

Assessing The Occupational Health Implications of Workplace Incivility and Microaggressions: A Critical Review of Modern Ego-Driven Manifestations

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Abstract

Background: In modern corporate landscape covert harassment, a form of micro-aggression or workplace incivility often described as subtle and low intent discretionary behaviour often gets unnoticed despite its culminative deleterious effect denting the overall psychological climate of an organization. Workplace plagued by unchecked, Incivility and its ill effects characterized by lower employee productivity, commitment, reduced satisfaction, and higher absenteeism are well documented. However, the negative consequences capturing the ill effects on Occupational health and Mental well-being remains scant and sparse. **Purpose:** Thus, this Critical review aims to synthesis the existing evidence encapsulating Workplace incivility, Microaggression and its repercussions on various dimensions of employee wellbeing, including psychological distress and Occupational health. **Method:** Utilizing a Narrative review design, this study synthesis prior literature shedding light on the impact of workplace microaggression and incivility on employee mental health and well-being. **Findings:** Drawing on Affective Events Theory and Allostatic Load Model results indicate acts of incivility and microaggression culminate into aggravators leading to depletion in occupational health (e.g. Stress, Anxiety & Depression). This study thus provide and equip human resource development practitioners and researchers with a better understanding of the similarities and distinguishing features of subtle form of aggression, that are often undermined especially in Indian workplace settings.

Keywords: Micro-Aggressions, Workplace Incivility, Employee Wellbeing, Psychological Distress, Organizational Health.

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Introduction

Microaggression and workplace incivility are often denoted as interchangeable terms yet hold a substantial difference in its meaning. Attributed as a subtle form of negative behaviour or interaction between people that may harm individual health, wellbeing, and performance at work. Almost half of the working population attribute witnessing instances of incivility on a daily basis, Harris et al. (2023). Confirming that they have been the direct target of such types of mistreatments in their workplace. The extent of measurable harm, meaning and merit caused by microaggression still remains debatable in nature Scott Lilienfeld (2019). In today's modern corporate landscape crafting practices fostering Diversity Equity & Inclusivity has been attributed as the most

complex challenge for the HRD Practioner's Heitner et al., (2013). Often neglecting the covert form of misconduct at workplace, organizational drives foster policies that are more driven to addressing overt misconduct Jones et al., (2017). Going by the Etymology "Microaggression" as a Jargon was first brought to light addressing racial discrimination incident exchanged between two distinct ethnic groups African Americans and White Americans. Subtle yet derogatory, disrespectful experienced by the black community in 1978 Chester Pearce (Pierce et al., 1977, p. 66). One of the earliest form of instances elucidating instances of microaggressions included: clutching your bag closer on seeing a young Black man approach on the street or saying, "what are you?" To gauge information about

someone's racial or ethnic group identity. Till early 20th century the term was often used to assess the mental health of marginalized groups (Lui & Quezada, 2019). On the other hand, Workplace incivility as a concept in the behavioral science arena rose to prominence through the peculiar work Tit for Tat? By Andersson and Pearson (1999). According to SHRM incivility index (2025) instances of uncivil conduct have elevated demonstrating an array of misconduct including shaming, gaslighting, micromanagement. Often denoted as a subtle mechanism of bad behaviour, empirical findings indicate substantial depletion of workplace outcomes, including performance reciprocity & job commitment however larger implications denting psychological wellbeing remains sparse. Therefore, this paper poist the relevancy of viewing and addressing microaggression and incivility as identical yet distinct forms of subtle discretionary behaviour and its diverse implications on mental well-being on working populus.

Problem Statement and Objective

Covert harassment is characterized as a specific mechanism of bad behaviour or misconduct at the workplace that often gets undermined due to its very subtle nature. Researches pertaining to its extent of measurable harms documenting non work outcome specifically in the context of contemporary professional landscape, where organizational structures are rapidly shifting, remains quite scant. Therefore, understanding the psychological underpinnings of "low-intensity" deviant behavior is crucial. The study aims to forefront Occupational Health as the core pillar of Organizational sustainability. Poiseting a necessity to better understand and recognize the distinguishing features of subtle forms of misconducts like Incivility and Microaggression that are often undermined. This negligence of subtle deviant behaviour is alarming and calls for considerable attention. As it gradually culminates into grave consequences, excruciating Mental health disruption, pace in diverse Occupational settings.

