You cannot leave it at the office: Spillover and crossover of coworker incivility

MERIDETH FERGUSON*
Department of Management, Hankamer School of Business, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, U.S.A.

Summary
This study examines the spillover and crossover effects of a specific chronic stressor, coworker incivility, on target marital satisfaction, partner marital satisfaction, and partner family-to-work conflict and on how the transmission of stress from the workplace to the family domain (as perceived by the target’s partner) mediates these relationships. Using a matched data set of 190 job incumbents and their partners, the findings reveal that coworker incivility demonstrates both spillover and crossover effects on these outcomes important to the family. Evidence indicates that incivility targets do not leave the stress of incivility at work but instead bring it home to the family domain where it influences relationships with and outcomes of their partners. Implications of these findings and avenues for future research are discussed. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Keywords: Crossover; Incivility; Spillover; Stress

Researchers are beginning to study the effects of coworker incivility on psychological well-being and distress, on workplace satisfaction (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), and on turnover intentions and physical health (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). Specifically, coworker incivility is defined as “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 447). Organizations with climates characterized by coworker incivility experience diminished morale and productivity, as well as increased tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover (Neuman & Baron, 1997; Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001).

Although coworker incivility research is receiving considerable research attention (Griffin & Lopez, 2005), extant research is just beginning to investigate how incivility affects the target beyond the boundaries of the workplace but has yet to extend those investigations to the target’s family members. Recent research found that coworker incivility relates to increased depression, anxiety, and work-to-family conflict for the incivility target (Lim & Lee, 2011). These findings suggest that the incivility experience affects the target’s life outside of the workplace. However, extant research has yet to investigate the mechanism through which this impact occurs or to investigate family or life outcomes for those other than the incivility target. This research contends that incivility targets may experience a spillover of stress from workplace mistreatment and carry that stress home with them. That stress is likely to affect their interactions with partners, children, parents, and friends.

The goals of this research are twofold. First, the current study seeks to determine if coworker incivility affects the target’s perceptions of the marital relationship. Further, does incivility affect the marital satisfaction of the target’s partner? A second goal of the study is to examine stress transmission as a mechanism for the spillover and crossover of coworker incivility experiences. This study draws on research related to stress theory and Westman’s (2001) crossover theory to develop its hypotheses. Specifically, this research theorizes that incivility experiences will spill

* Correspondence to: Merideth Ferguson, Department of Management, Hankamer School of Business, Baylor University, One Bear Place No. 98006, Waco, Texas 76798-8006, U.S.A. E-mail: merideth_ferguson@baylor.edu
over and cross over from the target’s work life to his or her family life through the transmission of stress. On the basis of this theoretical foundation, Figure 1 depicts the model of incivility’s effect on the target and the partner. This research aims to fill three gaps in the coworker incivility literature. First, incivility’s effects beyond the organizational setting, such as in the family domain, are significantly understudied. Coworker incivility relates to diminished satisfaction with work, coworkers, supervisors, pay, benefits, and promotional satisfaction (Cortina et al., 2001), and thus, the stress of those experiences is also likely to affect the target at home. In other words, incivility and the resulting stress shape the target’s attitudes towards life and their relationships with those in the family domain. In particular, the incivility experience is likely to influence a target’s relationship with a spouse, partner, or significant other. Thus, this study begins to fill that gap by exploring how the incivility experiences spills over to shape the target’s marital satisfaction. Second, extant research ignores incivility’s impact beyond the targeted individual. This research is a first step to fill that gap by investigating whether the stress of incivility crosses over to affect the target’s partner. Third, extant research has yet to meaningfully test potential mechanisms through which incivility experiences spill over and cross over to the target’s family life, and so, this research theorizes and tests the role of stress transmission in incivility’s effects beyond the target’s workplace.

The Impact of Incivility

Incivility is a specific form of workplace deviance (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) but distinguished from workplace aggression. First, aggression requires clear intent to physically or psychologically harm someone (Neuman & Baron, 1997, 1998), whereas as coworker incivility may not carry transparent intent. With incivility, the intent to harm is ambiguous, and ignorance or oversight may actually trigger the behavior (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Second, lower intensity characterizes incivility compared with workplace aggression (Pearson et al., 2001). However, researchers have noted that incivility can escalate to the level of aggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Lim et al., 2008). Examples of acts of incivility include, but are not limited to, condescension, demeaning or derogatory remarks, showing little interest in a worker’s opinion, and ignoring or excluding a coworker (Cortina et al., 2001).

The implications of incivility for organizations are numerous. Incivility diminishes a target’s supervisor, coworker, and overall work satisfaction (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Lim et al., 2008), increases job stress (Lim & Cortina, 2005) and turnover intentions (Lim et al., 2008), and job insecurity (Cortina & Magley, 2009). Rudeness, a key characteristic of incivility, decreases workplace helpfulness and leads to disruption and subsequent decreased work performance (Porath & Erez, 2007). Incivility also has an impact on those who simply

![Figure 1. Incivility’s effects on target and partner mediated by stress transmission](image-url)
witness the behavior in that it diminishes observer performance on both routine and creative tasks and leads to negative affect (Porath & Erez, 2009). Incivility has implications for work outcomes and productivity by increasing counterproductive work behaviors (i.e., deviant behaviors that overlap with incivility but that are typically characterized at intentionally harmful and more severe than incivility; counterproductive work behaviors also include behaviors such as theft, which are directed at the organization rather than at individuals) (Penney & Spector, 2005) and by decreasing work effort and work quality (Porath & Pearson, 2010). Furthermore, incivility targets experience distraction at work due to worry over incivility incidents and trying to avoid the instigator (Porath & Pearson, 2010), which may lead to poor job performance.

