

Responding to rudeness: does instigator status and directness matter?

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SUMMARY

The current paper applies a biobehavioural model of workplace incivility to explore responses to rudeness within the veterinary context. Veterinarians and veterinary nurses ($n=132$) were asked to evaluate six fictional scenarios depicting two types of rudeness (direct versus indirect) across three instigators (clients, co-workers and senior colleagues). The findings indicated that direct rudeness (demeaning comments) was appraised more negatively than indirect rudeness (ignoring person). Responses varied across scenarios; direct rudeness was associated with reciprocation, exit, avoidance, discussion with manager and support seeking, whereas indirect rudeness was associated with affiliative and ignoring responses. There was a significant positive association between appraisal and confrontation, exit, avoidance, support seeking and reporting responses. The findings confirm the utility of the biobehavioural model of incivility response and build on this model in terms of variation in response selection according to directness and status effects. From a practical perspective the findings suggest that interventions to manage rudeness in veterinary practice should accommodate variation in rude behaviours and include tailored responses based on instigator.

KEYWORDS

Incivility, Status, Directness, Veterinary

Introduction

'It totally affects your day because you start to question was it me? Was it something I did? Is it my professionalism?' (Vet describing the impact of client rudeness; Irwin, Hall & Ellis, 2022a).

Workplace mistreatment is a broad concept, encompassing aggression, harassment, ostracism and incivility, all of which can have adverse consequences (including reduced wellbeing, job satisfaction and work performance, Yao, Lim, Guo et al., 2022) for the worker experiencing these behaviours. Within that broad umbrella, incivility can be distinguished from other forms of mistreatment via three key mechanisms; uncivil behaviours are perceived as minor, or low-level, non-physical acts (an example of an uncivil behaviour could be scowling at somebody, in contrast to an aggressive act such as physical intimidation); incivility can be ambiguous in terms of intent to harm (e.g. the uncivil act of not responding to someone during a meeting may be due to the instigator being distracted, in contrast mistreatment via undermining an employee to reduce success is clearly intentional) (Yao et al., 2022). Thirdly, incivility goes against workplace norms for appropriate or polite behaviour, meaning perception of incivility can vary across contexts and individuals (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Incivility can be either active / direct, described as a commission of disrespect (e.g. unpleasant comments, sarcasm), or passive / indirect, involving omission of respect (e.g. ignoring a request via email) (Yuan, Park & Sliter, 2020).

A recent meta-analysis reported incivility as a reliable, valid construct with impacts independent of other types of mistreatment, highlighting the need for a tailored approach to addressing uncivil

behaviours in the workplace (Yao et al., 2022). This is particularly important given the relatively subtle nature of incivility, increasing the risk of such behaviours being ignored at an organisational level, despite the associated negative ramifications (Cortina et al., 2017). Incivility appears inherent in the workplace, with approximately 98% of employees estimated to experience some form of incivility at work and 50% experiencing incivility at least once a week (Porath & Pearson, 2012). Despite this, there is relatively little research about the coping strategies used in response to incivility, or the extent to which these strategies are considered appropriate and / or effective across different job roles. The aim of the current study was to explore the likelihood of different responses to direct and indirect rudeness across three instigator types; client, co-worker and senior colleague, within the specific context of veterinary practice.

Incivility in veterinary practice

Veterinary staff are acknowledged as having a stressful occupation, one with high levels of suicidal ideation and burnout (Andela, 2020). Research indicates a range of psychosocial stressors within this environment, including long work hours, financial insecurity and, most relevant to the current paper, negative interactions with clients and co-workers, including management of unrealistic client expectations, and conflict with colleagues (Bartrum et al., 2009). More specifically, experiencing incivility from clients and co-workers can have an adverse impact on job satisfaction, and mental health, as well as increasing quitting intention and the risk of burnout of veterinary staff (Irwin, Silver-MacMahon & Wilcke, 2022b). The range of interactions necessary for veterinary work, with both clients and colleagues, combined with the potentially harmful impact of incivility, emphasise the need for further work examining incivility coping responses within this context.

