

# Picking Up the Gauntlet: How Individuals Respond to Status Challenges

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How do people respond to status challenges? We suggest that responses depend on the relative status and genders of challenger and target. These variables affect appraisals about the status challenge (operationally defined as an act of incivility) and likely outcomes of various responses, and those appraisals proximately determine responses. Studies 1 and 2 show that male gender and high status were associated with more aggressive responses, whereas female gender and low status were associated with more avoidant responses. Study 3 shows that men's and women's responses were not perfectly antithetical: Men showed the greatest resistance toward peers, which may reflect greater sensitivity to status contests among men. Perceived legitimacy of challengers' actions and consequences affect the status-gender-response relationships.

Status is a constant struggle in social life. People begin or end relationships, affiliate with or disavow groups and organizations, and engage in physical combat in order to secure their social standing (Groysberg, Polzer, & Elfenbein, 2005; Russell, 1938; Veblen, 1899). Evidence has suggested that people are extremely attuned to their social status and exceptionally accurate at identifying their place in the pecking order (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006). Once their social status is identified, people expend great energy trying to maintain or improve their status (Groysberg et al., 2005). This is particularly the case in the workplace, an arena in which people jockey for prestige and position. We propose that indirect aggression constitutes a violation of the norms for civil behavior in the workplace, and these violations are experienced as challenges by targets of incivility.

Imagine that you are at work one day and a colleague insults you in a meeting. The colleague tries to laugh it off, but you feel sure the insult was intended. We suggest that this behavior constitutes a challenge to your status. The colleague is communicating that you are inferior to him or her through

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uncivil behavior that breaches the standards for harmonious social interaction. We suggest that, given the prominent role of the workplace in modern social life (e.g., Kanter, 1977) and the prevalence of such workplace incivility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000; Pearson & Porath, 2005), uncivil behavior is one of the most likely forms of status challenge that may be encountered. How will you respond to the challenge? Will you resist the challenge by overtly retaliating, acquiesce to the challenge by avoiding the challenger, or do something else? What considerations affect your response? The present paper explores these questions.

The *tit-for-tat strategy* involves mirroring a counterpart's actions, returning in like measure what has previously been done to the actor (cf. Axelrod, 1984). Theory specific to incivility (cf. Andersson & Pearson, 1999) suggests that the tit-for-tat strategy is quite common: Targets of incivility are likely to respond with incivility, perhaps even to escalate the uncivil behavior. Studies of hierarchies have suggested that the presence of competition for status causes group members to become preoccupied with maintaining their status position (Groysberg et al., 2005) and to block fellow members' efforts to gain more status (Overbeck, Correll, & Park, 2005). Perhaps such responses occur if the target is concerned with defending his or her status and when a status challenge is perceived as enough of a threat to compel the target to act.

On the other hand, research on interpersonal dominance has shown that a display of dominance is likely to be met by a display of submission (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). This, too, is echoed in the literature on status hierarchies. Groups that are traditionally low status in a society (e.g., ethnic minorities, women) have been known to acquiesce to their low status (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Overbeck, Jost, Mosso, & Flizik, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). That is, even if opportunities might exist to "take on" the more powerful group, and even if the more powerful group is exploitative and demeaning toward the lower group, the latter may tend to accept, excuse, and explain away these actions as the appropriate result of legitimate differences. These findings indicate that individuals might respond to a status challenge by simply acquiescing to it. We suggest that this pattern might appear safer to the challenged person. Perhaps such responses occur if the costs of resistance appear too great.

Because none of this work speaks directly to the issue of how individuals will respond to challenges, this paper explores new territory. We suggest that targets' responses to status challenges will depend on the relative status and the genders of challenger and target (cf. Aquino & Bommer, 2003; Cortina et al., 2001; Einarsen, 2000). In particular, these variables will affect the appraisals that targets make about the status challenge and likely outcomes of various responses, and those appraisals will proximately determine their

responses. As outlined later, in some cases, a more resistant response may occur. In other cases, a more acquiescent response may occur.

In the following pages, we further specify the constructs involved in our argument and describe three studies to explore it. Studies 1 and 2 examine two different respondent groups to learn how status and gender affect responses to incivility. Study 3 confirms that these incivility experiences are perceived as status challenges, and examines how targets' appraisals affect their choice of responses. Across all of the studies, we anticipate that the process is as follows: An uncivil act is committed, the target of the act perceives this as a status challenge or threat, the target assesses how legitimate the challenge is, the target assesses the consequences of responding in various ways, and the target selects a response. The three studies address various stages in this process.

### Definitions

The kinds of status challenges of concern in this work involve *incivility*, which is defined in the organizational literature as low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). It includes employees' withholding information from one another, giving others the "silent treatment," or belittling them. Although incivility does not involve physical attack, it can be quite severe, verbally and relationally.

We believe that incivility represents a status challenge for a number of reasons. In the workplace, as individuals jockey for power and status, they may behave uncivilly to elevate themselves and denigrate others. For example, insulting a colleague is a way to "take him down a notch" and show that he is not as talented as he might think. Colluding with a group to exclude a colleague is a way of shutting her out of the social network and cutting off her access to information or relationship resources. General rudeness or spreading rumors are ways of communicating to third parties that the target is not valued.

In our studies, we measure or manipulate the relative position status of the challenger and the target, as well as the genders of the challenger and target. In its broadest sense, *status* refers to the esteem in which one is held by others (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Overbeck et al., 2005; Weber, 1958). A *formal* (also known as *achieved* or *specific*) *status advantage* is one that reflects the holder's achievement and competence in a particular task domain and is conferred by the institution or the overt group structure; for example, holding a position that is associated with privilege and respect (Ravlin & Thomas, 2005; Rees & Segal, 1984; Ridgeway & Bourq, 2004). An

*informal* (also known as *ascribed* or *diffuse*) *status advantage* results from the deference and prestige granted by other people in the group and may be conferred on the basis of characteristics such as age, gender, or wealth. There is no direct association with competence, but the connection is inferred by others (Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004). In this paper, when we refer to relative *status* differences between challenger and target, we refer to the formal positions or ranks occupied by the two parties.<sup>2</sup>

Gender, on the other hand, should indicate informal status differences. Ridgeway and Bourg (2004) argued that gender, though conceptually independent of status, becomes functionally a form of status through repetition of gender stereotypes that reinforce beliefs about men's superior size, strength, and behavior. Through this process, gender itself becomes an organizing principle in hierarchies.

An important question arises from our designs: If position status represents formal status and (male) gender represents informal status, then are these simply two manifestations of the same conceptual substrate? It is noteworthy that prescriptive stereotypes for male and female behavior correspond closely to the stereotypes for people with high and low status (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). If each source of status provides a status "credit," then perhaps a low-ranking woman has 0 credits, a low-ranking man or a high-ranking woman has 1 credit, and a high-ranking man has 2 credits. If this is the case, we should see evidence that gender and status produce the same kinds of appraisals and the same kinds of responses.

On the other hand, research has shown that formal forms of status have distinct effects from gender on several outcomes, including negotiation performance (Curhan & Overbeck, 2008), leadership effectiveness (Carli & Eagly, 1999; Rudman & Glick, 1999), and persuasion (Carli, 1990). In this case, we might expect that gender would produce one pattern of responses and position status another. We explore these competing possibilities in our studies. Ridgeway and Bourg (2004) further specified that gender can moderate other status effects. For example, information about gender might anchor a perceiver's impression of a target, and subsequent contrasting information about formal status might not be sufficient to adjust that impression. They argued that gender is only likely to affect expectations when it is salient in a situation. Regardless of actual gender differences in conflict behavior, because people believe that such differences exist, most respondents should rely on gender in their expectations for their own and others' behaviors.

<sup>2</sup>Note that a higher status challenger necessarily implies a lower status target, and vice-versa. We do not manipulate absolute status levels, only the relative.

