

# Witnessing Incivility among Employees: Effects on Consumer Anger and Negative Inferences about Companies

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We introduce the incivility construct and demonstrate that witnessing an incident of employee-employee incivility causes consumers to make negative generalizations about (a) others who work for the firm, (b) the firm as a whole, and (c) future encounters with the firm, inferences that go well beyond the incivility incident. We demonstrate the process by which these effects occur, showing that anger at the uncivil employee induces these effects. We find that anger leads to rumination about the uncivil encounter and causes customers to make quicker and more negative generalizations about related entities. We also identify boundary conditions for the relationship between incivility and negative generalizations. These process and boundary condition results add theoretically to the literature on incivility as well as that on anger's effect on information processing.

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I asked the woman at the front desk a question. She looked up the answer in my account in the computer. She looked puzzled at the screen and called over another employee to clarify what she saw. Then, she began harshly questioning the other employee about why she did what she did in regards to inputting my information. The tone of voice she used, her body language, and her facial expressions seemed cold, tense, and condescending. (Consumer)

The consumer anecdote given above illustrates a worrisome problem in organization—incivility among employees. *Incivility* is defined as insensitive, disrespectful, or rude behavior directed at another person that displays a lack of regard for that person (Cortina et al. 2001). Incivility among employees is prevalent in organizations (Cortina et al. 2001;

Pearson and Porath 2005), making it likely that consumers will have occasion to witness such incidents. Indeed, some companies have instituted training programs designed to minimize their occurrence (Pearson and Porath 2009). We contribute to the consumer behavior literature by identifying whether, when, and why witnessing employee incivility affects consumers.

Even though it seems possible that consumers would narrowly fix blame on the uncivil employee or even dismiss such an incident as an isolated event, we show that witnessing employee incivility produces a “rotten apple spoils the barrel” effect, increasing the tendency to make negative generalizations about (a) others who work for the firm (generalization across people), (b) the firm as a whole (generalization across entities), and (c) future encounters with the firm (generalization across time). This effect is mediated by consumers’ anger at the uncivil employee. We also extend the literatures on incivility and anger by articulating the process by which incivility affects negative generalizations and the boundary conditions under which these effects emerge. We show that anger from incivility causes consumers to ruminate on the uncivil encounter and to make rapid and negative judgments about other firm-related entities. The effect of incivility on these negative generalizations occurs for both familiar and unfamiliar firms.

Overall, our results contribute to the literature by identifying how employee-to-employee incivility, a prevalent phenomenon, affects consumers’ negative generalizations about

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firms. They also contribute theoretically by demonstrating the role of anger on consumer information processing. These issues are described in more detail in the sections that follow.

## INCIVILITY AND ITS EFFECTS

### Incivility in the Workplace

Whereas high-intensity forms of mistreatment in the workplace, such as aggression and violence, have long been recognized as problematic, organizations have become increasingly aware of less intense behaviors that harm employees by violating norms of mutual respect (e.g., sexist comments, racial slurs). Incivility between employees is one such behavior. When one is uncivil, one acts in a way that lacks consideration and is disrespectful of another's feelings or sensibilities. These rude and discourteous actions can be verbal (making snide or derogatory comment toward another) or nonverbal (snatching an item out of someone's hand or pushing in front of another person). Incivility's interpersonal nature means that the phenomenon is restricted to contexts where information is delivered or behavior is directed from one person to another.

Incivility is prevalent in the workplace, and it is believed to be a serious and worsening problem (US News/Bozell Survey 1996). Pearson and Porath (2005) found that 10% of approximately 800 sampled U.S. employees report witnessing incivility at work daily; 20% claim to be targets of workplace incivility at least once per week. Pearson and Porath's (2005) second study found that 25% of Canadian employees reported witnessing incivility daily; half said that they were the direct targets of incivility at least once per week. Across studies of 9,000 employees, Pearson and Porath (2009) found that 96% of sampled employees had experienced, while 99% had witnessed, incivility in the workplace.

The prevalence of workplace incivility makes it possible that consumers have occasion to witness uncivil interactions among employees. Indeed, a pilot study conducted by the authors asked 58 undergraduates whether and where they had witnessed episodes of employee-employee incivility in their role as customers. Every individual was able to articulate such instances. Moreover, employee incivility was reported across a variety of industries, including restaurants, banks, government offices, gyms, retail stores, universities, airlines, and entertainment venues. Approximately 40% reported witnessing an act of employee incivility at least once per month. Such acts were seen as neither "extremely typical" nor "extremely atypical" of consumer experiences ( $M = 4.07$  on a 7-point scale). Most customers (73.2%) described incivility incidents that involved reprimands of one employee by another, often due to job-related infractions (75%).

### Potential Effects of Incivility on Anger and Negative Generalizations

In light of the prevalence of workplace incivility and at least anecdotal evidence that consumers witness it, one wonders about its potential effects on consumers. Our thesis

holds that incivility is deleterious to firms because it induces consumer anger, causing consumers to make far-reaching negative generalizations (inductive inferences). These generalizations go beyond the uncivil encounter, affecting judgments about the firm as a whole, other employees who work there, and expectations about future encounters with the firm. Research on the information-processing effects of anger (described below) informs these predictions.

*Anger.* According to appraisal theories of emotion, differentiated emotional responses arise from consumers' assessments (appraisals) of situations and events (Johnson and Stewart 2005; Kuppens and Van Mechelen 2007). Anger is evoked in situations appraised as unpleasant, goal incongruent, unfair, controllable, blameworthy, and certain. We anticipate that witnessing employee-employee incivility may activate anger by evoking these appraisals. Specifically, uncivil episodes between employees are likely to be viewed as inherently unpleasant (negative) and inconsistent with the goal of good customer service. They may seem unfair to the victimized employee as well as to customers who find themselves witnessing it. Moreover, the uncivil employee may be blamed for failing to control his or her uncivil behavior. Further, the fact that one has witnessed the uncivil behavior makes one certain about the event's occurrence.

