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# Missed, Dissed, or Dismissed—then Assist? How Identity Impacts Bystander Responses to Workplace Mistreatment

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## **Missed, Dissed, or Dismissed...then Assist?**

### **How Identity Impacts Bystander Responses to Workplace Mistreatment**

*“We don’t see things as they are; we see them as we are.”*

-Anaïs Nin, American-Cuban-French author (1961)

Virtually all employees have experienced or witnessed incivility at work (Porath, 2016; Porath & Pearson, 2013), a prevalent form of problematic mistreatment that triggers negative consequences for targets, observers, and organizations (Hershcovis, 2011; Schilpzand et al., 2016; Triana et al., 2019). Put simply, incivility refers to “rude, condescending, and ostracizing acts that violate workplace norms of respect, but otherwise [may] appear mundane” (Cortina et al., 2017: 299). However, incivility is not simply a general phenomenon; it often becomes selective—and potentially discriminatory—when motivated by targets’ social group membership (e.g., sex or race; Cortina, 2008; Cortina et al., 2013, 2021).

A challenge of selective incivility and similar forms of subtle, covert, interpersonal, or modern discrimination lies with its ambiguity: these subtle acts of disrespect and discrimination in social interactions are often low-intensity, not prohibited by law, and can be enacted by egalitarian-minded individuals, making it difficult to determine if the acts are indeed biased or discriminatory (Cortina, 2008; Cortina et al., 2013; Ellemers & Barreto, 2015; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Hebl et al., 2020; Sue, 2010). Such ambiguity complicates the attributions made in relation to such acts; whereas one party (e.g., the target) may experience an act as discrimination, another party (e.g., a bystander) may interpret the same act as benign.

Bystanders represent a fruitful avenue of study because it is common to witness potentially discriminatory encounters at work (Li et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2008; Miner & Cortina, 2016; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015; Reich et al., 2021). Compared with targets, bystanders can be as affected—if not more so—by mistreatment (see Dhanani et al.,

2018, for a review) and are also often more effective as allies and intervention agents (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008; Czopp et al., 2006; Good et al., 2012).

Given the importance of bystanders and the attributional leeway associated with selective incivility, we sought to test if group identification, namely, one's awareness and value of one's group membership (Tajfel, 1982), affects bystanders' responses to mistreatment. The social identity approach argues that an individual's self-concept is partly derived from their social group memberships (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979); group memberships also have motivational implications, because people derive self-esteem from their association with positive identities (Ashforth, 2001; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005, Turner et al., 1994). In other words, identification can serve as a source of motivation that shapes our cognitive processes, forming a lens through which we interpret information, particularly among individuals who strongly identify with their group (Turner et al., 1994). We propose that bystanders with stronger organizational identification are *less* likely to perceive incivility towards female colleagues as discrimination, and thus, less likely to intervene, but female bystanders with stronger gender identification and all bystanders with stronger feminist identification are *more* likely to do so.

By integrating the theoretical traditions of the social identity approach (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005) with selective incivility theory (Cortina, 2008), we contribute to modern discrimination research by illustrating how bystanders' social identities shape their perceptions of and responses to subtle gender discrimination at work. We also provide a more comprehensive picture of bystanders' responses to others' mistreatment. Finally, we offer a theoretical and empirical contribution to the (selective) incivility and identification literatures by using a two-wave, fully crossed panel design (Study 1;  $N = 336$ ) followed by two experimental replications and extensions (Studies 2-3;  $Ns = 410-504$ ). In doing so, our work also complements

the largely cross-sectional literatures on organizational identification, (selective) incivility, and subtle discrimination (see Ashforth et al., 2008; Dhanani et al., 2018; Hebl et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016; Schilpzand et al., 2016, for reviews).

Our results show that subtle, ambiguous acts of incivility and interpersonal discrimination are not always “missed,” nor does it seem to be over-reported by highly gender-identified women who may feel “dissed” on behalf of their gender. Rather, employees who highly identify with their organizations are more likely to “dismiss” their colleagues’ experiences of (selective) incivility and discrimination at work; but, once recognizing treatment as discriminatory, these employees are also more likely to “assist” or intervene. Similarly, employees who highly identify as feminists are more likely to recognize *and* assist in the wake of interpersonal mistreatment towards women at work. Thus, as echoed in the opening quote, employee organizational and feminist identification—but not women’s gender identification—are lenses through which bystanders view and respond to female colleagues’ workplace mistreatment, predicting their remaining passive witnesses or active allies.

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