

# Curtailing the harmful effects of workplace incivility: The role of structural demands and organization-provided resources

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## ABSTRACT

Workplace incivility is a widespread phenomenon that silently damages many organizations and people working within them. To better understand moderators of the relationship between experienced incivility and employees' decision to leave, we conducted a two-wave study that examined a sample of 618 nurses working in a public research hospital. Whereas previous research has focused on preventing and eradicating uncivil behaviors, our study investigates factors that enhance or buffer the negative consequences of incivility. Building on theories of job resources and job demands, we show that (a) certain structural demands (i.e., role ambiguity and working in the night shift) increase the relationship of workplace incivility with turnover intentions, while (b) organization-provided resources (i.e., team-building and personal management interviews) help organizations reduce the association of incivility with turnover intentions.

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## 1. Introduction

Mistreatment in the workplace is a widespread phenomenon that harms employees and decreases organizational effectiveness. To date, the majority of empirical research has focused on such forms of mistreatment as physical violence and psychological aggression (Hershcovis et al., 2007; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002). However, more subtle forms of interpersonal mistreatment happen in the workplace, that are likely more frequent and more widespread than stronger forms of antisocial behaviors, yet still harm work effectiveness considerably (Scott, Zagenczyk, Schippers, Purvis, & Cruz, 2014; Wu, Yim, Kwan, & Zhang, 2011). For instance, behaviors that display disregard for others, including giving curt responses, making negative faces, or giving one the silent treatment, have been shown to occur with higher incidence than physical violence (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999).

Andersson and Pearson (1999) call these low-intensity deviant behaviors *workplace incivility*, distinguishing them from explicit acts of aggression that convey unambiguous aggressive intent. Incivility has been shown to be pervasive in such organizational settings as engineering companies (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997), federal courts (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), universities (Cortina & Magley, 2007), law enforcement organizations (Cortina, Lonsway, & Magley, 2004), and hospitals (Graydon, Kasta, & Khan, 1994). Furthermore, studies show that although workplace incivility is subtler than physical violence or psychological aggression, its

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consequences are not. Implications of incivility include lower job satisfaction (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005), psychological stress (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005), and a decrease in physical health (Lim & Cortina, 2005).

Perhaps the most damaging consequence of incivility for organizations is employee exit (Cortina et al., 2001; Donovan, Drasgow, & Munson, 1998; Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000). In fact, in facing uncivil behaviors, victims of incivility could experience significant distress and decide to leave the organization (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim et al., 2008; Cortina et al., 2002; Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2013; Laschinger, Leiter, Day, & Gilin, 2009; Oyeleye, Hanson, O'Connor, & Dunn, 2013). For example, in Pearson et al. (2000) study, nearly half of the employees who experienced uncivil behaviors contemplated leaving their jobs. According to Cascio (2000; cited in Pearson & Porath, 2005), the average cost for organizations is about \$50,000 per exiting employee across all jobs and industries in the United States. Porath and Pearson (2010) have also shown similar turnover statistics involving costs of 30–50% of employees' salary for low-level departures and up to 400% for high-level employees departures. Given the effects of incivility on employee well-being and exit, these costs appears significant.

In this regard, the literature on incivility generally suggests two different strategies that organizations could implement before or after the escalation of incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). During the hiring process, managers can conduct a personnel screening to assess employees' predispositions to engage in workplace incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2005; Porath & Pearson, 2013). After the occurrence and escalation of incivility, organizations may (a) signal to their members a "zero tolerance" policy for workplace mistreatment to prevent, sanction, and isolate behaviors that violate norms of personal dignity and civility (Flynn & Stratton, 1981; Pearson & Porath, 2005; Porath & Pearson, 2013) or (b) restore a civil climate at the unit level (Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011; Pearson & Porath, 2005; Porath & Pearson, 2013). Despite the plausibility of these intervention strategies, the ambiguous nature of many uncivil acts makes them particularly difficult to implement. For example, some uncivil behaviors such as ignoring co-workers are difficult to recognize and designate as unacceptable behaviors, and this makes enforcement of specific organizational policies difficult.

As a result, we start with the assumption that workplace incivility cannot be completely eliminated, but its effects on turnover intentions can be understood, and eventually dampened, by taking into account individuals' reactions to mistreatment. Whereas previous research has focused on preventing and punishing uncivil behaviors, our study focuses on variations in victim response to incivility, and seeks to provide a more precise understanding of the moderating mechanisms underlying the negative manifestations of workplace incivility. Our research is consistent with Olson-Buchanan and Boswell's (2008) and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) arguments that the characteristics of the triggering event (e.g., experiencing incivility) should not be the only determinants of an individual's reaction to mistreatment. Rather, the incidence of work demands (which drain out victims' coping resources) and the provision of coping resources (which support positive reactions) likely constitute "critical factors" that regulate how individuals react to a triggering event (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Hobfoll, 1989; Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2015).

This insight is particularly important because the majority of research on incivility has overlooked the role that job demands and resources play in helping victims of incivility. That is, what can managers do to reduce the harmful effects of incivility? We thus focus on two questions that have remained under-researched: (a) What structural demands (i.e., job-related factors) make the link between workplace incivility and turnover intentions more likely? And, (b) What organization-provided resources (i.e., managerial practices) might help reduce the association of incivility with turnover intentions?

To answers to these questions, we draw on resource-based theories as a framework to investigate the types of demands and resources that enhance or buffer the negative consequences of incivility (Park et al., 2015; Hobfoll, 1989; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Specifically, we investigate the moderating role of two structural demands (i.e., job characteristics) in the relationship between experienced incivility and turnover intentions: role ambiguity (perceived task structure) and working on a night shift (task temporal structure). We posit that these job-related factors exacerbate reactions to incivility that ultimately cause employees to consider leaving their organizations.

