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Perceptions of Civility

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This pilot study examines the results of a national survey of communication professionals, capturing their perceptions of civil and incivil behaviors in the academic workplace. Current keyword searches of these terms yield limited results from the field of Communication, deflecting researchers from the discipline. Therefore, this study is the first step in filling that void. The study gathered open-ended responses addressing definitions of civility and incivility and narrative accounts of subject experience with civil and incivil behaviors. The authors found more cognitive and linguistic complexity associated with the definition of, and application of, incivility than civility.

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The front page of the April 5-6, 2008, *Wall Street Journal* includes an article titled, "Be Nice, or What? Fans of Dr. Forni Spread Civility" (Newman, 2008). The article provides a snapshot of the current state of the civility-incivility tensions in our culture. Rules provided by Dr. Forni (an Italian immigrant and graduate of the Harvard Divinity School), in his book, *Choosing Civility, the Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*, have given rise to a civility movement in Howard County, MD, home of Columbia, MD, a community designed and planned as a social experiment where "hate is truly overcome by love" (Newman, 2008, p. A6). Yet members of the community, including a pastor at the Kitamaqundi Community Church, bristle at the movement. For them, it's not the spirit of civility that creates tension, but the "rules" that Dr. Forni espouses. The article frames the situation by asking how we balance freedom of choice and self-monitoring with an ever-growing list of explicit and implicit social rules.

This pilot study attempts to explore the concepts of Civility and Incivility from the perceptual lens of communication professionals. The study of language and behaviors that are attributed to civility and incivility is not new to the field of communication. However, the impact of technology on research methods requires our field to take a more literal and specific approach to these two concepts. While Civility and Incivility have been named explicitly as areas of scholarly inquiry in the fields of pharmacy, nursing, law, social work, and education, communication data is largely absent from computerized keyword searches. In other words, a researcher is directed to little scholarly output generated in the field of communication concerning civility and incivility, as communication researchers and authors have chosen not to include these specific terms as key words. Given that these concepts are clearly communicative in nature, this study attempts to take the first step in fostering a methodic and semantically specific examination of these social phenomena. We attempt to discover:

- Is the perceptual definition of civility by communication professionals similar to definitions generated in other fields?
- Is the perceptual definition of incivility by communication professionals similar to definitions generated in other fields?
- What incidents of civility are most commonly reported by communication professionals?
- What incidents of incivility are most commonly reported by communication professionals?

What Do We Know about Civility?

In their edited volume, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationship*, Ronald Arnett and Pat Arneson (1999) present civility as an interactive, dialogic construct. They give a functional definition of civility as:

…as a metaphor that points to the importance of public respect in interpersonal interaction. And, second, when such a metaphor is agreed upon by a large number of communicative partners it begins to take on the character of an implicit background narrative for interpersonal communication. (p.7)

Arnett and Arneson envision civility as a construct that shapes our communicative behaviors and inherent meanings, resulting in a creation of the connotative reality in which we operate as human beings.

The concept of civility is further defined in research from the nursing field.

Clark and Carnosso (2008), look to define civility in nursing education noting the concept is not consistently defined in academic literature, yet it plays an important role in establishing useful and practical relationships. Their research indicates that:
Civility requires these antecedents: A civil environment that values respectful communication, a sender and recipient of information, a differing point of view of a conflict, a wiliness to engage in active listening, to participate in respectful discourse and to impart and receive sensitive information, time, and respectful negotiation. (p. 13)

The researchers continue to characterize civility thusly: "Civility is characterized by an authentic respect for others when expressing disagreement, disparity or controversy. It involves time, presence, a willingness to engage in genuine discourse and a sincere intention to seek common ground" (p.13). While there is little empirical research focusing on the definition of civility, more research focuses on defining incivility.

What is Incivility?

