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What is This?
The Role of Job Demands and Emotional Exhaustion in the Relationship Between Customer and Employee Incivility

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Workplace incivility research has focused on within-organizational sources of incivility, and less attention has been paid to outside-organizational sources such as customers. In a cross-sectional field study, the authors found that service employees (N = 307) who reported higher levels of uncivil treatment from customers engaged in higher levels of incivility toward customers. Specifically, the results show that customer incivility toward employees is related to employee incivility toward customers through job demands first and then emotional exhaustion. The authors discuss the implications of these results and highlight directions for future research.

Keywords: incivility; customer service; emotional exhaustion; job demands

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Workplace incivility is defined as “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). Examples of workplace incivility include individuals making demeaning, derogatory, or condescending remarks and raising one’s voice (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Exposure to uncivil behaviors can have a negative impact on employees in terms of mood, cognitive distraction, fear, perceived injustice, damaged social identity, and anger (Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 2001; Cortina, Lonsway, & Magley, 2004; Cortina et al., 2001). These reactions can negatively affect the incivility target’s occupational, psychological, and physical health (Cortina, 2008; Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). Although workplace incivility is on the rise (Cortina et al., 2004), relatively little is known about how incivility affects recipients’ behaviors (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

The majority of incivility research has considered within-organizational sources (e.g., supervisors, coworkers; Cortina et al., 2001; Cortina & Magley, 2009), overlooking extra-organizational sources of mistreatment in the workplace, such as a company’s customers (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). Yet, customer mistreatment of employees has been shown to influence employee attitudes and behaviors (Grandey et al., 2004; Rupp & Spencer, 2006). Consistent with the stakeholder view of the firm (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984; Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002), we advocate for a better understanding of how the customer can impact employee behavior.

To capture the interactive nature of incivility, Andersson and Pearson (1999) suggested that an act of incivility committed by an employee could lead the incivility target to respond with an act of incivility directed toward the incivility initiator, creating a “spiral of incivility.” This spiraling process is consistent with the target similarity model (Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007), which suggests that employees who are targets of mistreatment will reciprocate incivility by directing negative behaviors to the mistreatment source.

In the present study, we evaluated whether the reciprocal process observed in other studies occurs in the relationship between employees and customers. In doing so, we considered the roles of job demands and emotional exhaustion as mediators of the relationship between customer incivility and employee incivility. The control model of demand management (Hockey, 1993) proposes that when employees’ job demands are high, their ability to execute their role effectively diminishes. In the customer service interaction, exposure to customer incivility can increase employees’ perceptions of job demands, thereby reducing their ability to interact with customers in a civil manner. We also investigated the role of emotional exhaustion in this process because employees who are emotionally exhausted tend to lack the cognitive resources necessary to be civil to uncivil customers.

Research on employee burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach & Pines, 1977) shows that job demands and emotional exhaustion are interrelated. To untangle these relationships, we investigated whether job demands and emotional exhaustion have a mutual influence on employee incivility. Said differently, we evaluated the likelihood that job demands and emotional exhaustion mediate, in a sequential manner (e.g., three-path mediation model; Hayes, Preacher, & Myers, in press), the relationship between customer incivility toward employees and employee incivility toward customers.

These issues have important implications for research and practice. First, customers are the lifeline of most organizations (Schneider & Bowen, 1993). Employee incivility toward...
customers, even when the latter is being uncivil, is likely to detract from customer service, increase customer turnover, and lower organizational performance (Schneider, Ehrhart, Mayer, Saltz, & Niles-Jolly, 2005). Second, although the effects of customers on employee attitudes and behaviors are a relatively new line of inquiry, marketing research reveals that customer mistreatment of employees is increasing (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006). Research is needed to help organizations reduce the likelihood that customer service quality erodes because of customer incivility toward employees. Third, from the employee’s perspective, interacting with uncivil customers can negatively affect one’s health and well-being by giving rise to anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion (Grebner et al., 2003; Witt, Andrews, & Carlson, 2004). Last, despite organizations engaging in various sanctions (e.g., performance monitoring) to “manage” incivility and encourage high-quality customer service, the psychological mechanisms underlying employee incivility toward customers are not well understood. In summary, identifying the factors that mediate the customer and employee incivility relationship has the potential to provide guidance to managers to enhance service quality and improve employee health and well-being.