Complementarily, we investigate managerial practices that provide coping resources to victims of incivility (i.e., organization-provided resources), which should act as buffers on the relationship between incivility and turnover intentions. We posit that such organized practices as team-building and personal management interviews (PMI; Boss, 1983; Cameron, 2008) could foster a safe and enabling climate in which employees feel encouraged to raise their concerns and obtain clarifications and support (employee voice; Ng & Feldman, 2012).

Taken together, these theoretical issues suggest that more research attention needs to be devoted to the victim's surrounding context, in terms of demands and resources, when explaining the consequences of incivility. Using a sample of 618 nurses working in a public research hospital, a two-wave survey, and archival data (i.e., work-shift and team-building sessions), we extend research on incivility by examining how structural demands (i.e., role ambiguity and working on the night shift) and organization-provided resources (i.e., team building and personal management interviews) moderate the effects of experienced incivility on turnover intentions.

## 2. Theoretical background

To better understand employees' differential reactions to incivility, we focus on the role of work demands and resources, as recently proposed by Park et al. (2015). These authors rely on an integration of conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989), job demands-resources theory (JD-R; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), and the effort-recovery model (ERM; Meijman & Mulder, 1998) to conceptualize and test work conditions that likely lessen or enhance the negative consequences of mistreatment. The main idea behind the mechanisms undergirding work demands and resources as enhancers/buffers of the relationship between experienced incivility and intentions to leave entail victims' response capacity.

Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) speculates that individuals dealing with high environmental demands (e.g., mistreatment) dissipate valuable resources for coping (e.g., energy, cognitive focus, emotional stability), yet they can rely on other resources to protect themselves (e.g., social support) and buffer the negative consequences of the stressor. However, when individuals face multiple demands at the same time (e.g., both incivility and role ambiguity) they may also experience additive resource depletion, and this may trigger their intention to exit the situation (e.g., by leaving the organization). In a similar way, the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) suggests that employees are more likely to experience negative consequences when they face high demands (stressors) with a limited pool of alternative resources from which to draw upon. Incivility can, therefore, be categorized as a stressor while additional job demands (e.g., role ambiguity) can enhance or attenuate the related psychological costs of it (Park et al., 2015). Finally, the effort-recovery model (Meijman & Mulder, 1998) states that individuals need time to recover psychologically and physically from stressors (e.g., mistreatment). This type of recovery happens when individuals focus their attention on and engage in activities that distract themselves from the stressor, eventually psychologically distancing themselves from it. Thus, for subjects continuously exposed to incivility, a lack of recovery should increase negative reactions. This might be the case of employees narrowly focused on their task (i.e., because of the ambiguity associated with it), or that work on the night shift (e.g., because of interference with family and extra-work activities and the disruptions of their circadian rhythms).

While some of these aforementioned demands (i.e., role ambiguity and work-shift) deplete victims' resources for coping with incivility (e.g., putting strains on energy or emotions), additional coping resources can be situationally provided by the organization. Uncivil acts are more likely to result in harmful effects for the victim when they are not followed by clarifications, apologies, or support. This is due to victims' difficulty in making sense of perpetrator's intentions, indecisiveness about how to react, and uncertainty about what could happen next. Team-building and personal management interviews could allow the organization to replenish resources among victims of incivility, as they involve remedial voice both as a mean of protecting personal resources and a way of accumulating additional resources for coping (Ng & Feldman, 2012). During these organizationally provided dialogues, managers and colleagues may learn about incivility experienced by the focal employee and offer her or him opportunities for clarification and support. Thus, relying on resource-based theories allows us to hypothesize when workplace incivility leads to turnover intentions, as well as testing which type of work demands and resources could enhance or buffer such relationship.

### 2.1. Structural demands: the moderating role of job-related factors

Perceived incivility is inherently subjective and thus very much in the eye of the beholder. That is, when employees experience stress due to reasons other than incivility, they may be predisposed to see many acts at work as uncivil (i.e., through appraisal formation), or at least their sensitivity to such perceptions may increase. More importantly, additional work demands may overwhelm the coping abilities of many individuals and exacerbate the effects of incivility (Cortina & Magley, 2009). We posit that both night-shift work and role ambiguity present challenges to the employees in that these job-related factors cannot be easily controlled (for review, see Murphy, 1995; Colligan & Higgins, 2006), and because of this they may hinder important cognitive and affective resources for coping with incivility. We selected shift work schedules and role ambiguity as our focal structural demands for a variety of reasons. First, both demands have been implicated as sources of physiological, psychological, or social stress (e.g., Harrington, 2001; Kelloway & Barling, 1991; Ma et al., 2015; Srivastava, 2010). Second, role ambiguity and shift work have been singled-out as special problems for nurses' physical and psychological wellbeing (Bedeian & Armenakis, 1981; Chang & Hancock, 2003; Coffey, Skipper, & Jung, 2006; Gold et al., 1992; Sullivan, 1993). Finally, although incivility has not been studied much with regard to role ambiguity and shift work, we felt that these job characteristics were fruitful areas for investigating how structural demands exacerbate the effects of incivility and thus would be an interesting new line of research.

#### 2.1.1. Role ambiguity

The literature on occupational stress (Payne, 1979) suggests that a supportive workplace can act as a coping resource, attenuating the effects of work stressors such as experienced mistreatment, and protecting employees from the harmful effects of this stressor. By the same token, we expect that stressful job characteristics will exacerbate the harmful effects of mistreatment. One of the most common job-related demand that researchers have identified is role ambiguity, which concerns the clarity of behavioral requirements at work in regard to inputs from the environment (Chen & Spector, 1992; Gates, Fitzwater, & Succop, 2003; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970).