In fact, the implications of incivility stretch beyond strictly workplace outcomes and instead demonstrate a ripple effect. Incivility not only heightens the target’s psychological distress (Cortina et al., 2001) but is detrimental to his or her physical health as well (Lim et al., 2008). In a study of university students, research found that incivility targets often feel ostracized, which leads to psychological distress and poor academic engagement and performance (Caza & Cortina, 2007). These findings indicate that incivility affects a target’s broader well-being and that those effects reach far past workplace boundaries. Research has documented incivility’s harmful effects on outcomes directly related to the organization. What is unclear is how incivility may affect the target beyond the work domain, particularly in the target’s family domain. Given incivility’s effect on a target’s mental and physical health (Lim et al., 2008), the implications of this form of abuse are likely to stretch over into the target’s life outside of work.

**Spillover of incivility’s stress to the family domain**

Extensive research has demonstrated the relationship between stressful job conditions (stressors) and undesirable employee reactions (strains) to those stressors (Jex & Beehr, 1991; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992; Spector & Jex, 1998). The strain part of the process comprises the psychological, behavioral, and organizational outcomes thought to result from stressor exposure (Jex & Beehr, 1991). Incivility is often perceived and characterized as a chronic stressor, indicated by its frequency and endurance (Keashly & Harvey, 2005).

The stress of incivility manifests itself in the strain it creates for the target. Incivility is associated with increases in academic disengagement and performance as mediated by perceived ostracism and injustice (Caza & Cortina, 2007). Incivility’s stress also affects job withdrawal, psychological distress, job satisfaction, and career salience (Cortina et al., 2001). The harmful effects of incivility on the target’s work or school life suggests that the ripple effect from incivility experiences is likely to spill over into other aspects of the target’s life, specifically to the family domain.

Extant research uses several frameworks for investigating the interplay between work and family. For instance, early theoretical approaches of segmentation or compartmentalization proposed that factors in one domain tend to only impact outcomes in that same domain, and recent evidence indicates that family domain antecedents predict more variance in family outcomes as compared with work domain antecedents (Michel & Hargis, 2008). Another approach, the compensatory model, proposes that there will be a negative relationship between experiences in the work and family domains such that individuals will compensate for unstimulating work by seeking more stimulating experiences outside of the workplace (Lambert, 1990; Wilensky, 1960). In contrast, the spillover model suggests that work and family experiences will be positively related. Specifically, spillover involves the transference of experiences between family and work such that one domain impacts the other (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Rothbard & Dumas, 2006). In general, the spillover model has been more strongly supported (Karasek, 1979; Rousseau, 1978; Staines, 1980). Spillover is experienced with stressors, such as work overload (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989) and job demands (Demerouti, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2005), or strains, such as emotional exhaustion (Leiter & Durup, 1996).

With respect to incivility, researchers typically characterize the incivility experience as a chronic stressor (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). In fact, Cortina and colleagues found that employees’ current reports of depression and anxiety symptoms related to incivility experiences in the last five years (Cortina et al., 2001). Interpersonal conflicts with those outside the family such as with coworkers are the most distressing chronic stressors (Bolger et al.,
1989), and thus, incivility targets may find it difficult to set aside that stress when they return home. Coworker incivility relates to job stress as well as to impaired mental and physical health (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008) and psychological distress (Cortina et al., 2001), so the target most likely carries the stress created through incivility experiences with them when they leave the workplace. Thus, the chronic nature of the stress related to incivility suggests that spillover theory is a uniquely appropriate theoretical lens through which to study incivility’s effects beyond the workplace in that extant research indicates that the negative experience of incivility leads to negative experiences outside of work. This research theorizes that the chronic stress stemming from coworker incivility lends itself to influencing the family domain, rather than just the work domain, of the target. In other words, employees who experience incivility at work may bring home the stress, negative emotion, and perceived ostracism that result from those experiences, which then affects their family life.

The stress resulting from incivility reaches beyond the workplace or incivility incident to permeate the target’s life outside of work hours. In other words, the incivility target transmits this stress to the family domain. Howe, Levy, and Caplan (2004) define stress transmission as when an individual’s stress from some life event becomes a stressor for other individuals (in this case for the target’s family). Extant research has investigated often the effects of work-related stress interfering with an individual’s ability to engage in family activities (i.e., work–family conflict; for a recent meta-analysis, see Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007). However, research into the effects of one individual’s work-related stress infecting the family’s stress and strain is relatively new. The distinction between stress transmission and strain-based work–family conflict is twofold. The first distinction lies in the individual(s) experiencing the impact of the stress—the individual experiencing the original stressor or the individual(s) to whom the stress is transmitted. In other words, strain-based work–family conflict emphasizes the stress from work resulting in strain for the target, whereas stress transmission from work to family focuses on how the stress of the target’s job results in stress and strain for the family. The second distinction lies in the outcome of the work-related stress. With stress transmission, the effect emphasizes increased stress and diminished well-being of the family, whereas strain-based work–family conflict focuses on a lack of participation in family activities for individual experiencing the conflict.