*Effects on Information Processing and Negative Generalizations.* Prior work suggests that experiencing negative emotions, and anger in particular, focuses one's attention on the source of those emotions (Schwarz 1990; Simon 1967). Individuals ruminate and brood over the anger-evoking situation (e.g., Anestis et al. 2009; Sukhodolsky, Golub, and Cromwell 2001). Thus, when exposed to an anger-inducing uncivil encounter, customers' attention may narrow as they concentrate on the specific anger-evoking event. Rumination should lessen consumers' attention to other aspects of the environment (e.g., product attributes, other employees, store atmospherics), reducing the customer's capacity to engage in systematic processing of such entities. Consistent with this idea, prior research observes that negative affect decreases comprehension (Ellis et al. 1995) and recall (Ellis et al. 1997). Likewise, Porath and Erez (2007) showed that incivility (a predicted cause of anger) disrupts cognitive processing.

Although anger may foster negative rumination about the uncivil incident, it may simultaneously foster rapid and heuristic processing of other entities. This is so for several reasons. First, rumination about the uncivil encounter leaves less capacity to make other judgments, increasing the likelihood that evaluations of the firm will be based on heuristic cues as opposed to thoughtful processing. Second, consistent with appraisal tendency theory, the negative appraisal dimension linked to anger may color evaluations of others (Lerner and Tiedens 2006). Thus, consumers may judge other employees, the firm as a whole, and future encounters with it in a negative light as well. Third, angry people express certainty about who caused their anger and what happened to cause their anger (Lazarus 1991; Ortony, Clore and Collins 1988; Tiedens and Linton 2001). This certainty appraisal dimension may reduce

tentativeness or caution, increasing the speed at which consumers make judgments of other entities.

In support of the idea that anger can evoke superficial processing of other entities, Tiedens (2001) and Tiedens and Linton (2001) found that relative to other emotions, anger activated heuristic processing, as evidenced by greater use of chronically accessible scripts and greater reliance on superficial cues. Such heuristic processing influenced inferences made about others. Keltner, Ellsworth, and Edwards (1993) observed that angry people made simple dispositional attributions for an ambiguous social event. Further, Bodenhausen et al. (1994) observed that angry people made negative deductive inferences; they used negative stereotypes about a group to arrive at negative conclusions about an individual accused of bad behavior more than did people in a neutral mood. Anger also has been shown to influence the perceived likelihood of other anger-inducing events (DeSteno et al. 2000, 2004), further suggesting a link between the certainty appraisal of anger and judgments about other entities.

We extend this reasoning to predict that anger will lead consumers to make generalized negative inferences about the organization. Specifically, if angry people are more likely to engage in heuristic processing of other entities, they may make inductive inferences regarding entities or outcomes linked to the firm based merely on shared category membership. Rather than engaging in analytical processing that would take into account the external constraints on the uncivil employee and lead to caution in making negative judgments about the firm that go beyond the uncivil encounter, the mere fact that other employees belong to the same social group as the uncivil employee may be sufficient for the angry consumer to generalize to other entities or outcomes linked to the organization. Because anger affects rumination about the negative aspects of the uncivil encounter, judgments of entities and outcomes linked to the firm should also be directionally negative and made quickly. We call the expanded impact of an incivility incident on fellow employees, the firm, and across time *negative generalizations* (i.e., inductive inferences). Their relationship to anger has yet to be explored.

In sum, we make the novel predictions that incivility (a) induces negative rumination about the uncivil encounter and (b) induces rapidly formed, negative generalizations about the organization (i.e., its employees, the firm as a whole, and future encounters with it). The fact that consumers make negative (inductive) generalizations about other entities linked to the organization and make them quickly is taken as evidence of heuristic processing. We also anticipate that (c) the effect of incivility on rumination and negative generalizations occurs through the mediating effect of anger.

## STUDY 1

Study 1 tests these predictions using an employee-employee incivility incident among representatives of a bank. The incident involved a reprimand of one employee by another as our pilot study indicated myriad cases of uncivil

encounters involving reprimands. A *reprimand* is defined as a reproof or rebuke of one individual by another for behavior deemed inappropriate. Importantly, reprimands are not the same as incivility since reprimands can be delivered in a constructive and civil manner. A strong test of the link between incivility, anger, and negative generalizations would be found by comparing reprimands that are uncivil versus civil. Since both may be perceived negatively, what differentiates them is the civil versus uncivil manner in which they are delivered.

Study 1 also included a negative self-statement condition to disentangle the effects of incivility from the potentially confounding factor of negative information. Specifically, uncivil reprimands often convey negative information, which may be incorporated into consumers' judgments. We control for negative information by including a negative self-statement condition, in which an employee speaks negatively about her own actions. With a negative self-rebuke, an employee conveys negative information toward the self. With incivility, an employee conveys negative information toward another employee. To the extent that incivility affects negative generalizations while negative self-rebuke does not, it is more difficult to attribute respondents' negative responses to negative information per se.

## Method

Seventy-three respondents (61% male) who were enrolled in a senior-level business course at a large university participated in a study ostensibly designed to help an organization decide on a product launch. The study used a between-subjects design that randomly assigned respondents to one of three conditions: uncivil reprimand, civil reprimand, or negative self-rebuke.

*Procedure.* Respondents completed a survey that included, among other questions, items assessing their current emotional state. They were then asked to participate in an ostensibly unrelated study by a marketing professor who was helping a new bank decide on which options (various logos, alternative financing arrangements) to include on their new Visa alumni credit card. Respondents were told that they would meet bank employees who would explain the credit card options. Respondents were led to a room where they witnessed a reprimand delivered by one employee toward another employee in a civil or uncivil manner. In a third, negative self-statement condition, the employee used the same language as in the uncivil reprimand condition but directed the comments toward herself. After witnessing the employee interaction, respondents were informed of the various credit card options under consideration. They were then led back to the initial room, where they completed a survey that asked their opinions about the product's options. We saw no evidence of hypothesis guessing based on respondents' open-ended responses.