### How Targets Weigh Response

When a person's status is challenged through incivility, relational features help to determine the target's response. It may be different to be challenged by someone of higher status than by a peer or a subordinate. It may be different to be challenged by a man than by a woman. Responses of male targets may be different from those of female targets. In all cases, we suggest that targets of incivility are likely to base their responses on the perceived legitimacy of the challenger's actions and what the consequences may be of resisting the challenger. However, the relational features in the challenge will affect the contours of those evaluations. Based on those evaluations, targets may decide to resist a challenge overtly or subtly, or may instead decide to let the challenge pass unaddressed.

#### *Effects of Relative Status*

When the target evaluates the extent to which the incivility represents a challenge, the relative status of the two parties is likely to affect the judgment. Research on status and aggression leads to the strong expectation that high-status targets of incivility are more likely to aggress overtly.

High-status targets may be more likely to respond aggressively because of the perceived (il)legitimacy of a challenger's actions. Research has shown that a larger range of behaviors are considered appropriate or legitimate for high-status individuals (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002; Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, 2002; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Overbeck, Tiedens, & Brion, 2006), even when those behaviors violate norms (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002; Keltner et al., 2003). Chekroun and Brauer found that racist comments made by high-status group members were tolerated, while such comments by low-status members were confronted. This research suggests that a high-status person who engages in incivility in the workplace may be violating social norms, but such a violation may be seen as legitimate, given the greater behavioral freedom of high-status individuals (cf. Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). A low-status person's incivility, however, would more likely be considered illegitimate. A high-status target would likely see the low-status challenger as behaving illegitimately. It may seem perfectly legitimate, however, for the high-status target to respond aggressively.

Finally, relative status may affect the target's perceptions of the potential consequences for resisting the challenge. Though there may be few costs associated with a hostile response to status challenges by lower status challengers, resisting a superior may be quite costly indeed. Rather than retaliate, lower status employees are expected to appear professional and pay deference to higher status employees, a phenomenon often referred to as *strategic*

*deference* (Lively, 2000; Pierce, 1995). The term *strategic* suggests that absorbing abuse or acquiescing to challenges may be a way for lower status targets to minimize costs and maximize benefits. We suspect that resistance may be lower, and acquiescence higher, as challenger status increases.

### *Effects of Challenger Gender*

Because aggression is more common and accepted among men than women (Baron, 1977; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), it may be tolerated more by targets of male challengers. Similarly, research has suggested that men are granted greater behavioral latitude (Sekaquaptewa & Espinoza, 2004) and that deviant behavior by women is punished more (Fiske, 1993). For example, it is more expected (and, thus, likely seen as more legitimate) for men to display emotions that are uncivil and that communicate status challenges. Prescriptions and proscriptions for men emphasize strength, assertiveness, and drive (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Men have been found to display overt anger, frustration, and aggression more frequently than do women (Black, 1990; Kogut, Langely, & O'Neal, 1992; Smith et al., 1989; Tavris, 1984), and they possess a physical advantage in terms of size and strength (e.g., Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004). Women are expected to show interpersonal sensitivity, niceness, and modesty (Prentice & Carranza, 2002) and to temper their emotions and their expressions of those emotions (Lively, 2000; Pierce, 1995). These differences make it likely that the target's appraisal of the status challenge may result in greater resistance toward female challengers and greater acquiescence toward male challengers.

### *Effects of Target Gender*

Just as challenger gender should affect responses, so should target gender. Some research has suggested that men are likely to experience greater anger and to respond to a challenge with greater aggression because they are more sensitive to identity threats (Felson, 1982; Frodi, Macaulay, & Thome, 1977). The traditional masculine identity stresses concern with status, toughness, and courage when one is attacked (Felson, 1982; Frodi et al., 1977; Tannen, 1998). Men are less likely to feel guilty or anxious regarding reciprocal aggression than are women, who tend to anticipate more negative consequences of resistance (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Harris & Knight-Bohnhoff, 1996).

Further, target gender should affect targets' appraisals of the risks involved in the challenge: Men's physical advantage could well give male

targets greater confidence that they can protect themselves, even in a non-physical conflict. Although there is less of a difference for verbal than physical aggression, previous reviews have suggested that male adults are more likely to express verbal aggression than are women (Archer, 2004; Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Eagly & Steffen, 1986), especially when they are angered. Specifically, in the workplace, men are more likely to use indirect aggression (see Archer & Coyne, 2005).

Women, on the other hand, are more likely to feel that they should master anger and aggression in the service of “being nice” (Hochschild, 1983). When women are victimized by others—whether through acts of incivility, aggression, or violence—their role in defending themselves has been described by Rothleder (1992) as “silencing [them]selves, making [them]selves dumb” (p. 176). For women, active self-defense may be seen as antisocial, uncivilized, and irrational (Rothleder, 1992). Tannen (1999) argued that girls are inclined to hide their conflict, rather than retaliate. One study found that late adolescent girls who had been victimized tended to use withdrawal strategies, rather than conflict strategies (Lindeman, Harakka, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 1997). These findings suggest that, regardless of the perceived legitimacy of the incivility, a female target might find it illegitimate to respond with resistance, though a male target probably would not. Based on these patterns, we expect that female targets will be more likely to acquiesce to status challenges on average, and male targets will be more likely to resist them.

In Studies 1 and 2, we seek to confirm that status and gender affect patterns of response; specifically, that they differently affect targets’ likelihood of resisting or acquiescing to the status challenge. We do not explore appraisal or process variables in these studies, but simply establish the presence of status and gender differences. Study 1 uses a correlational design and asks participants simply to recall an instance of incivility and then report their responses to it. Study 2 uses an experimental design to manipulate the challenger’s gender, and status relative to the respondent, in order to establish more certainly the effects of these relational characteristics.

## Study 1

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

In Study 1, we collected data from 154 Master of Business Administration–Professional and Manager (MBA–PM) students (103 male, 51 female) who were enrolled in a management class at a large western university. The respondents’ mean age was 35.0 years ( $SD = 6.5$ ), and their

mean tenure was 6.0 years ( $SD = 5.3$ ). Of the status challengers described by these respondents, 72% were male, 55% had more status than the respondent, 16% had equal status to the respondent, and 29% had lower status than the respondent. The challengers' mean age was 43.0 years ( $SD = 8.4$ ).

### *Materials and Procedure*

The questionnaire began by asking whether the participant had ever experienced uncivil, rude, or disrespectful interactions at work. We followed with questions regarding how often they had experienced, witnessed, or heard about uncivil, rude, or disrespectful interactions at work. Then we asked participants to

Please think about a particularly unpleasant interaction that you had with another employee (of any level) at any time during your career. The unpleasant interaction need not have happened while working with your present employer. Please focus on a situation when you felt that another worker (the “instigator”) was rude, insensitive, or disrespectful to you.

Respondents were asked to answer questions about how they responded to the uncivil incident.

