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Customer incivility and employee well-being: Testing the moderating effects of meaning, perspective taking and transformational leadership

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Abstract

This study investigated factors that influence the relationship between experiencing customer incivility and the psychological well-being of employees in the service industry (N=215). Using the cognitive appraisal theory of stress, we identified and tested three factors that may buffer employees from the negative effects of customer incivility: finding meaning in work, perspective taking, and transformational leadership of supervisors. Transformational leadership was found to moderate the relationship between customer incivility and employee well-being. Meaning and perspective taking did not moderate the relationship between customer incivility and employee well-being, but did have a positive association with employee well-being. These findings contribute to the literature on customer incivility and suggest that organization-based resources that influence both primary and secondary appraisal, such as transformational leadership, are useful in buffering the harmful employee outcomes related to customer incivility.

Keywords: customer incivility; psychological well-being; transformational leadership; meaningful work; perspective taking

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Introduction

For many individuals working in service industries, interaction with customers is a daily occurrence. There is growing awareness and research support showing that negative customer-employee interactions often have harmful implications for service employee well-being (for example; Payne & Webber, 2006). Research has begun to uncover moderators of the customer mistreatment – service employee well-being relationship; this research implicitly aims to improve employee well-being, retain employees and improve customer service performance. Our study adds to this growing body of work through an investigation of three positive factors that may buffer employees' negative experiences of customer incivility: finding meaning in work, perspective taking, and transformational leadership of supervisors.

Our study is theoretically grounded in the cognitive appraisal theory of stress (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Cognitive appraisal is defined as “the process through which the person evaluates whether a particular encounter with the environment is relevant to his or her well-being, and if so, in what ways” (Folkman et al., 1986, p. 992). This evaluation process includes primary appraisal (determining whether or not an event is threatening) and secondary appraisal (determining whether or not one has the resources to cope with the threat or to overcome potential harm). Coping, within secondary appraisal, refers to an individual's “cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources” (Folkman et al., 1986, p. 993)

and functions to either alter the stressful environment or regulate negative emotions from stress.

According to cognitive appraisal theory, primary and secondary appraisals converge to help an individual determine if an event is: 1) irrelevant, 2) harmful and/or threatening, or 3) challenging (Marchiondo, 2012; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). We argue that the moderators in this study encourage customer service employees to appraise customer incivility as challenging, instead of harmful. Given the ambiguous nature of customer incivility, cognitive appraisal theory explains how the potentially negative impacts of incivility rest upon how one perceives and appraises incivility and the subsequent perceived ability to cope. Cognitive appraisal theory has been used to ground previous research on incivility. For example, Kern and Grandey (2009) argue that incivility's low-intensity and unclear motivation make factors influencing appraisal critical for understanding incivility's effects and processes.

The moderators we examine have tended to be associated with positive outcomes in past research. Taking this positive focus (Luthans, 2002) on negative customer interaction enables us to examine how employees may become resilient to negative work interactions. In this study we focus on the experience of customer incivility and how its negative impacts may be buffered by experiencing work as meaningful, by increased ability to take the perspective of the client or customer, and by the perceived level of transformational leadership of the supervisor. The main contribution of this study is to empirically test whether these variables moderate the relationship between experienced customer incivility and employee well-being.

Customer incivility and employee well-being

The most widely cited definition of workplace incivility comes from Andersson and Pearson's (1999) seminal work on the possible "spiraling" effects of ongoing, negative workplace interactions: "Workplace incivility is 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" (p. 457). Workplace incivility is distinct from other types of interpersonal mistreatment, such as aggression or bullying, and it is much more likely to be experienced in the workplace than overt hostility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Incivility can be conceptualized as a type of daily hassle (Sliter, Jex, Wolford, & McInnerney, 2010). Daily hassles are minor stressors that are experienced on a daily basis and negatively impact individual well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The low-intensity and frequency of incivility make it a particular type of daily hassle (e.g., Sliter et al., 2010). Research has shown that daily hassles often have a more negative health impact than singular devastating events (Ivancevich, 1986). Customer incivility, as a specific daily hassle, similarly can have negative impacts on employee well-being.