Although research has not explored sufficiently whether and how role ambiguity might interact with incivility to influence intentions to leave, how victims react to uncivil events at work likely depends on the degree to which they experience role ambiguity. To the extent that role ambiguity causes employees to question continuously the relevance of their task and create anxiety about employees' perceived contribution to the organization, they will consume significant cognitive and affective resources that may already be in short supply in a demanding task environment. Beyond these intrapersonal effects, role ambiguity may generate additional tension among employees about the boundaries of their jobs and accountabilities, and these interpersonal disagreements will consume additional cognitive and affective resources. These intra- and interpersonal effects should contribute to additive resource depletion (Hobfoll, 1989) and reduce victims' ability to cope with incivility, making them see incivility in an even more disabling perspective, ultimately increasing their turnover intentions. Therefore,

**Hypothesis 1.** *The relationship between experienced incivility and turnover intentions will be moderated by role ambiguity, such that the higher the role ambiguity, the stronger the association between experienced incivility and turnover intentions.*

### 2.1.2. Work-shift

The use of work-shift assignments is an employment practice that many organizations (e.g., hospitals, police departments, or manufacturing firms) employ to achieve economic gains (Mann, 1965) and meet customer demands—often in the form of 24-hour work schedules (Baba, Jamal, & Fang, 1997). Despite organizational advantages stemming from this practice, a great deal of research has highlighted how working on non-day-shifts may also lead to unfavorable worker responses (Barton, 1994; Dunham, 1977; Jamal & Baba, 1992). In particular, the literature on work-shift effects has identified three main areas of concerns that non-day shift workers experience: physical (e.g., body function problems, sleep problems, gastrointestinal disorders), relational (e.g., marital issues, family problems), and organizational (e.g., job dissatisfaction, burnout, job stress, and reduced commitment) problems. As a result, working on a night versus day shift is more likely to induce multiple negative stressors among employees, and this could exacerbate the harmful consequences of experiencing incivility (i.e., an additive model). For example, even if the night shift is associated with calmer working conditions than the day shift (e.g., fewer social interactions and less work), the lack of other resources, such as lower and less frequent managerial supervision, could induce a state of apathetic resignation in which employees see organizational exit as the only viable response to incivility.

Night shift workers are also less likely to have valuable time to spend with their significant others such as relatives and friends. This may preclude them from engaging in extra-work activities that favor psychological detachment from the source of incivility (ERM; Meijman & Mulder, 1998; Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2008; Sonnentag, 2012), alleviate its negative effects, and prevent further resource loss (COR; Hobfoll, 1989; Park et al., 2015). Moreover, from a biological point of view, the disruption of the circadian rhythm associated with working at night may prevent the recovery of important physical resources needed to deal with stressors (Meijman & Mulder, 1998; Sonnentag, 2012; Sonnentag et al., 2008), and this may result both in increased sensitivity and negative reactions to mistreatment. Finally, night workers are less likely to receive valuable support from relatives and friends with whom they can discuss what is happening at work (rather than ruminate about it), thereby missing an important resource for dealing with incivility (Stevanovic & Rupert, 2009). As a result, we expect that incivility will lead to higher intentions to leave the organization for employees working on the night shift than for those working on the day shift. Thus,

**Hypothesis 2.** *The relationship between experienced incivility and turnover intentions will be moderated by work-shift, such that for employees on the night shift, the association between experienced incivility and turnover intentions will be stronger than for those on the day shift.*

## 2.2. Organization-provided resources: the moderating role of managerial practices

Despite management efforts to prevent incivility, the ambiguity of uncivil acts could reduce the effectiveness of many managerial interventions. Indeed, uncivil acts are low-intensity behaviors that are difficult sometimes to recognize and label as unacceptable to perpetrators. Consequently, we posit that workplace incivility may not be able to be completely eliminated, but its effects on turnover intentions can be reduced through specific managerial practices that provide resources to the victims. One viable managerial action against incivility might involve providing victims with the opportunity to express their “voice” and obtain necessary coping resources (e.g., social support). Hirschman (1970) defined voice as “any attempt at all to change, rather than escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, [or] through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management” (1970, p.30). Accordingly, we propose two managerial practices (i.e., team-building and personal management interviews) that enable employee voice, eventually allowing victims of incivility to obtain additional resources for coping (Ng & Feldman, 2012).

### 2.2.1. Team-building

Team-building interventions are designed to help employees improve their effectiveness in working together by surfacing and resolving problems faced at work. According to Golembiewski (1979), the main characteristics of team building practices include: (a) participation of individuals who are involved in a common task, (b) dealing with members who have unresolved issues with one another, and (c) using dialogue or confrontation to enable frank and honest interaction and effective problem solving. In a recent meta-analysis, Klein et al. (2009) found that team-building interventions were related to affective outcomes for coworkers, such as mutual trust and improved interpersonal relations.

We posit that team-building could help employees reduce the harmful effects of incivility. Uncivil acts more likely damage workplace relations when they are not followed by reparation behaviors such as clarifications or apologies. This is due to victims' difficulty in making sense of perpetrator's intentions, indecisiveness about how to react, and uncertainty about what could happen next (Lim et al., 2008). This ambiguous state leads victims of incivility to experience psychological strain, which could increase turnover intentions. Conversely, through constructive dialogue, managers and colleagues may learn about uncivil situations and provide employees with supportive resources before they decide to flee from these unpleasant circumstances (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008). Team-building sessions can thus provide employees with an opportunity to safely confront perpetrators of incivility, understand their subtle antisocial behaviors, and thus, cope more constructively with the incivility (see next section for a description of how team-building meetings were conducted in the present research). This logic is consistent with the “resource acquisition” assumption of the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which suggest that individuals experiencing mistreatment might



benefit from voice opportunities, as in the case of team building sessions, because such meetings are instrumental in the acquisition of additional coping resources. As a result,

**Hypothesis 3.** *The relationship between experienced incivility and turnover intentions will be moderated by team-building interventions, such that for employees who participate in team-building sessions, the association between experienced incivility and turnover intentions will be weaker.*

### 2.2.2. Personal management interviews

Regular private meetings between the supervisor and employee to review the task and quality of interpersonal relationships can also help reduce the effects of incivility on turnover intentions. One of these concrete intervention techniques has been called the Personal Management Interview (PMI), which refers to regular private meetings that occur between a supervisor and each of her or his immediate subordinates (Boss, 1983; Cameron, 2008). These meetings are usually held on a regular basis and normally last between thirty minutes and an hour. PMIs focus on specific goals, such as leadership issues, interpersonal issues, individual needs, feedback on job performance, and even personal concerns or problems (Cameron, 2008). In a broader sense, PMIs provide subordinates with an opportunity to dialogue openly about unresolved issues that they experience at work.