Partners are in a unique position to assess the extent to which targets transmit the stress of coworker incivility from the work domain to the family domain. Recent research indicates that partners are able to assess validly a target’s experience of chronic stressors (Kromm, Gadinger, & Schneider, 2010). Prior research suggests that not only do partners assess a target’s stress but that their assessments of the other partner’s stress are better predictors of important outcomes (Saffrey, Bartholomew, Scharfe, Henderson, & Koopman, 2003). Individuals in close relationships have the motivation, opportunity, and information with which to perceive accurately their partners (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001; Swann, 1984). Prior research underlines the importance of partner perceptions of the stress transmission process. For example, Pearl and Turner (1995) found that interviewees could discern when their partners were stressed, even when the other partner did not refer to experiencing that stress. Changes in mood and activities signaled to the interviewee that his or her partner was distressed, even when the reason for the distress was unknown. These findings suggest that stressed individuals are rarely successful in blocking work-related stress from the family domain.

The incivility experience at work is likely to spill over to affect the target’s relationship with a partner. Daily hassles such as incivility are predictive of impaired social functioning and low morale (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Specifically, targets who experience the depression and anxiety that relate to coworker incivility (Lim & Lee, 2011) are more likely to experience negative mood and impaired social functioning and be less likely to engage with their partner. Research found that a stressful day at work leads to arguments and tense interactions at home (Bolger et al., 1989). Thus,

\[ H1: \text{Incivility will be positively related to partner perceptions of the transmission of stress from the work domain to the family domain.} \]

With impaired social engagement and tense or irritable interactions in the family domain, a target’s relationship with their partner is likely to be less satisfying. Furthermore, prior research found that work stressors such as job
insecurity, time pressures at work, and work–family conflict exhibit spillover effects and relate negatively to marital satisfaction (Mauno & Kinnunen, 1999). Therefore, those who experience coworker incivility are more likely to experience a lower level of marital satisfaction. Thus,

\[ H_2 \]: A target’s experience of coworker incivility will be negatively related to the target’s own marital satisfaction.

Spillover theory suggests that the incivility experience is likely to influence a target’s interactions in the family domain through the transmission of stress from the work to the family domain. Research has shown that after a stressful workday, job incumbents’ social engagement was diminished (Repetti, 1989, 1994), whereas their irritability and displays of anger increased (Repetti, 1994; Story & Repetti, 2006). In order words, the stressed out target is likely to engage in tense or irritable interactions with other family members, which influence their satisfaction in those relationships. Further, chronic daily stressors have a cumulative effect on the family (Repetti, Wang, & Saxbe, 2009) and have been found to foster tense and unpleasant interactions with family members (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). For instance, in a study of law enforcement officers and their families, officers who experienced stress displayed more anger, were less engaged in family issues, and were more likely to report marital dissatisfaction (Jackson & Maslach, 1982). Further, partner perceptions of interpersonal problems more consistently, and to a stronger degree, predict relationship satisfaction and quality compared with self-reports of interpersonal problems (Saffrey et al., 2003). Therefore, those who experience coworker incivility are more likely to carry stress home in a way that impacts their relationships and interactions with family members and leads to a lower level of marital satisfaction. Thus,

\[ H_3 \]: The relationship of a target’s experience of coworker incivility with his or her marital satisfaction will be mediated by partner perceptions of the transmission of stress from the work to the family domain.

Crossover of incivility’s stress to the family domain

Research on the impact of incivility often focuses on the direct target, with little focus on those beyond the victim such as a coworker who observes the incivility during the course of a work day or a partner who hears about the target’s experiences upon arriving home from work. However, vicarious victims of workplace violence do exhibit similar effects compared with a direct target (Rogers & Kelloway, 1997). Thus, incivility may also cross over to individuals within the target’s close circle of family and friends, particularly the target’s partner. Several studies have shown how one partner’s stress does cross over and influence the strain of the other partner (Bakker, Demerouti, & Dollard, 2008; Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005; Westman, Etzion, & Danon, 2001; Westman, Etzion, & Horovitz, 2004; Westman, Vinokor, Hamilton, & Roziner, 2004). However, research has yet to meaningfully consider the crossover effect of incivility, and work is needed to understand factors that may impact the crossover process (Westman, 2001).

Westman (2001, 2006) developed a model of the crossover process that can inform how crossover occurs. The core assumption of the model is that “one’s stress has an impact on others in different settings, indicating a complex causal relationship between stress and strain in the individual arena and between stress and strain of the dyads” (Westman, 2006, p. 166). In other words, one partner’s stressors have an impact on the other partner through the contagion of creating more demands (Dikkers, Geurts, Kinnunen, Kompier, & Taris, 2007; Westman, 2001). Stressors may also initiate or exacerbate a negative interaction between partners (Haines, Marchand, & Harvey, 2006).

