are detrimental to the perpetrator and the firm. Customers who witness employee incivility are not only angry at the perpetrator but are more likely to seek revenge against the perpetrator and the firm. Study 3 also reveals a greater understanding of what underlies these effects. Although witnessing employee incivility harms the customer's experience, runs counter to normative expectations, and is perceived as unjust to the victim (deontic justice), the driving mediating force responsible for the range of negative outcomes is deontic justice (Table 6). Customers do not like to see others treated disrespectfully. When they see others treated unfairly, it seems to motivate a desire to retaliate. However, this desire to retaliate is not isolated to the perpetrator of the suffering but extends to the firm associated with the perpetrator as well.

## General Discussion

Our research goals were to (a) examine how commonly customers witness uncivil actions between employees, (b) expand on prior research by investigating its effects on customers and firms, and (c) gain insight into the beliefs underlying why incivility negatively impacts customers and firms. Our results find that although witnessing incivility among employees is not normal, it is not rare either (Table 1). Moreover, its occurrence can have serious effects on customers and companies. Incivility makes customers angry and violates fairness perceptions regarding how employees should be treated. The violations of deontic justice cause them to seek revenge against the perpetrator and the firm. Witnessing an employee treat another employee disrespectfully is upsetting from a moral perspective. Although incivility among employees is counternormative and harms the customer's experience, our findings suggest that the detrimental consequences stemming from witnessing incivility

are driven by deontic injustice. As such, we contribute to the growing literature identifying customers' perceptions of fairness and justice as important to service evaluation (e.g., Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999) and by distinguishing the role of deontic justice, in particular.

Our findings also contribute to the burgeoning literature on consumers' sensitivities to the means of production. The vision of the consumer emanating from the marketing literature suggests that consumers focus on "what's in it for me." Although consumers perceive that they are indeed harmed by exposure to incivility between employees, this perception does not seem to impact anger and revenge. In contrast, the fact that the effects of incivility are driven by deontic justice perceptions suggests that *consumers are sensitive to the impact of production on producers*. Some other studies show that consumers express alarm at firms' treatment of their employees, such as hiring children to work long hours or permitting sweatshop factory conditions. We observe similar sensitivities where incivility is observed in a benign and isolated context (vs. a longstanding practice). Whereas a firm might plausibly be held responsible and castigated for planned, longstanding practices that harm employees, the fact that consumers punish the firm, even when there is no specific firm-sanctioned policy or convention to point to, is suggestive of the potentially insidious impact of incivility on negative company outcomes.

These findings contribute to an understanding of the powerful effects of social factors that might occur in the background of the service experience. Research on customer satisfaction reveals the important role of customers' emotional reactions (e.g., Westbrook and Oliver 1991). Little research has shown the effects of emotions when customers are not directly impacted (as when they are merely witnesses to employee incivility). In Study 1, we found that witnessing employee-to-employee incivility was as detrimental as when incivility is directed toward customers. Our results also help explain why employee satisfaction is related to customer satisfaction besides through employee commitment to the firm and employee organizational citizenship behaviors (Donavan, Brown, and Mowen 2004). Customers are influenced by how employees relate to each other, which is likely to be reflected in employee satisfaction measures.

Our research also contributes to research on the effects of discrete emotions, here anger, on consumer behavior. What is interesting about employee-to-employee incivility is that anger is not evoked in response to a goal-relevant outcome; it is induced even though the customer is not the target of the incivility. Prior evidence supports customers' experience of anger and finds that it can be directed toward firms (Folkes 1984). Anger in prior theoretical work (McCull-Kennedy and Sparks 2003) and empirical research (e.g., Folkes 1984) is largely precipitated by product or service failure. Our research identifies a fairly common source of anger that can be irrelevant to product and service outcomes (i.e., employee to employee incivility) yet still have detrimental effects on companies.



## Managerial Implications

Incivility is not a problem limited to a particular industry but is widespread (Table 1). Nevertheless, restaurants, retailers, and government offices may need to be particularly concerned since incivility in these settings appears to be more memorable. Moreover, incivility is not uncommon. Over a third of customers report employees behaving uncivilly toward other employees and to customers at least once a month. Yet managers may underestimate the prevalence of this problem in their own organizations because consumers seldom report it to employees, though consumers often tell friends and family.

To decrease employee incivility, organizations should invest in training programs focusing on civility. Civility is best enhanced by building competencies in skills such as listening, conflict resolution, negotiation, dealing with difficult people, and stress management. Organizations might also train managers in coaching so that they can mitigate the detrimental effects of incivility. Managers should learn how to observe others' behaviors, how to listen for signals that help is needed, how to give and receive feedback, and how to recognize the impact of their own behavior.