Much of the workplace incivility research has focused on the effects of incivility from sources within the organization (e.g., Cortina & Magley, 2009). Workplace incivility has been associated with decreases in physical health and increases in turnover intentions (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). Incivility from customers, however, is unique because of the social positioning of the employee in service interactions and the frequent nature of these interactions. Customer service employees interact with customers more often than colleagues or managers, and are often trained to accept that the customer is

always right (Grandey, Kern & Frone, 2007; Wilson & Holmvall, 2013). Furthermore, customer service interactions are often anonymous, and it is likely that this anonymity contributes to the likelihood for incivility to occur (Grandey et al., 2007). In this study, we aimed to capture a broad notion of customer incivility, encompassing both low-intensity verbal abuse and general rudeness as parts of the ongoing daily hassles service employees may experience.

Few studies have directly examined the impact of customer incivility on employees. However, the emerging research suggests that customer incivility is associated with turnover intentions, psychological strain, reduced job satisfaction (Wilson & Holmvall, 2013) and emotional exhaustion (Kern & Grandey, 2009). Sliter et al. (2010) found that customer incivility was negatively related to customer service performance, which highlights the impact of customer incivility on performance quality. Similarly, Van Jaarsveld, Walker and Skarlicki (2010) found that incivility from customers could lead employees to retaliate and act uncivil toward the customer. In sum, customer incivility is a significant problem for the service industry. The negative effects of customer incivility are costly for the individual and the organization in terms of reduced employee performance, increased turnover, and increased stress (Porath & Pearson, 2013).

Cognitive appraisal and moderating factors

Research has identified moderating factors that can buffer or exacerbate the negative impacts of customer incivility. Using cognitive appraisal theory and the general stress model as a framework, Kern and Grandey (2009) found that employees of racial minority who had a central racial identity were more likely to suffer from emotional

exhaustion when experiencing customer incivility. The ambiguous nature of incivility, in this context, allowed for incivility to be perceived as an intentional personal attack for those who filtered harmful information “through the lens of their racial group” (p. 54). In other words, participants with strong racial identity cognitively appraised incivility as threatening and ‘took it personally’ based on their perception of the customer’s motivation. In contrast, Sliter (2012) took a positive approach and found that work engagement and empathy reduced exhaustion stemming from incivility in firefighters’ interactions with victims. Sliter (2012) argued that whether or not incivility is harmful to employees depends on individual perception. In the context of his study, he proposed that firefighters who were high on work engagement or empathy were more likely to perceive incivility as a victim’s response to their own difficult situation. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that variables influencing cognitive appraisal processes can moderate the customer incivility – employee well-being relationship.

The relationship between incivility’s negative outcomes and perception makes cognitive appraisal theory useful in explaining why certain factors may allow employees to be resilient to incivility. Cognitive appraisal theory suggests that when individuals’ appraise events as less stressful and threatening, fewer negative outcomes are likely to occur (Folkman et al., 1986). Folkman et al. (1986) suggest that primary and secondary appraisals “converge to determine whether the person-environment transaction is primarily threatening (containing the possibility of harm or loss) or challenging (holding the possibility of mastery or benefit)” (p. 993). Although the majority of research has focused on how negative appraisals of events can lead to stress, Sliter’s (2012) work demonstrates the utility of taking a positive approach. As Sliter (2012) notes,

investigating positive buffering factors is relatively rare, and identifying these positive factors is a first step in taking positive interventions in customer service workplaces.

The moderators investigated in this study may influence perceptions of customer incivility through changing primary and secondary appraisal processes and increasing employees' resiliency to the challenge of customer incivility. We propose that meaning, perspective taking, and transformational leadership are positive factors that allow employees to distance themselves from customer incivility and appraise it as something that is not threatening or intentionally harmful. Instead, these resources allow employees to find the challenge and potential benefit in incivility and make them resilient to its negative effects. These factors may also help employees cope with any stress they do feel from incivility, and thereby make it less likely that the experience of customer incivility has negative impacts on their well-being. These theorized processes are outlined in more detail in the following sections.

Meaningful work as a moderator

Meaningful work is defined as "the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards" (May, Gilson & Harter, 2004, p. 11). It has been argued that people are intrinsically driven to find meaning in life events (Baumeister, 1991) and this drive applies in the work domain. Using cognitive appraisal theory and empirical evidence, we propose that meaningful work may buffer the potentially negative impacts of customer incivility on employee well-being. Although there has been little research on meaningful work as a moderator, previous work on this construct suggests that it influences primary and secondary appraisals of incivility in a positive way.