I theorize that the incivility experience crosses over to influence outcomes for the target’s partner. Ordinary daily hassles, rather than major life stressors, are more predictive of impaired social functioning, low morale, and psychosomatic symptoms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, an incivility target’s reduction in social functioning (Repetti, 1989, 1994), increased negative interaction with his or her partner (Haines et al., 2006), and poor family engagement inhibit marital satisfaction. In addition, anxiety and depression symptoms tend to characterize the psychological
distress experienced by incivility targets (Cortina, et al., 2001). These reactions to incivility lead to poor marital interactions in the case of anxiety symptoms (MacEwen, Barling, & Kelloway, 1992) and to engagement in negative and conflictual interactions with their partner and other family members in the case of depression (Coyne, Kessler, Tal, Turnbull, Wortman, & Greden, 1987). In other words, incivility targets are likely distracted by the experience of incivility, which crosses over into the family domain and hampers partner marital satisfaction. Therefore, a target’s experience of incivility is expected to negatively influence his or her partner’s marital satisfaction. Thus,

H4: A target’s experience of coworker incivility will be negatively related to his or her partner’s marital satisfaction.

Similarly, I also theorize that the incivility experience crosses over to create strain for the target’s partner. The negative experience of incivility is likely to create more demands for the target’s partner. For instance, incivility relates negatively to both mental health (Lim & Cortina, 2005; Lim et al., 2008) and physical health (Lim et al., 2008), and associates with target emotional exhaustion (Kern & Grandey, 2009). These experiences create “wear and tear” on the target, which a partner may try to alleviate by taking on more responsibilities within the family domain. As targets may experience a reduction in social interactions with their children as a result of job experiences or stressors (Repetti, 1994), the partner may in turn take on more of the childcare responsibilities such as picking up the children from school, helping them with their homework, or taking time off work to care for a sick child. Thus, a partner’s level of family-to-work conflict is expected to be negatively influenced by the target’s experience of coworker incivility. Thus,

H5: A target’s experience of coworker incivility will negatively relate to his or her partner’s family–work conflict.

Crossover theory suggests that the negative experience of incivility at work likely results in negative outcomes for other individuals in the family domain. I theorize that stress transmission is one mechanism through which the crossover occurs. In a study of the effects of workplace aggression, Haines, Marchand, and Harvey (2006) found that the stress resulting from aggressive behaviors such as physical violence, intimidation, or unwelcome remarks or gestures of a sexual nature at work does cross over to create psychological distress in the target’s partner. Another study focusing on the effects of supervisory incivility (abusive supervision) on non-work outcomes revealed that abused subordinates were more likely to engage in family undermining (i.e., actions that directly diminish a family member’s sense of self-worth) (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). Specifically, family members of targeted subordinates reported sustained negative affect and negative evaluations directed toward them in the family domain, and it is interactions like these that may undermine a partner’s satisfaction in the marital relationship. Thus, the family member perceived that the target’s experiences resulted in unpleasant interactions at home and to the target taking the stress of the abuse out on family members. The authors explained their findings as a case of displaced aggression whereby negative interactions with supervisors at work led to negative interactions with family members in the home and noted that negative interactions at work “flow downhill” to impact interactions and relationships within the family. In other words, the target’s stress related to the incivility experience carried over to the family domain where it impacted other family members. Recent research also provides evidence of the crossover of one partner’s stress to negatively influence the marital satisfaction of the other partner (Song, Foo, Uy, & Sun, 2011). Thus,

H6: The relationship of a target’s experience of coworker incivility with his or her partner’s marital satisfaction will be mediated by partner perceptions of the transmission of stress from the work to the family domain.

The stress that incivility targets carry home has the potential not only to cross over into the partner’s family domain but to cross over into the partner’s work domain as well. The stress brought to the family domain may leave the target ill equipped to manage demands in the family domain and thus may create more demands for the partner, translating into increased family-to-work conflict for the partner (Boyar, Maertz, Mosley, & Carr, 2008). In other words, because the incivility target comes home more stressed and distracted, the partner is likely to pick up more
of the family responsibilities, and thus, those demands may interfere with the partner’s work life. Research found that burnout crosses over between husbands and wives (Westman & Etzion, 1995), which suggests that the stress transmitted to the family domain may leave the partner ill-equipped to deal with work demands in that the partner is distracted by the stress of the incivility experience. For instance, when fathers bring home stress from work, it undermines mothers’ abilities to balance both work and family demands (Fagan & Press, 2008). Recent research also provides evidence of the crossover of one partner’s stress to negatively influence the experience of family-to-work conflict of the other partner (Song, Foo, Uy, & Sun, 2011). On the basis of crossover theory and on these empirical findings, I expected the stress of the incivility experience to cross over into the family domain where it creates more demands on the partner and thus heightens the family-to-work conflict of the partner. Thus,

H7: The relationship of a target’s experience of coworker incivility with his or her partner’s family-to-work conflict will be mediated by the transmission of stress from the work to the family domain.

Method

Sample

The focus of this study was job incumbents and their partners, each of whom were employed fulltime. With the assistance of an online data collection service, I collected a matched data set of 190 job incumbents and their partners. Management research successfully uses this manner of collecting data (Judge, Ilies, & Scott, 2006; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). The principal advantage of this approach is that it allows stipulation of specific characteristics to ensure that the sample is representative of the population of interest. The population of interest in this research was respondents who were employed fulltime, had coworkers, and who had an employed partner who would complete a survey. I supplied respondents with a URL (web link) that took them to the online survey, where they completed their portion of the survey. When their portion of the survey was complete, I asked them to have their partner complete a separate survey instrument that was linked back to the target. The partners entered a coordinating identification number to complete their portion of the instrument. Thus, the combined responses from the initial contact and the partner constituted one complete response in the database. Approximately 57% of the target sample was male with an average age of 36 years, whereas 43% of the partner sample was male with an average age of 35 years. Of these couples, 75% had children living with them.

