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But we're here to help! Positive buffers of the relationship between outsider incivility and employee outcomes

Michael T. Sliter and Elizabeth M. Boyd

Department of Psychology, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN, USA

Incivility from sources outside the organization (e.g., customers, patients) is increasingly recognized as an important workplace stressor, having been linked to a variety of negative outcomes. It is therefore becoming more important to understand not only the negative effects of outsider incivility, but also potential buffers of these negative effects. As such, the current study sought to explore the impact of outsider incivility directed towards emergency workers (called "victim" incivility) and to identify and test potential positive psychological buffers of the relationship between victim incivility and burnout, physical symptoms and objective absenteeism. Specifically, utilizing a resource perspective, we sought to determine whether work engagement and empathy buffered these negative effects. Survey data from 208 firefighters at two time points showed that victim incivility predicted burnout, physical symptoms and absenteeism, and that both engagement and empathy ameliorated some negative outcomes of victim incivility, including burnout and physical symptoms. Theoretical and practical implications of the research are discussed and areas for future research are proposed.

Keywords: Incivility; Absenteeism; Burnout; Empathy; Engagement; Firefighters.

In recent years, there have been an increasing number of people employed in the service industry (Hecker, 2005), meaning that more employees are exposed to a unique set of stressors created by working directly with organizational outsiders. One such stressor, outsider mistreatment, is thought to be particularly powerful and lamentably common. Outsider mistreatment occurs when someone external to the organization, such as a client or customer, mistreats an employee (e.g., Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007; Sliter, Jex, Wolford, & McInnerney, 2010). Although service employees can be the targets of severe forms of mistreatment such as verbal aggression or even violence, (e.g., Grandey et al., 2007; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002) a much more commonly experienced stressor is that of "outsider incivility" (Sliter et al., 2010). Outsider incivility is low in intensity but high in frequency, and it has been shown to result in long-term negative effects on employees (van Dierendonck & Mevissen, 2002). As such, outsider incivility is the focus of the current study.

Outsider incivility can occur in a variety of circumstances, including nontraditional service jobs. Indeed, a good deal of research has investigated student incivility in teachers (Lampman, Phelps, Bancroft, & Beneke, 2009) and patient incivility in nurses (e.g., Guidroz, Burnfield-Geimer, Clark, Schwetschenau, & Jex, 2010). The current study seeks to replicate the negative effects of outsider incivility, such as its relationships with burnout, (Sliter et al., 2010) physical symptoms (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008) and absenteeism (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012), in a sample consisting of emergency service workers, specifically firefighters.

In addition, we seek to extend the literature on outsider incivility by examining positive psychological buffers of the relationship between incivility and employee outcomes. This contribution answers the call of multiple researchers (e.g., Kern & Grandey, 2009; Rupp & Spencer, 2006; Yagil, 2008) who have recommended that future research examining individual and situational factors that might exacerbate or ameliorate the negative effects of outsider mistreatment, as well as the calls of other researchers to incorporate positive psychology into occupational health research (e.g., Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008; Turner, Barling, & Zacharatos, 2002). This positive psychology perspective has emphasized resource models, where personal and work resources can potentially ameliorate the negative effects of work stressors (Conservation of Resources (COR)

Correspondence should be addressed to Michael T. Sliter, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, 402 N. Blackford St., Indianapolis, IN 46204, USA. E-mail: msliter@iupui.edu

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theory, Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Hobfoll, 1989).

Particularly relevant when considering buffers of outsider incivility are resources that are implied in interpersonal functioning. We focused on two such resources: work engagement and trait empathy. Work engagement —often conceptualized as an abundance of energy, attachment with and motivation for one's work (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006)—has been implied in better interpersonal functioning both at work and beyond (e.g., Kahn, 1990; Rothbard, 2001), as well as the general protection of employees from the effects of stressors (e.g., Britt & Bliese, 2003). Trait empathy—a stable trait involving understanding and feeling the emotions of others—is a personal resource that is implied in helping and forgiveness behaviours. Both resources could be relevant to consider in relation to outsider incivility. By examining these personal resources, we extend the literature on outsider incivility not only by replicating research on its negative effects in a different type of sample (firefighters), but also by investigating possible positive buffers—resource buffers —of the relationship between incivility and its outcomes.

OUTSIDER INCIVILITY

Largely based on Andersson and Pearson's (1999) seminal work on incivility, Sliter and colleagues (2010) define outsider incivility as "low-intensity deviant behavior, perpetrated by someone in a customer or client role, with ambiguous intent to harm an employee, in violation of social norms of mutual respect and courtesy (pp. 468)". Outsider incivility and other outsider-related stressors have been shown to occur quite frequently, perhaps even more so than co-worker-related stressors (Sliter, Pui, Sliter, & Jex, 2011). Perhaps due to its frequency, outsider incivility has been shown to have serious implications for both the organization and the individual employee. For instance, burnout is directly and consistently related to outsider incivility (Dormann & Zapf, 2004; van Dierendonck & Mevissen, 2002), and outsider incivility has been linked to decreased life satisfaction (Appelberg, Romanov, Honkasalo, & Koskenvuo, 1991). Additionally, Sliter and colleagues (2010) and Sliter, Sliter, & Jex (2012) noted the relationship between outsider incivility and decreased service performance, tardiness and absenteeism.