Employee Incivility Toward Customers

In terms of employee incivility toward customers, we are referring to employees treating customers in a rude and discourteous manner (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina & Magley, 2009). As noted above, although incivility can be a low-intensity experience, it can have strong effects, and its targets can exhibit higher levels of stress, cognitive distraction, psychological stress, and turnover (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

In general, incivility research has concentrated on coworkers, supervisors, and more recently, customers as sources of incivility (e.g., Cortina & Magley, 2009; Kern & Grandey, 2009). We expand the incivility literature to consider that the customer can also be a target of incivility from employees. In this context, we define employee incivility toward customers as low-intensity behaviors directed at customers with ambiguous intent to harm, violating social norms of interpersonal treatment.

Customer Incivility Toward Employees

Regarding customer incivility toward employees, we are referring to an employee’s perception that the customer is treating the employee in an uncivil manner (e.g., rudeness, speaking in a disrespectful or insulting manner). Customer incivility is distinct from other types of employee mistreatment, such as verbal aggression and unfair interpersonal treatment (for a discussion, see Pearson & Porath, 2004; Shapiro, Duffy, Kim, Lean, & O’Leary-Kelly, 2008). Whereas verbal aggression refers to “verbal communications of anger that violate social norms” (Grandey et al., 2004, p. 398), customer incivility toward employees violates social norms but includes expressions that lack the anger generally associated with verbal aggression. Thus, incivility can be viewed as a milder form of verbal aggression. Incivility is a broader term than unfair treatment in interpersonal interactions (Cortina et al., 2001;
Incivility is based on expectations about an individual’s conduct in the interaction (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), as opposed to an individual making a fairness judgment about the interpersonal aspects of the interaction. A customer might behave uncivilly in a customer service interaction, for example, by raising his or her voice at the employee, but an employee might not perceive this treatment as unfair. Thus, whereas all cases of interpersonal unfairness are cases of incivility, some cases of incivility might not be seen as unfair.

The customer as a source of mistreatment has important implications for service employees interacting with customers and their organizations. Research has found, for instance, that customer mistreatment of employees is positively related to employee emotional labor (Rupp & Spencer, 2006), sabotage of customer service (Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008), emotional exhaustion (Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005; Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Grandey et al., 2004; Kern & Grandey, 2009), and absenteeism (Grandey et al., 2004). Qualitative research has similarly shown that customer mistreatment of employees can increase the service employee workload and that it has negative financial implications for organizations by increasing recruitment, retention, and turnover costs (Harris & Reynolds, 2003).

The Relationship Between Customer Incivility Toward Employees and Employee Incivility Toward Customers

Research has yielded important insights about the antecedents and consequences of workplace incivility. Yet, relatively little is known about how targets of incivility manage their experiences (for an exception, see Cortina & Magley, 2009). Customers have considerable power over employees given the “customer is always right” mantra and can thus take liberties in the way that they treat employees, including treating them with incivility (Kern & Grandey, 2009). Employees who are treated in an uncivil manner are likely to react negatively by reciprocating toward the source of the incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), despite knowing that the organization could deem their incivility as counterproductive work behavior (Penney & Spector, 2005). The notion that incivility tends to be reciprocated toward its source is consistent with the multifoci approach to unfair treatment theorized by Rupp and Cropanzano (2002), and it has been reported in empirical research on workplace aggression (for a meta-analytic review, see Hershovis & Barling, 2010) and organizational justice (Bies & Tripp, 1999; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). As such, we predicted that employees reciprocate incivility received from uncivil customers.