Status

Cognitive appraisal theory describes incivility via a three-step process whereby the target assesses the situation to determine threat level and select the most appropriate response (Cortina & Magley, 2012). This encompasses appraisal of the potential for negative impact, consideration of potential responses and coping strategies, and evaluation of the potential interaction outcome (Cortina & Mageley, 2012). Social power, or where the instigator and target sit within the organisational hierarchy, has been suggested as a factor within this assessment. For example, Porath and Pearson (2012) report that targets of incivility who evaluate their status as higher than the instigator tend to react aggressively, whereas lower status victims may be more likely to withdraw. Demographic characteristics can influence both vulnerability to incivility, and the selection of a response or coping strategy. Specifically, women appear more likely to exit the interaction, and men more likely to respond aggressively (Cortina & Mageley, 2009). Within the veterinary context research indicates that veterinary nurses experience higher levels of incivility than veterinarians, with an associated risk of burnout as a result (Irwin et al., 2022b). Appraisal theory highlights the importance of understanding how individuals appraise and understand uncivil behaviours according to status – of both the instigator and the victim, since this will also impact their responses and the potential consequences of experiencing the behaviour.

Coping

Coping encompasses any actions or thought processes used to manage stressful situations. Targets of workplace incivility can utilise a range of coping responses, which differ across and within individuals (Cortina & Mageley, 2003). Passive strategies (such as conflict avoidance) tend to be used more frequently than active coping strategies (such as confrontation), with researchers suggesting this may be linked to the difficulties inherent in reporting a low-level and potentially ambiguous behaviour (Cortina & Mageley, 2009). Research suggests that both passive and active strategies may be ineffective in preventing future incivility, but that active strategies may support psychological forgiveness, helping the target move on from the incident (Herscovis et al., 2018).

Previous research with veterinary staff highlights a preference for utilising social support, and attempting to ignore uncivil behaviours, along with emphasising the importance of a supportive practice culture (Irwin et al., 2022a).

Cortina and colleagues (2021) recently produced a biobehavioural model of workplace incivility, which suggests that uncivil acts prompt appraisal, and a biological response from the victim. This biological reaction leads to a behaviour response, with potential options categorised across four quadrants: reciprocation, retreat, relationship repair and recruitment of support. Reciprocation and relationship repair both involve direct efforts to change the behaviour of the instigator, whereas retreat and recruitment of support encompass leaving the immediate situation. Moreover, reciprocation and retreat both reduce social connections and are likely to prolong the initial biological response (e.g. heightened adrenalin), whereas relationship repair and recruitment of support both involve increasing social connections (with the instigator or with others) and reducing the original biological response. The model seeks to advance study of incivility responses and provide avenues of exploration in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of each response type. The current paper applies this model to responses to incivility within the veterinary context, and across different instigators and forms of rudeness, in order to further our understanding of response options and coping mechanisms.

Study aims

The aim of the current vignette study was to investigate perception, appraisal and response to incivility within veterinary practice across multiple sources, rudeness type and job role.

Method

Participants

A total of 132 participants (111 female, mean age: 38.1yrs, mean years job experience: 7.4yrs) were recruited via social media and direct email invitation. The sample comprised of veterinary surgeons ($n = 76$), veterinary nurses ($n = 53$), and not stated ($n = 3$).

Questionnaire

The online questionnaire consisted of two main sections and was created using SNAP. The first section comprised questions relevant to demographic information, including job role, years of job experience, nationality, gender, age, practice status and practice focus.

The second section encompassed six vignettes, followed by a series of scales and items relevant to rudeness, appraisal and response. The scenarios were designed according to the experimental vignette method (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), whereby two main variables were manipulated: directness (indirect versus direct rudeness) and instigator status (client, co-worker, supervisor). The vignettes were drawn from previous research exploring rudeness experiences in veterinary practice (Irwin et al., 2022a; 2022b) and were checked by veterinary experts to ensure relevance and realism.