Given that the focal occupation in the current study is firefighting, the primary organizational outsiders of reference are the victims of emergency situations (e.g., car accidents, fires, fire alarms). Therefore, for the sake of specificity, we will refer to low-intensity deviant behaviour from these victims as "victim incivility". Our hypotheses about victim incivility can be understood within the general framework of the COR theory. In this model of stress people strive to retain, protect and build resources, and the depletion of these resources can result in strain (Hobfoll, 1989). Social resources, particularly, are thought to be key components in the COR model (Halbesleben, 2006; Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) and social stressors are among the most damaging. When people are exposed to social stressors, their emotional, cognitive and physical resources become depleted and negative personal outcomes can result (Halbesleben 2006). Incivility is considered to be a social stressor, (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Kern & Grandey, 2009) and the principles of COR theory have often been applied to understanding the negative impact of incivility (e.g., Sliter et al., 2010). We will briefly discuss our replication hypotheses below, discussing the COR theory where relevant.

Burnout is an affective response to stress that consists of emotional, physical and cognitive exhaustion (Demerouti et al., 2001). Being treated poorly by organizational outsiders is likely to be a strong drain on individual resources (as per COR theory; Hobfoll, 2001). Indeed, other sources of incivility have been linked to feelings of burnout (e.g., co-worker incivility; Spence laschinger, Leiter, Day, & Gilin, 2009). As such, we propose that:

> *Hypothesis 1*: Victim incivility will positively relate to burnout.

Additionally, we expect victim incivility to impact not only the psychological health of a firefighter, but also his/her physical health. Workplace stressors have often been linked to physical health, primarily to the experience of physical symptoms. For instance, Nixon, Mazzola, Bauer, Krueger, & Spector, 2011) conducted a meta-analysis that summarized 79 studies linking workplace stressors to physical symptoms (both individual symptoms and composite measures). The results showed that interpersonal conflict stressors had a moderate, positive relationship with physical symptoms.

Workplace stressors can affect physical health through a variety of mechanisms. Typically, organizational researchers discuss the psychosomatic model of stress. This model essentially posits that stressors result in physical reactions, such as increases in blood pressure and/or acid reflux (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001) as well as immune suppression (McCraty, Atkinson, & Tomasino, 2003). These symptoms of stress, particularly immune suppression, can predispose people to experiencing stress-related health outcomes such as headache, upset stomach, or back pain (Spector & Jex, 1998). The proposed link between victim incivility and physical health would fit well into this theoretical model as interpersonal stressors have been shown to exert powerful negative effects on a person's physical health (Spector, Chen, & O'Connell, 2000). Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: Victim incivility will positively relate to physical symptoms.

Finally, we expect that victim incivility will not only affect physical and psychological outcomes within employees, but will also impact outcomes that affect organizations financially. Particularly, we will focus on objective employee absenteeism. COR theory continues to provide a useful framework for explaining this relationship. When a person is suffering from resource depletion as a result of workplace stressors, they will act to conserve and restore resources through a variety of means, including withdrawal from the workplace (Leiter, 1991). Indeed, people who report lowered levels of resources have been shown to report higher withdrawal from the workplace (e.g., Taris, Schreurs, & Van Iersel-Van Silfhout, 2001). In the case of victim incivility, because there is no sure way to avoid this stressor at work, firefighters may feel the need to withdraw from work to restore their resources. Previous research has linked incivility to absenteeism, both in terms of subjective (Porath & Pearson, 2012; Sliter, Sliter, Withrow, & Jex, 2012) and objective (Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012) outcomes. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: Victim incivility will positively relate to absenteeism.

In addition to examining these negative outcomes of victim incivility, we also sought to examine potential buffers of the negative effects of victim incivility. Particularly, we took a positive psychology approach (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and examined two variables that could result in reducing the negative effects of victim incivility—trait empathy and work engagement—which will be defined and discussed in turn.

ENGAGEMENT AS A MODERATOR IN THE INCIVILITY–OUTCOME RELATIONSHIP

Work engagement can be defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by three highly related factors: vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-romá, & Bakker, 2002). Engagement, therefore, can be thought of as a pervasive state of positive emotional attachment, energy and motivation towards work (e.g., Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006). Though work engagement has traditionally been treated as a precursor of organizational outcomes (e.g., productivity; Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005) and an outcome of workplace characteristics (e.g., autonomy, social support; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), there is potential for engagement to act as a moderator variable in the relationship between stressors and strains in the workplace. The potential for work engagement to act as a buffer of stressors is an area that is generally under-researched, and researchers have made unheeded calls to correct this omission (e.g., Britt & Bliese, 2003). A more complete understanding of the benefits of work engagement would serve to highlight reasons why organizations should be concerned with maintaining an engaged workforce.

We sought to examine whether work engagement is a viable buffer of the relationship between victim incivility and burnout, physical symptoms and absenteeism. However, before stating specific hypotheses, it is important to discuss and establish a theoretical rationale for understanding just why engagement might buffer the stressor–strain relationship. There has been little research in this area, but there is theoretical guidance that might provide an explanation as to why engagement might be a viable buffer.

Engagement is characterized by high levels of cognitive, emotional and physical resources that emerge as a result of being at work and doing one's job (Demerouti et al. (2001). Having higher levels of resources can potentially act as a buffer in the stressor–strain relationship. For instance, Demerouti and colleagues (2001) proposed the JD-R model which is a general model that was established for explaining job stress and burnout across multiple, disparate jobs. One assumption of this model is that characteristics of most occupations can be separated into two dimensions: job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to physical, social or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are associated with certain physiological and psychological costs, whereas job resources refer to physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, reducing job demands and associated physiological and psychological costs, or stimulating personal growth and development (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). Note that the definition of resources is different, but not incompatible, with the COR theory definition (Hobfoll, 1989). Particularly, in the JD-R model, resources could be cognitive or physical energies that reduce job demands and their associated costs. Stated differently, job resources can act as buffers in the relationship between job demands and strains.

