Location! Location. Location? Investigating the impact of context and status on perception of incivility in Higher Education, an experimental vignette study

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Background
• Social norms (our idea of acceptable behaviour) are likely to vary across different departments and work sites (Martin, 1992).
• Level of incivility can vary according to the purpose of a gathering. If participants are engaged and interacting the frequency of incivility is reduced (Odermatt et al., 2017).
• Incivility is more likely in a high density scenario, where the culprit is at less risk of being identified or punished (Moser & Corroyer, 2001).

Method
• Online questionnaire featuring six vignettes:
  • Staff or student instigator
  • Three different locations: lecture, tutorial, meeting
  • Same behaviour in each vignette: Student ignoring tutor and looking at phone
  • Each vignette followed by a series of questions asking about: Emotional impact (anger, fear, sadness, frustration)
  • Perceived level of incivility
  • Response to incivility (avoidance, mitigation, assertive)

Analysis: Three-way ANOVA (2 x group, 2 x status, 3 x context)

Perceived incivility level: M=16.39
Perceived incivility level: M=14.45
Perceived incivility level: M=12.46

Table 1: Mean emotion responses to vignette scenarios across two source conditions (student and staff), three contexts (lecture, tutorial, meeting), and two groups (student and staff), showing means (standard deviations).

Discussion
• Strong link between the context in which behaviors occur, the perceived level of incivility, associated emotional impact, and likely response. This suggests social norms, and perception of behaviors, differ across these teaching contexts.
• This may be linked to perceived anonymity with students ‘lost in the crowd’ and therefore difficult for staff to spot.
• Both student and staff based incivility resulted in equivalent ratings of anger, but student-based incivility was more likely to lead to an assertive response.
• Students have less organisational power than staff, and as such may not feel able to respond to staff-based incivility.

References

Abstract
Workplace incivility is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including stress and reduced task performance. The current study examined incivility across three academic contexts: lecture hall, tutorial and meeting, in order to determine if perception, reported impact, and reported response varied according to the context in which the incivility took place.

A sample of 180 participants (91 students, 89 academic staff) were recruited from Scottish Universities to take part in an online experimental vignette study. Six vignettes were presented, each depicting the uncivil behaviour of ignoring someone, with a student or staff member as the instigator.

The results indicated that incivility in a meeting was perceived as significantly more rude, and as having a greater impact, than incivility shown in a tutorial or lecture hall. Responses to the behaviour tended to be more assertive in meetings. Student instigators were considered more rude than staff instigators, and the level of perceived rudeness increased from lectures to meetings.

The future development of interventions to reduce incivility, or enhance coping, may need to consider the context in which incivility occurs, in order to deliver tailored and effective training.