

The effect of bystanders' support of targets of workplace incivility on observers' intentions to help

Workplace incivilities, defined as low intensity deviant acts with ambiguous intent to harm (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), are a source of psychological distress for their targets. They often occur in the presence of bystanders, and these bystanders may affect their consequences. For example, bystanders may give support to targets which reduces the targets' sense of isolation, thus alleviating an important source of their distress (Hershcovis, Ogunfowora, Reich, & Christie, 2017). However, bystanders also react to each other (Levine, Taylor, & Best, 2011), which we reasoned can either result in further (un)helpful behavior or cause a contrarian reaction, depending on the relative power of the bystanders.

We ran a 2 (bystander power: higher or lower) x 2 (bystander reaction: unsupportive or supportive) experimental vignette study to assess the effect of a bystander's reaction to workplace incivility on the intention of a second bystander (referred to here as the 'observer') to help the target. We hypothesized that supportive behavior (relative to unsupportive behavior) by a lower power bystander would *boost* observers' intentions to help a target of workplace incivility, whereas supportive behavior by a higher power bystander would *reduce* observers' intentions to help the target. Moreover, we hypothesized that these effects would be mediated by observers' perceptions of their responsibility to help the target and of their ability to do so effectively.

Students of a University for adult education ($N=119$) read how an employee treated a colleague in an uncivil manner. They then read how either an intern (lower power bystander) or a supervisor (higher power bystander) reacted by either brushing off the incident (unsupportive reaction) or siding with the target (supportive reaction). In line with our hypotheses, an interaction emerged between bystander power and bystander reaction on observers' intention to help the target, and observers' perceived efficacy and observers' perceived responsibility mediated this effect. Moreover, in line with our hypotheses, these results emerged because observers felt more responsible and more able to help the target when the *intern* sided with the target as opposed to brushing off the incident. Contrary to our hypotheses however no differences were found when the *supervisor* either sided with the target or brushed off the incident. Implications of these findings for research on workplace incivility, bullying, and harassment will be discussed.

Keywords: Workplace bullying, workplace incivility, power, support, multiple bystanders

De Waal-Andrews, Wendy & Pouwelse, Mienieke

Open University the Netherlands, Heerlen, The Netherlands

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