Ascribing positive meaning to work could help foster employees' ability to see customer incivility as a challenge versus as a threat, and make it more likely that employees will use emotion-focused coping when dealing with customer incivility. Both of these responses would lessen the likelihood that experiencing customer incivility would lead to lowered well-being. For instance, an employee who finds meaning in his or her work may internally re-frame an uncivil encounter with a customer as an opportunity to learn new skills, and as a challenge to overcome, versus as a threat. The employee may also see the situation as a chance to help a troubled customer and might derive positive emotions from this regulation. Instead of customer incivility having a negative effect, employees who find meaning in their work may perceive the experience of incivility from customers as a chance to master their customer service skills in a difficult environment (Folkman et al., 1986).

Empirical results support the potential for finding meaning in work to buffer service employees from the negative effects of experiencing incivility. Finding meaning in work has been shown to increase employee resistance to stressful work events. Britt, Adler and Bartone (2001), in a study of soldiers, emphasized how meaningful work can increase employee resiliency. Individuals in their study who found meaning in their work were likely to derive benefits from a stressful peacekeeping mission (Britt et al., 2001). Finding meaning in work was also related to context. For instance, Britt et al. (2001) found that soldiers who witnessed high levels of destruction on the job would find more meaning in the work as the destruction was "likely seen as reinforcing the justification" for their mission (p. 61). Similarly, Shrira, Palgie, Ben-Ezra and Shmotkin (2011) found that the related construct of finding meaning in life was most strongly related to

subjective well-being when adversity or threats are high. In the context of our study, we expect that employees who find meaning in their work will experience a buffering effect when customer incivility increases.

Theory and empirical findings suggest that meaningful work has the potential to moderate the relationship between experiencing customer incivility and employee well-being by mitigating the level of harm an individual perceives from customer incivility.

Hence we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Meaning will moderate the relationship between customer incivility and psychological well-being, such that the negative relationship between customer incivility and psychological well-being will be weaker for those who find more meaning in work.

Perspective taking as a moderator

Perspective taking is defined as “the ability to understand how a situation appears to another person and how that person is reacting cognitively and emotionally to the situation” (Johnson, 1975, p. 241). We conceptualize perspective taking as potentially influencing primary and secondary appraisals of customer incivility. Similar to meaningful work, current research has paid little attention to the role of perspective taking as a moderator of the relationship between customer incivility and employee well-being. We propose, however, that perspective taking will buffer the negative impacts of customer incivility on employee well-being by influencing how employees perceive and cope with incivility. Because customer incivility is ambiguous in intent, we suggest that taking the perspective of the customer is significant in buffering the negative impacts of incivility on employee well-being by clarifying perceived intent and potentially improving the situation through the response the employee makes to the uncivil customer.

In terms of primary appraisal, perspective taking should theoretically help employees appraise customer incivility in a non-threatening way. The ability of an employee to put themselves 'in the customer's shoes' would allow for customer service employees to attribute incivility to a customer's external situation versus to themselves personally. An employee who is high in perspective taking could attribute rudeness to a customer having a bad day, for instance, and would not appraise the situation as threatening. In contrast, an employee who is low on perspective taking could potentially attribute customer incivility to themselves. If an employee takes customer incivility 'personally', the customer incivility could feel like a personal attack instead of a function of the customer's personality or circumstance. Thus, the likelihood that customer incivility is cognitively appraised as harmful would be buffered by the ability of the employee to relate to the customer and to perceive the situation from the customers' perspective.

The secondary appraisal process is also relevant because it concerns whether an individual perceives there to be a way to cope with the threatening situation. In this sense, perspective taking could prove useful in a customer service context by increasing the likelihood that employees would empathize with hostile customers as opposed to reciprocating negative behaviour (Batson, Early & Salvarani, 1997). Perspective taking is an effective problem-focused coping strategy because it helps the employee to narrow in on what the customer's underlying problem may be and whether their service can help alleviate the situation. In other words, if the employee feels threatened by customer incivility, taking the perspective of the customer helps them cope in terms of taking the next step and determining what the customer may need from them. Taking a helpful stance may in turn act to diffuse the customer's negative treatment of the employee. In

sum, adopting the perspective of the customer would allow for the employee to negotiate and work with the customer, and would potentially lead to individual feelings of mastery from coping with this potential threat in a problem-focused way (Folkman et al., 1986).