*Independent Variable.* Employee incivility was manipulated by a reprimand directed by a marketing employee

toward a finance employee who was arranging a set of potential credit card logos on a table for respondents to inspect. Both “employees” were actually PhD student confederates. In all conditions, the “marketing employee” turned from her work at a computer workstation as students filed into the room and saw the finance employee arranging the logos on the table. In the uncivil condition, the marketing employee said: “You’re an idiot. You should know by now that that’s not where that one goes. If we want to do this right, we’ve got to keep this consistent each time. My marketing research depends on this. You went through training too—don’t you remember anything?” In the civil reprimand condition, the marketing employee said: “You know, that’s actually not where that one goes. I know your focus is on finance, but for the marketing part of this, it’s important that we keep it consistent each time so that nothing else affects consumers’ perceptions. Otherwise we won’t be able to compare people’s opinions and understand what is affecting them. My marketing research depends on this. So, can you please be careful to make sure it’s exactly the same set-up each time?” In the negative self-rebuke condition, the finance employee said, “I’m an idiot—I should know by now that that’s not where that one goes. I’ve got to keep it consistent! I learned this in training . . . Why can’t I remember anything?”

*Measures.* Respondents completed a questionnaire that asked their opinions about the new Visa credit card. They also responded to additional questions, which served as dependent variables (all used 7-point scales). The manipulation check for incivility asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed that the marketing employee was respectful.

Anger was one of a set of emotions measured both before and after witnessing the uncivil encounter. Anger was indicated by the respondent’s feelings of being angry and upset (1 = disagree strongly, 7 = agree strongly). These two items were highly correlated, both in the pre-incident ( $r = .62$ ) and the post-incident ( $r = .69$ ) encounter with the employees. To control for pre-incident anger, the difference between each of the pre- and post-encounter anger items was computed and then summed to serve as the measure of anger.

Negative generalizations about others who work for the firm were indicated by respondents’ judgments of the extent to which other employees who work for the bank are intelligent, professional, well-trained, consumer-focused, dedicated to the company, friendly, respectful, and “people I’d like to work with” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much;  $\alpha = .95$ ). Negative generalizations about the bank were indicated by judgments of the bank as favorable (1 = very unfavorable, 7 = very favorable) and good (1 = bad, 7 = good;  $\alpha = .85$ ). Finally, negative generalizations about future encounters with the bank were indicated by respondents’ judgments of whether they would be treated well as a consumer, would be treated well when talking on the phone to a representative, and would receive quality consumer service (1 = disagree strongly, 7 = agree strongly;  $\alpha = .93$ ). Items reflecting judgments of other employees, the firm, and future

encounters with it were combined to reflect a single negative generalizations scale ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

To examine the information-processing effects of incivility, an open-ended question asked respondents to report on thoughts about their encounter with the bank and its employees. Thoughts were coded by independent judges into positive and negative thoughts about their encounter with the bank, the credit card options, and the interaction between the employees. Negative rumination was measured both by the total number of negative thoughts consumers had about the employee interaction and the proportion of negative thoughts about the employee incident relative to the total number of thoughts.

## Results

*Manipulation Check.* The manipulation of incivility was successful. A one-way ANOVA on the manipulation check showed a significant effect ( $F(2, 70) = 27.05, p < .001$ ). The marketing employee was judged to be significantly less respectful in the uncivil condition ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 2.93$ ) than in the civil reprimand or negative self-rebuke conditions ( $M_{\text{civil}} = 4.79; t(52) = 7.62, p < .001$ , and  $M_{\text{self-rebuke}} = 5.67; t(47) = -4.05, p < .001$ ). The only other significant difference was between the civil reprimand and self-rebuke conditions ( $t(41) = 2.21, p < .05$ ). This result is unsurprising. One would expect that a reprimand delivered to another would be seen as less respectful of another than a negative self-statement; the former is by its nature socially focused and points out the faults of another. Table 1 summarizes the means and standard deviations of these results and those reported below by condition.

*Effects on Anger.* A one-way ANOVA showed that incivility increased anger ( $F(2, 70) = 6.99, p < .01$ ). As expected, respondents in the uncivil condition ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = .73$ ) were angrier than those in the civil ( $M_{\text{civil}} = -.42; t(47) = 2.91, p < .01$ ) or negative self-rebuke conditions ( $M_{\text{self-rebuke}} = -.35; t(52) = -3.16, p < .01$ ). The latter two conditions did not differ from one another ( $t(41) = .07, p = \text{NS}$ ).

*Effects on Rumination.* One-way ANOVAs also found the expected effects for negative rumination regardless of whether measured in terms of the total number of negative thoughts or the proportion of all thoughts ( $F(2, 70) = 16.74, p < .001$  and  $F(2, 70) = 18.66, p < .001$ , respectively). Consumers had more negative thoughts about the employee encounter in the uncivil ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 4.86$ ) than the civil ( $M_{\text{civil}} = 1.74; t(46) = -3.62, p < .001$ ) or self-rebuke conditions ( $M_{\text{self-rebuke}} = .92; t(51) = 5.48, p < .001$ ). Additionally, they had a greater proportion of negative thoughts about the encounter relative to total thoughts ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = .80$ ) than in the civil ( $M_{\text{civil}} = .30; t(46) = -4.44, p < .001$ ) or negative self-rebuke conditions ( $M_{\text{self-rebuke}} = .19; t(51) = 5.84, p < .001$ ). The uncivil and negative self-rebuke condition did not differ on either variable ( $t(41) = 1.19, p = \text{NS}$ ;  $t(41) = .83, p = \text{NS}$ , respectively). Correlations showed that anger was positively related to total negative thoughts about