Researchers have used the JD-R model as guidance in finding support for the buffering effects of job resources in the relationship between demands and strains. Bakker and colleagues (2005) found that job resources buffered the negative effects of emotional demands and work overload on burnout. Furthermore, Xanthopoulou and colleagues (2007) examined job resources as a buffer between patient harassment and burnout in 714 Dutch employees from two home care organizations. The researchers found support for this model, in that different job resources buffered the relationships between harassment and emotional exhaustion and harassment and cynicism. The job resources examined in these studies were both organizational in nature; however, the general notion that greater resources can act as a buffer in the

stressor–strain relationship provides support for the notion that engagement, when construed as a resource, may also act as a buffer of interpersonal mistreatment. Though engagement is often seen to be an outcome of more tangible job resources (e.g., social support, autonomy), the nature of the construct—the physical, cognitive and emotional abundance of resources—indicates that engagement may be more than just an outcome, and may also be a protective resource itself. As such, we propose:

> *Hypothesis 4:* Work engagement will moderate the relationship between victim incivility and burnout, physical symptoms, and absenteeism, such that the relationship between victim incivility and these outcomes will be weaker for those high in work engagement.

TRAIT EMPATHY AS A BUFFER IN THE VICTIM INCIVILITY–OUTCOME RELATIONSHIP

Firefighting is often acknowledged as a difficult job, difficulty that is compounded due to the emotional nature of working with fellow human beings who are injured, sick, dying or dead. This is an emotional challenge that many firefighters struggle with extensively, affecting them both within and outside of the workplace (Kitt, 2009). Particularly difficult for firefighters is their unique relationship with their victim—they must maintain compassionate understanding with these victims, while still retaining emotional distance so as not to become overwhelmed or burnt out. That is, firefighters must have some level of empathy. Empathy is often a trait that is assumed to be essential for any human service job, such as firefighters or emergency medical technicians. However, as with any personality variable, firefighters likely differ in trait empathy, which might have implications on how they react to various workplace stressors, particularly interpersonal stressors such as victim incivility.

Empathy can be defined as the reactions of one person to the observed experiences of another person (Davis, 1980). Davis (1980) notes that empathy consists of both a cognitive and an emotional component. An empathetic person both understands (the cognitive component) and feels (the emotional component) what another person is going through. To put it differently, empathy is the ability to "put oneself in another's shoes". The primary cognitive component of empathy is perspective-taking, which represents the tendency to be aware of and to adopt the perspectives of others, whereas the emotional component is empathic concern or the tendency to respond emotionally to the fortunes and misfortunes of others (Davis, 1983). High trait empathy is marked by characteristics that are relevant to the current study. First, people who are high in trait empathy are much more likely to be forgiving in interpersonal situations than people low in trait empathy (Schimel, Wohl, & Williams, 2006). Second, empathetic individuals tend to be less generally hostile or aggressive (e.g., Berry & Worthington, 2001), indicating that these people would be less likely to retaliate in the face of uncivil or aggressive behaviour.

We propose that trait empathy will act as a buffer in the stressor–strain relationship, particularly by buffering the negative effects of victim incivility. That is, firefighters who are high in trait empathy will be less affected by experiencing victim incivility when compared to firefighters who are low in trait empathy. As mentioned above, empathy is the ability to understand the reactions of other individuals in a specific situation. Though we could locate no research in which empathy has been investigated as a moderator in the interpersonal stressor–strain relationship, this would be a logical proposition based on assertions nested in COR theory and past research on empathy. Specifically, COR theory posits that personality characteristics can act as *personal resources*. Personal resources are resiliency traits that are linked to a person's perception of their ability to successfully control and impact their environment (e.g., Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003). These personal resources can potentially facilitate job performance and protect an individual from work stressors, and empirical evidence has supported the protective ability of personal resources such as self-esteem and optimism (e.g., Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). Given the definition and our understanding of empathy as a construct, this resource-based perspective offers insight into how empathy can buffer the stressor–strain relationship, particularly with interpersonal stressors.

Research on empathy has consistently demonstrated that if a person is high in empathy and encounters someone in need, he/she is more likely to help that person than someone low in empathy (Batson et al., 1997). This effect tends to span situation and group membership, where an empathetic person would help someone in need, even if that person is disliked (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002). The understanding and concern for the welfare of the individual in need seems to transcend the immediate situation, where empathetic people focus on the needs of that person rather than on their own personal needs. This research would support the proposition that trait empathy might buffer the relationship between victim incivility and its outcomes. That is, an empathetic person, if greeted with victim incivility, might be more likely to understand why the victim is reacting with uncivil behaviour and be more resilient to this stressor. The empathetic person might help despite this incivility, and might not perceive this incivility as a stressor, which may decrease the likelihood of experiencing strain. Said differently, empathy might act as a personal resource.

Additionally, as noted above, people who differ in levels of trait empathy also differ in their levels of willingness to forgive others. Schimel and colleagues (2006) found that, when people who are high in trait empathy are reminded of their mortality, they are more likely to forgive others for violence than people with low trait empathy. We would expect this same basic principle to apply in terms of firefighters experiencing victim incivility. Firefighters, when working with victims, are constantly being reminded of their own mortality, a natural reaction when working with people who are sick, injured, dying or dead. As such, consistent with Schimel and colleagues (2006), firefighters high in trait empathy would be more likely to forgive the victims, and families/friends of victims, who are being rude and uncivil. Forgiveness, in general, has recently become linked to a variety of short- and long-term outcomes. For instance, in the short term, people who forgive others are more likely to experience reduced physiological symptoms, such as reduced blood pressure (Lawler et al., 2003) and cortisol (stress hormone) activation (Berry & Worthington, 2001). Additionally, people who are more likely to forgive are more likely to be generally healthy (assessed by examining physical symptoms, medications used, sleep quality, fatigue and somatic complaints; Lawler et al., 2005), indicating that forgiveness might buffer the interpersonal stressor–strain relationship. Given that trait empathy is positively related to forgiveness in general (Schimel et al., 2006), it is likely that empathy would act as a buffer in the interpersonal stressor–strain relationship.