Defining incivility has received more attention in scholarly research than that devoted to its counterpart, civility. Clark (2008) defines academic incivility as "any speech or action that disrupts the harmony of the teaching-learning environment…'incivility' is defined as speech or action that is discourteous, rude, or impolite" (p.4). Caza and Cortina (2007) define incivility as "a low-intensity deviant behavior" (p. 335). Clark and Springer (2007) offer this contrast between civility and incivility: "To be 'civil' is to be polite, respectful, and decent. Conversely, 'incivility' is defined as speech or action that is disrespectful or rude and ranges from insulting remarks and verbal abuse to explosive, violent behavior" (p. 93).

Definitions of civility and incivility are rooted in the basics of communication behavior. When we begin to reflect upon these behaviorally based definitions, an examination of the effects of civil and uncivil behaviors is a logical progression for the researcher.

Effects of Uncivil Behavior in the Classroom

Researchers from various fields have examined classroom incivility. In general, they have found that students and faculty experience and witness incivility often in the classroom. Boice (1996) noted that classroom incivility occurred in more than two/thirds of the courses in his study, and suggested that more immediacy behaviors by the instructor would help mitigate the amount of incivility. However, as Alexander-Snow (2004) noted, such a response is too simplistic; in addition, we should consider the intricate interplay of cultural differences and power that combine to create perceived incivility. Braxton and Bayer (2004) reported that previous research has indicated that both faculty and students contribute to incivility. For example, both students and faculty are guilty of recognized incivilities. Incivility behaviors in students include: talking loudly in class while others are talking, tardiness, early departure from class, and sarcasm aimed at teachers. Incivility behaviors in teachers include: condescending negativism, inattentive planning, moral turpitude, particularistic grading, personal disregard, lack

of communication concerning course detail, and uncooperative cynicism. As such, faculty and student misconduct may be interlocking phenomena. West (2003) suggests that new faculty may experience more incivility in the classroom because of their inexperience as classroom administrators.

Beck, Krueger, and Byrd (2002) offer comparative dimensions of civility, contrasted with uncivil behaviors that threaten civility. These dimensions address students and faculty interacting in a medical practicum setting:

> *Civility* *incivility (faculty toward student and student toward patient)*
> Tolerance derogatory comments
> Respect derogatory comments, nasty comments, belittlement and humiliation, students not listening to patience, showing deference to authority, or being courteous
> Conduct using foul language, not showing up to meetings, students - poor grooming, not following procedures, complaining about policyt and not being polite
> Diplomacy disrepectfully disagreeing, not listening to students, always "being right," student – argumentative, inappropriate reactions, not communicating with faculty preemptively in areas of disagreement, not listening to everyone. (p. 41-42)

> Further examination of incivility in medical education is uncovered in the nursing field. Incivility is linked to a lack of empowerment, creating a pattern of incivility that flows from the faculty member to the student. (Clark, 2008) The role of power in uncivil exchanges is further explicated by Caza and Cortina (2007), who created a model that explains the student uncivil experience (p. 336). The model includes elements of instigator status and cognitive mediators (perception of injustice, perception of social ostracism, academic and psychological consequences). The relationship between top-down incivility and the perception of injustice was clearly documented in their 2007 study (p.334).

The need for power is documented in Feldmann's (2001) study addressing the psychological factors that give rise to uncivil behavior: "(a) a need to express power over another, (b) a need for verbal release due to frustration over an apparently unsolvable situation, or (c) a need to obtain something of value" (p.137). Feldmann offers categories of what instructors and students perceive to be uncivil behaviors. He groups these into four general categories: *Annoyances, classroom terrorism* (interferes directly with instruction), threats to bring social or political pressure onto the instructor is *intimidation,* and *violence* (pp. 137-138).