**TABLE 1**  
EFFECT OF WITNESSING EMPLOYEE INCIVILITY ON CUSTOMERS: ANOVA RESULTS, STUDY 1

Dependent measures	Employee uncivil to another employee (N = 30)		Employee issues a civil reprimand to employee (N = 19)		Employee engages in negative self-rebuke (N = 24)		F	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Incivility manipulation check	2.93 <sup>a</sup>	1.53	4.79 <sup>b</sup>	1.62	5.67 <sup>c</sup>	.96	27.05	.001
Anger	.73 <sup>a</sup>	1.29	-.42 <sup>b</sup>	1.03	-.35 <sup>b</sup>	1.09	6.99	.002
Rumination, total negative thoughts about the employee encounter	4.86 <sup>a</sup>	3.09	1.74 <sup>b</sup>	2.64	.92 <sup>b</sup>	1.86	16.74	.001
Rumination, proportion of negative thoughts about the employee encounter relative to total thoughts	.80 <sup>a</sup>	.36	.30 <sup>b</sup>	.41	.19 <sup>b</sup>	.39	18.66	.001
Negative generalizations	3.69 <sup>a</sup>	1.00	4.87 <sup>b</sup>	1.03	4.88 <sup>b</sup>	1.15	12.03	.001

NOTE.—Means with different superscripts are significantly different from one another ( $p < .05$ ).

the uncivil encounter ( $r = .36, p < .01$ ) and relative negative thoughts ( $r = .37, p < .001$ ), further supporting the link between anger and rumination.

**Effects on Negative Generalizations.** Incivility also affected negative generalizations as predicted ( $F(2, 70) = 12.03, p < .001$ ). Consumers were more likely to view the firm, the people who work for it, and their future encounters with the firm as more negative in the uncivil ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 3.69$ ) than the civil reprimand ( $M_{\text{civil}} = 4.87; t(47) = -3.94, p < .01$ ) or the negative self-rebuke condition ( $M_{\text{self-rebuke}} = 4.88; t(52) = 4.31, p < .01$ ; see table 1). Consumers in the civil reprimand and negative self-rebuke conditions did not differ in their negative generalizations ( $t(41) = -.26, p = \text{NS}$ ). Correlation analysis showed that anger ( $r = -.44, p < .001$ ), total negative thoughts about the encounter ( $r = .64, p < .001$ ), and relative negative thoughts ( $r = .71, p < .001$ ) were associated with negative generalizations, which is consistent with our theorizing.

A Sobel (1982) test examining the mediating effect of anger on the relationship between incivility and negative generalizations was significant ( $z = 2.07, p < .05$ ), further supporting the proposed mediating effect of anger. Anger partially mediated the effect of incivility on negative generalizations. These effects were replicated when the results were analyzed using contrast codes with the manipulated (vs. measured) independent variable. In this contrast code analysis, each condition was contrasted (comparing one condition vs. another) using the following codes: 1 = uncivil, 0 = civil reprimand, and -1 = negative self-rebuke. To determine if it is anger per se or anger from incivility that affects generalizations, we examined whether pre-incident anger affected generalizations. A regression analysis predicting negative generalizations from pre-incident anger showed no effect on negative generalizations ( $\beta = .18; t(1, 71) = 1.57, p = \text{NS}$ ).

Sobel tests showed that negative rumination about the encounter mediated the effect of anger on negative generalizations. Specifically, total negative thoughts about the uncivil

encounter fully mediated the effect of anger on negative generalizations ( $z = -2.79, p < .01$ ). The proportion of negative thoughts about the encounter to total thoughts partially mediated the effect of anger on negative generalizations ( $z = -3.00, p < .01$ ). Anger still had a significant indirect effect on negative generalizations ( $t(1, 71) = -2.20, p < .05$ ). These results support the role of anger and rumination in the incivility–negative generalizations relationship.

## Discussion

Study 1 demonstrates that consumers become angry when they witness an employee behaving in an uncivil manner toward another employee. Evoked anger causes consumers to ruminate about the uncivil encounter and to go beyond this incident to make negative generalizations about the firm, its other employees, and future encounters with it. The results are consistent with prior work suggesting that anger induces rumination and greater processing of the source of anger as well as superficial, nonthoughtful processing of other entities. Had processing about these other entities been thoughtful, consumers are unlikely to have generalized this single uncivil encounter to other entities associated with the firm.

However, study 1 involved an organization that was new (unknown) to consumers. Consumers may be unlikely to make the inductive generalizations observed here when the uncivil incident occurs in an organization with which they have had previous experiences. We explore this effect in study 2.

## STUDY 2

Study 2 was designed to provide a stronger test of the idea that consumers' negative judgments generalize more from an employee's uncivil than civil behavior. One might argue that, when a firm is unknown (as was true in study 1), the negative generalizations we examined were the only basis for making inductive inferences since consumers had no prior knowledge about the firm. A stronger test would

find that these same effects are observed even when consumers have had many encounters with the organization and its employees. When firms are familiar, prior encounters might be expected to dilute the impact of any one encounter on negative generalizations. If, however, incivility affects anger and subsequent generalizations even when the company is well known, we would have more solid evidence of the impact of incivility on generalizations.

One might also argue that the results in study 1 do not represent generalizations because respondents might not have been reacting to incivility per se but rather to the number of people who were behaving "badly." In study 1, the finance employee behaved badly (i.e., was incompetent) in all conditions. The marketing employee behaved badly (was uncivil) only in the uncivil condition. Perhaps respondents' negative generalizations reflected the fact that more people were behaving badly in the uncivil versus the other two conditions. Study 2 was designed to rule out this numerical ("two bad apples") effect as an alternative explanation.

Study 2 was also designed to provide more direct evidence for the information-processing effects of anger. Study 1 supports the idea that anger from incivility makes consumers ruminate about the uncivil encounter, increasing processing of the uncivil encounter. The fact that consumers generalized from this uncivil encounter was viewed as evidence that processing about the firm was quick and superficial, based on heuristic processing. Study 2 examines the effect of incivility and anger on heuristic processing by measuring consumers' reaction times when making judgments about the firm. To the extent that negative generalizations are made quickly, we have greater evidence that participants evaluated the firm in a heuristic manner involving limited processing (cf., Whittenbrink, Judd, and Park 2001).

Finally, study 2 was designed to rule out the possibility that our previous results are due to a testing effect of measuring anger twice (before the incident and after). Study 2 rules out this effect by assessing only post-incident anger.