> *Hypothesis 5:* Trait empathy will moderate the relationship between victim incivility and burnout, physical symptoms and absenteeism, such that the relationship between victim incivility and these outcomes will be weaker for those high in trait empathy.

METHOD

Participants and procedures

Firefighters from 50 firehouses in a large Midwestern city in the United States were recruited to participate in a two-wave, grant-funded study. Once the study began, the Chief issued a formal departmental order encouraging participation and ensuring confidentiality. For Time 1, a total of 636 survey packets were sent to the home addresses of all city firefighters who work in suppression (i.e., 24-shift work). The packets included a letter of endorsement from the Chief, an informed consent document, the survey and a postage-paid return envelope. In the letter from the Chief, a link to an internet survey was provided in case the participant would prefer filling out the survey online. A total of 231 useable packets (i.e., no missing data) were returned (response rate: 36.6%). These 231 participants were invited to participate in the Time 2 survey, which occurred 3 months later. A total of 208 useable Time 2 packets were returned (overall response rate: 32.7%). Participants received $15 and $25 for participating in Time 1 and Time 2, respectively. This final group of participants were all male, with an average age of 48.7 (*SD* = 6.66). The majority of participants were Caucasian (74%), and have been employed as firefighters for an average of 19.9 years (*SD* = 6.81). Most participants were classified as first rank firefighters, though many lieutenants (27%) and higher participated.

Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all measures utilized a five-point Likert-type response scale, and participants were asked to consider the past month as a time frame. The measures used for the current study were nested within a larger study, and only represent a portion of the variables assessed.

Victim incivility (Time 1). Given that available organizational outsider incivility scales are designed for customer service contexts and may not fully assess incivility in an emergency situation, and given the recognition of the need for context-specific conflict scales (e.g., Nursing Incivility Scale; Guidroz et al., 2010), we created a victim incivility scale specifically for the current study. In order to develop this scale, the first author met with focus groups of firefighters. After being provided with possible examples of victim incivility, firefighters were asked to think about specific events in which victims were rude, uncivil or aggressive. The firefighters were given 30 minutes to write down as many incidents as they could think of. Following this, firefighters were given an opportunity to describe some of these incidents out loud to the group. Firefighters were welcome to continue writing down incidents during this group session. Verbal responses were recorded, and all written responses were collected.

All responses were organized based on their similarity. A total of 12 items were created, and this scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .91. No items could be deleted to improve the internal consistency. Items were rated on a five-point frequency scale (1 = never; 5 = extremely often). The scale score was calculated as a mean of the items, reflecting how often each participant reported experiencing incivility in the last month. To determine the factor structure of the scale, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted using SPSS v.20 (IBM Corp, 2011). Promax rotation with Kaiser normalization was utilized as the extraction method, with all factor loadings less than .30 being suppressed. Based on analysis of eigenvalues and the scree plot, a one-factor solution with a strong first factor explaining 52% of the variance was arrived at. All 12 items had high loadings on the first factor, though three items loaded on a weak second

TABLE 1
Exploratory factor analysis for victim incivility scale

Items	*Factor 1*	*Factor 2*
Victims ignore instructions I give them.	.64	
Victims change their stories while talking to me.	.67	
Victims question my competence.	.65	
Victims say rude things.	.74	.31
Victims act like they know better than I do.	.71	
Victims don't show appreciation (e.g., say please and thank you.)	.65	
Victims try to talk over me.	.76	
Victims won't move out of my way when I am trying to work.	.76	
Victims raise their voice at me.	.73	
Victims are not truthful with me.	.63	
Victims get too close to me when talking.	.62	−.42
Victims walk away from me while I'm talking.	.75	−.33

Factor Extraction Method: Promax with Kaiser normalization.
Factor 1 explained 52.1% of the variance.
Factor 2 explained 8.1% of the variance.

factor (Table 1). These factors were highly correlated (r = .83), and the items in the second factor did not appear to have common characteristics or a common theme. However, to address concerns related to factor structure, we opted to further examine this scale with the goal of supporting a one-factor solution.

To meet this goal, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on a separate group of firefighters using LISREL v.7.0 (SSI Software, Skokie, IL, USA; Joreskog, 1993). This data is currently in collection as part of a larger survey study, and 248 firefighters have participated at this point. This group of 248 firefighters were once again all male, with an average age of 42.9 (SD = 7.66). Most were Caucasian (69%), and have been employed as firefighters for an average of 16.4 years (SD = 6.81). All participants worked in suppression at the firefighter rank. Along with other measures, these participants responded to the victim incivility scale. The CFA tested three alternate models: (1) the proposed single-factor model, 2) a two-factor model based on the two slightly overlapping factors from the EFA, and 3) a null model in which none of the items were correlated. Based on standard cut-off scores (see Hu & Bentler, 1999), the proposed model had adequate fit (RMSEA = .06, NFI = .95, CFI = .95), and significantly better fit compared to the two-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 38.91$, $p < .01$), lending evidence of the stability of the single-factor structure of the victim incivility scale across samples.[1]

[1]To further address concerns related to the unidimensionality of the victim incivility scale, we reran our analyses without the items in found in the second factor. The results (effect sizes, significance values) in the current study were essentially identical when compared to the 12-item scale, leading us to retain the longer version of the scale in the reporting of our results.