To assess the extent to which participants would respond to an uncivil incident with overtly aggressive behavior against the challenger, participants completed a two-item measure (verbally threaten the challenger; yell/shout at the challenger;  $\alpha = .71$ ). These items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

To assess the extent to which participants would intentionally avoid or distance themselves from challengers as a result of the incident reported in the scenario, participants completed a two-item measure (intentionally avoid the challenger; become more distant from the challenger;  $\alpha = .78$ ). These items were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

### *Results and Discussion*

Study 1 used regression analyses to test the effects of status and gender. The effects of status were tested while controlling for gender; and the effects of gender were tested while controlling for status. Table 1 reports the means by challenger gender, target gender, and relative status (Target > Challenger



Table 1  
*Means of All Scales by Participant Gender, Challenger Gender, and Challenger Status: Studies 1 and 2*

	Male targets						Female targets					
	Lower status		Equal status		Higher status		Lower status		Equal status		Higher status	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Study 1</b>												
Aggression												
Male challenger	5.41 <sup>ab</sup>	0.85	4.11 <sup>a</sup>	0.79	3.80 <sup>a</sup>	0.81	3.50 <sup>a</sup>	0.58	4.67 <sup>b</sup>	1.21	3.12 <sup>a</sup>	0.60
Female challenger	4.69 <sup>a</sup>	0.75	4.20 <sup>ab</sup>	0.44	3.30 <sup>b</sup>	1.05	3.67 <sup>a</sup>	0.81	4.00 <sup>a</sup>	0.81	4.00 <sup>a</sup>	1.00
Avoidance												
Male challenger	2.50 <sup>a</sup>	0.67	4.22 <sup>b</sup>	1.09	4.11 <sup>b</sup>	1.08	3.75 <sup>a</sup>	0.96	3.50 <sup>a</sup>	1.05	5.88 <sup>b</sup>	0.93
Female challenger	3.23 <sup>a</sup>	1.01	4.20 <sup>ab</sup>	1.09	4.50 <sup>b</sup>	1.64	4.83 <sup>a</sup>	0.98	5.00 <sup>a</sup>	0.82	5.00 <sup>a</sup>	0.99
<b>Study 2</b>												
Aggression												
Male challenger	5.27 <sup>a</sup>	0.56	3.18 <sup>b</sup>	1.01	3.36 <sup>b</sup>	1.04	3.18 <sup>a</sup>	0.77	2.82 <sup>b</sup>	0.85	2.50 <sup>b</sup>	0.67
Female challenger	3.35 <sup>a</sup>	1.12	3.63 <sup>a</sup>	1.12	4.19 <sup>a</sup>	1.02	3.30 <sup>a</sup>	0.96	3.02 <sup>a</sup>	0.93	3.25 <sup>a</sup>	0.88
Avoidance												
Male challenger	3.69 <sup>a</sup>	1.40	3.67 <sup>a</sup>	1.51	3.39 <sup>a</sup>	1.39	3.62 <sup>a</sup>	1.31	3.74 <sup>a</sup>	1.67	5.01 <sup>b</sup>	0.89
Female challenger	3.83 <sup>a</sup>	1.17	3.27 <sup>a</sup>	1.26	3.59 <sup>a</sup>	1.49	3.83 <sup>a</sup>	1.45	3.44 <sup>a</sup>	1.30	3.82 <sup>a</sup>	1.54

*Note.* Within each left-hand or right-hand half of a row, means with different subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ .

Table 2

*Correlations: Studies 1 and 2*

	Study 1				Study 2			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1. Target gender	—				—			
2. Challenger status	-.09	—			.06	—		
3. Challenger gender	.02	.25**	—		.08	.02	—	
4. Aggression	-.31**	.52**	-.01	—	-.36**	-.06	.01	—
5. Avoidance	.47**	-.48**	-.10	-.58**	.15**	-.11*	-.10*	.09

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

vs. Target = Challenger vs. Target < Challenger). Table 2 reports the correlations among our measures.

Higher status targets of incivility reported ( $M = 4.32$ ) that they were more likely than were targets of lower status ( $M = 3.56$ ) to aggress overtly against the challenger,  $t(152) = 7.93$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .27$ ). Male targets ( $M = 4.25$ ) of incivility reported that they were more likely than were female targets ( $M = 3.83$ ) of incivility to engage in overtly aggressive behavior against the challenger,  $t(152) = -3.94$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .09$ ). There was a significant Status  $\times$  Gender interaction, such that higher status male targets were most likely to engage in overt retaliation,  $t(152) = -2.49$ ,  $p = .01$  ( $R^2 = .03$ ). There was also a significant gender interaction: Overt retaliation was most likely in the case of male dyads,  $t(152) = 1.94$ ,  $p = .05$  ( $R^2 = .01$ ).

In terms of avoidant responses, lower status targets of incivility ( $M = 4.87$ ) reported that they were more likely than were targets of higher status ( $M = 3.58$ ) to avoid the challenger,  $t(152) = -7.51$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .23$ ). Females ( $M = 4.66$ ) reported that they were more likely than were males ( $M = 3.79$ ) to avoid the challenger,  $t(152) = 6.81$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .21$ ). Unexpectedly, challenger gender affected the likelihood of avoidance: Targets were more likely to avoid female challengers,  $t(152) = 2.26$ ,  $p < .05$  ( $M_{\text{male}} = 3.99$ ;  $M_{\text{female}} = 4.46$ ;  $R^2 < .01$ ). As predicted, there was a significant Status  $\times$  Gender interaction, such that lower status female targets were most likely to avoid the challenger,  $t(152) = -1.99$ ,  $p = .05$  ( $R^2 < .01$ ). Finally, there was a three-way interaction

for avoiding the challenger,  $t(152) = 2.18, p < .05 (R^2 = .02)$ , such that lower status female targets were most likely to avoid male challengers.

Our results from Study 1 suggest that target status and gender differences do exist. Although this study benefited from its reliance on participants' reports of their actual responses to real situations involving incivility, the correlational nature of the study indicates that we cannot be certain about the causal contribution of some of our variables. We do not know, for example, whether relative status led to the pattern of responses or if, instead, something else led participants to both retrieve an example involving a challenger of particular status and report a particular response. Further, we could not control the content of the incidents that participants recalled, nor equalize these between conditions. Therefore, we replicated this study in a lab setting, using experimental manipulations of status and challenger gender.

## Study 2

### *Method*

#### *Overview*

The purpose of Study 2 is to examine the effects of target status and gender on targets' intended reactions to incivility. To test this, we designed an experimental laboratory study. We asked male and female participants to assume the role of the target of incivility. Challenger status and gender were experimentally manipulated in the incivility scenario.

#### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 418 undergraduate students (194 male, 224 female) who were enrolled in a senior-level management course at a large western university. The students participated in exchange for extra credit in the course. Participants' mean age was 21 years (range = 20–41 years). Their average part-time work experience was more than 4 years.

#### *Procedure*

All experimental questionnaires were distributed to participants and completed during the session times selected by participants. The sessions ranged in size from 36 to 42 students. Each participant received a scenario that contained the challenger gender manipulation. The scenario reads as follows:

My peer (subordinate, boss) has repeatedly made insulting, belittling remarks about me in front of customers. The other day while I was trying to help a customer with one of our products that had malfunctioned, my peer (subordinate, boss) rolled her (his) eyes and said to the customer, “Guess you’re wondering if you’ll ever get to talk to someone who could actually help you.” It seems like she (he) makes the comments in a joking manner, but says some really rude things.

After reading this scenario, participants were asked to answer a series of questions about their responses to the scenario. The questions were prefaced by the phrase “In response to this interaction, I would . . .”.

### *Measures*

To assess the extent to which targets responded to an uncivil incident with overtly aggressive behavior, respondents completed the same aggression scale that was used in Study 1. The coefficient alpha of these two items was .73. To assess the extent to which targets avoided the challenger as a result of an uncivil incident, respondents completed the same scale that was used in Study 1. The coefficient alpha for the present sample was .71.

### *Results and Discussion*

Study 2 again used a 2 (Challenger Gender)  $\times$  2 (Target Gender)  $\times$  3 (Relative Status: Target > Challenger vs. Target = Challenger vs. Target < Challenger) between-subjects design. Table 1 reports means by condition; while Table 2 reports correlations among our measures.