## Method

One hundred and seventeen undergraduate respondents (42% female) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: uncivil, civil, and "two bad apples" control. Respondents wore headphones and viewed a pre-timed video PowerPoint slide show depicting photographs of a bookstore's exterior and interior, as well as images of salespeople. Audio instructions told the respondents that the bookstore was Barnes & Noble, a bookstore with which our respondents have considerable familiarity. The audio instructed subjects to imagine that they had gone to the store to search for books they wanted to buy. Accompanying the audio were photos of bookshelves and reading areas in a typical bookstore. Respondents were then told to imagine that, after locating their books, they went to the cashier's desk. At that point they viewed photos of a female and a male employee. The former was gossiping on the phone with a friend. The latter offered to help respondents ring up their books.

Incivility was manipulated by the nature of the male cash-

ier's response to the gossiping saleswoman. In the uncivil reprimand condition, he said: "Get off the phone you idiot! What do you think you're doing talking on the phone when customers are waiting?" In the civil reprimand condition, the male employee said to the female employee, "Please be more considerate of the customers who are waiting. You can talk to your friends on your break." A different "two bad apples" control condition was added, in which respondents observed two instances of employee incompetence. In that condition, respondents were asked to imagine that they saw an employee talking on the phone with a customer when they entered the store. The saleswoman demonstrated incompetence by saying that, although she just saw the book the customer was looking for, she could not find it now and might have misshelved it. When they got to the counter to purchase their books, they gave the salesman their books and an item to be returned. The salesman demonstrated incompetence by indicating that he had no idea how to process the return. If the mere number of incompetent employees leads to generalizations, we should see similar generalizations in this control condition as in the uncivil condition but more generalization than in the civil condition because the control and uncivil condition both include "two bad apples."

The measures of incivility, anger, and generalizations were identical to those in study 1. To measure the speed at which respondents made negative generalizations, we used Direct RT to assess response times to each generalization item. To control for individual differences in response times, we also collected response time data at the beginning of the study, where we posed questions about consumers' prior experiences with Barnes & Noble (e.g., if and how often they had frequented the store and interacted with employees). These individual difference variables were used as covariates in the response time analyses reported below.

## Results

As expected, respondents had considerable familiarity with Barnes & Noble bookstores and familiarity did not differ across conditions. Ninety-two percent of the respondents had visited a Barnes & Noble store before, with over 80% reporting that they had been there multiple times. Eighty-two percent claimed that they had interacted with Barnes & Noble's employees.

*Manipulation Check.* The incivility manipulation was successful, as indicated by a one-way ANOVA ( $F(3, 116) = 24.69, p < .001$ ). The salesman was regarded as significantly less respectful in the uncivil ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 2.94$ ) than the civil reprimand or control conditions ( $M_{\text{civil}} = 5.41; t(75) = -6.21, p < .001$ , and  $M_{\text{control}} = 5.15; t(73) = -5.91, p < .001$ ). The civil reprimand and control conditions did not differ ( $t(78) = .78, p = \text{NS}$ ). Table 2 summarizes the means and standard deviations of these results and those reported below by condition.

*Anger.* A one-way ANOVA on anger revealed a main effect of condition ( $F(3, 116) = 8.37, p < .001$ ). As expected,

**TABLE 2**  
EFFECTS OF INCIVILITY ON CONSUMERS: ANOVA RESULTS, STUDY 2

	Uncivil		Civil		Control		F	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Incivility manipulation check	2.94 <sup>b</sup>	1.72	5.41 <sup>a</sup>	1.76	5.15 <sup>a</sup>	1.51	24.69	.001
Anger	4.70 <sup>b</sup>	1.12	3.73 <sup>a</sup>	1.77	3.32 <sup>a</sup>	1.50	8.37	.001
Rumination, total negative thoughts about the employee encounter	3.20 <sup>b</sup>	1.54	1.23 <sup>a</sup>	.82	.96 <sup>a</sup>	.74	47.57	.001
Rumination, proportion of negative thoughts about the employee encounter to relative to total thoughts	.87 <sup>b</sup>	.22	.58 <sup>a</sup>	.34	.52 <sup>a</sup>	.40	11.42	.001
Negative generalizations	3.44 <sup>b</sup>	1.04	4.04 <sup>a</sup>	1.02	4.21 <sup>a</sup>	.82	6.78	.001

NOTE.—Means with different superscripts are significantly different from one another ( $p < .05$ ).

consumers were more angry in the uncivil ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 4.70$ ) than the civil ( $M_{\text{civil}} = 3.73$ ;  $t(75) = -2.72$ ,  $p < .01$ ) or the control condition ( $M_{\text{control}} = 3.32$ ;  $t(73) = -4.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The difference between the civil and control conditions was not significant ( $t(78) = 1.26$ ,  $p = \text{NS}$ ). The fact that these results replicated those in study 1 for anger casts doubt on the notion that the anger effects observed in study 1 are attributable to measuring anger twice.

**Effects of Rumination.** One-way ANOVAs also found the expected effects for negative rumination ( $F(3, 115) = 47.57$ ,  $p < .001$ , for total negative thoughts about the encounter;  $F(3, 115) = 11.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , for the proportion of negative thoughts about the encounter to total thoughts; see table 2). As expected, consumers had more negative thoughts about the employee encounter in the uncivil ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 3.20$ ) than the civil ( $M_{\text{civil}} = 1.23$ ;  $t(74) = 7.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) or control conditions ( $M_{\text{control}} = .96$ ;  $t(73) = 8.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A greater proportion of their thoughts also concerned negative aspects of the uncivil encounter ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = .87$ ) than in the civil ( $M_{\text{civil}} = .58$ ;  $t(74) = -3.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ) or control conditions ( $M_{\text{control}} = .52$ ;  $t(73) = -4.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Those in the civil and control conditions did not differ in terms of total negative thoughts about the encounter ( $t(77) = 1.47$ ,  $p = \text{NS}$ ) or the proportion of such thoughts ( $t(77) = .63$ ,  $p = \text{NS}$ ).