Burnout (Time 2). Burnout was measured using the Shirom–Melamed Burnout Measure (Shirom & Melamed, 2006). This scale consists of 14 items that measure three dimensions of burnout: physical fatigue, cognitive weariness and emotional exhaustion. Example items include "I feel physically drained", "I have difficulty concentrating" and "I have been unable to be sensitive to the needs of coworkers and victims". Items were rated on a five-point frequency scale (1 = never; 5 = always). As these dimensions were highly correlated (r = .77–.84), and because a good-fit CFA indicated a single-factor solution, we used a composite measure of overall burnout (α = .89). Composite burnout scores have been often applied in occupational health research (e.g., Armon, Shirom, Berliner, Shapira, & Melamed, 2008), and, given the nature of our data (intercorrelations and factor structure), we deemed a composite acceptable.

Physical symptoms (Time 2). The physical health of employees was assessed using the Physical Symptom Inventory (PSI; Spector & Jex, 1998). The PSI (18 items) examines somatic health issues often related to stressors, such as backaches, heartburn and trouble sleeping. Participants choose one of the three response options for each symptom: "No, I didn't" (scored as a "1"), "Yes, I did but did not see doctor" (scored as a "2"), and "Yes, I did and I saw doctor" (scored as a "3"), and an aggregate score was created that averaged together responses for all symptoms. Higher scores on the PSI indicate worse physical health. Cronbach's alpha is not appropriate for this measure, which is a causal indicator scale.

Work engagement (Time 2). Work engagement was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2002). This scale consists of 17 items that measure three related dimensions of engagement: vigour, dedication and absorption. Example items include "At my job, I feel strong and vigorous" and "I am enthusiastic about my job" and "I am immersed in my work". All items were rated along a five-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). A composite measure of engagement from the three dimensions was computed. This decision was made for a couple of reasons. First, though some research has utilized CFA techniques to empirically support the three-dimension factor structure (e.g., Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003), this has not been a consistent finding (e.g., Sonnentag, 2003), and our own CFA showed the best model fit with a single-factor solution. Additionally, Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) argue that a composite score for engagement can be very useful based on the moderate to high correlations between dimensions (replicated in the current study; r = .70–88). Based largely on this recommendation, a composite score was utilized for the current study (.87).

Trait empathy (Time 2). Empathy was assessed using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980). The

complete scale consists of four dimensions, but consistent with past research on cognitive and affective empathy (Ristovski & Wertheim, 2005), only two subscales were used: empathetic concern and perspective-taking. Empathetic concern refers to the tendency to have feelings of compassion and concern for other people, and to the emotional component of empathy ("I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me"). Perspective-taking refers to the tendency to adopt the point of view of other people, and to the cognitive component of empathy ("I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the 'other guy's' point of view"). The items were rated on a five-point scale, with "1" being "does not describe me well", and "5" being "describes me very well". The dimensions were highly correlated (r = .69), and consistent with past research, we deemed that a composite score (α = .72) was used to best indicate trait empathy (Ristovski & Wertheim, 2005).

Absenteeism. Data on absenteeism was obtained from the management of the fire department. Archival records data on absenteeism (i.e., number of days missed) were provided for each of the 208 participants. Number of days missed were counted by halves; that is, firefighters could receive a 0.5 missed day if half of their shift was missed. Three months of this data was utilized, with these three months immediately following the Time 1 data collection. The absenteeism data was then matched to employee survey data.

The use of 3 months of absenteeism data was intentional. Three months represents a relatively long period of time and is thus likely to capture significant variance in absenteeism, yet is not long enough that absenteeism numbers might regress to the mean (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Martocchio, 1994).

Control variable. We controlled for negative affectivity (NA) to rule out the argument that people may report, rather than experience, high levels of stressors/strains (Judge, Erez, & Thoresen, 2000). NA was measured using the 10-item (α = .89) NA subscale of the positive and negative affectivity scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which was rated on a five-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and analytic strategy

Descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables are available in Table 2. In terms of prevalence, analysis revealed that approximately 99% of firefighters have experienced some level of victim incivility within a single month. More specifically, 12% reported experiencing incivility between never and rarely, 60% reported experiencing this incivility between rarely and sometimes, 26% reported experiencing this incivility between sometimes and often, and approximately 2% experienced this incivility between often and extremely often.

Hierarchical regression was used to test the main effect hypotheses, where the control variable was entered in the first step and victim incivility was entered in the second. To test the interaction hypotheses, we used a three-step moderated regression procedure. In the first step, the control variable (NA) was entered. In the second step, the predictor and the moderator variables were entered in the equation. In the final step, interaction terms, computed by multiplying the mean-centred scores (i.e., the mean subtracted from each score) for the predictor and moderator variables, were entered into the equation. Significant interaction terms were further investigated by plotting interaction graphs and calculating simple slopes.

Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1, that victim incivility would positively relate to burnout, was fully supported. Victim incivility (β = .25, p < .01) predicted burnout above and beyond the control variable. Hypothesis 2, that victim incivility would positively relate to physical symptoms, was also supported (β = .15, p < .05), Hypothesis 3, that victim incivility would positively relate to absenteeism, was also supported (β = .24, p < .01).

All interaction hypotheses were tested using the aforementioned hierarchical regression method

TABLE 2
Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among study variables

Measure	*M*	*SD*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*
1. NA	1.72	.51	*.89*	—	—	—	—	—	—
2. Victim incivility	2.59	.63	.24**	*.91*	—	—	—	—	—
3. Burnout	2.20	.50	.21**	.30**	*.85*	—	—	—	—
4. Physical symptoms	1.28	.21	.08	.17*	.52**	—	—	—	—
5. Absenteeism	1.17	1.22	−.06	.21**	−.04	−.01	—	—	—
6. Engagement	3.46	.54	−.11	−.08	−.53**	−.30**	.09	*.87*	—
7. Empathy	2.79	.52	.04	.14	−.20**	−.12	−.04	.27**	*.72*

n = 208; * p < .05; **p < .01; Italicized values on diagonal indicate internal consistency, where applicable.