Although the dyadic and hierarchical configuration of PMIs differs from team-building sessions (i.e., PMIs do not specifically involve group behavior among peers), we posit that this type of intervention can also help employees better cope with experienced incivility. For instance, PMIs provide employees informal and regular opportunities to voice concerns to supervisors about incivility issues with co-workers and benefit from valuable resources such as supervisors' remedial work, informal support, and psychological help (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2012) rather than engaging in psychological states of rumination or resignation. PMIs may also have indirect effects on improving social behavior. In fact, when a supportive superior-subordinate relationship exists, subordinates deal with the problems that arise at work with less fear of retaliation from management. In this way, supervisors can indirectly encourage employees to confront uncivil co-workers, resolve their issues in a constructive way, and hold them accountable for doing so. These benefits can only be realized if PMI interventions are performed frequently enough that a reasonable level of familiarity, comfort, and trust can be built over time. Frequency and regularity of interventions reinforce learning through repetition and consolidate norms at work (Boss, 1983). Therefore, we predict that the effect of perceived incivility on turnover intentions will be less likely to occur for employees who hold regular PMIs. That is,

**Hypothesis 4.** *The relationship between experienced incivility and turnover intentions will be moderated by PMI interventions, such that the higher the participation in PMIs, the weaker the association between experienced incivility and turnover intentions.*

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants and procedure

We surveyed 979 nurses in non-managerial positions in a 550-bed teaching and research public hospital with about 5000 employees in the Southeastern United States. Specifically, we contacted the chief executive officer of the hospital, explained the purpose of the study, and asked for permission to conduct the study. Permission was granted to conduct an on-line survey of nurses, and the CEO sent an e-mail to all nurses one week before the initial survey period, describing the study and giving as its purpose the gathering of confidential information to better understand employees and improve the quality of work life. One week later, an e-mail was sent to nurses that contained a link to the on-line survey.

We used a time-lagged design of two waves of data. Workplace incivility, role ambiguity, work-shift, team-building, and personal management interviews were measured at Time 1, and turnover intentions at Time 2. A 5-months interval occurred between the first and the second measurement waves. A total of 618 nurses completed all substantive questions on the survey for the two waves of data, for a response rate of 63%.

In the final sample, 571 respondents (92%) were women. Participants ranged from 21 to 67 years of age ( $M = 40.98$ ,  $SD = 11.91$ ). With regard to tenure, 135 nurses had been employed by the hospital less than a year (21.8%), 83 between 1 and 2 years (13.4%), 109 between 3 and 5 years (17.6%), 119 between 6 and 10 years (19.3%), 60 between 11 and 15 years (9.7%), and 112 for >16 years (18.1%). Of the respondents, 522 (84.5%) were Caucasian, while the others belonged to other ethnicities; finally, with regard to work-shift: 396 (64.1%) worked during the day, 199 (32.2%) worked on the night shift, 23 (3.7%) worked on the evening shift.

### 3.2. Measures

**Workplace incivility.** Workplace incivility was measured by modifying the original scale developed by Cortina et al. (2001). Our first concern was to limit respondent recollection biases of experienced incivility. Indeed, previous researchers suggest that the oft-used "5-year time frame may not be ideal" for estimating the incidence of incivility (Cortina et al., 2001: 76; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Lim et al., 2008), because respondents may have forgotten about previous mistreatments or even changed organizations. To overcome this recollection problem, the measure of incivility was adjusted to rely on a 3-month period for the recall of incidents.

We re-worded items from the original scale developed by Cortina et al. (2001) to fit descriptions of uncivil acts, as recalled by respondents in our research setting. As an example, we simplified and re-worded the original item from Cortina et al. (2001), “ignored or excluded you from professional camaraderie,” with the item, “turning away, ignoring.” One of the authors, who had collaborated with people in the hospital in the past, ensured that the respondents understood and agreed with the final wording of the survey.

To cross-validate the reliability of our modified scale, we conducted an additional study on a new sample of 150 U.S. employees working in different organizations. Respondents rated the items of both the incivility scales. The two scales were found to have a strong statistically significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.93$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), thus validating the psychometric properties and generalizability of the scale. The final six items included in the scale were: “scapegoating, blaming others,” “snide remarks, curt responses, lack of openness,” “making negative faces or gestures (such as eyebrow rising),” “turning away, ignoring,” “avoiding, not being available,” and “generally rude behavior.” Participants responded on a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for this measure was 0.93.

*Turnover intentions.* Turnover intentions were assessed by two items adapted from Irving and Meyer (1994). The items read, “How likely is it that you will actively look for a new job in the next year?” (1 = *not at all likely* to 7 = *extremely likely*) and “I will probably look for a new job in the next year” (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for these items was 0.95.

*Role ambiguity.* Role ambiguity was assessed by two items adapted from Rizzo et al. (1970) and Ivancevich and Donnelly (1974). Respondents were asked to rate how much they agree with the following statements, using a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*): “My immediate supervisor makes it clear how I should do my work,” and “It is clear what is expected of me on my job.” The two items were reverse coded. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the items was 0.78.

*Work-shift.* Information about the work-shift was retrieved from the HR department and coded as 1 if the respondent was working on the night shift, and 0 if the respondent worked during the day. We aggregated evening and night shift because of the reported similarity between the two shift environments and the very few cases in the evening ( $n = 23$ ).

*Team-building.* Team-building meetings in our specific context involved three-day events designed to build healthy, viable teams. At the time of the first survey, 52 employees had participated in the team-building exercises. The hospital management randomly selected participants for the team-building sessions as a part of a mandatory and ongoing managerial intervention for the whole organization.