The vignettes manipulated the directness of the rudeness shown, with indirect incivility depicted as the instigator ignoring the victim, and direct incivility shown as demeaning comments related to work performance. The scenarios were created to show incivility originating with three different instigators: clients, co-workers or senior colleagues. The vignettes were presented in a randomised order using the randomise function within SNAP software. Following each vignette there were a series of quantitative items designed to investigate perceived rudeness level, appraisal and coping response. First, participants were presented with a single item: *If this behaviour happened in real-life would you consider the behaviour shown here to be rude?* with five response options from 1 –

not at all rude, to 5 – extremely rude. This was followed by a short scale designed to assess participant's appraisal of the depicted behaviour. The scale asks respondents to characterise their perception of behaviour: *If this situation occurred in real-life to what degree would you find it:* followed by six descriptors (e.g. offensive, annoying, frustrating) with five response options (from 1 – not at all, to 5 – extremely) (Cortina & Mageley, 2009). Next, participants were asked: *If this situation occurred in real-life how likely would you be to respond in the following ways?* This was followed by eight items, five of which were drawn from the Coping with Harassment questionnaire (CHQ, Cortina & Mageley, 2009) (e.g. 'ignore it', 'let the person know you didn't like their behaviour') together with three original items designed to reflect response options from the biobehavioural theory of response to workplace incivility (Cortina, Hershcovis & Clancy, 2021) which were not reflected within the CHQ (e.g. 'make a friendly overture').

Results

The mean score for each dependent variable was calculated (Table 1) across the six vignettes in order to gain an overview of the general pattern of results. These preliminary findings indicate that responses varied across the vignettes, with a general overview suggesting that direct rudeness tended to be appraised more negatively than indirect rudeness, though it was not always perceived as more rude.

Table 1: Mean scores (standard deviation) for perceived rudeness, appraisal and initial reported response to rudeness vignettes.

Variable	Client		Co-worker		Senior	
	Indirect	Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect	Direct
Rudeness level	4.08 (.86)	4.08 (.87)	3.26 (1.02)	4.27 (.76)	3.62 (1.04)	3.13 (1.05)
Appraisal	16.51 (4.45)	20.36 (5.20)	14.35 (4.38)	20.71 (5.23)	16.12 (5.20)	19.14 (5.25)
Friendly overture (<i>affiliative</i>)	2.78 (1.41)	2.67 (1.38)	2.38 (1.32)	2.00 (1.29)	2.84 (1.37)	2.15 (1.36)
Ignore it (<i>ignore</i>)	2.31 (1.28)	1.73 (1.10)	2.61 (1.32)	1.91 (1.06)	2.77 (1.22)	1.53 (1.07)
Let person know you didn't like their behaviour (<i>confront</i>)	2.82 (1.43)	2.70 (1.33)	2.40 (1.37)	3.45 (1.33)	2.19 (1.24)	2.13 (1.29)
Reciprocate (<i>reciprocate</i>)	1.11 (.34)	1.19 (.50)	1.17 (.56)	1.69 (1.17)	1.15 (.46)	1.19 (.55)
Leave situation (<i>exit</i>)	1.59 (1.11)	2.27 (1.35)	2.66 (1.39)	2.93 (1.41)	2.43 (1.25)	2.06 (1.30)
Try to avoid that person (<i>avoid</i>)	1.56 (.93)	2.91 (1.38)	1.65 (.95)	2.68 (1.44)	2.17 (1.28)	2.35 (1.33)
Talk to friend / family member (<i>support</i>)	2.93 (1.50)	3.65 (1.36)	2.49 (1.47)	3.58 (1.37)	3.02 (1.50)	3.88 (1.24)
Talk to senior colleague / manager (<i>discuss</i>)	2.64 (1.43)	3.94 (1.17)	1.99 (1.26)	3.38 (1.42)	2.33 (1.32)	2.97 (1.43)

Impact of directness and instigator status on reported rudeness level, appraisal and response.

A series of within subjects ANOVA (2 x directness, 3 x status) analyses were used to explore whether responses varied across vignettes ($p < .005$ was set as the significance level to ensure rigour when conducting multiple analyses). Results for each dependent variable can be viewed within Table 2.

Table 2: Within subjects ANOVA (2 x directness, 3 x status) for level of rudeness, appraisal and response.