TABLE 3
Hierarchical regression tests for engagement and empathy as moderators between victim incivility and its outcomes

	DV: Burnout			*DV: Physical Symptoms*			*DV : Absenteeism*		
Variable	*Step 1*	*Step 2*	*Step 3*	*Step 1*	*Step 2*	*Step 3*	*Step 1*	*Step 2*	*Step 3*
NA	.22**	.11	.14*	.09	.02	.04	−.06	−.09	−.09
Victim incivility (VI)		.26**	.24**		.16*	.15*		.23**	.23**
engagement		−.47**	−.42**		−.26**	−.23**		.12	.09
Empathy		−.15**	−.13		−.07	−.05		−.10	−.11
VI × Engagement			−.27**			−.19*			−.05
VI × Empathy			−.21*			.06			.17
R^2	.06	.40	.47	.01	.10	.13	.01	.07	.09
ΔR^2		.34**	.07**		.09	.03*		.06**	.02

n = 208; beta weights provided are in their standardized form. *p < .05; **p < .01. DV = Dependent variable.

(Table 3). Hypothesis 4, that engagement will moderate the relationship between victim incivility and its outcomes, was partially supported. First, in examining burnout, the victim incivility–engagement interaction was significant (β = −.27, p < .01). The form of this interaction was graphed and further examined (see Figure 1). A simple slope analysis indicated that the relationship between victim incivility and burnout was significantly stronger (β = .42, p < .01) when employees are low in engagement. High engagement, however, seemed to buffer the relationship between victim incivility and burnout, as there was no significant increase in burnout (β = −.05, p > .05) when engagement was high.

Next, physical symptoms were examined as an outcome. The victim incivility–engagement interaction terms was once again significant (β = −.19, p < .05). The form of this interaction was graphed and further examined (see Figure 2). A simple slope analysis showed that the relationship between victim incivility and physical symptoms was stronger (β = .28, p < .01) when employees were low in engagement than when employees were high in engagement (β = .02, p > .05). Later, we examined absenteeism as an outcome in this relationship, and found no significant relationship.

Hypothesis 5—that empathy will moderate the relationship between victim incivility and its outcomes—was tested. In examining burnout as an outcome, the victim incivility–empathy interaction term was significant (β = −.21, p < .01). The form of this interaction was graphed and can be seen in Figure 3. A simple slope analysis indicated that the relationship between victim incivility and burnout was stronger (β = .50, p < .01) when empathy was low than when empathy was high (β = .07, p > .05).

Finally, we also tested the victim incivility–empathy interaction term while examining physical symptoms and absenteeism as outcomes. Neither of these interaction terms was significant, which provides only partial support for hypothesis 5.

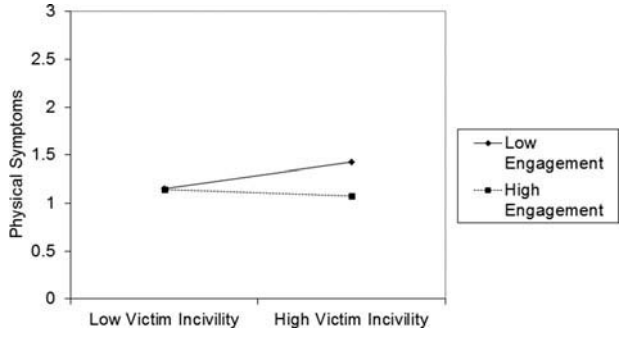


Figure 2. The moderating effect of engagement on the relationship between victim incivility and physical symptoms.

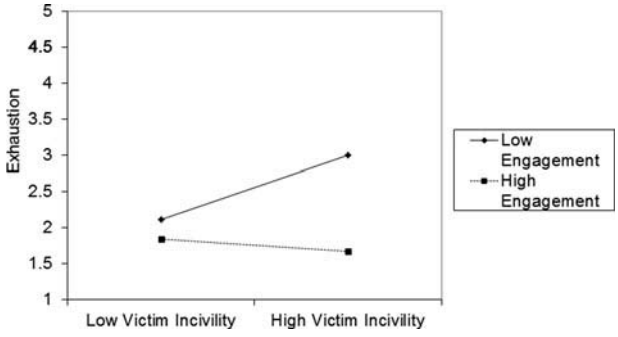


Figure 1. The moderating effect of engagement on the relationship between victim incivility and burnout.

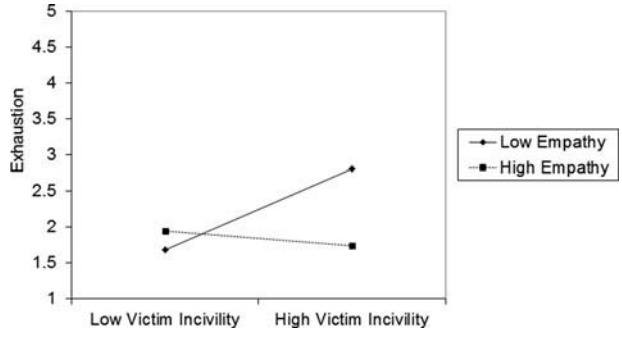


Figure 3. The moderating effect of empathy on the relationship between victim incivility and burnout.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The goals of the current study were to (1) replicate previous findings on the effects of outsider incivility (in the context of firefighters), and (2) examine potential positive psychological buffers of the victim incivility–outcome relationship. Using a multiple time-point design, we sought to investigate these questions using a sample of firefighters. The results generally supported the assertion that victim incivility is not only a common occurrence, but can have negative effects. Specifically, victim incivility was shown to be positively related to burnout, physical symptoms and absenteeism, which highlights the possible costs of victim incivility to both employees and organizations.