Hypothesis 1: Customer incivility toward employees is positively related to employee incivility toward customers.

The Mediating Role of Job Demands

Job demands refer to “physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Bakker,
Demerouti, de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003, p. 344). An important aspect of this definition is that job demands are primarily as perceived by the employee. In a call center context, for example, pressure to maintain service levels and meet productivity goals contributes to service employees’ job demands (Batt, 2002). Because customers are often waiting in a queue, service employees can feel pressure to move on to the next customer. Customer service representatives often work in highly standardized workplaces where their interactions with customers are scripted and their performance is based on such factors as the number of calls they answer, the length of each call, and the amount of time they are on breaks or available to take calls (Deery et al., 2002; Grandey & Fisk, 2004).

Dealing with incivility can increase employees’ job demands (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), and it is an important social job stressor (Penney & Spector, 2005). According to the job-stress process model (Spector, 1998), individuals react negatively to perceived stressors in the workplace. Under stress, an individual’s social skills can suffer, and an individual can react negatively in difficult social interactions, including being uncivil (Johnson & Indvik, 2001). Consistent with Hockey’s control model of demand management (1993, 1997), individuals react to high levels of job demands in two ways. First, employees can increase their effort and maintain their performance levels, even though this response may lead to fatigue and irritability. Second, employees can maintain a consistent level of effort while limiting their psychological and physiological effort but also likely reducing performance levels.

Increasing effort in response to greater job demands is not always sustainable, and the corresponding fatigue and irritability is likely to erode employees’ ability to be civil to customers. As employees try to complete their work tasks quickly, their ability to interact politely with customers is likely to suffer. Alternatively, if employees maintain the same level of effort in the face of increasing job demands, it can be more difficult for them to interact politely with customers. In both cases, if employees are interacting with uncivil customers, fulfilling their requests tends to require more time than civil customers, resulting in higher fatigue and lower performance.

Consistent with this line of reasoning, empirical evidence has revealed that workplace incivility and job demands are positively related to counterproductive work behaviors (Chen & Spector, 1992; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Penney & Spector, 2005). We explored this dynamic by considering that customer incivility toward employees relates to employee incivility toward customers through employees’ job demands. Uncivil interpersonal interactions with customers can intensify an employee’s job demands, raising the likelihood of an uncivil response toward the customer.

**Hypothesis 2:** The relationship between customer incivility toward employees and employee incivility toward customers is mediated by job demands.

**The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion**

Emotional exhaustion, defined as “feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one’s emotional resources” (Maslach, 1993, pp. 20-21), is an individual strain dimension
that signals the first stage of burnout (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2005). Service work involves frequent interactions with customers, and high levels of these interactions have been shown to be associated with high levels of employee emotional exhaustion (Grandey et al., 2004).

Emotional exhaustion has received considerable attention in the workplace-burnout literature. High levels of contact with coworkers and clients in the health care context, for example, were found to be related to increased levels of employee emotional exhaustion (Leiter & Maslach, 1986; Maslach & Jackson, 1982). Building on these findings, Grandey et al. (2004) found that employees who interact with customers who treat them uncivilly can become emotionally exhausted in part because of the higher stress levels they experience. Kern and Grandey (2009) described customer incivility toward employees as a “daily hassle” (p. 47) with a single occurrence of incivility being “unlikely to be perceived as stressful” whereas multiple occurrences can increase the negative experience of incivility for employees, thereby increasing the stressful nature of individual uncivil acts. According to the process model of burnout, when employees’ emotional exhaustion levels increase, they can exhibit negative attitudes toward the source of their emotional exhaustion (Leiter & Maslach, 1988). Customer service employees, for instance, can find it more difficult to be polite to customers. In support of this line of reasoning, negative customer behaviors toward employees have been shown to contribute to employee emotional exhaustion (Deery et al., 2002; Grandey et al., 2004; Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007; Maslach, 1978).