Variable	Mean (SE)	Directness	Mean (SE)	Status of instigator	Interaction
Rudeness level	Indirect: 3.65 (.066) Direct: 3.84 (.061)	$F(1, 125): 7.853, p: .006$	Client: 4.08 (.066) Co-worker: 3.76 (.060) Senior: 3.38 (.073)	$F(2, 250): 52.338, p < .001$	$F(2, 250): 72.754, p < .001$
Appraisal	Indirect: 15.79 (.36) Direct: 20.14 (.39)	$F(1, 119): 205.258, p < .001$	Client: 18.58 (.41) Co-worker: 17.56 (.37) Senior: 17.75 (.39)	$F(2, 238): 5.732, p: .004$	$F(2, 238): 18.730, p < .001$
Affiliative	Indirect: 2.64 (.10) Direct: 2.26 (.09)	$F(1, 123): 18.518, p < .001$	Client: 2.71 (.11) Co-worker: 2.15 (.09) Senior: 2.28 (.10)	$F(2, 246): 18.007, p < .001$	$F(2, 246): 6.201, p: .002$
Ignore	Indirect: 2.57 (.09) Direct: 1.72 (.07)	$F(1, 120): 85.497, p < .001$	Client: 2.02 (.09) Co-worker: 2.26 (.09) Senior: 2.15 (.08)	$F(2, 240): 2.945, p: .055$	$F(2, 240): 8.110, p < .001$
Confront	Indirect: 2.47 (.10) Direct: 2.76 (.09)	$F(1, 120): 12.910, p < .001$	Client: 2.76 (.11) Co-worker: 2.92 (.10) Senior: 2.16 (.10)	$F(2, 240): 32.984, p < .001$	$F(2, 240): 23.949, p < .001$
Reciprocate	Indirect: 1.15 (.03) Direct: 1.36 (.05)	$F(1, 122): 19.044, p < .001$	Client: 1.15 (.03) Co-worker: 1.43 (.06) Senior: 1.17 (.04)	$F(2, 244): 17.698, p < .001$	$F(2, 244): 14.858, p < .001$
Exit	Indirect: 2.24 (.08) Direct: 2.42 (.09)	$F(1, 121): 3.728, p: .056$	Client: 1.93 (.09) Co-worker: 2.79 (.10) Senior: 2.25 (.09)	$F(2, 242): 36.323, p < .001$	$F(2, 242): 15.638, p < .001$
Avoid	Indirect: 1.78 (.08) Direct: 2.64 (.11)	$F(1, 119): 108.151, p < .001$	Client: 2.25 (.09) Co-worker: 2.11 (.09) Senior: 2.26 (.10)	$F(2, 238): 2.037, p: .133$	$F(2, 238): 31.672, p < .001$
Support	Indirect: 2.81 (.12) Direct: 3.69 (.11)	$F(1, 122): 126.796, p < .001$	Client: 3.28 (.12) Co-worker: 3.02 (.12) Senior: 3.46 (.11)	$F(2, 244): 14.343, p < .001$	$F(2, 244): 2.532, p: .082$
Discuss	Indirect: 2.33 (.09) Direct: 3.43 (.09)	$F(1, 122): 199.818, p < .001$	Client: 3.31 (.10) Co-worker: 2.69 (.10) Senior: 2.64 (.11)	$F(2, 244): 28.137, p < .001$	$F(2, 244): 8.111, p < .001$

* Grey squares denote non-significant results.

The findings indicate a consistent impact of directness on reported responses (excluding rudeness level and the exit responses), whereby direct rudeness was appraised more negatively than indirect rudeness and more likely to lead to a confront, reciprocation or avoidance response. This is with the caveat that the indicated likelihood for reciprocation was low (< 2) across all vignettes, suggesting that reciprocation as a response is not very likely in general within veterinary practice regardless of rudeness type. Direct rudeness was also more likely to prompt support seeking and discussion than indirect rudeness (Table 2). In contrast, indirect rudeness was linked to a greater likelihood of ignoring the behaviour,

The impact of status was more variable and often qualified by a significant interaction. For example, there was a significant main effect status, with a significant interaction, for making an affiliative (friendly) response (Table 2). The interaction (Table 1) indicates that although the likelihood of a friendly gesture was less likely in response to direct, versus indirect, rudeness across all three status types, this difference was least pronounced across the client vignettes; suggesting a friendly gesture is a potential response to client rudeness regardless of directness. The support response was the one exception to this, with a significant main effect of directness and status, with no significant interaction (Table 2). The pattern of results (Table 1) indicates that talking to a friend was more likely in response to direct versus indirect rudeness across all three status types. In addition, talking to a friend was more likely in response to senior colleague, than client rudeness, and more likely in response to both of those status types than co-worker rudeness.