Higher status targets of incivility reported ( $M = 3.78$ ) that they would be more likely than targets of lower ( $M = 3.32$ ) or equal ( $M = 3.17$ ) status to aggress overtly against the challenger,  $F(1, 402) = 16.06$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .13$ ). Male targets ( $M = 3.83$ ) of incivility reported that they would be more likely than female targets ( $M = 3.01$ ) of incivility to engage in overtly aggressive behavior against the challenger,  $F(1, 402) = 80.28$ ,  $p < .001$  ( $R^2 = .06$ ). Challenger gender did not significantly affect the likelihood of aggression retaliation. As predicted, there was a significant Status  $\times$  Gender interaction, such that higher status male targets were most likely to engage in overt retaliation,  $F(1, 402) = 3.60$ ,  $p < .05$  ( $R^2 = .02$ ). There was also a significant gender interaction: Overt retaliation was most likely in the case of male dyads,  $F(1, 402) = 9.96$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .01$ ). Finally, there was a three-way interaction for overt retaliation,  $F(1, 402) = 16.54$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .05$ ), such that higher

status male targets were the most likely to retaliate overtly against male challengers.

In terms of avoidant responses, lower status targets of incivility reported ( $M = 3.95$ ) that they would be more likely than targets of higher status ( $M = 3.53$ ) to avoid the challenger,  $F(1, 402) = 16.06$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .02$ ). Women ( $M = 3.91$ ) reported that they would be more likely than men ( $M = 3.43$ ) to avoid the challenger,  $F(1, 402) = 11.96$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .02$ ). Challenger gender also affected the likelihood of avoidance, as targets were more likely to avoid male challengers,  $F(1, 402) = 6.99$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $M_{\text{male}} = 3.85$ ;  $M_{\text{female}} = 3.49$ ;  $R^2 = .01$ ). There was a significant Status  $\times$  Gender interaction, such that lower status female targets were most likely to avoid the challenger,  $F(1, 402) = 2.92$ ,  $p = .05$  ( $R^2 = .02$ ). Finally, there was a three-way interaction for avoiding the challenger,  $F(1, 402) = 5.93$ ,  $p < .01$  ( $R^2 = .03$ ), such that lower status female targets were most likely to avoid male challengers.

Like Study 1, Study 2 confirms that the genders and relative status of the two parties affect targets' responses to uncivil acts. Across the two studies, the patterns of responses do appear to correspond to our predictions. We see more resistance (and less acquiescence) to lower- or equal-status challengers, consistent with the ideas that it is less costly to resist lower-status and peer challengers, and that incivility by these challengers is seen as illegitimate. Similarly, we see more resistance (and less acquiescence) by male targets than by female targets, and these two variables interact to produce stronger effects as sources of formal and informal status combine.

We did find one discrepancy across the two studies. In Study 1, participants reported avoiding a female challenger more than a male, while in Study 2, this pattern was reversed. The Study 1 pattern was unexpected. However, it seems possible that our Study 2 participants, who were reacting to hypothetical scenarios, imagined a female challenger who conformed to the stereotype of women; whereas those in Study 1 were recalling a real woman who may have been much less stereotypical. It is also possible that the age differences between participants in Study 1 and 2 (MBA-PMs and undergraduates) and the different kinds of interactions they might have had with different socially recognizable women could account for differences in the responses. However, we cannot explain this difference conclusively.

In Study 3, we address some shortcomings of the first two studies. First, we confirm one of the foundational assumptions of this work: that incivility constitutes a status challenge. Study 3 is also designed to examine why we observe different effects of status and gender. We believe that two different processes might affect people's decisions about how to respond to status challenges. On the one hand, people may make judgments of the legitimacy of the status challenge and respond with greater resistance when the challenge seems illegitimate. On the other hand, they may simply evaluate the potential

consequences of resisting and decide according to the perceived costs. In Study 3, we asked participants to report their judgments of the status challenge situation so that we could evaluate how these appraisals might have led to a choice of response.

### Study 3

#### *Method*

##### *Overview*

Participants read three vignettes in which they were to imagine themselves as members of a university club that was very important to them, and that during club activities, they were treated uncivilly by another person associated with the club (see Appendix A). Across vignettes, the challenger's status varied such that each participant read about a challenger who was of higher, equal, or lower status than the self.

##### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 148 undergraduate students (73 male, 75 female) who were enrolled in a senior-level management course at a large western university. The students participated in exchange for extra credit in the course. Participants' mean age was 20 years (range = 18–45 years). Their mean part-time work experience was more than 4 years.

##### *Materials and Procedure*

Participants were given a packet containing all three vignettes and subsequent measures. Before reading the vignettes, participants responded to a set of demographic questions.

In all of the packets, one vignette featured a high-status challenger (a professor in charge of the club), one featured an equal-status challenger (a fellow club member), and the third featured a low-status challenger (a brand-new, inexperienced member). There were three kinds of uncivil acts presented in the vignettes. These uncivil acts were taken from open-ended responses in previous studies (one of which was used as the scenario in Study 2) and adapted to fit the club context (e.g., *boss* was changed to *professor*). These specific scenarios (i.e., forms of incivility) were chosen because they repre-

sented the three highest loading items from Cortina et al.'s (2001) Workplace Incivility Scale (WIS), a taxonomy of forms of incivility.

In one vignette, the challenger belittled the participant in front of another person, a representative of a partner organization. In another vignette, the participant missed a class, then asked the challenger for help identifying makeup material; the challenger ignored and then rudely brushed aside the participant. In the third vignette, the participant was presenting an idea in a club meeting and was interrupted and overruled by the challenger. Each vignette is comprised of a single paragraph, presented on its own page. Participants were asked to take a moment to imagine themselves in the situation and to experience the feelings and impressions that would occur.

Participants responded to an identical set of measures after each vignette. They were given a list of 37 possible responses to the interaction and were asked to respond to this prompt: "In response to this unpleasant interaction, I would . . .". They rated their responses on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants were also given a list of statements about their own appraisals of the situation and the challenger. Again, they rated their responses on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

To address possible effects of order or stimulus, we administered 36 different versions of the questionnaire. These were created by crossing the order in which challenger status was presented (high/equal/low, equal/low/high, low/high/equal) with vignette content (belittling/refusing to help/overriding, refusing to help/overriding/belittling, overriding/belittling/refusing to help), the gender of the challenger, and questionnaire order (response items appeared first or appraisal items appeared first).

### *Measures*

The study used a 2 (Participant Gender)  $\times$  2 (Challenger Gender)  $\times$  3 (Challenger Status: high [HS], equal [ES], or low [LS]) design, with repeated measures on the third factor. We combined items from the questionnaires to create the following measures (the full set of items appears as Appendix B). Each measure was calculated separately for the high-, equal-, and low-status vignettes and later combined into linear and quadratic contrasts in order to test for effects of status. The measures of responses to incivility were overt aggression ( $\alpha_{HS} = .79$ ,  $\alpha_{ES} = .85$ ,  $\alpha_{LS} = .84$ ), passive aggression ( $\alpha_{HS} = .82$ ,  $\alpha_{ES} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{LS} = .86$ ), building coalitions ( $\alpha_{HS} = .86$ ,  $\alpha_{ES} = .84$ ,  $\alpha_{LS} = .83$ ), and avoidance ( $\alpha_{HS} = .82$ ,  $\alpha_{ES} = .79$ ,  $\alpha_{LS} = .64$ ).

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) reveals that three of these measures—aggression, passive aggression, and building coalitions—loaded

Table 3

*Correlations: Study 3*

	1	2	3	4
1. Resistance	—			
2. Avoidance	.44**	—		
3. Status challenge	.15†	.13	—	
4. Legitimacy	.13	.13	-.40**	—
5. Consequences	-.11	.10	.25**	.02

*Note.* All measures are collapsed across status and gender.

† $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

on a single factor. The CFA model shows very good fit,  $\chi^2(9) = 4.78$ ,  $p = .86$  (comparative fit index = 1.00; root mean square error of approximation = .000;  $p_{close} = .949$ ). All of the scales (using the high-, equal-, and low-status versions of each) loaded significantly on the single factor. Therefore, we created an additional scale variable called *resistance*. As in Studies 1 and 2, we will continue to use avoidance responses to suggest acquiescence to the status threat.