Employees who are emotionally exhausted are also likely to treat customers in an uncivil manner because they lack the cognitive resources to be civil (Baumeister, 2001). Studies have shown, for example, that employees with higher levels of emotional exhaustion engage in higher levels of incivility, organizational deviance, and other forms of counterproductive work behaviors. Consistent with the target similarity model, we expected that incivility would be directed toward the source of the emotional exhaustion. In a study of health department employees, for example, Mulki, Jaramillo, and Locander (2006) showed that employees who were emotionally exhausted from a lack of participative leadership from supervisors reacted by engaging in supervisor-targeted deviant behaviors. Thus, we made the following prediction:

**Hypothesis 3:** Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between customer incivility toward employees and employee incivility toward customers.

As described above, job demands and emotional exhaustion are both implicated in the relationship between customer and employee incivility. Not surprisingly, research has shown that these two factors are intercorrelated (Bakker et al., 2003; Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; de Jonge & Schaufeli, 1998; Lee & Ashforth, 1996).

According to Leiter and Maslach’s process model of burnout (1988), environmental stressors such as excessive job demands can lead to an increase in employees’ emotional exhaustion levels. The job demands–resources model of burnout also proposes that excessive job demands can place a strain on employees (Demerouti et al., 2001). In response to such a strain, the control model of demand management states that employees experience physiological and psychological costs such as emotional exhaustion when trying to maintain their performance levels (Hockey, 1993, 1997).
Given the theory and empirical evidence above, we theorized that customer incivility toward employees is related to employee incivility toward customers through job demands first and then emotional exhaustion. Integrating the two models with mediation through job demands and with mediation through emotional exhaustion yields a three-path mediation model, depicted in Figure 1 (Hayes, 2009; Hayes et al., in press; Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein, 2008). We tested whether job demands and emotional exhaustion sequentially mediate the relationship between customer incivility toward employees and employee incivility toward customers, respectively.

**Hypothesis 4:** The relationship between customer incivility toward employees and employee incivility toward customers is sequentially mediated by job demands and emotional exhaustion.

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Method

Sample and Procedure

We tested our hypotheses with a cross-sectional field study of customer service representatives employed in a call center located in western Canada. We selected a call center for our study for at least two reasons. First, call center employees are in frequent contact with customers, giving them ample opportunity to experience customer incivility (Grandey et al., 2004). Second, the call center industry is one of the fastest-growing segments of the North American economy, and organizations are increasingly moving service interactions into call centers (Batt & Moynihan, 2002). Service quality is important to organizational effectiveness, making this setting highly relevant to many organizations (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 2003).

Several weeks before the survey administration and with the assistance of the site’s managers, we circulated a formal e-mail invitation to all customer service representatives employed in the site. The letter introduced the researchers, explained the purpose of the study, signaled management’s support for the study, and outlined confidentiality procedures. All customer service representatives (n = 950) in the site were invited to participate in the survey, with the exception of those who participated in the focus groups (described below).

In the call center’s cafeteria, a high-traffic area, the researchers distributed a paper survey to customer service representatives over the course of 3 days. Respondents who returned a completed survey received a pass to a local movie theater. The response rate for the survey was 38% (n = 358). Of the 307 respondents who provided usable surveys, 218 (71%) were female and 89 (29%) were male. Their average age was 32.6 years and their average tenure was 1.8 years. The human resource manager confirmed that these demographics represented the organization’s workforce.

Measures

The items for all scales in the study were averaged to form the measures such that larger numbers signified higher levels of the variables.