A typical team-building event proceeded as follows. During the first two days of the meeting, participants had the opportunity to get to know their co-workers and supervisors better through (1) disclosure of their personal life experiences and (2) common sharing of personality test results (e.g., FIRO-B test). Once a climate of trust and informality was achieved between participants, the team-building leader used the last day to discuss unresolved relationship issues between participants (e.g., incivility issues). One of the authors, with long experience in the field of organizational change and development interventions, personally conducted each team-building session. At the time of this study, respondents were asked about their participation in team-building meetings. The team-building variable was coded as 1 if the respondent had already participated in team-building meetings; otherwise it was coded 0. This information was later confirmed by archival data.

*Personal management interviews.* PMIs are private meetings that occur between a supervisor and each of her or his immediate subordinates (Boss, 1983). These meetings are usually held on a regular basis and normally last between thirty minutes and an hour in this organizational setting. PMIs focus on interpersonal issues, individual needs, feedback on job performance, and personal concerns or problems (Cameron, 2008). Prior to the time of this study the hospital had undergone a cultural change (beginning eight years earlier). Central to this cultural change was the implementation of PMIs. In particular, supervisors at all levels were trained to conduct PMIs. All employees were given the opportunity to participate in PMIs. Respondents were asked about the frequency of their participation in PMIs on a scale with the following anchors: 1 = “We do not hold individual meetings,” 2 = “We hold them, but only on an irregular basis,” 3 = “Less often than once every three months,” 4 = “Once every three months,” 5 = “Once every two months,” 6 = “Once each month,” 7 = “Once every three weeks,” 8 = “Once every two weeks,” 9 = “Once each week,” and 10 = “More than once each week”.

*Control variables.* The demographic variables included in this study (gender, age, and tenure) were also used as control variables. Indeed, such factors may influence one’s experiences of mistreatment and have also been linked to retention-related variables (Cortina et al., 2013). Age was measured as continuous variable, gender (0 = *male*; 1 = *female*) as categorical variable, and tenure was measured as ordinal variable.

#### 4. Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, intercorrelations, and Cronbach’s alphas for all the study variables. We tested the hypotheses regarding the moderating effects of structural demands (i.e., role ambiguity and work-shift) and organization-provided resources (i.e., team-building and PMIs) on the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intentions following the procedure for moderated regression analysis outlined by Aiken and West (1991). To reduce potential collinearity between the interaction term and its components, we mean-centered the continuous independent variables (e.g., workplace incivility, role ambiguity) involved in the presumptive interaction. Specifically, we tested the moderating effects of structural demands and organization-provided resources in separate regression equations to clearly outline the differential role of these factors for victims of incivility. We hypothesize that demands and resources should exert a unique moderating effect on the relationship between incivility and turnover intentions, and therefore sought to test them independently, rather than simultaneously (e.g., Scott et

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics, alpha coefficients, and correlations.

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender <sup>a</sup>	0.92	0.27	–								
2. Age	40.98	11.91	0.07	–							
3. Tenure <sup>a</sup>	3.36	1.76	0.08*	0.48**	–						
4. Workplace Incivility	1.79	0.86	–0.06	–0.05	–0.04	0.93					
5. Role ambiguity	2.12	1.22	–0.03	0.02	0.02	0.42**	0.78				
6. Work-shift	0.36	0.48	–0.03	–0.14**	–0.22**	0.00	0.02	–			
7. Team-building	0.08	0.28	0.04	0.11**	0.24**	–0.01	–0.06	–0.12**	–		
8. PMI	4.37	1.55	0.00	–0.08	0.05	–0.14**	–0.31**	–0.10*	0.06	–	
9. Turnover intentions	2.64	1.90	–0.02	–0.21**	–0.16**	0.22**	0.27**	0.00	–0.02	–0.13**	0.95

Alpha coefficients appear on the diagonal.

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

<sup>a</sup> Female = 1, male = 0. Tenure = ordinal variable. Team building: yes = 1 no = 0; Work-shift: night shift = 1, day shift = 0.

al., 2014). We added control variables (i.e., gender, age, and tenure), the main predictors involved in the interactions (e.g., workplace incivility, role ambiguity, and work-shift); and the product terms (e.g., workplace incivility X role ambiguity and workplace incivility X work-shift) in the regression analyses<sup>4</sup>. Support for our hypotheses requires statistically significant increases in variance explained ( $\Delta R^2$ ) with the addition of the two-way interactions. Tables 2 shows the regression results with unstandardized coefficients.

Results indicate that the interaction between workplace incivility and role ambiguity was a significant predictor of turnover intentions ( $b = 0.11, p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, the interaction between workplace incivility and work-shift ( $b = 0.42, p < 0.05$ ) was also significant. Furthermore, with regard to managerial practices, the interaction between workplace incivility and team-building ( $b = -0.68, p < 0.05$ ) and the interaction between workplace incivility and PMI ( $b = -0.12, p < 0.05$ ) were both significant. To examine these interactions in more detail, we conducted simple slopes analyses and plotted unstandardized regression lines representing the relationship between workplace incivility, turnover intentions, and each of the moderators (Aiken & West, 1991) at one and two standard deviations below and above the mean for the continuous variable, and at the original values for the dichotomous variables.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that role ambiguity would moderate the linkage between workplace incivility and turnover intentions, such that the relationship becomes stronger as role ambiguity increases. Accordingly, simple slope analyses indicated that for employees experiencing very high role ambiguity, the association between workplace incivility and turnover intentions was positive and significant (+ 2 S.D.;  $b = 0.32, p < 0.05$ ), whereas for employees who experience high (+ 1 S.D.;  $b = 0.19, ns$ ), low (– 1 S.D.;  $b = -0.09, ns$ ) and very low role ambiguity (– 2 S.D.;  $b = -0.22, ns$ ), the effect of workplace incivility on turnover intentions was not significant (see Fig. 1).

**Table 2**  
Moderating effects of structural demands and organization-provided resources on the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intentions.

