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The Escalation of Incivility in the Light of Social Constructions that Conceal Inequalities

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***Abstract*—**The purpose of this article is to understand the dynamics of the increase in incivility through social relations (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc.), which hide inequalities in the form of treatment and opportunities within the organizational sphere. For this, we will examine works that address incivility at work, as well as studies that deviate from the *mainstream*, bringing more obscure organizational facets to light in connection with a critical approach to this issue. Next, some results of a bibliometric study shall be exposed, to analyze contributions connected to the theme and demonstrate gaps for future research. Then, models that facilitate reflection on the dynamics of violence shall be discussed. Finally, a broader concept of incivility in interpersonal relationships in the workplace shall be exposed considering the multiple approaches discussed.

***Keywords*—**Incivility, inequalities, organization reflections, preventing violence.

I. Introduction

INCIVILITY may be understood as a subtle micro-violence, which when occurring frequently in work routines can open the way for more harmful forms of violence. The individual, in contemporary work relations, is surrounded by an ideological process based on managerial assumptions, in which the other is often their continuous competitor. In this regard, uncivil acts become normal and even banal in an organizational routine, and to minimize them, irony, cynicism [10, p. 173], and even benevolent sexism (such as saying, "let me help you with this difficult work, darling" to enforce implicitly the inability of a woman to complete a task [15] may mask a lack of respect and consideration for others.

Letting organizations and managers 'wash their hands' of this issue is an error, which creates a catalyst scenario for daily violence arising in the work context, in communication failures and/or excessive competition. When there is no rapid intervention in a conflict, for example, the organization sends out a message that its values prioritize performance before the well-being of its employees.

II. Incivility: Different Versions

Reference [4, p. 455] explains that

> ". . . incivility involves acting rudely or discourteously, without regard for others, in violation of norms for respect in social interactions",

and workplace incivility represents

> ". . . acting with disregard for others in the workplace, in violations of workplace norms for respect"

The authors are cautious with regard to the question of intentionality, as such an issue is not transparent, i.e. it can vary according to interpretation, and as such, involves a subjective character.

Pearson et al. state that incivility can be very harmful to business, as cooperation and collaboration at work are drastically reduced, and this in turn impacts on customer relations [24]. Emotions and feelings experienced by employees in the aforementioned research were described using the words: depressed, down, disappointed, mood, in a funk, irritated, hurt, in a black cloud, etc.

The mark of incivility, considering the classic theory of Andersson and Pearson, is ambiguity of action, which can be deemed unintentional or intentional [4]. However, Callahan elaborates his theory considering that acts are intentional, even if this intention is not clearly formed [5].

Other authors discuss the organizational dark side, addressing issues traditionally forgotten, ignored or suppressed in Administration [21]. Lindebaum and Geddes, for example, develop a chain of thought based on the concept of moral anger, through a constructive aspect, which is seen as important to minimizing anti-ethical behavior in the workplace and perpetuated injustices [20].

For [20, p. 743], moral anger is defined as:

(i) an aroused emotional state stemming from
(ii) a primary appraisal of a moral standard violation that
(iii) impacts other more than oneself and
(iv) prompts corrective behavior intended to improve the social condition, even in the face of significant personal risk.

They affirm that moral anger encourages individuals to act in a reparative way towards others, i.e. with a focus on civility, so that their voice is heard rather than suppressed [20]. The theory can be illustrated in the case of Edward Snowden and his whistleblowing against the North American government, which led to a reconsideration of legislation that encourages and protects whistleblowers.

Another example is that of confidence, which is also seen as a 'poisoned chalice'. Reference [29] argues that anthropological literature on gift-giving widely demonstrates intentions from the most altruistic ('free gift') to sinister forms of manipulation. They [29] do not deny the positive meaning of trust, but they explore the complexity of the subject,

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showing that benign motives do not encompass every scenario. They also emphasize that the characteristics of trust are symbolic, private, social, and emotional.

In a wider context, in connection with public spaces, incivility is understood as public disorder which generates a sense of insecurity and fear in connection with visible disorder (graffiti on walls, beggars on public highways, lack of cleanliness on streets, dog waste, etc.) resulting in a reduced trust in social institutions that protect citizens [27]. Thus, a degraded environment tends to influence uncivil acts connected to public space in a behavioral process linked to mimicry.

Note that even incivility can represent a 'double edged sword', as ignoring others, for example, can be seen as a defense by those who ignore, and as an attack by those who are ignored. As [13, p. 5] state, behaviors (functional or disfunctional) need to be understood considering ". . . the intention, the motive, the context and the consequences".

Men and women do not experience violence in the same way and with the same intensity. For [28], gender as a category for analysis represents a commitment to including the oppressed in history, as well as the meaning and nature of this oppression. Furthermore, adding race and social class to the debate allows a better understanding of how social inequalities are woven. This is because uncivil acts, as well as the process whereby violence is escalated, are not neutral, i.e. social relations affect hostile behaviors.

Reference [1, p.151] warns that "the absence of sexuality, emotionality, and procreation in organizational logic and organizational theory is an additional element that both obscures and helps to reproduce the underlying gender relations". With regards to sexism and racism, it is necessary to consider contemporary situations, such as the immigration system [16]. In this way, questions of gender, race and class affect behaviors and organizational decisions. Incivility is not only selective, as [6] explains, but the escalation of incivility will be affected by the intersectionality identified by [2].

It is also important to expand this consideration and analyze other social variables that may mask inequalities such as: age, sexual orientation, religion, disability, physical appearance, etc. [26]. Physical appearance, for example, is an insidious factor of social discrimination [3]. Furthermore, the investigation must consider the context and also the historical panorama, i.e. each theme must be inter-connected and contextualized.