Customer and employee incivility. We followed the procedure that Cortina et al. (2001) used to develop their Workplace Incivility Scale. We held interviews and focus groups with 10 subject matter experts (2 managers and 8 customer service employees) to identify context-specific examples of uncivil behaviors that occurred in interactions with customers. This process generated seven uncivil behaviors for customer incivility and six for employee incivility. The researchers rewrote the behaviors into behavioral scales and administered them to employees, who responded using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (frequently—more than 7 times over the past month). Sample items for customer incivility toward employees included “Insisted on speaking to another agent,” “Demeaned you; put you down,” and “Attacked you personally.” Sample items for employee incivility toward customers included “You got blunt with a customer,” “You were derogatory to a customer,”
and “You escalated your tone of voice.” The Cronbach alphas for the customer and employee incivility scales were .87 and .77, respectively.

Job demands. We measured employees’ perceptions of job demands using a seven-item scale (Karasek, 1979), including “My job requires me to work fast” and “I feel that there is not enough time for me to finish my work.” The responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree; α = .84).

Emotional exhaustion. Employees self-reported their emotional exhaustion using six items developed by Wharton (1993). They used a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) to report their level of agreement with such items as “I feel emotionally drained from my work” and “I feel frustrated by my job” (α = .92).

Control variables. We controlled for employee age, gender, education, tenure, and negative affectivity (NA) in the analyses. Age and gender were controlled because both factors have been shown to relate to counterproductive work behaviors and workplace aggression (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999; Henle, 2005) such that (a) males report performing these behaviors more than females and (b) younger workers report more deviant behaviors than older workers do (O’Moore, 2000). Age and gender were self-reported, with gender coded 0 and 1 for males and females, respectively. Education level has been shown to be positively related with antisocial behavior (Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998) and was coded as follows: some high school (1), high school (2), college or technical school (3), and university (4). Tenure has been shown to be positively related to workplace deviance (Hollinger, Slora, & Terris, 1992; Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998) and dysfunctional customer behaviors (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Tenure was measured as the number of months that employees had worked for the organization.

We controlled for NA because it predicts emotional exhaustion (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002) and relates positively to counterproductive work behaviors (Aquino, Lewis, & Bradfield, 1999; Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999). We measured NA using 11 items from the Multidimensional Personality Index (Agho, Price, & Mueller, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1984). Respondents were asked to think about their feelings at work and indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements such as “I get irritated by little annoyances” and “There are days when I am on edge.” Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating higher levels of NA (α = .90).

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliability estimates (Cronbach alphas) for all the study variables. All analyses were conducted with structural equation modeling (Mplus 5.21; Muthén & Muthén, 2007). Before forming the scales for hypothesis testing, we assessed the construct validity of our measures using confirmatory factor analysis by comparing the measurement model with four competing models, described in detail in Table 2 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). We correlated the errors for two pairs of
items from the job demands scale because these items tapped into similar ideas—“My job requires a great deal of work to be done” and “My job requires that I work hard”; “There is not enough time for me to do my job” and “I feel there is not enough time for me to finish my work”—and for two items from the emotional exhaustion scale because they were highly intercorrelated: “I feel used up at the end of the work day” and “I feel emotionally drained from my work.” As shown in Table 2, our four-factor measurement model was the best-fitting
model and provided a reasonable fit to the data, supporting the unidimensionality of our measures: comparative fit index = .91; root mean square error of approximation 90% confidence interval = .06, .07.

Because these measures are self-reported, we evaluated the impact of common method bias, which is highly problematic if a single latent factor accounts for the majority of the manifest variables’ variance. We tested for common method bias by loading each set of indicators on their latent variables and by loading all the items onto a fifth, common method latent variable. This five-factor model did not converge, however, which can be a common problem with a relatively small sample and large number of items. We then conducted a Harman single-factor test (for a discussion, see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) and found that the items did not significantly load onto a single factor. We concluded that common method bias was not a major concern in our analysis.

In the structural model analysis, we estimated all the path coefficients, simultaneously controlling for employee age, gender, education, tenure, and NA. Table 3 shows the results.