Measures from target

Coworker incivility

To measure respondent experiences with coworker incivility, I used the seven-item incivility scale developed by Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout (2001). The stem of this scale reads, “During the YEAR how often have you been in a situation where any of your coworkers…?” An example of an item is “Put you down or were condescending to you?” Responses used a 5-point scale with endpoints of “1=never, 5=daily.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .95.

Marital satisfaction

To assess a target’s level of satisfaction in the marriage, I used a three-item measure. I adapted this measure from the Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1979) scale and modified it to deal with the marital relationship. An example item is “Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with my marriage.” Respondents used a 5-point scale to indicate
the extent to which they agreed with each item (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .97.

Measures from partner

Marital satisfaction
To assess the partner’s marital satisfaction, I used the same three-item measure employed for the target. Respondents used a 5-point scale to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each item (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .97.

Family-to-work conflict
To assess the partner’s level of family-to-work conflict, I used a nine-item scale (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000). An example item from the scale is “Due to stress at home, I am often preoccupied with family matters at work.” Respondents used a 5-point scale to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each item (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .96.

Stress transmission
I developed three items to capture the partner’s perceptions of the stress that the incivility target transmits from the work domain to the family domain. The foundation of these items lies in prior research that found that the stress stemming from one individual’s life events (particularly stress related to work or job loss) can become a burden and a stressor for other family members, particularly in close or intimate relationships such as those with a spouse or partner (Howe et al., 2004; Rook et al., 1991) and that stress spills over and crosses over from the work domain to the family domain (Bolger et al., 1989; Westman & Etzion, 1995). The items are “You feel your spouse/partner’s job negatively impacts the well-being of you or your family,” “You feel your spouse/partner brings work home (either physical or emotional) in a way that negatively impacts you or your family,” and “You feel your spouse/partner’s job makes you or your family more stressed.” Respondents used a 5-point scale to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each item (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .92.

Control variables
The analyses controlled for respondent’s age, number of children living at home, and length of the marriage to reduce spurious results because of the possible effects of demographic characteristics as these variables are frequently used in work–family interface and stress research (Bolger et al., 1989; Westman & Etzion, 2005). Analyses controlled for the variable as related to the source of the dependent variable (Westman, 2001). In other words, when examining the target’s marital satisfaction, the analyses controlled for his or her controls, and when examining the partner’s marital satisfaction and family-to-work conflict, the partner’s controls were used. I measured age, number of children, and marriage length by using open-ended items.

The analyses also controlled for the target’s perceptions of social support provided by the partner, by using a 5-item scale developed by House (1981). Some research shows that having a supportive partner is beneficial in buffering stress (Frone, 2000; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000), whereas other research reveals a harmful moderating effect of family support on the relationship between incivility and outcomes such as low perceived fairness and increased depression (Lim & Lee, 2011). Thus, I controlled for partner social support’s role in the spillover and crossover of incivility. An example from the scale is “My spouse is ready to help me with a work problem whenever I need it.” Respondents used a 5-point scale to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each item (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .93.

Lastly, the analyses controlled for the target’s tenure in his or her current job position. The rationale for controlling for position tenure is twofold. First, the longer the target occupies a certain job position, the more effective he or she may become at coping and managing the effects of incivility, which may help mitigate the spillover and
crossover effects. On the other hand, the longer the target fills a job position, the more he or she may become “worn down” or burned out, becoming more vulnerable to incivility’s effects and thus could magnifying the spillover and crossover effects. I measured target position tenure by using an open-ended item, asking how many years the respondent had worked in his or her current position.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, reliability measures, average variance extracted (AVE), and correlations. Not surprisingly, the level of marital satisfaction experienced by the target and the partner were correlated at .65, consistent with them being in a partnership.

Given that the measure of stress transmission from the target’s work domain to the family domain was developed for this study and thus not previously validated, it was important to determine its construct validity. I followed the recommendations of Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Chin (1998) in evaluating the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of each construct of interest. First, internal consistency reliability (ICR) is a measure of reliability that should be 0.70 or above (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The lowest ICR in the table is 0.92, indicating the reliability of the measures. Second, AVE measures the amount of variance captured by a variable’s indicators as opposed to the amount of variance caused by measurement error (Chin, 1998). AVE figures of 0.50 or above provide evidence of convergent validity within the items of a variable (Chin, 1998). As the table’s last row shows, each construct exceeds this requirement. Lastly, AVEs also are used to assess discriminant validity. As shown in Table 1, each latent variable correlation should be less than the square root of the AVE on the same row and column. For example, the correlation between coworker incivility and target marital satisfaction (−0.15) would be compared with the bold items in diagonal above it (0.86) and to its right (0.96) to verify that it does not exceed either diagonal element. Surpassing either diagonal element would violate discriminant validity (Chin, 1998). Comparing each correlation against its corresponding diagonal figures revealed that each correlation is less than the square root of the AVEs thereby demonstrating discriminant validity for the variables of interest in the study.