Impact of job role on reported rudeness level, appraisal and response to incivility vignettes.

A series of one-way ANOVA's (used rather than t-tests to reduce the likelihood of type 1 error) were conducted to compare responses across job roles (veterinarian versus veterinary nurse) for all six vignettes.

There were no significant differences across job role for perception of rudeness, appraisal or any of the response types excluding one significant difference for the vignette depicting indirect rudeness from a senior staff member. For that vignette there was a significant difference in the reported likelihood of letting the person know you didn't like their behaviour, with veterinarians less likely (M: 1.92, sd: 1.1), than veterinary nurses (M: 2.65, sd: 1.35) to report this response ($F(1, 122): 11.010, p:.001$).

Associations between variables

A correlation matrix was developed to examine the associations between the key dependent variables across the six vignette conditions (Table 3). The results indicate a consistent positive association between rudeness level and negative emotional reaction across all six scenario. There are also fairly consistent positive relations between rudeness level, appraisal and likelihood of confrontation, exit, avoidance, support seeking and reporting (with some variability across scenario types). There was a lack of a consistent relationship between rudeness, appraisal and affiliative, ignore or reciprocate responses.

Table 3: Pearson correlations illustrating associations between rudeness level, appraisal and responses across vignette conditions.

Vignette	Rude/ appraise	App- raise	affiliative	ignore	confront	Recipr- ocate	exit	avoid	support	report
Client	Rudeness	.620**	.010	.128	.236*	.150	.251**	.203*	.312**	.263**
indir	Appraisal		-.021	.097	.163	.185*	.267**	.300**	.370**	.395**
Co- worker	Rudeness	.670**	-.011	-.302**	.367**	-.110	.214*	.241**	.222*	.463**
indir	Appraisal		-.004	-.132	.260**	-.178	.281**	.482**	.282**	.281**
Senior	Rudeness	.791**	-.011	-.178	.311**	.044	.399**	.330**	.495**	.359**
indir	Appraisal		.022	-.048	.220*	.092	.494**	.449**	.456**	.291**
Client	Rudeness	.644**	-.182*	-.052	.457**	.202*	.272**	.216*	.336**	.183*
direct	Appraisal		-.186*	-.013	.308**	.235*	.254**	.354**	.402**	.288**
Co- worker	Rudeness	.693**	.053	.131	.235*	.039	.111	.133	.326**	.292**
direct	Appraisal		.016	.101	.062	.126	.219*	.317**	.382**	.208*
	Rudeness	.664**	.046	-.023	.369**	.167	.407**	.433**	.244**	.167

Senior direct	Appraisal		.009	.017	.250**	.248**	.479**	.572**	.366**	.197*
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**significant at <.005, * significant at <.05, grey squares denote non-significant correlations

Discussion

The analysis reported above indicates that the selection of response will vary according to the status of the instigator and the nature of the rude behaviour. Direct rudeness, in this case demeaning comments, was appraised more negatively (e.g. considered more offensive) than indirect rudeness, and prompted an increased reported likelihood of the victim responding by being rude themselves, confronting the behaviour, exiting the situation, avoiding the instigator in the future, seeking support from friends and discussing the behaviour with a senior colleague. Indirect rudeness, in this case ignoring someone, was associated with an increased likelihood of a friendly response (e.g. a smile) or ignoring the behaviour. Status effects were quite variable, and qualified by interactions, but general trends suggest that a friendly gesture was more likely in response to client, as opposed to co-worker or senior colleague rudeness. Seeking support was most likely in response to direct rudeness from a senior colleague, and discussing the incident with a senior colleague was most likely in response to direct client rudeness. The reported responses to the vignettes did not vary significantly across job roles. Finally, the correlation matrix indicates that negative appraisals of rudeness are associated with confrontation, exit, avoidance, support seeking and reporting responses.