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<th>Path Coefficients</th>
<th>Indirect Effects</th>
<th>Bias-Corrected</th>
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<td>Customer incivility</td>
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Table 3
Path Coefficients and Indirect Effects for Mediation Models

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<th>Path Coefficients</th>
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<td>Customer incivility</td>
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<td>0.16 (.05)</td>
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<td>Job demands</td>
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<td>Emotional exhaustion</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>CI → JD → EI</td>
<td>-.06 (.04)</td>
<td>-.13, .01</td>
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<td>CI → EE → EI</td>
<td>.13 (.05)</td>
<td>.05, .22</td>
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<td>CI → JD → EE → EI</td>
<td>.06 (.03)</td>
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bootstrapping procedure (Efron & Tibshirani, 1993; Mooney & Duval, 1993) addressing some weaknesses associated with the Sobel test (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). In Table 3, we provide estimates of the indirect effects, along with the symmetric and 95% bias corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals for our path estimates. Figure 1 also identifies the estimates from the structural path coefficients.

As predicted in Hypothesis 1, customer incivility toward employees was positively related to employee incivility toward customers. Hypothesis 2 stated that job demands mediate the path between customer incivility and employee incivility. This hypothesis was not supported. Rather, the results show that job demands mediated the path between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion. Hypothesis 3 was supported—namely, emotional exhaustion mediates the path from customer incivility to employee incivility.

Hypothesis 4 stated that job demands and emotional exhaustion sequentially mediate the relationship between customer incivility and employee incivility. The analyses reported above show that job demands mediated the relationship between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion and that emotional exhaustion mediated the relationship between customer incivility and employee incivility. We formally tested Hypothesis 4 and found that uncivil treatment by customers was associated with higher employee job demands and emotional exhaustion, which related to higher levels of employee incivility toward customers.

**Discussion**

To date, research on the causes and consequences of incivility in organizations has focused on incivility that occurs within organizations (e.g., among supervisors and coworkers), with less attention given to incivility arising from customers. As more organizations compete on the basis of customer service, successful interactions between employees and customers become crucial for organizational success. Employees who demonstrate uncivil behavior toward customers are likely to contribute to customer turnover and erode a company’s effectiveness. At the same time, customer incivility can detract from employee health and well-being. Because customer incivility toward employees is on the rise, the primary objectives of this study were to investigate the relationship between customer incivility toward employees and employee incivility toward customers and to better understand why this might occur.

The theoretical significance of this research is threefold. First, we found that employee incivility toward customers is associated with customer incivility toward employees—that is, employees act in an uncivil manner toward customers because they experience incivility from customers and so they reciprocate by targeting customers with incivility. Our results are consistent with justice reciprocity processes, suggesting that when individuals encounter negative interactions, they can react by engaging in counterproductive work behaviors directed toward their source. These findings are consistent with a spiral of incivility, discussed in studies of within-organization incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson & Porath, 2004), and with the target similarity model of mistreatment (Lavelle et al., 2007). We extend existing incivility research by showing that this spiral can occur between employees and customers.
Second, we evaluated the roles of job demands and emotional exhaustion as mediators of the relationship between customer incivility and employee incivility. Job demands on their own did not mediate the relationship between customer incivility and employee incivility. One possible explanation for these nonsignificant findings is that the effects described above are nonlinear. That is, when job demands reach certain levels, employees who experience customer incivility might be motivated to target customers with incivility; but at lower levels of job demands, this effect might not exist. In post hoc analysis, we investigated this possibility but did not find evidence to support the presence of a nonlinear relationship between job demands and employee incivility. One implication of these results is that job demands do not alone account for the relationship between customer and employee incivility unless they lead to emotional exhaustion.

Regarding the role of emotional exhaustion, our findings show that emotional exhaustion mediated the relationship between customer incivility toward employees and employee incivility directed toward customers. This finding suggests that interactions with uncivil customers can increase employees’ emotional exhaustion levels, thereby reducing their ability to be civil to customers.