The related construct of empathy has been shown to moderate the relationship between incivility and exhaustion (Sliter, 2012). As Sliter (2012) notes “the empathetic person would help despite this incivility, and might not perceive this incivility as a stressor, which would decrease the likelihood of experiencing strain” (p. 28). Sliter’s (2012) argument illustrates the potential for perspective taking, as a related construct, to encourage employees to (1) perceive incivility as non-threatening and as a response to a customer’s own unique situation, and (2) to help the customer despite the incivility, which may in turn mitigate the incivility and lead to positive outcomes for the individual employee. Furthermore, these processes may come together to increase the confidence of the employee and facilitate further positive coping. Taking theoretical arguments and empirical evidence into consideration, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Perspective taking will moderate the relationship between customer incivility and psychological well-being, such that the negative relationship between customer incivility and psychological well-being will be weaker for those who are higher in perspective taking.

Transformational leadership as a moderator

Leadership is an important factor affecting employees’ well-being, and studies have illustrated that supervisors influence how followers feel about work (Gilbreath & Benson, 2004; Van Dierendonck, Haynes, Borrill & Stride, 2004). A comprehensive review of leadership literature found that enhancing leadership through developmental initiatives is a cost-effective way to improve employee well-being, decrease stress, and increase workplace performance (Kelloway & Barling, 2010). This review also illustrated

that many of these initiatives focused on developing transformational leadership skills (Kelloway & Barling, 2010). Transformational leadership has an abundance of positive financial and attitudinal outcomes (e.g. Barling, Weber & Kelloway, 1996; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). It is defined in terms of four major components: individualized consideration (supporting and developing employees), idealized influence (also called charisma; enacting behaviors that are ‘ideal’ to organizational functioning as a role model), intellectual stimulation (encouraging followers to think about problems in new ways), and inspirational motivation (developing and communicating an organizational vision; e.g., Bass, 1998). We propose that transformational leadership influences both the primary and secondary appraisal processes of customer incivility by (1) fostering employees’ ability to perceive customer incivility as a challenge with potential benefits for them within the organization, and (2) assuring employees that they have the resources (or indeed providing resources) to cope with this challenge by encouraging emotion-focused and problem-focused coping.

Theoretically, the dimensions of transformational leadership have the potential to impact the primary appraisal process of employees. A leader who exhibits high inspirational motivation may encourage employees to re-frame the experience of customer incivility such that employees see dealing with incivility as contributing to a greater goal in line with a compelling vision. In contrast, employees who do not have a transformational leader may not have the same motivation to influence their primary appraisal process in this way and they may be more likely to appraise incivility as threatening.

Transformational leaders are also likely to foster emotion-focused and problem-focused coping within the secondary appraisal process. The intellectual stimulation dimension of transformational leadership could enable employees to develop new and creative ways to cope with the challenges associated with uncivil customer interactions. Finding creative ways to cope with customer incivility would be a problem-focused coping process, making the experience of customer incivility an opportunity to increase skills and to solve organizational problems. Although there may not be a true ‘solution’ to uncivil customers, a transformational leader who uses intellectual stimulation may encourage employees to ‘think outside the box’ about customer incivility and find creative ways to lessen its negative impacts, such as facilitating supportive team structures to cope with the problem. These increases in problem solving skills could also increase employee self-efficacy in dealing with customer incivility.

Transformational leaders may also encourage emotion-focused coping by simply being a ‘shoulder to cry on’ when employees feel overwhelmed by customer incivility. The individual consideration component of transformational leadership includes leader behaviors that are supportive of employees, such as taking individual needs into account when making organizational decisions. Transformational leaders who enact individual consideration often sacrifice their own needs (Arnold & Loughlin, 2010), and develop employees based on employees’ unique progress within their work roles. An employee who has this type of support from their leader would likely feel an emotional connection with their leader and would be comfortable discussing how customer incivility impacts them. Individual consideration would allow employees to use emotion-focused coping in terms of simply being aware of an organizational support in the form of a leader, and

using that support to cope in ways that help to buffer the negative outcomes of customer incivility.

Empirical evidence supports the potential of transformational leadership to buffer negative outcomes for employees, such as decreasing feelings of alienation (Sarros, Tanewski, Winter, Santora & Densten, 2002), depression, job strain, and perceptions of stress (Kelloway & Barling, 2010; Van Dierendonck et al., 2004). These empirical findings indicate that transformational leadership may act as a coping resource in that it lessens work demands and mitigates negative outcomes for employees. Transformational leadership has also been found to have positive moderating effects. For example, transformational leadership moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and work commitment in a positive way (Cole & Bedeian, 2007).