The results build on the biobehavioural theory put forward by Cortina and colleagues (2021) by suggesting that selection of an appropriate response to rude behaviour at work can be influenced by the status of the person engaging in the behaviour, as well as the nature of the behaviour itself. Based on their theory of biological response, it is possible that direct rudeness prompts a heightened biological reaction in comparison to indirect rudeness (a suggestion supported by the significantly more negative appraisals of direct rudeness, and the association between rudeness level and appraisal), increasing the potential likelihood of the associated ‘fight or flight’ response, and producing behaviours associated with reciprocation (fight) and retreat (flight). This heightened response may also explain the increased likelihood of seeking support, which can be interpreted as seeking out comfort and support, which may soothe and reduce the biological reaction. Indirect rudeness, linked to a reduced biological reaction, enables relationship repair to be attempted via a friendly overture. A lower biological reaction may also make ignoring the behaviour easier.

Within the incivility literature, appraisal of uncivil behaviours has consistently been highlighted as an important aspect of understanding incivility within the workplace. Researchers emphasise that rudeness can produce an emotional reaction within the target, but that this emotional appraisal should be relatively mild to match the low intensity of rudeness as a mistreatment construct (Cortine & Mageley, 2009). The current results suggest that not all rude behaviours should be considered equal, with direct rudeness prompting more negative appraisals (indicating a higher level of frustration, annoyance, upset etc.) than indirect rudeness. As such organisational interventions may need to encompass guidance about the variety of rude behaviours that might be experienced, along with tailored support mechanisms according to directness.

Veterinary practice is based on successful interactions with clients, as such it is perhaps not surprising that participants within the current study showed a preference for making a friendly overture when the instigator was a client. This may be partially explained through the mechanism of emotional labour, where workers within service industries – reliant on client business – are expected to present positive emotions (service with a smile) to clients (Yagil, 2021). Such overtures could be potentially harmful to mental health, with research indicating that suppression of negative emotions, particularly when combined with portraying false positive emotions, can reduce

employee wellbeing (Goldberg et al., 2007; Irwin et al., 2022b). However, this type of affiliative response might also be aimed at reducing the cause of the instigator's rudeness, and as such may comprise a practical approach to managing client emotions (Irwin et al., 2022a). Similarly, ignoring rude behaviour from clients has been discussed within previous research as a mechanism for maintaining professionalism and maintaining a calm façade (Irwin et al., 2022a). It is important to raise awareness of the effort involved in such mechanisms, with support provided for veterinary staff following such interactions.

The findings confirm support seeking as a popular response to the experience of incivility, regardless of the status of the instigator. Support seeking has been previously highlighted as a frequently used response by veterinary staff (Irwin et al., 2022a; 2022b), enabling the victim of the behaviour to 'let off steam' by discussing the incident with colleagues, as well as gaining empathy and the benefit of insight into shared experiences. Although discussion with a senior colleague might produce many of the same benefits, this response appeared more frequent when dealing with client as opposed to colleague rudeness. It is unclear from the current results why this might be the case but may relate to difficulties in reporting a relatively low-level behaviour using official channels highlighted by Cortina and Mageley (2009). However, given the emphasis on leader commitment to professional behaviour as a mechanism for managing unprofessional behaviours (including incivility) within healthcare research (Hickson et al., 2007), this aspect of responding to incivility may benefit from further research.

Limitations

The current study is based on self-reported responses to fictional scenarios, and as such may not represent the full range of responses seen in real-world practice. In addition, this data is primarily subjective, and as such future research should look at gathering objective data (such as physiological reactions to rudeness and coping mechanisms) to validate this pattern of results. Finally, the sample is representative of veterinary staff from the UK and Ireland and as such the results may not generalise beyond that population and geographical location.

Conclusion

The findings confirm the utility of the biobehavioural model of incivility response and builds on this model to point to variation in response selection according to the directness of rudeness shown, and the status of the instigator. From a practical perspective the findings suggest that interventions to manage rudeness in veterinary practice should accommodate variation in rude behaviours and include tailored responses based on instigator. In addition, it is important to recognise the value of support for victims of rude behaviour, particularly where the victim may have had to manage their emotional response.

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