Our results also highlight the importance of knowing how to reprimand employees civilly—even in cases of incompetence. Although managers might assume that customers will appreciate an uncivil reprimand to an incompetent subordinate, our results suggest the opposite. To repair the (justice-related) effects on customers who witness incivility, managers and employees might learn how to give apologies not only to the customer but also to apologize to the victim in the customer's presence. Practice scenarios of employees and customers who have experienced or witnessed incivility are useful training tools. To maximize the impact of training efforts, organizations should evaluate civility in performance reviews, and perhaps tie civility to career advancement.

## Limitations and Future Research

Our research is limited by its use of student samples, retrospective reports (Study 1), and simulated experiences (Studies 2 and 3). However, the results are sufficiently provocative to warrant additional research on incivility. For example, although incivility was examined in the context of employee reprimands in Studies 2 and 3, not all uncivil behaviors represent reprimands. Employee-employee incivility incidents that are not couched as reprimands (e.g., mocking another's appearance or manner) may result in even more negative consequences for firms.

Future research might also explore whether different forms of employee incivility prompt a deontic justice response. Perhaps, different circumstances increase the extent to which harm to the customers' experience and violation of normative expectations induce anger. Our research tested whether competence affected witnesses' responses to employee-employee incivility and found that even a supervisor's offstage reprimand for incompetence angered customers. Although we did not uncover such effects, there may be circumstances where

witnesses feel that an employee deserved his or her uncivil treatment. Future research might explore other potential boundary conditions.

Future research might also investigate emotions beyond those examined here. For example, incivility may induce anxiety, pity (for the victim), or surprise. Do these emotions impact forms of revenge against the firm and perpetrator as well? Emotions may play an even more complex role when incivility is reciprocated.

Studies 2 and 3 examined incivility eliciting a passive response (the target of incivility did not respond to the manager), which reflects the kinds of incidents reported by Study 1 respondents. When employees reciprocate incivility (as in the case of bickering) other emotions may be salient (such as fear over whether the incident might escalate or even amusement over witnessing behavior that might seem childish). Additionally, future research might study how customers evaluate an organization's procedural fairness culture, and how this affects their response against an uncivil employee and the organization.

Given the negative impact of incivility, how might companies mitigate its effects once it has occurred? One interesting issue concerns the effect of apology. To whom should the apology be directed—the victim and/or customers who witness the uncivil interaction? How do certain tactics improve the perceived sincerity of an apology? Learning more about how employees, managers, and organizations can repair the detrimental effects of incivility is worthy of additional research.

## Appendix A

### *Excerpts from Seven Different Respondents' Open-Ended Responses to Incivility from Study 1*

The nurse took long because she was helping other patients. The doctor was pretty rude to the nurse. He raised his voice and told her "I'm not paying you to come and work at your pace." She said, "Sorry doctor, but I was busy with the other patients. I couldn't bring it to you sooner." The doctor told her to leave his office.

I was sitting on one end of the square table and directly saw that it was a waiter who had accidentally dropped about four or five dishes containing pizza, pasta, etc. While he was apologizing and beginning to clean up, either another waiter or the manager came up and just started yelling and screaming in front of everybody at the restaurant.

There was a new employee working a cash register at an amusement park and two other employees were speaking rudely to this individual because she was slow at operating the cash register due to her unfamiliarity with the location of the buttons. The two other employees were speaking rudely to her and were disrespectful and the language used was unnecessary.

I asked the woman at the front desk a question. She looked up the answer in my account in the computer. She looked puzzled at the screen, and called over another employee to clarify what she

saw. Then, she began harshly questioning the other employee about why she did what she did in regards to inputting my information. The tone of voice she used, her body language and facial expressions seemed cold, tense, and condescending.

One of the tellers was recently hired and had misfiled a large batch of the day's checks. One of the older tellers, rather than aiding the person, snatched the checks out of her hand and proceeded to do all of the re-filing herself.

One of the employees was restocking a shelf of clothes when the supervisor or co-worker came up to them, and rather loudly started explaining that they were doing everything wrong and began to undo all of their work. For the employee to criticize their co-workers efforts in such a way in front of customers was very disrespectful as well as unprofessional.

An employee was trying to look up the SKU number. She asked her manger to help her. The manager did not respond to her at first, even though she must have heard her. The employee asked for help again, assuming the manger did not hear her, and the manager yelled at her, saying that she should just go find it herself because the manger was too busy to deal with it.

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