Overall, evidence suggests that transformational leadership may act as an effective buffering mechanism for employees during primary and secondary appraisal processes; challenging employees, offering feedback, support, and creating a collective sense of responsibility through a shared vision, reduces the negative effects of customer incivility on employee well-being by encouraging employees to reframe perceptions of customer incivility as a part of the job and a positive challenge. Hence we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: Transformational leadership will moderate the relationship between customer incivility and psychological well-being, such that the negative relationship between customer incivility and psychological well-being will be weaker for those who perceive their supervisor to be high in transformational leadership.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through StudyResponse, a non-profit organization that links researchers to participants willing to take part in research studies (<http://www.studyresponse.net/>). To mitigate issues related to common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), data was collected at two separate times. At Time 1 our survey included measures of independent variables (customer incivility), control variables (negative affectivity and gender) and one moderator (transformational leadership). At Time 2, one month later, measures of two moderators (meaning and perspective taking) as well as the outcome (psychological well-being) were collected.

At Time 1, 327 individuals identified as customer service employees were invited to participate. 231 individuals responded at Time 1 for an initial response rate of 71%. 225 individuals who responded at Time 1 were invited to participate at Time 2 (6 individuals who had responded at Time 1 had become inactive in the StudyResponse database in the intervening time). Of these 225, we received 215 completed responses (response rate = 96%). The final sample for this study therefore consisted of 215 customer service employees.

The percentage of females in the final sample was 48%. The average age was 39.9 years (range 25-69). The majority reported dealing with clients or customers (85.6%), and some respondents dealt with patients (9.8%). A small percentage (4.2%) reported dealing with other types of stakeholders in their interactions (e.g., students, donors, human resources dealing with employees). A wide range of industries was represented including, for example, retail, food services, banking, entertainment, construction, manufacturing, not-for profit, government, healthcare, and education.

Measures

All measures used in this study have been utilized and validated in previous research.

Customer incivility was measured at time 1 with three items from the Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale (ICAWS) (Spector & Jex, 1998). The rating scale of 1 (less than once a month) to 5 (several times per day) was used. Items were: “How often do customers, clients or patients yell at you at work,” “Do you get into arguments at work with customers, clients or patients,” and “Are customers, clients or patients rude to you at work.” Reliability was acceptable with an alpha of .88.

Transformational leadership was measured at time 1 with seven items from Carless, Wearing and Mann (2000). Participants were asked to rate how frequently their manager engages in various transformational behaviours on a scale of 1 (rarely or never) to 5 (frequently, if not always). Examples of items are “Communicates a clear and positive vision of the future” and “Encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questions assumptions.” The reliability of this scale was good with .95 Cronbach’s alpha.

Meaning was measured at time 2 with three items from Spreitzer (1995) which asked participants to rate the extent to which they agreed with statements related to how they felt about their work role. Examples of items are “The work I do is very important to me” and “The work I do is meaningful to me.” Reliability was good as Cronbach’s alpha was .95.

Perspective taking was measured at time 2 with seven items used in previous research by Axtell et al. (2007). Participants rated how true each item was for them based on a five point rating scale (1= not true at all through 5 = true to a very large extent [most of the time]). At .93 alpha was acceptable. Item examples are: “I try to imagine how things look

from the customer's perspective" and "I try to imagine myself as a customer in a similar situation."

Psychological well-being was measured a time 2 using the twelve items from the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1972; Mullarkey, Wall, Warr, Clegg, & Stride, 1999). We reverse coded the negatively worded items such that higher scores on this measure reflect better overall well-being. Participants rated on a scale of 1 (never) through 4 (all the time) how often they had experienced specific feelings within the last three months. Examples of items are: "Have you recently been able to concentrate on whatever you are doing?" and "Have you recently lost much sleep over worry? (reverse coded)." Alpha was acceptable at .87.

Control variables We controlled for gender (measured at time 1 - male or female), and negative affectivity in our analyses. Negative affectivity was measured at time 1 with 10 items from the PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Reliability for this measure was .96. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they feel certain emotions in general on a scale of 1 (not at all) through 7 (very much). Examples of items are "distressed," "afraid," and "nervous."

Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between all variables in the study are outlined in Table 1. Each of the hypotheses were tested using a separate hierarchical step-wise regression. Prior to conducting the analyses, all variables were standardized as z-scores to test for interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991).