We also wanted to confirm that our vignettes were seen as status challenges by group members and to examine potential mediators of resistance and avoidance effects. We were interested in how perceptions of legitimacy of the challenger's behavior and perceived consequences might predict participants' responses. Therefore, we created scales for these measures as well. The items are listed in Appendix B. The scales were highly reliable: status challenge,  $\alpha_{HS} = .83$ ,  $\alpha_{ES} = .83$ ,  $\alpha_{LS} = .87$ ; legitimacy,  $\alpha_{HS} = .87$ ,  $\alpha_{ES} = .84$ ,  $\alpha_{LS} = .87$ ; and perceived consequences,  $\alpha_{HS} = .73$ ,  $\alpha_{ES} = .72$ ,  $\alpha_{LS} = .73$ . Intercorrelations among the measures are reported in Table 3.

### Results

Preliminary analyses involving status order, response order, and scenario variables reveal order and scenario effects on some outcomes. Therefore, in all analyses that follow, we controlled for all three variables.<sup>3</sup> Also, because

<sup>3</sup>In many cases, the effects of these variables were significant. However, because they are not of theoretical importance, we will not discuss each effect. A summary of the important patterns is presented at the end of the Results section, some specific effects appear in Table 5, and a full list of order and scenario effects is available from the authors upon request.



of missing data on individual questions, the degrees of freedom vary slightly throughout our analysis.

We first wished to confirm that the uncivil acts in our vignettes were perceived as status challenges. To this end, we examined responses to the status challenge scale. As shown in Table 4, responses were significantly higher than the scale midpoint of 4, indicating that the vignettes were seen by participants as reflecting status challenges.

Next, we examined responses to the status challenge. We constructed general linear models in which resistance or avoidance was predicted by participant gender, challenger gender, challenger status, and all interactions. Models and parameter estimates are presented in Table 5 (Models 1 and 2). On resistance, there were no main effects of participant or challenger gender, nor did they interact. As shown in Figure 1, there was a significant linear effect of status,  $F(1, 138) = 23.33, p < .001 (R^2 = .17)$ , and a significant quadratic effect of status,  $F(1, 138) = 22.37, p < .001 (R^2 = .16)$ .<sup>4</sup> The linear effect did not depend on gender: Men and women both showed less resistance to high-status than to low-status challengers,  $F(1, 138) = 2.07, ns$ . However, the quadratic effect did depend on gender,  $F(1, 138) = 4.28, p = .04 (R^2 = .03)$ . Whereas men showed a quadratic pattern in which resistance was greatest toward equal-status challengers, women did not show a quadratic pattern. Instead, they reported less resistance as challenger status increased.

For avoidance, we found a marginal main effect for participant gender such that women intended to avoid the challenger more than men did,  $F(1, 138) = 3.03, p = .08 (R^2 = .02)$ . Further, the significant linear effect of status indicated that participants were more likely to avoid challengers as the latter's status increased,  $F(1, 138) = 13.99, p < .001 (R^2 = .10)$ . No other main or interaction effects were observed.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, we wanted to examine potential mechanisms for participants' choices of responses to status challenges. We predicted that differences might occur based on appraisals made by the threatened party, specifically the perceived legitimacy of the challenger's behavior and perceived consequences of resisting the challenge. A marginal main effect of participant gender confirmed that men saw status challenges as somewhat more legitimate than

<sup>4</sup>The quadratic effect of status was implicated in a significant Status  $\times$  Scenario interaction,  $F(1, 137) = 38.94, p < .001$ , which indicates that the quadratic pattern was present primarily in the overriding scenario. On the other hand, in the belittling scenario, actions by both low- and equal-status challengers were seen as more of a status challenge than those by high-status challengers. In the missed-class scenario, action by the high-status challenger was seen as more of a status challenge than those by low- and equal-status challengers.

<sup>5</sup>To examine this question in another way, we also asked participants to rank-order the seven possible responses to show what they were most and least likely to do. These results echo our findings using the rating scales.

Table 4  
*Means of All Scales by Participant Gender, Challenger Gender, and Challenger Status: Study 3*

	Male targets						Female targets						
	Lower status		Equal status		Higher status		Lower status		Equal status		Higher status		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Avoidance													
Male challenger	2.08	0.92	2.32	0.99	2.47	1.02	2.54	0.78	2.75	1.29	2.77	1.20	
Female challenger	2.25	1.10	2.44	1.20	2.47	1.58	2.26	1.09	2.54	1.10	2.74	1.39	
Resistance													
Male challenger	3.20	1.31	3.35	1.13	2.84	0.99	3.03	0.96	2.89	0.99	2.55	0.91	
Female challenger	3.06	1.12	3.49	1.14	2.85	1.21	3.32	1.22	3.15	1.08	2.57	0.93	
Status challenge													
Male challenger	4.83	1.14	4.93	1.00	4.74	0.93	5.04	0.89	4.93	0.87	4.85	0.87	
Female challenger	4.75	0.91	5.02	1.01	4.59	1.07	5.36	1.06	5.47	0.79	5.26	0.84	
Legitimacy													
Male challenger	2.02	1.13	2.19	1.16	2.44	1.15	1.92	0.95	2.21	1.02	2.31	1.01	
Female challenger	1.95	0.92	2.31	1.03	2.36	1.19	1.72	0.68	1.92	0.85	1.76	0.73	
Perceived consequences													
Male challenger	3.54	1.30	3.88	1.18	5.15	1.28	4.06	1.02	4.10	0.87	5.62	0.80	
Female challenger	3.71	1.08	4.08	1.10	5.25	1.06	4.15	1.14	4.33	1.19	5.82	0.75	

Table 5  
*Results of General Linear Models to Test Within-Subjects Mediation and Moderated Mediation: Study 3*

Dependent measure	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2a	Model 2b	Model 3a	Model 3b	Model 4a	Model 4b	Model 5a	Model 5b	Model 6a	Model 6b
	Resist (L)	Resist (Q)	Avoid (L)	Avoid (Q)	Resist (L)	Resist (Q)	Avoid (L)	Avoid (Q)	Resist (L)	Resist (Q)	Avoid (L)	Avoid (Q)
Intercept (status contrast)	-.30*	-.31*	.26*	-.07	.08	-.55*	.54*	.06	-.01	-.15	.70	.20
Participant gender (PG)	.21	.21	-.25†	-.25†	.15	.15	-.27†	-.27†	.22	.22	-.39	-.39
Challenger gender (CG)	-.13	-.13	.01	.01	-.12	-.12	.01	.01	-.12	-.12	.02	.02
PG × CG	.04	.04	-.12	-.12	.08	.08	-.09	-.09	.04	.04	-.11	-.11
Status × PG	.09	-.14*	-.01	.02	.14*	-.15*	.02	.01	.14	-.04	-.04	.08
Status × CG	.03	.10	-.03	.01	.05	.11	.00	.02	.02	.10	-.03	.00
Status × PG × CG	-.04	.00	.06	.00	-.07	.03	.04	-.01	-.05	.00	.06	.00
Legitimacy (sum)					-.05†	.04	-.04	-.02				
Legitimacy (L)					-.21*	-.03	-.11†	.01				
Legit (L) × PG					-.07	.00	.00	.07				
Legitimacy (Q)					.02	-.09*	.01	-.03				
Legitimacy (Q) × PG					-.03	-.02	.02	-.01				
Consequences (sum)									-.01	.00	-.04	.03
Consequences (L)									-.15*	-.06	.11†	.04
Consequences (L) × PG									-.06	-.05	-.04	-.02
Consequences (Q)									.04	-.08*	-.02	.00
Consequences (Q) × PG									.05	-.03	.05	-.04
Response order	-.05	-.04	-.01	-.15*	-.05	-.04	-.02	-.16*	-.07	-.07	.00	-.13†
Status order	.24*/14*	.12/-08†	.01/07	.06/-03	.25*/12*	.13†/-08†	.03/06	.09/-03	.23*/10†	.08/-03	.05/10	.08/-02
Scenario	-.21*/-12*	-.25*/08†	-.26*/-01	-.06/13*	-.20*/-07†	-.17†/08†	-.24*/01	-.03/13*	-.24*/-12*	-.27*/10*	-.28*/00	-.06/15*

Note: Values shown are unstandardized beta weights. The two values for Status order and Scenario reflect linear and quadratic contrasts. Resist = resistance; Avoid = avoidance; L = linear; Q = quadratic.  
 † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ .

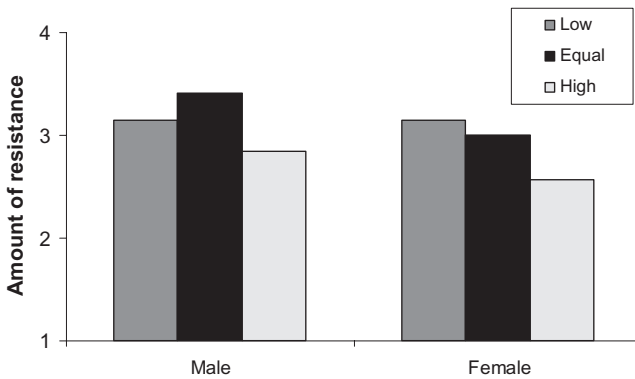


Figure 1. Amount of resistance to status challenges, as a function of participant gender and challenger status: Study 3.

did women,  $F(1, 139) = 3.03, p = .08 (R^2 = .02)$ . Similarly, status challenges by male challengers were seen as somewhat more legitimate than those by female challengers,  $F(1, 139) = 2.72, p = .10 (R^2 = .02)$ . Finally, a significant linear contrast confirmed that legitimacy of the challenge increased as challenger status increased ( $M_{HS} = 2.23, M_{ES} = 2.16, M_{LS} = 1.91$ ),  $F(1, 137) = 5.90, p = .02 (R^2 = .04)$ . There were no significant interactions.

As for the consequences of resisting, women were significantly more concerned about these consequences than were men,  $F(1, 139) = 13.76, p < .001 (R^2 = .09)$ . Perceived consequences of resisting increased as challenger status increased,  $F(1, 137) = 212.87, p < .001 (R^2 = .52)$ . The quadratic contrast for challenger status was also significant ( $M_{HS} = 5.45, M_{ES} = 4.09, M_{LS} = 3.86$ ),  $F(1, 137) = 71.74, p = .02 (R^2 = .52)$ . This effect seems to reflect the influence of the exceptionally high mean for perceived consequences of resisting a high-status challenger. There was no effect of challenger gender or any interactions.

Following Judd, Kenny, and McClelland's (2001) instructions for testing within-subjects mediation, we constructed several general linear models whose outcome variable was either resistance or avoidance. In addition to the gender, status, and control variables used in all models so far, we included variables representing the mechanism being tested; that is, either perceived legitimacy or perceived consequences of resisting. Each model included the following variables: a sum of the judgments (of legitimacy or consequences of resistance) of high-, equal-, and low-status challengers; a linear contrast of high- versus low-status judgments; a quadratic contrast pitting judgments of peers against those of high- and low-status challengers; and interactions of these variables with gender.

Judd et al. (2001) demonstrated that if the sum is significant, then the variable is moderating the within-subjects effect of status on resistance. If the contrasts are significant, then the variable is mediating the within-subjects effect of status. And if the interactions between the predictor contrasts and participant gender are significant, then participant gender is moderating the mediation by the variable. As in the familiar Baron and Kenny (1986) approach to testing mediation, these models must be compared to a baseline model in which the additional predictor variables are not included. The baseline models for resistance (Models 1a and 1b) and for avoidance (Models 2a and 2b) were described earlier and are shown in Table 5. The significant effects of status in those baseline models may be mediated in the augmented models. Later, we will highlight the most important effects and refer the reader to Table 5 for all models and parameter estimates.

### *Mediating Effects of Legitimacy*

We expected that, as the perceived legitimacy of the incivility increased, resistance would decrease. Consistent with this prediction, Model 3a shows a linear pattern of decreasing resistance as legitimacy increased,  $F(1, 132) = 19.98, p < .001 (R^2 = .13)$ . With legitimacy variables in the model, the linear effect of status became nonsignificant, suggesting that perceptions of legitimacy mediated the linear effects of status on resistance,  $F(1, 132) = 0.21, ns$ . However, in the quadratic contrast tested in Model 3b, we found both a significant quadratic pattern of higher perceived legitimacy for high- and low-status challengers than peers,  $F(1, 132) = 5.38, p = .02 (R^2 = .04)$ , and a significant quadratic effect of status on resistance,  $F(1, 132) = 7.78, p = .006 (R^2 = .06)$ . Across the linear and quadratic models, it appears that challenger status and perceived legitimacy both contributed to decisions to resist a status challenge, and we find evidence only for partial mediation.

Because of the aforementioned result whereby men are more resistant toward peers (a quadratic pattern) and women to superiors (a linear pattern), we examined men's and women's responses separately. For men, legitimacy mediated the linear effect of challenger status on resistance,  $F(1, 132) = 23.81, p < .001 (R^2 = .15)$ ; while for women, marginal mediation occurred,  $F(1, 132) = 3.39, p = .07 (R^2 = .03)$ . As expected, though, quadratic results differed by gender. For men, both legitimacy,  $F(1, 132) = 5.38, p = .02 (R^2 = .04)$ , and status,  $F(1, 132) = 10.30, p = .002 (R^2 = .08)$ , independently predicted resistance to peers versus others. For women, though, legitimacy had no effect on intention to resist peers versus others.

Across the models, participant gender effects remained significant, indicating that legitimacy did not mediate or moderate these effects. Figure 2

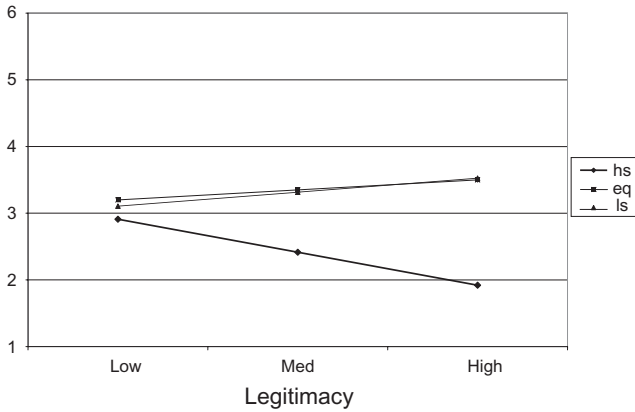


Figure 2. Linear effect of legitimacy on resistance.

illustrates the effects of status and legitimacy on resistance. Resistance is generally lower to high-status than peer or low-status challengers, and increasing legitimacy only exacerbates this difference.

As for the models predicting avoidance (Models 4a and 4b), we found a marginal linear effect of legitimacy,  $F(1, 138) = 3.69, p = .06 (R^2 = .01)$ . However, the linear effect of status remained significant,  $F(1, 132) = 6.35, p = .01 (R^2 = .05)$ . Again, this suggests that status and legitimacy contributed independently to decisions to avoid the challenger. No other mediating or moderating effects were found.