The current study also examined engagement as a moderator in the relationship between victim incivility and its outcomes. The hypotheses on the moderating effects of engagement were partially supported, specifically when examining burnout and physical symptoms as outcomes. The results show that people who are less engaged are more likely to experience negative effects of victim incivility than people who are highly engaged in their work. That is, engagement might act as a buffer in the interpersonal stressor–strain relationship, and this might be facilitated by the abundance of resources that an engaged person might have. Specifically, engaged employees are emotionally invested in their work, motivated and have high levels of energy. Based on these emotional and cognitive resources, JD-R and COR theories predict that outside influences—such as interpersonal stressors—might not impact an engaged person as powerfully. These results are generally consistent with the findings of Britt and colleagues (Britt, 2003; Britt et al., 2005), who found that self-engagement in a performance domain can act as a buffer in the stressor–strain relationship within military personnel. However, the definition of engagement used in the current study was much broader in nature, encompassing engagement with the overall job as opposed to simply performance. As such, the current findings may be more generalizable to other occupations.

We also investigated empathy as a moderator in the relationship between victim incivility and its outcomes. Once again, this hypothesis was partially supported, with empathy interacting with victim incivility to explain additional variance in burnout. The victim incivility–empathy interaction was in the predicted direction when examining burnout as an outcome variable. That is, trait empathy seemed to buffer the relationship between victim incivility and burnout, such that the relationship between victim incivility and burnout was weaker for those higher in trait empathy. Based on the characteristics of people who are high in trait empathy, and based on the concept of personal resources, these findings make sense. If a victim is being rude to an empathetic firefighter, that firefighter would be able to understand, cognitively, what the victim is experiencing, and feel the emotions experienced by that victim (Davis, 1980). This may thus allow the firefighter to perceive the incivility as a less stressful experience. The empathic firefighter, too, may be more likely to forgive this incivility, and forgiveness has often been linked to both physical and cognitive benefits (e.g., Lawler et al., 2005; Schimel et al., 2006). Overall, this points to trait empathy serving as a personal resource that can be helpful when coping with uncivil organizational outsiders.

It is worth noting, however, that neither engagement nor empathy moderated the incivility–absenteeism relationship, and that the interaction between empathy and incivility approached significance and was in the opposite direction of what was hypothesized. In addition, empathy did not moderate the incivility–physical symptoms relationship. In terms of absenteeism, it may be that certain people are simply prone to using absenteeism to recover resources lost as a result of victim incivility. Such people may be more sensitive to breaches in interpersonal justice. Research has investigated how justice sensitivity might moderate the relationship between experienced injustice and absenteeism (e.g., Schmitt & Dörfel, 1999), and this sensitivity may operate independently from engagement or empathy. In terms of the results regarding empathy, our findings were largely inconclusive and indicated that empathy is a construct in need of more rigorous future investigation. More specifically, perhaps empathy is effective in buffering the emotional and cognitive outcomes of incivility, but not the physical. That is, while an empathetic person may cope better with rude victims, he/she may still experience the physiological symptoms associated with interpersonal conflict (Cortina et al., 2001).

Theoretical implications

The current study successfully applied COR theory as a theoretical framework for understanding how victim incivility negatively impacts firefighters. That is, COR theory posits that stressors, particularly social stressors, drain cognitive, physical and emotional resources. For firefighters, frequency to which they are exposed to victim incivility seems to be associated with resource loss, given the relationship between victim incivility and burnout, physical symptoms, and absenteeism. These findings are consistent with other studies that have nested the relationship between incivility and its outcomes in resource loss (e.g., Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Sliter et al., 2010; Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012).

Additionally, we sought to extend the COR theory, and incorporate the JD-R model, by positing that engagement would act as a buffer in the relationship between victim incivility and its negative outcomes.

Little research has investigated engagement as a moderator, despite these possible theoretical frameworks. Essentially, these theories indicate that high levels of personal and workplace resources can buffer the negative effects of stressors. We posited that engagement can act as a resource, and possibly buffer the negative effects associated with victim incivility. The results showed partial support of this assertion, showing that engagement protected employees from experiencing some of the negative effects (burnout and physical symptoms) associated with victim incivility. We argue that an engaged employee might have an abundance of resources—cognitive, physical and emotional energies—as well as higher levels of work-related motivation. These resources—as per COR and JD-R theories—might protect an individual by delaying resource exhaustion. Alternately, as suggested by Britt and Bliese (2003), engaged employees may be generally focused on the job, and outside stressors may fall below the notice of this engaged employee. Overall, the results point to beneficial effects of engagement, and suggest that engagement should be examined as more than an outcome of job resources (e.g., Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), or a predictor of performance (Salanova et al., 2005). Engagement could serve as a cognitive and an emotional resource in its own right, and it could viably buffer stressor–strain relationships.

Another theoretical contribution of the current study was to investigate empathy as a buffer between victim incivility and outcomes, extending stress-moderation model of personality, which posits that personality traits can (1) exacerbate, ameliorate, or prevent the appraisal of stressors, and/or (2) guide the selection of effective/ineffective coping strategies, essentially serving as personal resources (e.g., Grant & Langan-Fox, 2007; Wiebe & Smith, 1997). Typically, this model focuses on extraversion, neuroticism and hardiness (e.g., Eschleman, Bowling, & Alarcon, 2010; Grant & Langan-Fox, 2007), as well as self-efficacy and optimism (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). The current study adds empathy as a possible personality buffer. The results showed that trait empathy protected employees from some of the negative effects of victim incivility—namely burnout. Previous research on the characteristics empathetic individuals has shown that empathetic people are more likely to show concern for people (regardless of the immediate situation), and are more likely to forgive others in emotional situations (Batson et al., 2002; Schimel et al., 2006). This is particularly true if an empathetic person is reminded of their own mortality, a reminder that likely looms large for firefighters due to the very nature of their work. There is very little overlap between research on empathy and research on the workplace, and thus this is an important area where future researchers should focus, particularly in the professions in which empathy might play an important role, such as nursing, emergency medical technicians and police officers.