He also adds another category, attacks on the psyche of the instructor (p.138).
Some faculty rate incivility as a moderate to serious problem in the instructional setting, and take action to avoid instigating uncivil students, such as changing their pedagogy and grading criteria (Clark & Springer, 2007, p. 94). Braxton, Bayer and Noseworthy (2004) found that teachers who violated expected college teaching norms hampered the academic and intellectual development of students. Braxton et al. suggest that faculty can head off some of these problems by being more explicit in their syllabi about their expectations for student work. Some teachers have developed teaching styles that suppress student misbehavior, particularly by always being fair and explicit about course requirements, or lecturing for only 20 minutes at a time, then providing

some sort of change or "commercial break" (Perlmutter, 2004). In general, researchers agree that instructors must encourage the best behavior through their practices and behavioral example.

Effects of Incivility in Society

As noted by Twale and DeLuca in their recent book, *Faculty Incivility* (2008), incivility in academia reaches far beyond the classroom. Bullying is documented as part of the professional workplace in general, and academic settings in particular are rife with similar humiliation and intimidation of colleagues and subordinates, reflecting the corporate culture at large. In their book, Twale and DeLuca detail how incivility permeates academic culture, particularly as the entry of new groups has challenged the homogeneity of the academic elite group.
Evidence suggests that incivility is destructive and deserves tangible censure. The practice of withholding welfare benefits in order to limit incivil behavior has been explored (Rodger, 2006). Studies link perceptions of incivility to social identity (Montgomery et al., 2004), and workplace performance (Estes & Wang, 2008; Lim et al. 2008). These academic inquiries demonstrate a need to understand the cause of incivility in order to alleviate the social and economic impact on individuals and the greater society in which they live.

Survey Methods

In order to gather data that would examine perceptions of civility and incivility provided by communication professionals, a survey was developed that allowed participants to answer open ended questions, along with closed questions collecting basic demographic data. A link to an online survey provider, StudentVoice, was posted in a call for participation on CRTNET, the listserv of the National Communication Association. By accessing the link, a subject was taken directly to the StudentVoice server, and could complete the survey. In order to minimize the perceived invasiveness of the questionnaire, the subjects were allowed to skip any questions they desired and still partially complete the survey.

Of the 79 total participants, 53 participants completed the demographic section. Of those 53 participants, 41 were professors of various ranks, while another 8 were adjuncts or instructors. More than half (57%) were employed at a university, while 13 taught at two-year colleges and 9 taught at four-year colleges. Participants were overwhelmingly from public institutions, 77%. Females made up almost three-fourths of the participants (72%), and 66% of the participants were between the ages of 36 and 55. The range of years of teaching experience reported was 3-45, with the median being 18 years. Heterosexuals made up 68% of the participants, with the remaining identifying themselves as bisexual, homosexual or preferring not to respond. Most identified themselves as white (81%), with 7 preferring not to respond.

Once the survey period ended, responses were gathered from StudentVoice. The definitions and narrative responses were coded by the researchers. The responses were grouped by thematic similarities. Once the coding was completed, a basic frequency analysis of the recurring themes was performed.

Questions concerning civility and incivility were included in the survey to gather data that would indicate any consistencies or contradictions in the way individuals perceived these two constructs. By using this specific terminology in the questions, especially those questions that requested the respondents provide narrative descriptions of their experiences, the survey

framed the respondents' perceptions of past events. The narrative format allowed respondents to describe any experiences they believed were associated with those particular constructs. Their descriptions were not forced into a "both sides of a coin" typology by the researchers so that the narratives could take any shape or direction desired by the respondent.

Results

The voluntary subject pool (n=79) yielded response sets for all items of the questionnaire. Respondents were not required to furnish responses for all items of the questionnaire, as they were allowed to exit the survey at any time, or to skip any survey item they perceived to be too invasive.

Definitions and Experiences of Civility

"Respect," "politeness," and "courtesy" were central to the majority of the 57 responses regarding how to define civility, as shown in Table 1. Ten responses suggested behaviors to avoid, such as not raising your voice or avoiding negative non-verbal behaviors. The majority of the definitions specifically mentioned that civility was directed toward another person, suggesting that civility is a form of communicative action, not an innate quality that one can possess in solitude. Here are some examples of the definitions. Please note that we have not edited the responses in any way.