Insert Table 1 about here

For each of the three hypotheses, control variables of gender and negative affectivity were entered on the first step. In the second step, the independent variable (customer incivility) and moderator (H1: meaning, H2: perspective taking, H3: transformational leadership) were entered. In the third and final step, the interaction term between the independent and focal moderator variable was entered. A significant interaction term indicates moderation.

Results for Hypothesis 1 are outlined in Table 2. Meaning had a direct and significant positive effect on employee psychological well-being ($\beta = .44, p < .001$), but the interaction terms was not significant ($\beta = .01, n.s.$). Hence Hypothesis 1 was not supported. In a similar fashion, results for Hypothesis 2 are outlined in Table 3.

Perspective taking had a direct and significant positive effect on employee psychological well-being ($\beta = .44, p < .001$), but the interaction terms was not significant ($\beta = -.00, n.s.$). Hence Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

Detailed results of the analysis for Hypothesis 3 are presented in Table 4. As can be seen from this table, the interaction term is significant. Hence Hypothesis 3 was supported. Of the two control variables, negative affectivity was significantly and negatively associated with psychological well-being in step one ($\beta = -.57, p < .001$), suggesting that as negative affectivity increases psychological well-being decreases. In the second step, transformational leadership was significantly and positively associated with psychological well-being ($\beta = .22, p < .001$). However, as shown in step three, although transformational leadership still has a positive association with psychological

well-being ($\beta = .23, p < .001$), the relationship between customer incivility and psychological well-being was moderated by transformational leadership shown by the significance of the interaction ($\beta = .12, p < .05$). Following Aiken and West (1991), a graph was produced to aid in the interpretation of this significant interaction (see Figure 1). High and low values of customer incivility (predictor variable) and transformational leadership (moderator variable) were used to construct this graph. High and low values were calculated by adding (for the high value) and subtracting (for the low value) one standard deviation from the mean.

 Insert Table 4 and Figure 1 about here

The graph depicts the form of the moderation. The relationship between perceptions of customer incivility and employee psychological well-being differs across levels of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership appears to buffer the negative effects of incivility on psychological well-being, particularly when incivility is high.

Discussion

The focus of this study was on positive individual and organizational factors that influence employees' resiliency against the harmful outcomes of customer incivility. Our study was theoretically grounded in cognitive appraisal theory of stress (Folkman et al., 1986). We argued that finding meaning in work, perspective taking, and transformational leadership of supervisors would buffer employees from the negative effects of experiencing customer incivility. We found that employees' perception of transformational leadership of their supervisor moderated the relationship between experience of customer incivility and employee well-being. When experiencing high

incivility, perceived transformational leadership in a supervisor buffered the employee from a decrease in well-being. Although meaning and perspective taking had positive associations with employee well-being, the moderating role of these variables were not confirmed.

The fact that having a transformational leader was found to moderate the relationship between the experience of incivility and psychological well-being for employees supports previous research on the impact transformational leadership can have on well-being (e.g. Nielsen & Munir, 2009; Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011). Studying transformational leadership as a moderator illuminates new avenues for research on employee well-being in that we conceptualize transformational leadership as a buffering resource for employees facing low-level, ongoing aggression from customers in a service role.

Theoretical implications arise from examining the relationships between customer incivility, transformational leadership, and employee well-being. As outlined in our introduction, cognitive appraisal theory (Folkman et al., 1986) suggests that primary and secondary appraisals work together within an individual to determine if a situation is challenging (potentially positive) or threatening (potentially harmful). A transformational leaders' ability to both support and motivate employees are likely key mechanisms through which this type of leader influences the primary and secondary appraisal processes. For instance, transformational leaders would be expected to lessen the demand of customer incivility by emphasizing the importance of the employee's role within the organization and would subsequently help them interpret customer incivility in a positive way to reduce the likelihood that a customer's behaviour would be interpreted as a

personal attack. A transformational leader will likely instill in employees the confidence and skills needed to deal with uncivil customers, which allows employees to cope in a positive, productive way (secondary appraisal). Furthermore, a transformational leader also stimulates personal growth and development through individualized consideration and inspirational motivation, and supports employees. Employees with supervisors who are perceived as higher in transformational leadership are likely to see ‘the big picture’ and conceptualize dealing with incivility as part of larger, shared responsibility.