Practical implications

The primary practical implication of the current study is that victim incivility can have negative consequences on both firefighters and organizations. The results of the study show that firefighters commonly experience victim incivility, and that this incivility can have harmful, negative consequences. Given these relationships, it appears that understanding victim (outsider) incivility merits attention from both researchers and management. Particularly, researchers should focus on ways to decrease the negative effects of this type of incivility.

Similar to nurses who experience aggressive/difficult patients (e.g., Spence laschinger et al., 2009), firefighting organizations have extremely limited control over victims of emergency situations. That being the case, interventions involving victim incivility would need to be employee-focused, or outcome focused, in nature. The results of the current study can partially inform such inventions. For instance, the results indicated that engagement might buffer some of the negative effects of victim incivility. This being the case, organizations could endeavour to increase employee engagement as a possible solution to the problems associated with victim incivility. This would have additional benefits to the organization, such as increased job satisfaction, organizational commitment, citizenship behaviours and reduced intentions to quit (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Saks, 2006). However, despite many popular articles on increasing employee engagement, there has been little empirical research investing possible methods for doing so. Saks (2006) examined some antecedents of employee engagement, and found that perceived organizational support, particularly, tended to be associated with high levels of engagement. Saks (2006) recommends that organizations—to improve employee engagement—focus on employees' perceptions of the support provided by the organization. For instance, organizations could enact programmes that address employees' needs, concerns and feelings, such as surveys and focus groups. Or, organizations could demonstrate care and support, e.g., by allowing flexible schedules. This could potentially increase workplace engagement, which, in turn, would help ameliorate the negative effects associated with victim incivility.

Finally, we found that empathy was linked with reducing burnout associated with victim incivility. Though this might imply that empathy training—occasionally used in the medical field (LaMonica, Carew, Winder, Haase, & Blanchard, 1976; Sanson-Fisher & Poole, 1980)—might be a logical next step, we would recommend caution in this implication. This area of research is new, and the benefits—or possible detriments—of trait empathy are not fully understood. As an example, our data indicated a positive sign on the incivility–empathy interaction with examining absenteeism as an outcome, indicating that empathy might exacerbate the effects of

victim incivility. Though this did not quite reach statistical significance at the .05 level, these results suggest the need for future research in examining how trait empathy could either protect or sensitize employees to interpersonal stressors.

Limitations and future directions

Though the current study had several strengths (e.g., multiple time-points, use of an objective measure), there are limitations that should be noted. First, because the current study was nested within a larger study, we were unable to logistically measure all study variables at each time point. That is, we were only able to measure burnout and physical symptoms at Time 2, which did not allow for a cross-lagged study design (which would involve controlling for baselines of burnout/physical symptoms at Time 1). This limits the causal conclusions that can be drawn from the results.

Second, most of the variables of interest were assessed using self-report measures, which evaluate self-perceptions that might be inaccurate or biased due to the method of collection (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, efforts were made to lessen the impact of this bias. First, participants were given statements from both the researchers and management of the Fire Department ensuring confidentiality of responses, which should reduce social desirability biases. Additionally, we statistically controlled for a variable that might have systematically affected relationships among study variables (e.g., NA). Controlling for NA addresses the concern that some relationships may have been artificially inflated due to perceptual or experiential biases.

Finally, the limited response rate (36.3% at Time 1, and 32.7% at Time 2) could potentially limit the conclusions drawn from the study due to generalizability concerns. That is, firefighters who participated may differ systematically in some way from firefighters who did not. However, we would like to note that our response rate is typical for studies conducted in the United States, where the average rate is estimated to be around 35% (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Nonetheless, we would urge some caution in generalizing these results.

Given the findings of the current study, there are several fruitful areas that researchers may choose to pursue along this vein of research. First of all, the current study was conducted with firefighters, and we found that victim incivility can be relatively harmful to people working in this profession. Given the somewhat unique relationship between firefighters and victims, future research should investigate whether the moderators in the current study (engagement and empathy) are viable buffers of outsider incivility in traditional service occupations. For instance, will engagement offer the same benefits for bank tellers, cashiers or call centre employees? Could empathy have more beneficial/detrimental effects when the stakes are lower when compared to an emergency situation?

Along those lines, our results regarding empathy should be considered preliminary, and certainly merit future investigation. That is, while empathy might be protective in some situations with some outcomes, it could potentially exacerbate other outcomes related to stressors. Some research has shown that "positive" traits, like optimism, could potentially worsen the stressor–strain relationship (Britton, Sliter, & Jex, 2012), and this could be the case with empathy. A final, but vital area, for future research is to investigate interventions for dealing with the effects of victim incivility, and the results of the current study can guide such interventions. In terms of dealing with victim incivility, possible interventions would have to be person- or outcome-focused in nature. For instance, the current results suggest that an intervention focused on creating an engaged workforce could be effective. Other researchers investigating more general forms of outsider incivility suggest that interventions focusing on employee training and knowledge could potentially reduce incivility (e.g., Sliter et al., 2010), though this has not been empirically supported. Overall, regardless of mechanism, it is important to begin researching interventions to alleviate the negative effects of outsider incivility—regardless of occupation—to protect both employees and organizations.

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