Variables	Structural demands		Organization-provided resources	
	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>
Constant	4.06***	0.36	3.96***	0.35
Gender	0.08	0.27	0.04	0.27
Age	–0.03***	0.01	–0.03***	0.01
Tenure	–0.09	0.05	–0.06	0.05
Workplace Incivility	0.05	0.11	0.44***	0.09
Role Ambiguity	0.30***	0.07		
Workplace Incivility × Role Ambiguity	0.11*	0.05		
Work Shift	–0.18	0.15		
Workplace Incivility × Work Shift	0.42*	0.17		
Team-Building			0.11	0.27
Workplace Incivility × Team-Building			–0.68*	0.27
PMI			–0.14**	0.05
Workplace Incivility × PMI			–0.12*	0.05
$\Delta R^2$	0.014**		0.017**	
$R^2$ for total equation	0.150***		0.123***	

Similar results were achieved when testing for the effects of each single interaction (role ambiguity  $\Delta R^2 = 0.14, p < 0.05$ ; work-shift  $\Delta R^2 = 0.10, p < 0.05$ ; team building  $\Delta R^2 = 0.09, p < 0.05$ ; and PMI  $\Delta R^2 = 0.11, p < 0.05$ ).

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

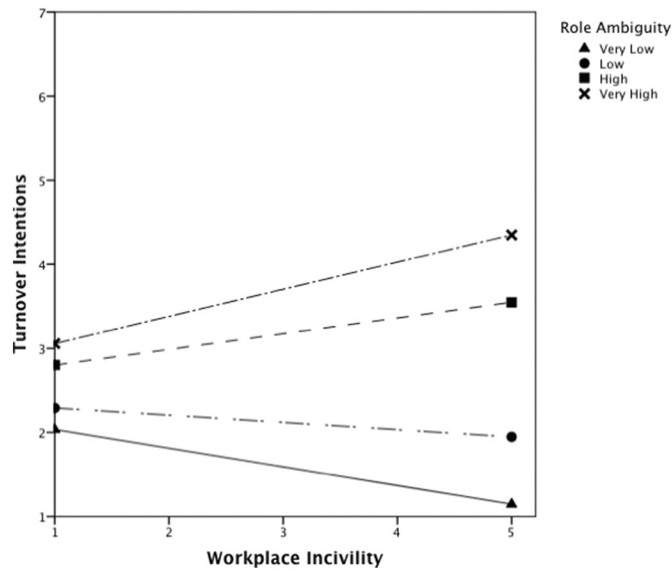


Fig. 1. The moderating effect of role ambiguity on the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intentions.

Confirming [Hypothesis 2](#), simple slope analyses indicated that for employees in the night shift, the association between workplace incivility and turnover intentions was positive and significant (value 1;  $b = 0.47, p < 0.01$ ), whereas for employees in the day shift incivility did not influence turnover intentions (value 0;  $b = 0.05, ns$ ; see [Fig. 2](#)). Consistent with [Hypothesis 3](#), a simple slope test indicated that for nurses who participated in team-building sessions, workplace incivility was not related to turnover intentions (value 1;  $b = -0.24, ns$ ), whereas for those nurses who did not participate to team-building, the effect of incivility on turnover intentions was positive and statistically significant (value 0;  $b = 0.44, p < 0.001$ ; see [Fig. 3](#)). Finally, results confirmed [Hypothesis 4](#) by indicating that when the frequency of PMI was very high (+ 2 S.D.;  $b = 0.07, ns$ ) and high (+ 1 S.D.;  $b = 0.25, ns$ ), workplace incivility was not significantly related to turnover intentions. In contrast, when the frequency of PMI was low (- 1 S.D.;  $b = 0.62, p < 0.001$ ) and very low (- 2 S.D.;  $b = 0.81, p < 0.001$ ), workplace incivility was positively and significantly related to turnover intentions (see [Fig. 4](#)). In conclusion, all our four hypotheses but one were confirmed.

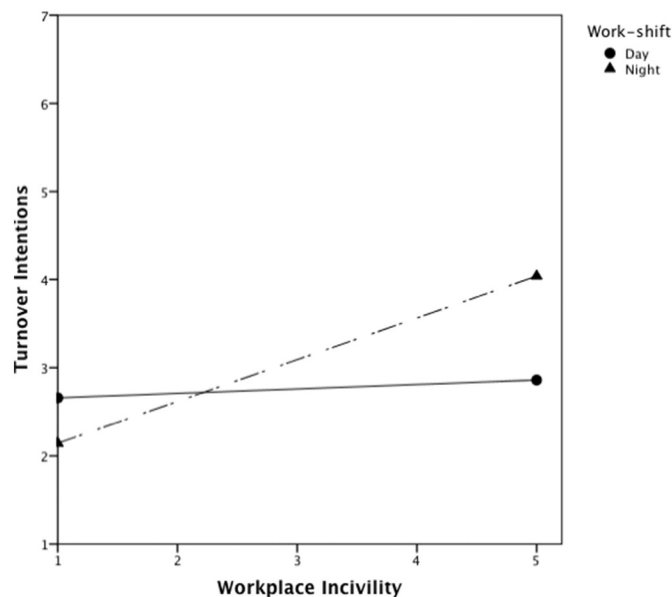


Fig. 2. The moderating effect of work-shift on the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intentions.



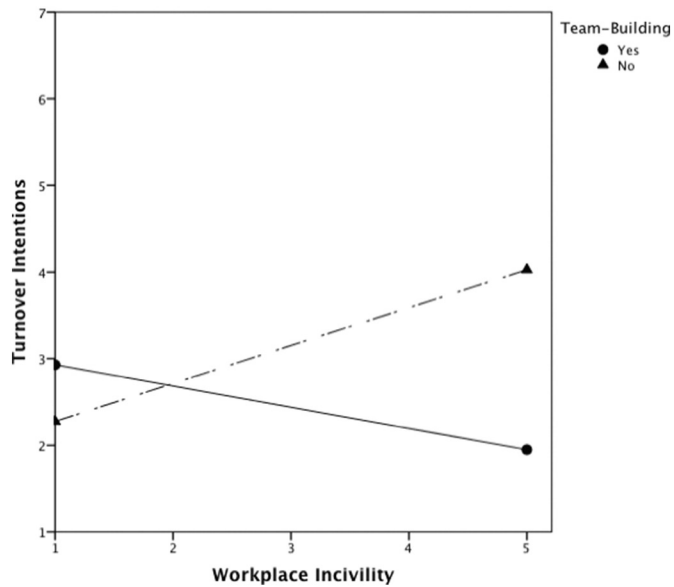


Fig. 3. The moderating effect of team-building on the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intentions.