Meaning and perspective taking were not supported as moderating the relationship between customer incivility and employee well-being. However, meaning and perspective taking both had a significant positive association with employee well-being. Although we cannot know for certain why we did not find a significant moderating relationship, we offer potential explanations. Interaction effects can sometimes be difficult to detect in field studies (e.g., McClelland & Judd, 1993). There is the possibility that we did not have sufficient power to detect these particular effects. It is also possible that the timing of measurement of these moderators is responsible. Meaning and perspective taking were measured at time 2, whereas transformational leadership was measured at time 1. Alternatively, we might have found a moderating effect if we had used a more focused sample where service employees are dealing with customers in distress (for example, only funeral directors or firefighters). Because ours is the first study to test these moderators empirically, it is important that future research substantiate these findings by measuring all moderators at the same time.

Strengths and limitations

Like every research study, this study has limitations. First, the data used in our

analysis came from a single source, so it is possible that common method bias influenced our results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, we attempted to minimize this issue by using temporal separation, which has been shown to reduce bias by eliminating retrieval cues and ensuring that previous information does not remain within the respondents' short-term memory (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, we did not measure well-being at both time 1 and time 2, so we were unable to control for well-being at time 1. However, we controlled for negative affectivity at time 1 and past research has demonstrated that negative affectivity is significantly negatively correlated with individuals' perceptions of personal well-being (Watson, Pennebaker, & Folger, 1987). We tested whether removing negative affectivity and gender as controls affected the results. The interaction between transformational leadership and incivility is no longer significant when negative affectivity and gender are not controlled. Negative affectivity is significantly correlated with well-being in this study, thus controlling for negative affectivity leads to a more powerful analysis and resultant minimization of Type II error, particularly in the absence of controlling for well-being measured at time 1.

Finally, our analytic strategy regarding the decision to analyze each moderator in a separate regression might be questioned. Indeed, if the three interaction terms are simultaneously entered into one regression, none are statistically significant. This non-significant result could be due to the amount of shared variance between the moderators and/or the smaller degrees of freedom with three interaction terms included – leading to a larger error term when testing each of the three interaction terms. Shared variance is an unlikely cause; the percentage of variance shared is not extremely high. For example, transformational leadership and meaning share 20% $[(.45)^2]$; meaning and perspective

taking share 19% $[(.44)^2]$; and perspective taking and transformational leadership share 12% $[(.34)^2]$. In addition, a factor analysis demonstrates the three moderators should be considered as separate. We suggest that the reduction in degrees of freedom is a more likely reason for the non-significant results.

In addition, we have conceptual reasons for testing each moderator separately. In studies of transformational leadership, meaning and perspective taking are not commonly controlled. Therefore, we would not necessarily need, nor want, to control them in this study. As well, there could be numerous other variables that are also correlated with transformational leadership (for example, organizational commitment, trust in management, self-efficacy, to name only a few; see Bass & Riggio, 2006), that we have not included in our analysis because we simply could not measure and control for everything that might be correlated with transformational leadership. Testing each moderator on its own is congruent with current theory and practice in studies of transformational leadership (e.g., Bass & Riggio, 2006).

There are also several strengths of this study worth noting. First, it is based on well-developed theory. By using cognitive appraisal theory as a theoretical framework, we are able to conceptualize moderators of the customer incivility – employee well-being relationship related to factors both inside the employee's control (i.e. their internal appraisal processes) and factors outside their control (i.e. transformational leadership). It could be the case, for instance, that positive factors outside employees' control are helpful in mitigating the negative outcomes of customer incivility because they are viewed unambiguously as coping mechanisms. Future research should explore factors that influence secondary appraisal, such as colleague support, because our findings

suggest that salient, organization-based coping resources attenuate harmful outcomes of customer incivility.

Second, this study identified a positive factor that can buffer the negative effects of customer incivility on employee well-being. Past research has focused on factors that exacerbate the effects of customer abuse. This study adds to the literature and assists in identifying factors that may help employees to be resilient to negative job demands such as customer incivility.

Our findings may have practical implications for organizations. First, where employees in service roles encounter customer incivility, well-being may be preserved by having supervisors who are perceived as transformational. In a study looking at transformational leadership and employee well-being, Nielsen, Yarker, Brenner, Randall and Borg (2008) proposed “training staff at managerial levels might prove to be both more cost-effective and easier to control than implementing wide-ranging organizational changes” (p. 473). Likewise, the finding that transformational leadership in supervisors moderates the relationship between experiencing customer incivility and employee well-being is consistent with Kelloway and Barling’s (2010) argument that leadership development is an effective intervention to improve employee health and well-being from an occupational health psychology perspective. Our finding illustrates another way in which transformational leadership may be beneficial for service employees.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring whether meaning, perspective taking, and transformational leadership moderate the relationship between customer incivility and employee well-being. Grounded in the cognitive appraisal theory

of stress (Folkman et al., 1986), transformational leadership of supervisors moderated the relationship between customer incivility and employee well-being. Customer incivility may have many harmful outcomes for service employees. Future research should continue to focus on factors that can ameliorate this negative relationship.