Hypothesis testing

Although much extant research tests hypotheses using the Baron and Kenny (1986) framework for establishing mediation, current recommendations emphasize using the bootstrapping method (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007). In the Baron and Kenny approach, in the first step, the independent variable should have a “total effect” on the dependent variable (c path). In the second step, the independent variable should significantly relate to the mediator (a path). In the third step, the mediating variable should relate to the dependent variable while controlling for the independent variable (b path). In the fourth step, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable comes significantly smaller or non-significant when controlling for the mediator (c’ path or “direct effect”). However, bootstrapping provides a more rigorous approach with greater statistical power as well as a formal significance test of indirect effects (MacKinnon et al., 2007; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The recommended method for testing mediation is to bootstrap the sampling distribution of the indirect effect and obtain a confidence interval with the empirically derived bootstrapped sampling distribution. Thus, to test the hypotheses, I used an SPSS macro for simple mediation analysis developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004), which includes the four steps outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986) as well as non-parametric tests (i.e., bootstrapping) of the indirect effect.
Table 1. Correlations, means, and standard deviations.

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<tr>
<td>1. Target’s age</td>
<td>35.88</td>
<td>6.47</td>
<td></td>
<td>.79*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Partner’s age</td>
<td>36.68</td>
<td>7.92</td>
<td></td>
<td>.79*</td>
<td>.79**</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Number of children</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td></td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.21**</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Length of marriage</td>
<td>10.22</td>
<td>6.36</td>
<td></td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
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<td>5. Partner social support</td>
<td>3.87</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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<td>6. Position tenure</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>4.51</td>
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<td>.18*</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<td>Target</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Coworker incivility</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Marital satisfaction Partner</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>.96</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Marital satisfaction Partner</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.96</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Family–work conflict</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Stress transmission</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.17*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.89</td>
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<td>AVE</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.75</td>
<td></td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.87</td>
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</table>

Note: The bold items in diagonal are square roots of the average variances extracted (AVEs) for discriminant validity testing.

*p < .05, **p < .01.
Table 2 provides the simple mediation analysis to test hypotheses 1–3. According to hypothesis 1, target experiences of incivility will positively relate to partner perceptions of stress transmission from the work to the family domain. As shown in step 2 of Table 2, coworker incivility positively relates to the transmission of stress from work to the family domain (a path). Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported. According to hypothesis 2, coworker incivility will negatively relate to the target’s marital satisfaction. Step 1 of Table 2 demonstrates that the effect of incivility on target marital satisfaction was significant (c path) and supports hypothesis 2.

According to hypothesis 3, stress transmission mediates the effect of incivility on the target’s marital satisfaction. The lower half of Table 2 shows that the bootstrap results indicate a mediating effect of stress transmission on the relationship between incivility and the target’s marital satisfaction. Specifically, the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval around the indirect effect did not include zero (−.12, −.01). Furthermore, step 4 of Table 2 reveals that the relationship between incivility and target marital satisfaction is non-significant when stress transmission is controlled thus suggesting full mediation. The adjusted $r^2$-square indicates that this model explains 42% of the variance in target marital satisfaction. Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Hypothesis 4 states that incivility will negatively relate to the partner’s marital satisfaction. Step 1 of Table 3 indicates that the effect of incivility on partner marital satisfaction was significant (c path) and supports hypothesis 4. Hypothesis 5 states that incivility will negatively relate to the partner’s family-to-work conflict. Step 1 of Table 4 indicates that the effect of incivility on partner family-to-work conflict was significant (c path) and supports hypothesis 5.

According to hypothesis 6, stress transmission from the target’s work domain to the family domain mediates the effect of incivility on the partner’s marital satisfaction. The lower half of Table 3 indicates that the bootstrap results point to a mediating effect of stress transmission on the relationship between incivility and the partner’s marital satisfaction. The bootstrapped 95% confidence interval around the indirect effect did not include zero (−.13, −.01). Step 4 of Table 3 indicates that the relationship between incivility and partner marital satisfaction is non-significant when stress transmission is controlled thus suggesting that stress transmission fully mediates the relationship between coworker incivility and partner marital satisfaction. The adjusted $r^2$-square indicates that this model explains 23% of the variance in partner marital satisfaction. Hypothesis 6 is supported.

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**Table 2. Mediation analyses results for target marital satisfaction.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baron and Kenny (1986) steps</th>
<th>Coeff.</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct and total effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Incivility to target marital satisfaction (c path)</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>−1.99</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Incivility to stress transmission (a path)</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Stress transmission to target marital satisfaction, controlling for incivility (b path)</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>−2.26</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Incivility to target marital satisfaction, controlling for stress transmission (c’ path)</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>−0.81</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partial effects of control variables on target marital satisfaction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of marriage</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>−0.08</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner social support</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>11.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position tenure</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>−0.50</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bootstrap results for the indirect effect of incivility on target marital satisfaction through stress transmission</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point estimate</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−0.12</td>
<td>−0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The coefficients are based on bootstrapping 5000 re-sampling. BCA LL = bias corrected and accelerated lower limit; BCA UL = bias corrected and accelerated upper limit.
According to hypothesis 7, stress transmission from the target’s work domain to the family domain mediates the effect of incivility on the partner’s family-to-work conflict. The lower half of Table 4 indicates that the bootstrap results point to a mediating effect of stress transmission on the relationship between incivility and the partner’s family-to-work conflict. The bootstrapped 95% confidence interval around the indirect effect did not include zero (.06, .22). This suggests that stress transmission mediates the relationship between coworker incivility and partner family-to-work conflict.
family-to-work conflict. The adjusted $r$-square indicates that this model explains 21% of the variance in partner family-to-work conflict. Hypothesis 7 is supported.