**Effects on Negative Generalizations.** A one-way ANOVA on negative generalizations also revealed a main effect of condition ( $F(3, 116) = 6.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As expected, generalizations were more negative in the uncivil ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 3.44$ ) compared to the civil ( $M_{\text{civil}} = 4.04$ ;  $t(75) = 2.61$ ,  $p < .01$ ) or control conditions ( $M_{\text{control}} = 4.21$ ;  $t(73) = 3.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The means of the civil and control conditions were not different ( $t(78) = -.83$ ,  $p = \text{NS}$ ). These results suggest that the effects observed in study 1 were not due to the fact that the store was unfamiliar. They also cast doubt on the numerical (“two bad apples”) effect posited as an alternative explanation for study 1’s generalization results.

Sobel tests showed that both total negative thoughts and proportion of negative thoughts about the uncivil encounter fully mediated the effect of anger on negative generalizations ( $z = -2.77$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $z = -1.94$ ,  $p = .05$ ,

respectively). These results replicated our predictions about the effects of anger on rumination about the uncivil encounter.

**Response Times to Making Generalizations.** Participants’ response times to the generalization items provide evidence that incivility evokes generalizations in a heuristic manner, one that involves rapid processing. We followed recommended procedures of response time analysis, excluding responses that were over two standard deviations above the mean (11 responses; Whelan 2008). Analyses for response times to all the negative generalization items controlled for individual differences in response times to the pre-incident questions. A one-way ANCOVA on response times to the generalized judgments did not reveal the expected main effect. However, these results are not wholly surprising; prior research suggests that ANOVAs often fail to detect differences from reaction time analyses because the data are rarely identically or independently distributed (cf. Whelan 2008). However, and as expected, the correlation between the incivility manipulation check and response time was significant ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Moreover, as predicted, regression analyses indicated that the more angry consumers were, the less time they spent making (negative) generalizations ( $t(105) = -2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

As theorized, anger mediated the relationship between the incivility manipulation check and the speed of negative generalizations. As expected, regression analyses showed that the incivility manipulation check measure was significantly and negatively related to anger ( $t(105) = -3.48$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Incivility was also significantly related to faster negative generalizations ( $t(105) = 2.39$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Regression analysis also showed that the effect of incivility on time spent making negative generalizations failed to reach significance when anger was included in the relationship ( $t(105) = 1.57$ ,  $p = \text{NS}$ ) but the effect of anger on the speed of negative generalizations remained significant ( $t(105) = -2.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ). A Sobel test confirmed that anger fully mediated the effect of incivility on the speed with which negative generalizations were made ( $z = 1.89$ ,  $p = .05$ ).

## Discussion

The results of study 2 (a) replicate the results of study 1 even for a familiar firm, (b) show that incivility-induced

**TABLE 3**  
EFFECTS OF INCIVILITY AND DELAY ON CONSUMERS: ANOVA RESULTS, STUDY 3

Dependent variable	Uncivil– no delay (mean)	Uncivil– delay (mean)	Civil– no delay (mean)	Civil– delay (mean)	ME Incivility ( <i>F</i> )	ME delay ( <i>F</i> )	Interaction ( <i>F</i> )
Incivility manipulation check	3.03 <sup>b</sup> (1.88)	3.35 <sup>b</sup> (1.70)	5.46 <sup>a</sup> (1.26)	5.63 <sup>a</sup> (1.47)	–5.74 [.00]	.38 [.00]	.24 [NS]
Anger at the reprimanding employee	2.83 <sup>b</sup> (1.70)	2.19 <sup>a,b</sup> (1.22)	1.52 <sup>a</sup> (.99)	1.59 <sup>a</sup> (1.47)	13.57 [.00]	1.18 [NS]	1.90 [NS]
Anger at the delaying employee	5.53 <sup>a,b</sup> (1.33)	6.31 <sup>b</sup> (.54)	5.32 <sup>a</sup> (1.21)	6.11 <sup>b</sup> (.92)	1.08 [NS]	15.65 [.00]	.01 [NS]
Negative generalizations	2.64 <sup>b</sup> (.86)	2.80 <sup>b</sup> (1.01)	3.51 <sup>a</sup> (.77)	3.07 <sup>a,b</sup> (1.02)	10.67 [.00]	.67 [NS]	3.02 [NS]

NOTE.—Means with different superscripts are significantly different from one another ( $p < .05$ ). Standard deviations for the means are in parentheses;  $p$ -values or indications of nonsignificance (NS) for the  $F$ -statistics are in brackets.

anger leads to rumination about the uncivil encounter but (c) faster and more negative generalizations about the firm as a whole, its employees, and future encounters with the firm, and (d) show the effects are driven by incivility versus bad behavior.

### STUDY 3

Studies 1 and 2 assessed overall feelings of anger, not anger toward the uncivil employee per se. Yet our theorizing suggests that anger would itself affect negative generalizations. Showing that anger at an employee for a reason other than incivility also induces negative generalizations would provide additional evidence for the relationship between anger and generalizations. Although such results would not contribute to the literature on incivility per se, they would contribute to the broader literature on the information-processing effects of anger. Study 3 examines this issue by manipulating both (a) incivility and (b) a different anger-inducing incident by a firm's employee; here, an employee who makes a customer wait for service.

Examining the effect of anger at an employee who makes customers wait has an added benefit; it helps us identify a potential boundary effect of employee incivility. Perhaps customers would tolerate an employee who behaves uncivilly toward another employee if the uncivil action was designed to stop the service provider's delay in serving the customer. The effects of incivility on anger and negative generalizations would be particularly powerful if it was observed even when it was designed to help the customer.

### Method

**Procedure.** One hundred and thirteen undergraduate subjects (49% female) who participated in the study for course credit were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (civil employee–employee reprimand versus uncivil employee–employee reprimand)  $\times$  2 (customer delayed versus not delayed by an inattentive service provider) between-subjects design.