1. Appropriate, respectful treatment of others.
2. Civility is treating other people like equal human beings with the same rights and dignity as yourself.
3. Courtesy, polite language, inclusiveness, and open, gracious behavior.
4. Respect for the uniqueness of the individual.

It was encouraging that 93% of the participants indicated that they had experienced civility at their educational institution, and 37 provided a brief narration of a specific experience of civility at their institutions. As compiled in Tables 2 and 3, a total of 25 incidents described civility between faculty members, while 8 described incidents among students, and 5 narrated an incident between faculty and students. The narratives highlighted differences of opinion handled with respect, polite behavior, effective listening, accommodation, clarification, and restraint. These narratives will be analyzed in more detail below. These results suggest that people do experience civility on a regular basis in academic institutions.

Definitions and Experiences of Incivility

Similar to the definitions of civility, the definitions of incivility overwhelmingly mentioned actions and attitudes toward others, with the majority mentioning disrespectful, rude, or inappropriate behavior, as tabulated in Table 4. Here are several samples of their definitions:

1. Acting in ways that shut down communication/openness by humiliating or intimidating others.
2. Incivility is the communicated/demonstrated lack of respect for individuals, ideas and processes.
3. Insulting others because they do not agree with you, disregarding others' feelings and emotions, embarrassing people in front of others, behaving in a distracting, demeaning or

immature manner. Lack of respect toward others, speaking in a manner that is arrogant, condescending, or inappropriate. Threatening or intimidating someone.

It was distressing to note that 88% of the participants indicated that they had experienced incivility at their academic institution. As shown in Table 5, more than half of the 41 incidents recounted were among faculty or between faculty and administrators. Of the 16 cases involving students, 7 of them were student-to-student incidents, and 7 involved incivility between students and faculty. In 2 of the cases, the faculty were the uncivil parties.

As shown in Table 6, the incidents of incivility mentioned disrespect, disruptive behavior, a sense of entitlement, personal attacks, and obscenities. Here are some exemplar narratives:

1. A male tenured professor in a departmental meeting tried to overtalk a full-time temporary faculty member who stood her ground and would not yield the floor to his interruption. The topic was not a controversial subject. He stormed from the room shouting obscenities. Because I was leading the meeting, I asked him not to employ such language and he also verbally accosted me. As an outcome, the faculty member has not attended meetings because he states that the meetings are not health for him to attend. The consequence has been ongoing interpersonal strain in the department between this professor and other faculty, as well as between him and me.
2. In my class which I am co-teaching this quarter, I have had several occasions when I have mentioned some unusual ideas that I think are worth considering, and on each occasion, a student in the class (a different one each time) responded by saying "That's a load of crap," or "That's a really stupid idea." I responded by finding sources to back me up, putting those before the class, and telling the class in general that I hoped that they would give me some benefit of the doubt and assume that it's possible that I know what I'm talking about when I share ideas with them. One student has not come back to class; the other has become more responsive and pleasant to interact with. I still feel nervous about his potential responses in class, though.
3. At my institution, we have advising responsibilities. Some people fulfill their duties; others not. Rather than address the individuals personally who have chosen to shirk their duties, an administrator in our school sent out an incredibly disrespectful EMAIL to all faculty—basically blaming all of us for not meeting the standards of excellence. Faculty, especially those who work hard, were pissed and rightfully so—and let the administrator know about it via email and personal conversations. The individual later apologized.

One narrative in the group noted uncivil behavior that was the symptom of clinically more serious emotional problems:

A female student in my class threatened to kill another female student in my class because the second student had served in the military. Campus security security removed the student from my class . . . . The student was referred to the school counselor. She had serious mental problems. . . .