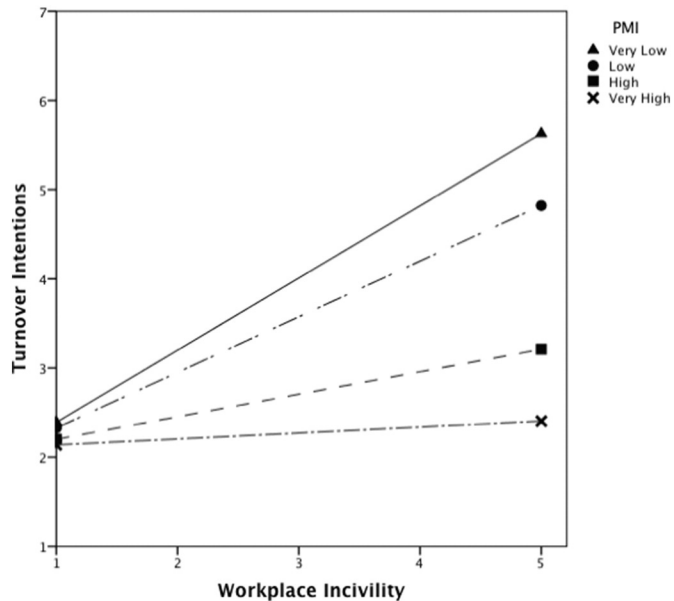


Fig. 4. The moderating effect of personal management interview (PMI) on the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intentions.

### 5. Discussion

Workplace incivility is subtle but can erode relationships between employees, reduce their job efforts, and lower their psychological and physical health. From a practical point, it is extremely difficult to evaluate all the costs of incivility for organizations. To the best of our knowledge, one of its most damaging consequences is employee exit (e.g., Lim et al., 2008; Pearson et al., 2000), which increases the significant cost of attracting and maintaining qualified personnel for organizations. To better understand the moderating mechanisms through which experiencing incivility elicits employees' intentions to leave, we conducted a two-wave study that examined a sample of 618 nurses working in a public research hospital. Our study extends research on workplace incivility by showing that the experience of mistreatment is sufficiently strong to influence employees' turnover intentions, even after a period of five months.

Whereas previous research has examined the relation between workplace incivility and turnover intentions (Lim & Cortina, 2005; Lim et al., 2008), empirical research has under-investigated the moderating mechanisms influencing this relationship. Drawing from insights of resource-based theories (Hobfoll, 1989; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Meijman & Mulder, 1998), our

study contributes to the literature on workplace incivility by answering the following questions: What structural demands (i.e., job-related factors) make the link between workplace incivility and turnover intentions more likely? What organization-provided resources (i.e., managerial practices) might reduce the effects of incivility on turnover intentions? The findings of our study suggest that (a) experiencing role ambiguity and working on the night-shift increase the relationship of workplace incivility with turnover intentions and (b) team-building and personal management interviews can be effective managerial practices that help reduce the association of incivility with turnover intentions.

### 5.1. Implications for practice

With regard to role ambiguity (i.e., perceived task structure), we suggested that when managers fail to provide employees with sufficiently clear guidelines to complete the assigned tasks, they foster situations in which workers myopically focus on their task, eventually hindering their abilities to cope with incivility (i.e., additive resource depletion). Consistent with this view, the results of the simple slope tests showed that workplace incivility relates to employees' intentions to leave only for those who experienced greater role ambiguity. Thus, managers can reduce the effects of incivility on turnover intentions by ensuring that their employees have the necessary information to perform their task.

With regard to those temporal factors that may enhance the effects of incivility on turnover intentions, we compared employees working on the day and on the night shifts (i.e., task temporal structure). Although the night shift is more associated with calmer working conditions than the day shift (e.g., fewer social interactions and less work), we suggested that other factors, such as lower and less frequent managerial supervision and involvement (see the negative correlation of night shift with PMI and team-building), less social support from the family, biological factors, and lack of psychological detachment through extra-work activities may hinder the coping ability of employees who experienced incivility. Eventually, these factors may lead to rumination or induce a resignation state in which victims of incivility are less willing to invest in or maintain healthy working relationships and see organizational exit as the most viable response to incivility. Given this finding, managers may want to provide additional support to those who work on the night shift and, in the worst cases, contemplate modifications to their work-shift. Further, organizations may introduce policies specifically focused on curtailing the effects of incivility and increasing employees' abilities to cope constructively with uncivil acts (e.g., providing and encouraging extra-work activities).

Perhaps the most practical contribution of our study is the empirical examinations of managerial practices that help victims cope with incivility on an ongoing basis. Surprisingly, despite the spread of incivility and its negative consequences, we know very little about effective organizational responses to this phenomenon from a victim's perspective. Thus, whereas previous research has proposed strategies to reduce workplace incivility relying on means such as zero-tolerance expectations, teaching about incivility and civility (Leiter et al., 2011), or investing in post-departure interviews (Pearson & Porath, 2005), this study is one of the first to examine empirically concrete interventions (i.e., team-building and personal management interviews) that provide victims of incivility with resources to cope with mistreatment through "informal" methods for voicing discontent.