The study also aims to elucidate and identify gaps pertaining to current literature, and propose future directions for researches designed to better classify identical yet distinct forms of bad behaviour mechanism exclusively addressing Incivility and microaggression at workplace.

Method

The study adopts a narrative review design, explicitly postulating the distinguishing features to synthesize the existing literature pertaining to identical yet distinct forms of subtle misconduct.

Theoretical linkage Microaggression, Workplace Incivility and Occupational Health

Interpersonal mistreatment is common terminology that defines microaggression and incivility at workplace, while they differ in intent and target, they share a common trajectory leading to deuterating mental well-being of an employee. Before formulating a theoretical construct, it is necessary and essential to distinguish the intensity of these stressors. Anderson and Pearson, (1999), Attribute incivility as conduct of an individual exhibiting, deleterious behavior deviating from organizational norms in a manner that is considered rude, inconsiderate, disrespectful, lacking sense of self control in an organizational setup Phillips and Smith (2003). On contrary microaggression inherits its root tied to target identity encompassing across gender, race and religion .It may be defined as daily subtle slights that may vary as verbal or behavioral derogatory conduct. Holder et al (2007). Occupational health simply refers to the physical and cognitive state of an employee or worker. Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) Affective Events Theory (AET) presents a robust theoretical basis to understand this linkage, it suggests that specific workplace events (like a microaggression) trigger negative emotional states that accumulate poor health outcomes and negative work attitudes Namin and Røislien (2021). The Allostatic Load Model conceptualized by McEwen and Stellar (2003) theory postulates a biological passage, denoting how repeated episodes of minor psychological stressor gradually culminate

into major health decline. Elaborating further act of incivility acts as a trigger point, the cognitive processing perceives it as a threat to social standing or identity, as a response to stimulus body releases stress hormones (cortisol/adrenaline) because these slights are micro and frequent, the body never fully returns to a baseline state. This constant revving of the system leads to Allostatic Load, resulting in cardiovascular disease and immune system suppression. APA (2023). While stress is often discussed as a feeling, Allostatic Load describes it as a measurable biological debt. Hobfoll (1989) Conservation of resource theory indicates a potent resemblance. COR theory posits individuals need to acquire and maintain resources (time, energy resilience). Incidents carrying microaggression or act of incivility are conducts of resource taxing elements. In such circumstances when resources get depleted, employees enter a burnout stage channeling poor occupational health. Chen, Westman, Hobfoll (2015).

Although a single act of incivility or microaggression does not act as aggravator leading to health threatening on its own, however the cooccurrence does create a toxic cocktail that serves as a basis depleting occupational health of an employee.

Microaggression and Occupational Health

The term "Microaggression" has a fascinating academic evolution. It departed from a clinical psychiatric observation to a cornerstone of modern organizational psychology and workplace diversity studies. Penetrating the academic mainstream and management lexicon term "Microaggression" garnered much attention in recent times. Fletcher et al (2025) defines microaggression as a subtle mechanism of bad conduct with daily occurrence channeling negativity and denting psychological climate at workplace. Assessing occupational well-being of Malawian employees Hara's (2025) mixed method study demonstrated a positive significant correlation between microaggression, elevating anxiety, depression and distress. Parallely the qualitative review revealed reports of insomnia, headaches, and

gastrointestinal distress aligning with chronic stress frameworks. In another study applying a meta-analytical approach Costa et al. (2022) assessed the relationship between microaggressions and psychological well-being, physical health at workplace. The findings implied microaggressions as chronic stressors. Shandra et al (2018) study too revealed a positive linkage between microaggression and psychological distress, denting the overall mental well-being of academic fraternity. Elucidating diversity climate management as a critical component fostering mental well-being at workplace McCallaghan (2022) testified its association with microaggression illuminating fascinating revelation's, the findings concluded that microaggression dents the overall psychological climate of managements directly impacting mental well-being of employees. Post pandemic (Covid-19), mental health has occupied a pivotal place in Occupational settings. Highlighting the importance Richard's empirical work (2021) sheds light on workplace Microaggressions and how it positively correlates with mental health symptoms including depression, anxiety, and stress. Laying further emphasis, Washington (2022) cite's microaggression linking with racial identity as an aggravator of mental symptoms including psychological distress, anxiety and depression as critical byproducts. Feitosa et al (2025) study too highlights the importance of recognizing

Microaggression as a chronic stressor that negatively impacts the occupational health of employees. Therefore, it's a necessity to recognizing Microaggression as a form of misconduct with larger mental health implications. Thus, the above findings clearly indicate how microaggression at workplace has gradually proliferated as a root cause denominator of mental health disruption, culminating into grave consequences, fostering depression, anxiety, and psychological stress in diverse Occupational settings.