The other reports of student incivility are typical complaints teachers experience in and out of the classroom: Students chatting and acting disinterested in the classroom, challenging a grade or a teacher's opinion, making phone calls in class. Teachers who have taught for more

than 10 years often claim anecdotally that these behaviors are on the rise, and as noted above, some of these behaviors can be headed off by more faculty vigilance.

All the other narratives, however, speak of "a low-intensity deviant behavior" (Caza & Cortina, 2007, p. 335) that people endure in everyday work settings with colleagues and supervisors in academia. Although they are not violent or dangerous, this incivility creates uncomfortable work and learning environments and provide rich examples of basic communication principles and how they may be transgressed. Three themes emerge from the narratives that underscore the importance of two-way communication, listening skills, and empathizing with the audience. Many responses narrated how the uncivil party engaged in one-way communication. In many narratives the uncivil person(s) refused to allow the others a response by talking louder, storming out of the room, withdrawing from further communication, or by making important announcements publicly before announcing them privately to primary stakeholders. Similarly, many of the reported incidents of civility contrast with the incidents of incivility in the skill of listening. For example, a moment of civility occurred when "the group worked hard to listen effectively and to seek feedback in order to clarify messages." Another participant said, "Any time a colleague listens to a concern and responds politely and honestly, I [consider] it as an act of civility." Uncivil incidents included tales of colleagues and supervisors "closing off all opportunities to provide feedback." Thus listening and two-way communication are essential to civil interactions. Some participants recounted an incident in which one communicator appeared to promote two-way communication, but didn't take time to understand or empathize with the audience:

I have a colleague who feels that because I am a new faculty member (and newly out of graduate school), that she needs to "educate" me on how to be a faculty member at my institution. I think her heart is in the right place . . .

These narratives underscore the importance of basic communication principles in everyday interactions—something we teach in our basic course, but is nevertheless ignored by many people from students to college presidents.

Discussion

The results from this study suggest that both civility and incivility co-exist in institutions of higher education in many forms and may include students, faculty, and administrators. The element of "respect" resonated in the definitions of civility provided by survey respondents.

Over half of the definitions mentioned "respect" (57.6%), echoing the definitions of Arnett and Arneson (1999), and Clark and Carnosso (2008). Adherence to social convention, signified with the descriptors of politeness, social norms, etiquette, consideration and courtesy, was also noted as important elements of civility in over 59% of the definitions.

Conversely, "disrespect" was mentioned in only 35% of the incivility definitions, with violating social conventions of impoliteness, rejecting social norms and rudeness mentioned in only 31% of the definitions. Incivility had a broader interpretation among survey respondents, with less repetition spread among 28 general descriptors. Civility definitions included 26 general descriptors, with only a few descriptors showing high repetition. These numbers may indicate

that definitions of incivility are more personalized, and possibly more contextually based than definitions of civility.

When examining the incidents of civility described by respondents, faculty-to-faculty incidents were the dominant interactive set (67.5%) followed by student to student (21.6%). Incidents of incivility demonstrated more variations on power differentials. Faculty-to faculty incivility was still the dominant interactive set (44%). Student-to-faculty and student-to-student interactions were described in 17% of the incidents, followed by administration-to-faculty in 15% of the incidents. Administration-to-faculty and faculty-to-student interactions were not mentioned in the civility incidents. These responses appear to support the element of powerless victimage inherent in incivility reported by Feldmann (2001) and Caza and Cortina (2007), as well as the predominance of the bullying culture purported by Twale and DeLuca (2008).