Through the years, organizations have adopted "formal" mechanisms such as grievance systems to encourage employees' voicing of mistreatment (Feuille & Delaney, 1992; Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988). However, despite the potential usefulness of these interventions, it seems plausible that the use of grievance systems could eventually worsen victims' situations by triggering perpetrators' retaliation and inducing spirals of mistreatments. The reason for this is that grievance systems merely aim to sanction perpetrators of uncivil acts, rather than solving the roots of the problem in a constructive manner. By contrast, providing employees with constructive dialogue, where they can informally raise their concerns and, most importantly, safely confront the situation, might improve the unpleasant experience of mistreatment before it leads to intentions to leave (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008).

As demonstrated in this study, one viable managerial practice likely involves implementing team-building meetings. Indeed, considering the fact that many perpetrators of incivility are not aware of their harmful actions, these three-day meetings may provide victims with an opportunity to express their discomfort with various acts of incivility that are perpetrated by various members of the organization, to understand their subtle antisocial behaviors, and to cope more constructively with the incivility that they experience.

Holding regular private meetings between employees and their supervisors may also help organizations curtail the consequences of incivility (through social support; e.g., Scott et al., 2014). In this sense, our study complements previous research by Leiter et al. (2011) by examining managerial practices that specifically help single victims of incivility, rather than the whole work unit. Many supervisors are often unaware of the existence of incivility problems among their employees and are unprepared to act when warning signs of incivility arise. Thus, PMIs provide an informal yet regular complaint system that may concretely assist managers in coaching employees targeted with incivility. Our findings show that, when involved in personal management interviews, employees coped better with experienced incivility. Specifically, workplace incivility was positively related to turnover intentions only when the frequency of PMIs was low. In contrast, workplace incivility had no effects on turnover intentions for those employees frequently involved in PMIs (Fig. 4). To have a precise calibration of PMI interventions, we computed the Johnson-Neyman regions of significance (Johnson & Neyman, 1936) for the interactive effect of incivility and PMI on turnover intentions. The Johnson-Neyman procedure is often used in conjunction with the simple slope test (Aiken & West, 1991) and provides the value of the moderator (e.g., PMI) at which the relationship between the independent variable (e.g., workplace incivility) and the dependent variable (e.g., turnover intentions) becomes significant, or vice versa. The test indicated that the relationship between incivility and turnover intentions becomes nonsignificant for PMI values above 5.77. Thus, our analysis shows that holding

PMIs at least “once each month” (i.e., PMI = 6 as coded in the survey) could neutralize the effects of workplace incivility on employees’ turnover intentions.

## 5.2. Limitations

One possible limitation of our study is that we did not directly measure coping mechanisms, but rather observed their differential effects on the decision to leave. Similarly, we analyzed resource depleters (role ambiguity and work-shift) and replenishers (team-building and PMIs) and their moderating effects rather than measuring variability in the presence of resources. Another possible limitation of our research deals with the use of turnover intentions rather than actual turnover behavior as dependent variable. In this regard, four justifications attenuate possible concerns with the use of intentions. Theoretically, we were interested in the mechanisms leading to voluntary turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993) rather than involuntary turnover (e.g., layoff), which may depend upon general economic conditions or specific organizational restructuring decisions. Methodologically, turnover intentions have been validated as a strong predictor of actual voluntary turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993). In addition, decades of research on the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) demonstrated that behaviors are strongly influenced and preceded by behavioral intentions. Further, to reduce the likelihood of common-method variance, we measured incivility and turnover intentions at two separate points in time (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Practically, one of the authors personally interviewed both the hospital’s CEO and other organizational members and corroborated our initial conjecture that incivility was inducing voluntary turnover in the organizational context under study. Managerially speaking, organizations may have a better chance of curtailing the negative consequences of incivility if they can intervene before intentions to leave manifest themselves.

## 5.3. Future research

There are at least three avenues for important follow-up research on workplace incivility. Following the distinction between major forms of aggression that have been described and investigated in research on workplace aggression (e.g., Baron et al., 1999), future studies can focus on different forms of incivility (e.g., verbal, dyadic or generalized, virtual) and how their effects can be curtailed through different coping resources. For example, we found that supervisors may act as important resources to cope with generalized incivility, and co-workers may also provide social support that may act as resources for coping. In addition, a climate of competition and performance may entail idiosyncratic job demands, eventually leading to resource depletions. Moreover, since experiencing rude behaviors from organizational members may have different effects if compared to uncivil behaviors from individuals external to the organization, future studies should distinguish sources of incivility and include separate questions for uncivil behaviors by customers or patients, together with investigating coping resources against this type of externally originated incivility.

Finally, although we did not directly measure coping in this study, our findings suggest that future research should explore buffers and enhancers of experienced incivility on victims’ coping strategy. Because incivility towards oneself by coworkers likely engenders such emotions as anger, frustration, unhappiness, anxiety, embarrassment, and social disgust, it would be interesting to investigate different emotional reactions and their effects. Theories of emotion maintain that the experience of emotion must often be coped with (Lazarus, 1991), and certain action tendencies are automatically evoked, depending on the emotion elicited (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989). For example, anger often leads to retaliation or lashing out, unhappiness to reaching out for comfort, embarrassment to breakdowns in communication or avoidance behaviors, and anxiety to efforts at escape from unpleasant situations. But in many service-related occupations, it is not possible or appropriate to enact such action tendencies, and efforts at emotion self-management are often called for (e.g., Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Future research on incivility in organizations should examine how workers manage their emotions so as to remain authentic and function effectively, without turning to withdrawal. These processes have been termed, emotional labor, in the literature and encompass multiple dimensions and elicitors (Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005), entail certain costs and benefits (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011), and are related to employee wellbeing (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002).

## 6. Conclusions

To conclude, more research is needed to better understand the nature and consequences of workplace incivility. Workplace incivility is a widespread phenomenon that silently damages many organizations and the people working within them. Accordingly, this study shows that incivility can carry substantial costs, potentially causing employees to contemplate leaving their organizations even after a considerable lapse of time. Hence, rather than treating uncivil behaviors as inconsequential, organizations should actively manage them by taking actions and implementing practices that improve the quality of work life of their members.

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