### Mediating Effects of Consequences

In the next set of augmented models, Models 5a and 5b, the continuous predictor was the anticipated consequences of resisting the challenger. Both the linear consequence contrast,  $F(1, 132) = 8.24, p = .005 (R^2 = .06)$ , and the quadratic contrast,  $F(1, 132) = 3.88, p = .05 (R^2 = .03)$ , were significant. With these variables in the model, the baseline status effects became nonsignificant: linear,  $F(1, 132) = 0.00, ns$ ; and quadratic,  $F(1, 132) = 0.12, ns$ . This indicates full mediation of the status effect on resistance by perceived consequences. The effect is quite straightforward: As challenger status increases, the perceived consequences of “taking on” the challenger increase, which in turn decreases the likelihood of resistance toward high-status challengers.

In Models 6a and 6b, predicting avoidance, the linear consequence contrast marginally predicted intended avoidance,  $F(1, 132) = 3.46,$

$p = .07$  ( $R^2 = .03$ ), and the linear status effect became nonsignificant,  $F(1, 132) = 2.28$ , *ns*. Again, this suggests that the status effect on avoidance was fully mediated by perceived consequences. Because participant gender also became nonsignificant in these models, it appears that female targets' avoidance stems from their more dire assessment of the consequences of resisting.

### *Order and Scenario Effects*

It appears that the order in which dependent measures was administered somewhat affected the degree to which participants anticipated using non-confrontational responses. Specifically, if the response items were presented before the judgment items, participants were more likely to report avoidance. It may be that when participants first made judgments about the challenger and his or her incivility, they became more resolved to respond actively and in less compliant ways.

The order in which status was rated also appeared to affect responses. Generally, at each level of status, the first status to which participants responded elicited the lowest level of resistant responses (i.e., overt aggression, passive aggression, or coalition building). It appears that participants may have started out in a milder frame of mind and became more belligerent as they read about repeated uncivil acts. Finally, we found several scenario effects. In particular, the belittling scenario seemed to bring out the most resistant and least acquiescent responses.

### *Discussion*

The results of Study 3 provide important detail about the processes involved in responding to status challenges. We found patterns of response (both resistance and acquiescence) consistent with theoretical predictions and with many of our findings in Studies 1 and 2, although—perhaps because of the changes in the Study 3 design—there were some important points of divergence. In particular, though Study 2 found that male resistance was highest toward lower-status challengers, Study 3 found higher male resistance toward peers.

Further, we identified variables that can account for the distinct appraisals that uniquely affect status-based decisions to resist (particularly the perceived consequences of resistance based on challenger status). This study helps us to understand that position-based status and gender are not simply interchangeable factors; they do not produce the same patterns of response. As Ridgeway and her colleagues have established (e.g., Ridgeway & Bourg,

2004), gender judgments should be based, at least in part, on physical and biological differences that are independent of status. Thus, when participants make judgments involving both gender and status, it seems likely that their gender-based judgments reflect at least some component of the status-free, biological differences between the sexes. Indeed, we find that the effects of status are much stronger, though each characteristic contributes separately and sometimes interactively to determine how individuals will respond to status challenges.

Responses were largely consistent with, if not identical to, those in the earlier studies. A number of design changes in Study 3 could have produced somewhat different results. First, we manipulated relative status within participants so that each participant reported his or her likely responses to a lower-status, peer, and higher-status challenger. Second, Studies 1 and 2 only provided one scenario to which participants could react. In Study 3, we provided three different vignettes, in case they prompted different patterns of response. Finally, we asked participants about both their responses and their appraisals of the situation. The more extensive questioning could have led to greater reflection, and thus somewhat different reporting.

### General Discussion

Across three studies, our results provide interesting insight into how status and gender affect people's responses to status challenges. People with high status and men are accustomed and expected to be more reactive to status challenges. This is reflected in a greater tendency by both groups to retaliate overtly to incivility. It is particularly important that, at least in Study 3, the patterns of response to challengers of different status levels were different for men and women. Whereas women showed a consistent linear pattern of decreasing resistance and increasing acquiescence to higher-status challengers, men tended to show the most resistance to peers, followed by lower- and then higher-status challengers. This appears to reflect a distinct psychology of status struggle for men and women.

This finding supports Tannen's (1990) suggestion that male peer groups are much more focused on power dynamics and winning, whereas women's peer groups tend to focus more on relationship building and connections (vs. status). Tannen explained that this pattern manifests itself in the social structures of the peer groups in which men grow up: Men identify opportunities to be "one up," and actively resist being put in a "one-down" position by others (particularly those in their peer group). Our Study 3 findings explain why this finding likely occurs: Men perceive more threat when challenged by a peer.



Our results also offer important insight into how status and gender affect the development and maintenance of status hierarchies. The foundational research on the development of status hierarchies generally posits that a few status-seeking members of an undifferentiated group will engage in contests for status (Overbeck et al., 2005). These contests can be physical; they can involve displays of emotions or body postures (Tiedens, 2001; Tiedens & Fragale, 2003); or they can be symbolic (Conniff, 2002; Groysberg et al., 2005). Once the “pecking order” is established, however, it has not been clear how stable it might be or by what mechanism it is maintained. Our work offers substantial insight into this issue, providing information about mechanisms that may help to perpetuate hierarchies.

Aggression may be used to keep others “in line” and to reinforce one’s image of power and control (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Heider, 1958; Mazur, 1973, 1985). If a target of incivility does not agree that the challenger has legitimate claim to higher status, then he (and it *is* most likely a “he”) will probably respond with overt aggression himself—thus engaging in a contest for dominance. However, when those of lower status accept the status differential, they may defer, using conflict-defusing behaviors such as avoidance to refrain from challenging the challenger’s status. Repeated instances of this pattern begin to constitute a social norm that defines acceptable behavior for people with low status (and women). As a result, the status hierarchy is reinforced and made more stable. Over time, the hierarchy—resting as it does on the asymmetry in responses of people with higher and lower status—may become self-perpetuating (e.g., Anderson et al., 2001; Bell & French, 1950; Fiske & Cox, 1960; Mazur, 1973, 1985; Nelson & Berry, 1965; Ridgeway & Bourg, 2004).

It is somewhat surprising that challenger gender had few effects on responses to status challenges. Although we are unsure why this was the case, it seems plausible that the changing demography of the workplace and the rise of women in managerial positions (though not necessarily into the most senior ranks; cf. Northcraft & Gutek, 1993; Powell, 1999) may be shifting how people perceive female challengers. Recent research on stereotypes of women and men suggests that perceptions of women’s attributes have shifted (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000). Specifically, people believe that women of the present are more masculine than are women of the past, and that women of the future will be more masculine than women of the present (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000). Thus, it seems likely that the gap in status or power attributed to challengers based on gender is narrowing. Women’s participation in traditionally male-dominated activities, including many sports (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 1997), may also influence people’s appraisals of challenger gender. However, additional research is needed to examine these potential explanations.

*Implications of the Current Work for Research on Incivility*

Although our current work focuses on the phenomenon of status challenges, the form of challenge that we examine—incivility—is the subject of a healthy and growing literature in its own right. Our findings enrich this literature in some important ways. First, we address the call by researchers who identified the need to examine how employees' reactions to mistreatment by others are influenced by their relative status (e.g., Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Aquino, Lewis, & Bradfield, 1999). Second, our findings regarding the mechanisms that explain response differences also provide greater insight into some of the current findings in the literature, including differences in targets' emotional responses (especially based on status; e.g., Porath & Pearson, 2005). The notion that targets weigh the level of status challenge, the legitimacy of the challenger's actions, and potential consequences of their responses may help to explain why those who experience incivility experience cognitive disruption, which, in turn, reduces performance (Porath & Erez, 2007).

More research is needed regarding the relationship between power and incivility. How do acts of incivility relate to the accumulation or depletion of a challenger's or a target's power? Research has suggested that witnessing disrespect or the harming of others can arouse strong feelings of anger and injustice (cf. Miller, 2001; Vidmar, 2000). Do those who behave uncivilly and get away with it tend to accumulate referent power from witnesses, or do they lose power as colleagues who find their behavior untoward disassociate themselves from the challenger?