The theme of respect that appears to dominate respondent definitions of civility continued to be pervasive in the descriptions of civil incidents. Twenty-four percent of respondents mentioned respectful behavior, with polite behaviors, supportiveness, and positive interaction patterns including effective listening and providing/receiving clarifying feedback also mentioned in multiple examples. These positive interaction patterns support Clark and Carnosso's (2008) antecedents for civil behavior:

A civil environment that values respectful communication, a sender and recipient of information, a differing point of view of a conflict, a willingness to engage in active listening, to participate in respectful discourse and to impart and receive sensitive information, time, and respectful negotiation. (p.13)

Uncivil incidents were most often characterized as "disrespectful" (32% of responses), with "disruptive" behaviors following with 22% of responses. Reported incivility behaviors may be grouped into power-based behaviors and non-productive communication patterns. Power-based behaviors reported include: entitlement, personal attacks, superiority/condescension, threats and accusatory behavior. Non-productive communication patterns are signified with not listening, obscenities, no ability for feedback and interrupting. These behaviors echo those described by Beck, Krueger and Byrd (2002) who offer descriptions of uncivil behaviors such as: derogatory comments, nasty comments, belittlement and humiliation, students not listening, using foul language, not being polite, disrepectfully disagreeing, and not listening (p.41-42).

The responses provided by the survey participants appear to be consistent with descriptions of civility and incivility found in fields other than communication. Civility and incivility exist only as communication. As noted above, the uncivil behaviors reported are transgressions of basic principles of good communication—principles which we teach in our basic courses which in many institutions are part of general education requirements.

Nevertheless, students emerge from these classes practicing behaviors that are considered uncivil. It follows that the field of communication should take the lead in researching these phenomena in order to create a meaning-based paradigm from which to explain, dissect, and respond to incivility in our society.

Tables

Table 1. *Definitions of civility*

	# of responses 59/79 total
Respect	34
Polite, social norms, etiquette	23
Consideration, courtesy	12
Sensitivity	6
Humanity	6
Equality	6
Honest	4
Diversity, inclusiveness	4
Continued engagement, productive dialogue	4
Recognizing rights/needs	3
Taking ownership	3
Appropriate to context	3
Intentionality, discourse, desire to understand, health, integrity, not raising voice, not using violent motions, acceptance, community, kindness, social intelligence, tolerance, openness, truth, honor, dignity	<3 each

Table 2: *Participants in incidents of civility*

	# of incidents 37/79 responses
Faculty to faculty	25
Faculty to student	4
Student to student	8
Student to faculty	1

Table 3: *Descriptors of incidents of civility*

	Frequency of descriptors
Difference of opinion handled professionally or with respect	9
Acts of polite behavior	6
Supportive climate	5
Willingness to discuss	5
Positive working relationships	5
Effective listening	4
History of respect between participants	4
Clarifying feedback present	4
Acts of accommodation	3
Restraint, overcoming defensiveness, absence of problems	1 each

Table 4. *Definitions of incivility*

	# of responses 51/79 total
Disrespect, lack of respect	18
Impolite, rude, ignoring social rules	16
Lack of acknowledging humanity	8
Inappropriate behavior	6
Impinges on rights/needs of others	5
Threatening, intimidation	6
Humiliation, insulting	5
Competitive	4
Selfish	4
Arrogance	3
Not listening	3
Inequality	3
Exclusionary	3
Shut-down communication, knowingly cause distress, insensitivity, caustic, injustice, lack of self-restraint, not worthy, untrustworthy	<3 each

Table 5. *Participants in incidents of incivility*

	# of incidents 41/79 responses
Faculty to faculty	18
Student to faculty	7
Faculty to student	2
Student to student	7
Administration to faculty	6
Faculty to administration	1

Table 6. *Descriptors of incidents of incivility*

	# of incidents
Disrespect	13
Disruptive behavior	9
Entitlement	7
Personal attacks	7
Not listening	6
Superiority/condescension	6
Obscenities	5
No ability for feedback	5
Offensive behavior	3
Threats	3
Interrupting	3
Accusatory Behavior	3
Back-stabbing	3
Alienation, rudeness, oppression, hostility, punishment, racial discrimination, dismissiveness, embarrassment, physical abuse, destroying trust	<3 each

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