Third, the data suggest that perceived job demands and emotional exhaustion sequentially mediated the relationship between customer incivility and employees’ uncivil treatment of customers. This finding is significant because previous studies have shown that job demands and emotional exhaustion are related and have important implications for employee outcomes, but no research has considered how the two function together in this relationship.

Previous research has shown that customer verbal aggression and customer incivility toward employees in service interactions are associated with an increase in service employees’ emotional exhaustion (Grandey et al., 2004; Kern & Grandey, 2009). We extend this research by showing that emotional exhaustion is associated with an increase in employee incivility toward customers, and we consider the role of job demands in this relationship. Our primary interpretation of the present study is that customer incivility increases the job demands to efficiently deliver high-quality service and, in turn, the employees’ emotional exhaustion levels. One outcome of the rising pressures and corresponding escalation in emotional exhaustion is that the latter erodes employee abilities to provide customer service and increases uncivil employee treatment of customers. Our findings shed light on how the customer incivility–employee incivility dynamic plays out through job demands and emotional exhaustion.

Practical Implications

The present study holds important insights for customer service managers who seek to foster high-quality customer service. In the customer service context, companies strive to retain customers, but at the same time, customer incivility toward employees appears to be a growing problem. Our research shows that customer incivility toward employees can have adverse effects on service quality because employees are likely to reciprocate by treating customers in an uncivil manner. Under these circumstances, customer service representatives might encounter difficulties delivering high-quality customer service. One strategy is for organizations to take preventative steps to reduce customer incivility by providing quality customer service and products in the first place. Said differently, some customers
can be uncivil toward employees because they are justifiably frustrated with poor-quality products and service and thus take out their frustration on employees. Providing high-quality service and products will likely reduce the customer incivility that triggers employees’ uncivil reactions.

Second, managers could consider training employees in effectively dealing with difficult customers, including strategies to defuse upset customers. Training interventions are effective to the degree that they help reduce the likelihood that incivility increases perceived job demands. Such training interventions can include using mock customer calls with individuals pretending to be difficult customers that employees can practice handling. Alternatively, research has shown that employees who are emotionally exhausted invest in their relationships with coworkers to recover (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). Coworkers and supervisors need to be trained in how to effectively support customer service representatives who have uncivil interactions with customers, to prevent the experience from becoming one of employee incivility directed at customers.

Third, companies could seek to limit the frequency with which their customers treat employees with incivility. For example, in times of widespread customer service failures, a call center can broadcast a message that customers hear when going through the interactive voice response system before they interact with a customer service representative. In Canada, a telecommunications company experienced a widespread system failure that disabled customer service representatives’ access to the company’s computer system. To address this problem, they broadcast an announcement that customers heard when they called the call center, and this strategy helped to reduce the number of unpleasant calls their employees encountered (interview with call center manager, May 2009).

Working conditions in call centers can be highly standardized, with employees being strictly monitored, even during their break times to ensure that they return to their phones within a specific amount of time (Holman, 2002). The problem with this strategy is that it runs contrary to findings from the work recovery literature that shows that within-day work breaks are an important recovery time for employees, especially when they have negative work experiences (Trougakos, Beal, Green, & Weiss, 2008). By penalizing employees who take excessive work breaks, employers may be increasing the likelihood that employees will be uncivil to customers. One solution to this problem is to provide employees with extended work breaks that they can use in circumstances when they have experienced customer incivility.