**Discussion**

One goal of this research was to examine if the effects of incivility extend beyond the workplace and impact family outcomes for both the target and the target’s partner. Although extant research on coworker incivility has investigated the effects of this construct on organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction (Lim et al., 2008) and performance (Porath & Erez, 2007), little research has explored the effects of coworker incivility beyond the workplace, particularly with respect to spillover and crossover effects. The current research fills this gap by exploring the relationships among incivility, marital satisfaction for both the target and the partner, and family-to-work conflict for the target’s partner. This study predicted that incivility would be detrimental to each of these outcomes. This study in fact found that incivility did have a negative main effect on target marital satisfaction as well as on marital satisfaction and family-to-work conflict of the target’s partner.

A second goal was to examine stress transmission as a mechanism for the spillover and crossover effects of incivility. Although one study demonstrates a link between coworker incivility and family outcomes for the target (Lim & Lee, 2011), the impact on the partner and the processes through which these effects occur have not been meaningfully tested. This study investigates stress transmission as the mechanism through which incivility influences outcomes important to the family. The findings indicate that the stress the target carries over from the work domain to the family domain mediates incivility’s impact on target marital satisfaction, partner marital satisfaction, and partner family-to-work conflict.

This study found that incivility targets carried the stress from the work domain over into the family domain (hypothesis 1). Regarding the spillover hypotheses, coworker incivility demonstrated a significant main effect on target marital satisfaction with stress transmission mediating this effect (hypothesis 2 and 3, respectively). These findings suggest that like emotional exhaustion (Leiter & Durup, 1996), job demands (Demerouti et al., 2005), and work overload (Bolger et al., 1989), the stress of incivility may spill over into the target’s life outside of work. Furthermore, targets may not leave the stress of the incivility experience at work but instead may bring that stress home where it affects their satisfaction with important personal relationships. These findings align with extant research that indicates the work–family interface mediates the impact of stressors such as work pressure or emotional demands at work on an individual’s life satisfaction (Demerouti et al., 2005).

Regarding the crossover hypotheses, this study found that the incivility experience crosses over to influence both the marital satisfaction and the family-to-work conflict of the target’s partner (hypotheses 4 and 5, respectively). Furthermore, the target’s transmission of stress from the work domain to the family domain mediates these relationships (hypothesis 6 and 7, respectively). Similar to burnout (Westman et al., 2001), the stress of incivility crosses over into the family domain to influence the family satisfaction and family-to-work conflict of the target’s partner. These findings suggest that the stress of incivility is not left in the workplace but is carried home to the family domain where it affects the target’s relationships with family members as seen through partner marital satisfaction and then crosses back over into the work domain of the target’s partner through family-to-work conflict.

**Strengths, limitations, and future directions**

As with all research, there are areas of strength and opportunities for development. One strength of the current study is that it builds on previous research, which explored implications of incivility’s impact (Caza & Cortina, 2007; Cortina et al., 2001). A second strength of this study is that it uses a matched data set of targets and partner to demonstrate that incivility has harmful implications not just for targets but for their family members as well. In doing so, it also extends extant research that demonstrates how the stress of one partner can lead to stress and strain in the other partner (Jones & Fletcher, 1993; Rook, Dooley, & Catlano, 1991). Thus, it expands our understanding of the
relationship between incivility and family outcomes beyond the target. Finally, this research broadens the scope of incivility to include the partner in our understanding of its far-reaching effects and one mechanism through which those effects spill over and cross over to impact marital satisfaction and the partner’s family-to-work conflict. Research on incivility’s effects beyond organizational outcomes such as job performance or work satisfaction is limited. This research helps fill this gap in the literature and suggests that there is a ripple effect to incivility, particularly with respect to the target’s family. Using a matched sample of incivility targets and their partners, this study demonstrates that the stress of incivility has important implications not only for the target but for the partner as well.

There are also limitations to this study. First, the study investigates a limited number of outcome variables. Future research should explore the impact of incivility on other outcomes such as family functioning and communication between the target and family members. Second, the interesting findings for the spillover and crossover effects of incivility call for further investigation as to what other relationships these stressful experiences might influence. Future research could benefit from exploring incivility’s impact upon the target’s children or other family members as well as how it might affect relationships and interactions with the target’s friends. Do the children of incivility targets experience crossover effects similar to those of partners? Does the incivility experience affect the target’s ability to effectively engage as a parent or as a friend? How does the transmission of stress from work to the family domain impact communication processes among family members? Although this study explored the impact of incivility on a target’s working partner, future research should also explore the role of non-working partners in the spillover and crossover process. Do non-working partners buffer incivility’s effects and thus mitigate the spillover and crossover process? Furthermore, what factors, such as supervisor support, might buffer the effects of incivility and limit its effects on the target’s life outside of work? Another limitation is that this research uses a cross-sectional approach. Researchers should replicate these findings by using longitudinal data so that evidence of a causal chain can be investigated. Next, this study did not control for the target’s overall work stress. Future research investigating incivility’s impact on the family should control for overall workplace stress as it may shape these dynamics and be a tipping point or moderator in the stress transmission process. Finally, stress transmission is one mediating mechanism between incivility and important family outcomes. There may be other factors that facilitate the spillover and crossover processes. First, interactional justice (Bies, 2001; Colquitt, 2001) may be another mechanism through which incivility’s effects reach beyond the workplace. For instance, incivility targets may experience a sense of injustice in being poorly treated, and the emotions that arise from that sense of injustice are likely to spill over to other domains. Second, Westman (2001) theorized empathy as a mechanism for crossover effects. How might having an empathic partner affect the spillover and crossover effects of incivility? Recent research indicates that empathy might moderate these relationships in that it buffers the effects of work–family conflict on the distress of the both the job incumbent and the partner (Ferguson, Carlson, Zivnuska, & Whitten, 2010). Would partner empathy similarly help buffer the effects of incivility upon the family domain?