**Independent Variables.** Incivility was manipulated in a manner identical to that of study 2, with respondents being exposed to a reprimand of the Barnes & Noble salesman to the gossiping saleswoman in either a civil or an uncivil manner. Delay by a service provider was manipulated by varying the time respondents waited to be served. Waiting time is an important factor in customers' evaluations of whether a firm fails to deliver convenient service (Berry, Seiders, and Grewal 2002). In the no delay condition, respondents encountered the female service employee gossiping on the phone, but they were immediately approached by the male employee, who stepped in to handle the transaction. In the delay condition, respondents waited several minutes (in real time) as the female employee gossiped on the phone, despite her being aware of the customer. After several minutes, the male employee approached the customer and offered to handle his or her transaction. So that the respondents in both conditions knew that the saleswoman's conversation was lengthy, the no delay condition told respondents that they heard her gossiping on the phone with a friend as they entered the store.

**Measures.** Measures of negative generalizations and incivility were identical to those in studies 1 and 2. However, whereas studies 1 and 2 measured overall feelings of anger, study 3 collected measures of targeted anger (a) at the salesman ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and (b) at the delaying saleswoman ( $\alpha = .68$ ). We used the same anger items as those used in the prior studies. Table 3 presents means and standard deviations for all variables for all conditions.

### Results

As indicated by a one-way ANOVA, the incivility manipulation check worked as expected ( $F(1, 112) = -5.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The male salesperson was regarded as less civil in the uncivil ( $M_{\text{uncivil}} = 3.19$ ) versus the civil condition ( $M_{\text{civil}} = 5.55$ ). Delay ( $F(1, 112) = .38$ ,  $p = \text{NS}$ ) and the interaction between incivility and delay were not significant ( $F(1, 112) = .24$ ,  $p = \text{NS}$ ).

All subsequently reported results are based on regression

analyses (see table 4); contrast codes are used to represent the experimental conditions. Such an analysis has the advantage of retaining the original manipulations in testing the mediating impact of anger on the incivility-inductive inferences relationship (Irwin and McClelland 2001, 2003). For incivility, the uncivil condition was coded as 1 and the civil reprimand coded as  $-1$ ; delay was coded as 1, with no delay coded as  $-1$ . The results were replicated when we used the manipulation check measure of incivility as the independent variable.

**Effects on Anger.** As expected, incivility induced targeted anger. That is, incivility affected anger at the reprimander (salesman;  $\beta = .45, p < .01$ ; model 1). Anger at the reprimander was unaffected by delay ( $\beta = .03, p = \text{NS}$ ; model 1). Consumers were also more angry at the delaying employee when made to wait ( $\beta = .36, p < .01$ ), whereas incivility had no impact on anger at the delayer ( $\beta = .10, p = \text{NS}$ ; model 2). Thus, incivility and delay had effects on different targets of anger, with incivility's effects isolated to inducing anger at the reprimander and delay's effect isolated to inducing anger at the delaying employee.

**Effects on Negative Generalizations.** Models 3–5 test the effect of incivility and delay on negative generalizations ( $\alpha = .93$ ) and the mediational effect of anger. Consistent with studies 1 and 2, incivility caused consumers to make

negative generalizations ( $\beta = -.45, p < .001$ ; model 3). Model 3 also shows that consumers were more likely to make negative generalizations when they were delayed ( $\beta = -.23, p < .10$ ) and were least likely to make such inferences when the reprimand was civil and they were not delayed ( $\beta = .27, p < .10$ ). Studies 1 and 2 suggest that anger mediates the effect of incivility on negative generalizations. Study 3 supports this effect. Anger at either the reprimander ( $\beta = -.38, p < .001$ ) or the delayer ( $\beta = -.32, p < .001$ ) increased negative generalizations (see model 4). These effects remained when incivility and delay were included (see model 5). The fact that incivility affected negative generalizations in model 1 but did not in model 5 supports the mediating role of anger on the relationship between incivility and negative generalizations. A Sobel test also showed that anger at the salesman fully mediates incivility and negative generalizations ( $z = 2.50, p < .05$ ). A Sobel test also showed that anger at the salesperson (delayer) fully mediates delay and negative generalizations ( $z = -1.94, p = .05$ ).

## Discussion

Study 3 confirms the finding of studies 1 and 2 that incivility (and the anger it induces) causes consumers to make far-reaching and negative conclusions about the firm. The effect of incivility on negative generalizations is also robust.

TABLE 4  
CONTRAST CODE ANALYSIS: STUDY 3

Independent variable	Dependent variable = anger					
	Anger at the reprimander (1)		Anger at the delayer (2)			
	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$		
Incivility (1 = uncivil; $-1$ = civil)	.45***	3.59 (.36)	.10	.77 (.28)		
Delay (1 = delay; $-1$ = no delay)	.03	.20 (.37)	.36**	2.79 (.28)		
Incivility $\times$ delay	-.22	-1.38 (.52)	-.01	-.04 (.40)		
Independent variable	Dependent variable = negative generalizations					
	Inductive inferences (3)		Inductive inferences (4)		Inductive inferences (5)	
	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$
Incivility (1 = uncivil; $-1$ = civil)	-.45***	-3.56 (.25)			-.23	-2.23 (.25)
Delay (1 = delay; $-1$ = no delay)	-.23*	1.78 (.25)			-.14	-.96 (.25)
Incivility $\times$ delay	.27*	1.74 (.35)			.23	1.37 (.33)
Anger at the reprimander			-.38***	-4.33 (.06)	-.28**	-3.20 (.06)
Anger at the delayer			-.32***	-3.59 (.08)	-.15*	-2.96 (.08)

NOTE.—Standard errors are in parentheses;  $\beta$  = standardized beta;  $t$  =  $t$ -value.

\* $p < .10$ .

\*\* $p < .05$ .

\*\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Consumers respond negatively to incidents of employee incivility even when it was provoked by an employee's failure to serve the customer. Finally, the results extend work on anger by suggesting that target-specific anger (for incivility or for other reasons such as delay) creates these negative generalizations.