While we acknowledge the significant difficulties in doing so, we urge scholars who are interested in workplace deviance to take a closer look at the challengers. How do organizational norms affect would-be challengers' tendencies toward incivility?

*Implications for Practice*

These studies provide useful information for understanding, anticipating, and managing workplace incivility. In particular, they demonstrate that gender and status of the target will affect how workplace incivility manifests, spreads, and intensifies.

Our findings suggest that gender and status inequities are reinforced by the way targets tend to respond to incivility. As suggested in studies of emotional management, the very steps that targets of lesser status take to manage their discontent (so as to maintain an appropriately professional demeanor) can perpetuate their structural inferiority (Lively, 2000) and vali-

date interpersonal mistreatment. That is, by behaving as though nothing has offended them, they unwittingly forgo opportunities to make the challenger and the organization aware of the offensive effects.

Perhaps these findings help to explain why managers and organizations seem to ignore incivility, often claiming that they do not hear about it and do not believe that it is a problem in their organizations (Pearson & Porath, 2004, 2005). This finding should alert organizational leaders to the importance of eliciting safe and candid feedback from lower-status employees regarding their superiors. Incivility is simply too costly to individuals and organizations to ignore, since it results in decreased performance, creativity, and helpfulness for targets (Porath & Erez, 2007) and witnesses (Porath & Erez, 2006).

Our research suggests that work groups in which a member experiences incivility may face varied consequences, depending on the gender and status of the targeted employee. For example, if the target is female, she may disengage. If a male member of the group experiences incivility, he may directly confront the challenger. Groups in which male targets experience incivility may be well advised to brace for responsive aggression from those targets, particularly when the target is of higher status than the challenger. Even when male targets experience incivility from peers, resistance is likely.

### *Study Limitations*

We acknowledge some limitations of these studies. First, our status manipulations always involved relative status. We posit somewhat different mechanisms based on whether the challenger or the target has relatively higher status. However, given our design, we were unable to separate target and perceiver effects in this study. Future research might manipulate these effects separately (perhaps by crossing absolute levels of challenger and target status) in order to identify more precisely how the two affect responses.

Study 3 used a within-subjects design, which can raise the possibility of demand characteristics. The presence of order effects in Study 3 might heighten this concern. We tried to minimize this possibility by presenting the three statuses in the context of different scenarios so that the change in status did not appear too salient. Further, the results of Study 3 are generally consistent with those of Studies 1 and 2, both of which used between-subjects designs.

Another limitation of our studies is the use of hypothetical and retrospective vignettes, rather than more behavioral manipulations and measures. It would be fruitful in future research to include more behavioral research designs. However, we are confident that our methods allow us to draw

conclusions about how people think about responding to challenges, based on relative status and gender.

Also, we recognize that some of the issues addressed in these studies included a range of responses that might be considered socially undesirable. As such, respondents may have biased their responses to reflect socially acceptable behavior. We note, nonetheless, that respondents were made aware of our efforts to secure their anonymity, which should have lessened the likelihood of this bias. Moreover, in a recent study on the measurement of workplace deviance, Bennett and Robinson (2000) found that employees were willing to admit to engaging in socially undesirable, deviant behaviors. In addition, if this bias did permeate participants' responses, then our findings are conservative. That is, in trying to respond in a socially desirable way, respondents may have tempered their answers such that the effect of incivility on the deviant reactions of employees actually may be more damaging than our findings suggest.

As we have stated, the workplace is the arena in which people jockey for prestige and position. As such, it seems inevitable that aggression—softened though it might be by the norms of professionalism—may be rampant in the workplace. Because this is precisely the context in which status orders are determined and maintained, we expected to (and did) find that status and gender are crucial in understanding how targets of incivility respond. We also found that perceived legitimacy of the challenger's actions and consequences are mechanisms that explain these differences.

In the end, our findings give notice that hierarchy is likely to be self-reinforcing. Those with high status respond with resistance and indirect aggression: This response helps them to defend their status. Those with low status avoid and defer. Although this response protects them, it also reinforces their lower status positioning, while protecting the status of challengers above them. Organizations should be aware of these patterns if they wish to root out incivility and protect those with less power from challenges that may have detrimental consequences for organizations.

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## Appendix A

### *Study 3 Vignettes*

1. During an important meeting with 12 other student members from The *Xs*, the professor in charge of The *Xs* club (another student member, a pledging member/brand new member) tried to over-ride a suggestion I was proposing. He (she) cut me off right in the middle of a sentence and was very rude about it. He (she) said that he (she) had heard enough. I couldn't believe it! What made it worse was that it was a project I was in charge of.
2. The professor in charge of our club (another student member, a pledging member/brand new member) has repeatedly made insulting, belittling remarks about me in front of other club members. The other day I was trying to help address an issue that a representative from a partner organization who we're doing a community project with brought up and the professor in charge of our club (another student member, a pledging member/brand new member) rolled his (her) eyes and said to the organization's representative, "Guess you're wondering if you'll ever get to talk to someone who could actually help you." It seems like he (she) makes comments in a joking manner but says some really rude things.
3. I missed a class because I was sick. The next day, I saw the professor, who is also in charge of our club (another student member, a pledging member/brand new member) from my class in the library. I asked if he (she) could tell me what I missed, and he first ignored my requests, then yelled that I was wasting his (her) time and to stop bugging him (her) so that he (she) could get some work done.

## Appendix B

*Study 3 Items*

Scale	Component items
Aggression	Verbally threaten the challenger Yell/shout at the challenger Respond with just as much rudeness as the challenger used Make negative/obscene gestures at the challenger Physically attack (push, shove, hit) and curse at the challenger
Passive aggression	Withhold information the challenger needs Belittle the challenger to others Do things that cause trouble for the challenger without the challenger knowing Look for opportunities to sabotage the challenger in the future
Building coalitions	Put off doing something that the challenger wanted Enlist the support of others in the group to oppose the challenger Gather support from those who can help support me against the challenger in the future Find other members of the organization who have been frustrated by the challenger and join forces
Resistance	Aggression scale, Passive Aggression scale, Building Coalitions scale
Avoidance	Intentionally avoid the challenger Become more distant from the challenger Avoid the challenger Leave the room when the challenger enters Consider dropping out of the organization Actually drop out of the organization
Status challenge	By acting the way she/he did, the group member was clearly trying to challenge me. The group member's behavior communicates that the group member doesn't respect me. If the group member respected me, the group member would not have behaved this way. The group member's behavior was a slap in the face. The group member's behavior would embarrass me.

Appendix B *Continued*

Scale	Component items	
	I would not really mind how the group member treated me. (R)	
	Regardless of what I think of the group member's behavior, I do not think the intent was to challenge me. (R)	
	Most likely, the group member did not mean to communicate anything negative about me. (R)	
	The group member thought she/he was better than me. I don't think the group member meant anything bad by his/her behavior. (R)	
	Legitimacy	The group member's initial behavior was legitimate. Given the group member's position, it was appropriate for the group member to behave the way she/he did.
		The group member was entitled to behave the way she/he did.
Regardless of whether I like it, I think that people like the group member should just be expected to behave like the group member did.		
In general, if you are in the position of the group member, it makes sense that you will act like the group member.		
People probably agree that it's perfectly acceptable for the group member to act the way she/he did.		
Consequences	Even if other people couldn't get away with it, it was acceptable for the group member to act that way.	
	It could be dangerous to come back at the group member in a confrontational way.	
	The group member could make things difficult for me if my response wasn't acceptable.	
	I would not want to cross someone like the group member.	
	It would be OK to respond to the group member in whatever way I wanted. (R)	
Nothing bad would happen if I was rude in response to the group member. (R)		
If the group member wanted to, she/he could make my life miserable for responding the wrong way.		