III. Bibliometry: Contributions and Gaps

Following the research in the databases ABI/INFORM Collective (1994-2016), Business Source Complete (1989-2016), Emerald (1999-2016) and SAGE Journals Online (1987-2016), 32 scientific articles were found that addressed incivility in the workplace. In relation to the nature of the studies, ten articles were theoretical, and 22 were theoretical-empirical. The primary conclusions of the articles are as:

- It is prudent that theory on incivility does not assume that norms of respect are always shared [22].
- Humor is seen as a modern mark for forms of discrimination, but also as a coping strategy used by victims [8].
- The negative effects between passive corrective leadership ("involves reacting to correct problems or waiting until the behavior has created larger issues", p. 422) and incivility in the workplace have a high potential for unleashing and promoting an escalated violence process [18].
- Manipulative behaviors by mentors are positively associated with incivility instigated by mentees [11].
- Interaction with uncivil customers increases levels of emotional exhaustion at work, reducing employees' capacity to be civil with customers [14].
- Cyber incivility is a daily stressor at work. Problems with digital communication (via e-mails), is a risk that can affect the escalation of interpersonal conflict at work [23].

With regards to indications for future research, it is important to consider antecedents of incivility, to undertake longitudinal research, to analyze incivility in the workplace in the light of different generations, to study how the dynamics between selective uncivil behaviors can affect career choice, to examine instigators, considering their thoughts, emotions and the context in which they are inserted.

IV. Models That Facilitate Reflection on Dynamics of Violence

When discussing the bullying, [9] talks of a gradual process that escalates and which in its initial phase is represented by types of indirect and discrete behavior. Reference [19] when describing the typical course of psychological terror, indicates that the first phase covers more veiled conflicts, 'misunderstandings', forming 'sparks' which cannot yet be characterized as mobbing at work. These sparks can be called incivilities, and it relates to a non-neutral concept, as [6] explains, by incorporating the action of individual cognitive and affective factors, the organizational factor and the social factor, in its multi-layered conceptual model.

The model of escalation proposed by [12] is composed of nine stages. In the initial phase, there are attempts to cooperate, but accidental errors generate tension and friction, even successive worsening of the conflict, which can culminate in the final phase, known as total destruction and suicide, in which the parties lose control of any 'limit' for the use of violence. According to [12], an incident can awaken negative feelings that lead to aggressive behaviors. In this regard, with each episode of conflict, the tendency is for the process to return, as the parties tend to simplify the problem, blaming the other party.

Another model aligned with the discussion is that of [30], which incorporates structural and procedural elements. The author explains that the escalation of conflict represents an increased frustration with someone, cognitively or affectively. De-escalation, meanwhile, consists of not adding to conflict or to reducing frustration on both sides. [30, p. 363] clarifies that

> "ways to escalate conflict management, in which spontaneity usually predominates, include magnifying an issue, attacking the adversary, and restricting the amount

of interaction. These are particularly characteristic of conflicts with strongly emotional aspects".

The escalation of conflict, for the author, disintegrates teams, generates high staff turnover, an increase in absenteeism, as well as other deleterious consequences.

In this way, the important role of incivility in understanding the worsening of the conflict process can be observed, as can the role of civility in efforts to de-escalate it. In the world of work, micro-violence is becoming increasingly naturalized, which maximizes the potential of the problem, as it creates a harmful environment susceptible to other forms of violence. Thus, the organization immersed in a given social context will tend to reflect it, so that incivility within the social sphere tends to be reproduced in an organizational sphere [7].

For [25, p. 139], *savoir-vivre* is composed of levels that comprise several functions, namely:

> "at a psychic level its role is to reaffirm and protect the I, at an interactional level, it facilitates the regulation of exchanges. And at a group level, it helps to consolidate ties"

In the view of the author, the rules and principles of *savoir-vivre* are strategies for prevention and protection, such as moderation, cooperation, and altruism. In this regard, they work to reduce violence. For her, "politeness is used to disarm a bomb" [25, p. 97].

V. Conclusion

Incivility in the workplace can be defined as rude and insensitive behaviors that violate the mutual norms established by the working group, which can be analyzed from the point of view of the agent who interprets it (as a victim, instigator or witness) within the work context. It is important to remember that a person can be a victim and instigator, in the same situation, and that the arguments for the behavior can be linked, not only to misconduct, but also to a response (through uncivil behavior) of a deception (tricks and manipulations) experienced - even if apparently civil.

Uncivil acts are not always random; however, incivility is not only selective, as the escalation of incivility will also be permeated by social relations (gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, etc.), as well as its de-escalation. This theoretical argumentation offers greater complexity to the issue and a more realistic view. Incivility is considered as a micro-violence which is not rarely underestimated, may result in other forms of violence. For this reason, proactive preventive and educational approaches are fundamental [6].

The theory of the escalation of incivility must be understood from a procedural perspective permeated by social relations that mask inequalities. In this regard, the idea of consubstantiality is important, as it relates to 'a mode of reading social reality', [17, p. 136] explains that ". . . it is not about doing a *tour* of all social relationships involved, one by one, but viewing the inter-sections and inter-penetrations that form a 'knot' at the heart of an individuality or a group". Thus, the issue deserves attention, as it represents possibilities for study connected to primary prevention and the beginning of violence, in order to reduce organizational damage. It also deserves attention through a critical reflection on the context in which the worker is immersed, as this may be a catalyst element of violence at work.

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