Implications

Despite its limitations, this research contributes concretely to both the incivility and work–family literatures. The first theoretical contribution lies in the stress transmission construct as a mechanism through which incivility’s effects extend beyond the workplace to impact the target’s family. Although early research in the spillover and crossover of job stressors found only spillover but no crossover effects of job stressors onto marital satisfaction (Mauno & Kinnunen, 1999), this research used matched data to study the spillover and crossover of the job stressor of incivility and found both spillover and crossover effects on the marital satisfaction of each partner and on the family-to-work conflict of the target’s partner. The conflicting findings between the current study and the results found by Mauno and Kinnunen suggest that the type of work stressor may play a significant role in whether or not crossover of a work–family conflict occurs. Although prior research found only spillover effects of job stressors such as job insecurity, time pressures at work, and work–family conflict to negatively influence marital satisfaction, the current research focused on coworker incivility as the stressor and found both spillover and crossover effects. Given that interpersonal conflicts with those outside the family such as with coworkers are the most distressing chronic
spillover and crossover of incivility

stresses (Bolger et al., 1989), it may be that the stress of incivility is much more difficult to leave at the office and more easily distracting outside the workplace compared with less interpersonally related stressors.

This research extends the work of Cortina and colleagues (2009, 2001) by identifying other implications of incivility’s impact, in this case on the familial outcomes of those targeted. Second, this study also extends the literature and makes a theoretical contribution to the study of spillover and crossover research. Although more recent research indicated both spillover and crossover effects of external stress (i.e., stress outside of the marital relationship) on marital satisfaction (Neff & Karney, 2007), the present study is the first to theorize and meaningfully test a potential mechanism for those effects, namely that partners have an awareness or perception of the stress that a target carries home from the workplace, and these perceptions facilitate the spillover and crossover of job stressors, in this instance, of incivility.

There are also important practical implications for organizations and their leaders. There is growing evidence of incivility’s negative impact on organization outcomes. For example, prior research notes that incivility has broad organizational implications such as diminished work satisfaction (Cortina et al., 2001) and absenteeism and turnover (Pearson et al., 2001). Other research suggests that simply witnessing incivility can lead to fewer organizational citizenship behaviors and increased aggressive thoughts (Porath & Erez, 2009), whereas recent findings indicate that simply having second-hand knowledge of incivility incidents leads to subsequent incivility (Ferguson & Barry, 2011).

Unlike the study of incivility’s effects within the work domain, the study of incivility’s impact on the family is in its infancy. However, the significant findings for the mediating mechanism of stress transmission support the theory that the stress of incivility is not left at work but is carried home at the end of the day and that partners are aware of the stress brought home from the target’s workplace and that stress has a negative impact on the family. These findings emphasize the notion that organizations must realize the far-reaching effects of coworker incivility and its impact on employees and their families. Organizations should take an active role in discouraging incivility in the workplace by encouraging management to model appropriate behavior and by setting clear expectations about what is and is not an acceptable behavior among colleagues (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000). Although job stressors spill over and cross over to the family domain, research also found that stressors from the family domain also spill over and cross over to the work domain. For instance, research has found that marital problems relate to lower workplace productivity (Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, & Kessler, 1996), and work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict negatively influence an employee’s work performance (as rated by both the employee and a supervisor) and career satisfaction (Hoobler, Hu, & Wilson, 2010). Research found the relationship between family-to-work conflict and work-to-family conflict to be reciprocal in nature (Westman, Etzion, & Gattenio, 2008). Thus, when incivility leads to stress transmission and then to partner family-to-work conflict, that conflict may result in further conflict for the original target of the incivility. Thus, the findings of the current research combined with the aforementioned studies suggest that incivility may not only cross over to affect the target’s family but that those negative effects on the family domain may then spill or cross back over into the target’s workplace. Thus, organizations should seek way to prevent the spillover and crossover effects of incivility and the stress that stems from them. One approach might be to encourage targets to seek support through their organization’s employee assistance program or other resources (e.g., counseling, stress management) so that the target can identify tactics or mechanisms for buffering the effect of incivility’s stress on the family. This research underlines the importance of stopping incivility before it starts so that the ripple effect of incivility does not impact the target’s family and then potentially crosses back over to inflict further damage for the target at work.

Author biographies

Merideth Ferguson is an Assistant Professor of management in the Hankamer School of Business at Baylor University. She earned her Ph.D. from the Owen Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt University. Her research focuses on coworker incivility, abusive supervision, and the work-family interface, with a particular interest in understanding how deviance affects an employee’s life beyond the workplace.
References