Workplace Incivility and Occupational Health

Often attributed to a subtle or low intent mechanism of bad behaviour at the workplace. Incivility at the workplace has occupied a peculiar position in a global workplace context. Plethora of read explicitly shedding light on its ill effect and work-related outcomes are available, yet the literature pertaining to its hazardous implication on occupational health remain limited. Regardless of its low intent nature, A.G. *et al* (2023) empirical findings indicate startling facts attributing emotional exhaustion & depression symptoms as byproducts of incivility experience culminating over a period of time. In an interesting attempt addressing the monetary dent caused to employer's empirical study concluded by Sabbath *et al* (2018) laid emphasis on the importance of workplace modification to curb and control the expenditure incurred for mental conditioning caused by instances of uncivil acts. In another study assessing the ill impact of incivility alleviating psychological distress Geldart's (2018) research affirms empirical validation indicating the magnitude of incivility experienced among Canadian postal workers denting the mental well-being. Qui and Zhang (2022) study elucidating an Asian world perspective too attribute incivility as a potent predictor of psychological distress among nursing staff.

Although attributed to a micro construct of bad behaviour mechanism, its ill implications are comparatively larger. Lim *et al* (2011) findings affirm instances of incivility fuel depression syndrome in Asian work culture. Corroborating with the prior studies Shahzadi *et al* (2025) work assessing non work outcomes reveals positive correlation between act of incivility on physical and mental ailment particularly resulting in insomnia and psychological distress. Demsky *et al* (2019) found affirming support too indicating act of incivility alleviates sleep deprivation and gradually culminates into grave psychological distress. Over a period, frequent instances of uncivil acts culminate into insidious, pervasive and harmful nature denting the psychological climate and mental

well-being of employees at the workplace. Jackson *et al.* (2024)

Thus, it is imperative to note that the subtle mechanism of misconduct is often viewed as a micro element; the repercussion or ill impact of workplace incivility remains pervasive regardless of the diverse occupational settings as testified. Due to its subtle nature, it is often misconceived as a non-deterrent aspect causing larger implications, specifically non-work-related outcomes.

Future Directions

While the synthesis of review incorporates a comprehensive methodological trajectory approach. However, several limitations and gaps still constraint its generalizations. The existing studies are predominantly either experimental or cross sectional in nature, further the data measurable methodologies are either Self-report measures or surveys although considered as a golden standard for capturing large data perceptions, but they are highly prone to social desirability bias. Using other prominent techniques such as Critical Incident Technique (CIT) or Experience Sampling Method (ESM) / Daily Diary can element recall bias which is quite common in survey methodologies. ESM captures micro-events in real-time, providing unbiased feed. Further Majority of the study has been conducted in the western context therefore it is essential to capture real time data for cultural generalizability. In collectivist culture like India societal and cultural factors acts as key stakeholders in an Individual career pathway therefore future research studies can analyze impact of societal and cultural factors considering workplace misconduct. Additionally assessing demographic denominator including socio-economic status, gender, Age etc can offer fresh insights. Englighting with a better understanding of the similarities and distinguishing features of subtle form of aggression, that are often undermined especially in Indian workplace settings.

Conclusion

In Organizational behaviour context, Occupational Health of an employee is

critical component and a multidisciplinary field that focuses on safety health and welfare of an employee while at work. Subtle, low intent covert harassment like incivility and an act of microaggression rooted in one's identity creates a gradual mental blockage that can pile up into larger mental health implications. Anxiety, insomnia syndrome, depression and stress are some keys by products. Existing evidence's particularly in western context have documented the ill effects, however in non-western context, there remains a paucity elucidating the similarities and distinguishing and recognizing workplace incivility and microaggression as identical yet two distinct forms of subtle misconduct at workplace. Methodologically, current research is predominantly limited to cross sectional study, surveys, and self-reports. Therefore, this study calls for a necessity to address these gaps, via a diverse methodological approach. By recognizing Incivility and Microaggression as two distinct forms of subtle misconduct at workplace, this can help HRD Practioners craft potential parameters and interventions combating Mental health challenges, pertaining to Occupational health.

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