An alternative approach that managers might consider is a zero-tolerance policy toward uncivil customers. Some companies, for instance, have introduced emotion sensors to monitor the customer’s emotional state that can signal the need for a supervisor intervention or, in more severe cases, can empower the customer service representative to terminate a call on the basis of customer behavior without negatively affecting the employee’s performance metrics (Shin, 2006). In other companies, customer service representatives are prohibited from ending a call regardless of the customer’s behavior. Organizations such as Sprint and ING Direct are taking more extreme measures to protect employees from abusive customers by automatically “terminating” abusive customers (Esfahani, 2004; Twiddy, 2007). Protecting employees from uncivil customers can help safeguard employees from escalating job demands and rising emotional exhaustion levels, which together lead to employee incivility toward customers. This strategy could also yield higher-quality service for customers because they will not be subjected to employee incivility.
Fourth, companies could provide opportunities for employees to share their experiences and vent their concerns. For example, some employee-initiated blogs and Facebook groups have been created to discuss various forms of customer mistreatment (White, 2008). Managers could also consider creating online forums within company-sponsored intranets to give employees the opportunity to share with coworkers their encounters with misbehaving customers and their lessons about how to deal effectively with these encounters.

**Potential Limitations and Future Research**

Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, we could not assess direction of causality. For instance, employee incivility toward customers might instead lead to customer incivility toward employees. To test for this possibility, we reversed the model and found that the mediation results did not hold when customer and employee incivility were reversed or when we reversed the order of our two mediators. Nonetheless, our results should be interpreted in light of this potential limitation.

Second, our study relied on a self-report measure of customer incivility toward employees. Although this approach is consistent with previous incivility research, using independent judges to evaluate the interactions between customers and employees to verify the presence of customer incivility would provide a more objective way to evaluate customer incivility toward employees. The call center context is an especially appropriate site for this type of research design, given that many interactions between customers and employees are recorded. We also measured employee incivility toward customers via employee ratings, whereas a stronger measure would have customers provide the incivility ratings.

Third, some of our findings could have emerged as a result of self-serving bias (Miller & Ross, 1975). Employees who act uncivilly might attribute their uncivil conduct to customers, stating that the customers brought it on themselves. Alternatively, they might blame the circumstances, attributing their ill-tempered behavior to job demands and stress. Future research is needed to control for individual differences that reflect these sorts of attribution biases.

Fourth, our study explored telephone-mediated customer service interactions, whereas customer service interactions also occur face-to-face and via e-mail. Research on face-to-face customer service interactions has found that unfair treatment of employees by customers increases the emotional labor of the employees who experience the mistreatment firsthand and the coworkers who witness their counterparts being mistreated (Rupp, McCance, Spencer, & Sonntag, 2008; Spencer & Rupp, 2009). Another issue in face-to-face encounters is that other customers can witness the interaction. An important question to address is whether observing an uncivil interaction between a customer and a service employee increases the likelihood that the next customer will be uncivil or will sympathize with the service employee. Research is warranted on the conditions under which customers influence other customers’ behavior, and little is known about how customer mistreatment expressed through e-mail communication affects employees.

In the present study, we argued that customer incivility leads to higher levels of job demands and emotional exhaustion, which is associated with higher levels of employee
incivility directed at customers. In a study of firefighters and working adults, Halbesleben and Bowler (2007) found that employees who were emotionally exhausted were motivated to invest in relationships with coworkers to recover, which in turn increased their organizational citizenship behaviors. Trougakos et al. (2008) reported that workday break activities have a positive effect on emotional labor and performance by helping employees recover from negative emotional experiences. Alongside our findings, these studies have interesting implications. Future research might consider whether boundary-spanning employees who experience customer incivility and become emotionally exhausted might recover and reduce their incivility toward customers by investing in relationships with coworkers or supervisors or by using workday break activities.

Last, in the present study, we explored the role of emotional exhaustion as a component of burnout and as an important mediator in our model. At least three aspects of burnout exist: emotional exhaustion, professional efficacy, and cynicism (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Future research needs to consider the role of professional efficacy and cynicism in the relationship between customer and employee incivility.

The present study highlights the relationship between customer incivility toward employees and employee incivility toward customers. As service work expands, understanding the influence of the customer on employee attitudes and behaviors increases in importance. The present study offers some interesting insights on the customer service interaction by evaluating the role of job demands and emotional exhaustion in this dynamic.

Note

1. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

References


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