## STUDY 4

Whereas studies 1–3 support our expectations, it is unclear whether the effects are due to incivility per se or to employee-employee incivility. We expect that the effect of incivility on negative generalizations about the firm is tied to a shared social categorization between the uncivil employee and the firm. Incivility from a source outside of the firm is not expected to induce these negative generalizations about the organization. Hence, incivility from another customer should not lead to negative generalizations about the firm because the customer is not a member of the firm. Study 4 tests this idea.

A second issue concerns the potential effect of measuring anger and negative generalizations in the same study. That is, one might argue that measuring anger caused consumers to become aware of their feelings, augmenting the impact of incivility on negative inferences. To address these two issues, study 4 omitted a measure of anger. Data collection followed a procedure almost identical to that in studies 2 and 3.

## Method

Study 4 manipulated the source of incivility, whether another employee (employee-employee incivility) or a customer (customer-employee incivility). Fifty-nine respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions that manipulated the source of incivility. Only the high-delay, Barnes & Noble bookstore scenario was used so that the uncivil reprimand by the male employee or another customer seemed justified. Half of the respondents were assigned to the employee-employee incivility condition described in studies 2 and 3. The remaining half were assigned to a condition where another customer was uncivil to the delaying employee. In both conditions, the uncivil person told the salesperson: "Get off the phone you idiot! What do you think you're doing talking on the phone when customers are waiting?" The measures of negative generalizations ( $\alpha = .91$ ) were identical to those used in the prior studies.

## Results and Discussion

A main effect of source of incivility on negative generalizations showed that consumers were more likely to make negative generalizations about the firm when incivility emanated from an employee as opposed to another customer ( $M_{\text{employee}} = 3.04$  vs.  $M_{\text{customer}} = 3.74$ ;  $F(1, 57) = 7.24$ ;  $p < .01$ ). These results suggest that it is not incivility per se that affects negative generalizations but rather employee

incivility. It also rules out the measurement of anger as a spurious cause of the effects reported in the prior studies.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our research introduces the incivility construct and examines its effects on consumers. Whereas one might anticipate that incivility directed at consumers has extremely negative effects on consumers, we show that consumers are also negatively affected even when they are mere observers of incivility between employees. Furthermore, the effects go well beyond the initial incivility incident. They create negative generalizations (inductive inferences) about other employees who work for the firm, the firm as a whole, and future encounters with the firm. The "two bad apples" effect and lack of company familiarity cannot account for these results.

Interestingly, we did find a critical boundary effect of incivility. Incivility induced negative generalizations only when customers witnessed employee-employee incivility. Customer incivility toward an employee did not create these effects. The results underscore the importance of studying employee-employee incivility as opposed to incivility in general, at least as it pertains to consumers' judgments of firms.

Our research also contributes to the literature on discrete emotions, in particular, the information-processing effects of anger (Bodenhausen, Sheppard, and Krameret 1994; Lerner and Tiedens 2006). Our results also expand upon the work of Bodenhausen et al., who found that anger leads to deductive inferences. Previous research documents consumers' reluctance to make inductive inferences about the firm from an individual employee's negative behavior (Folkes and Patrick 2003). However, that research involved incidents that provoked irritation at most, unlike the anger our participants expressed. We find that anger has interesting information processing and inferential effects; ( $\alpha$ ) on the one hand, it makes consumers ruminate about the anger-inducing event; ( $\beta$ ) on the other hand, it fosters rapid, negative generalizations about the firm and other employees that extend into the future. The effects of incivility on anger and negative generalizations are quite robust, as they occur even when the firm is familiar to consumers and when the incivility was designed to help the customer (by rectifying a delay). Notably, anger induced from employee incivility and anger induced from customer delay both caused negative generalizations. These results further underscore the anger-heuristic processing links observed elsewhere (e.g., Keltner et al. 1993; Tiedens and Linton 2001).

## Limitations and Future Research

Our studies are limited by their use of student samples and, in the case of several studies, simulated versus real situations. As such, there is a need to investigate the magnitude of incivility effects in real-world encounters, where environments are complex and potential distractions are numerous. Moreover, we did not examine the underlying appraisal dimensions linked to anger, though appraisal tendency theory proposes

that such appraisal dimensions should affect judgments of other entities. Their role should be explored in future research.

Despite these limitations, the incivility construct is rich and affords numerous opportunities for future research. Incivility has a variety of forms that may influence consumers' responses, and certain forms of incivility (e.g., rude comments about an employee's accent, inappropriate gestures) may have even more powerful effects than those observed here, particularly if they are not designed to improve another's behavior (as reprimands do). Future research should examine these effects. Additional research should also explore mediators beyond those examined here. For example, uncivil encounters between employees may elicit other emotions, such as surprise and fear, which may also affect consumer judgments.

## Implications

From a marketing standpoint, our findings contribute to the burgeoning literature on consumers' sensitivities to the means of production. In contrast to the vision of the consumer as focusing on "what's in it for me," this literature suggests that consumers are sensitive to the impact of production on producers. For example, some consumers express alarm at such practices as hiring children or permitting sweatshop factory conditions. We observe similar sensitivities in more benign contexts where incivility is observed in a single, isolated incident (vs. a long-standing practice). The fact that consumers hold firms responsible, even when there is no firm-sanctioned policy or convention to point to, is suggestive of the potentially insidious impact of incivility. These findings also contribute to understanding the effects of emotions when consumers are not directly affected (as when they merely witness employee incivility).

Our findings underscore the need for organizations to promote employee civility. Several methods include selecting for and training in civility, setting zero-tolerance expectations, and reprimanding incivility before it festers. Expectations of workplace norms can shape behavior, but civility is enhanced by building competencies in skills such as listening, conflict resolution, negotiation, dealing with difficult people, and stress management. Training in coaching can also improve employees' abilities to help each other when incivility occurs and can improve bottom line company performance (Pearson and Porath 2009). Employees who learn to be mindful of their own behavior may create a better work environment and a better service experience. Our findings suggest one reason why training in the treatment of customers and employees enhances the bottom line—because of its impact on future customer behavior.

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