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Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender ¹	.52	.50	--					
2. Negative affectivity	2.45	1.43	.10	--				
3. Customer incivility	2.11	1.10	.22 ²	.70	--			
4. Meaning	3.91	.97	.12	-.13	-.06	--		
5. Perspective taking	3.83	.83	-.13	-.26	-.26	.44	--	
6. Transformational leadership	3.40	1.03	.02	-.02	.05	.45	.34	--
7. Psychological well-being	2.93	.53	-.04	-.56	-.36	.50	.54	.23

1. Non parametric correlations are reported for all correlations involving gender due to the categorical nature of this variable
0= Female; 1= Male

2. Correlations at or above .22 in absolute value are significant at $p < .01$ (2 tailed)

Table 2: Results of moderated regression analysis examining meaning as a moderator

Predictor	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.31***	
Gender		.04
Negative affectivity		-.57***
Step 2	.18***	
Gender		-.04
Negative affectivity		-.52***
Customer incivility		.04
Meaning		.44***
Step 3	.00	
Gender		-.04
Negative affectivity		-.52***
Customer incivility		.04
Meaning		.44***
Customer incivility X Meaning		.01
Total R ²	.50	
n	213	

* p< .05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 3: Results of moderated regression analysis examining perspective taking as a moderator

Predictor	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.31***	
Gender		.04
Negative affectivity		-.57***
Step 2	.18***	
Gender		.07
Negative affectivity		-.53***
Customer incivility		.11
Perspective taking (PT)		.44***
Step 3	.00	
Gender		.07
Negative affectivity		-.53***
Customer incivility		.11
Perspective taking (PT)		.44***
Customer incivility X PT		-.00
Total R^2	.50	
n	213	

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

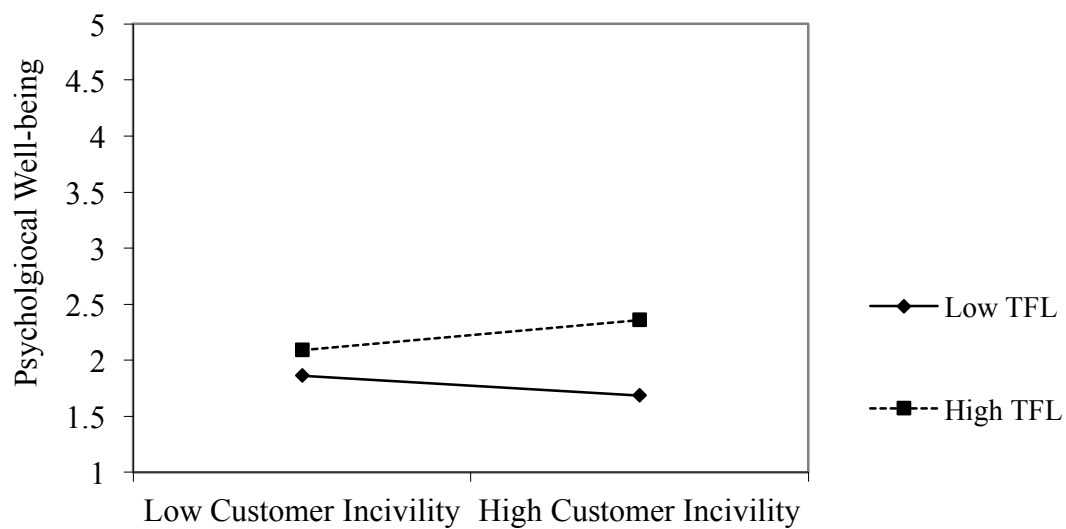
Table 4: Results of moderated regression analysis examining transformational leadership as a moderator

Predictor	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.31***	
Gender		.04
Negative affectivity		-.57***
Step 2	.05**	
Gender		.03
Negative affectivity		-.57***
Customer incivility		.02
Transformational leadership (TFL)		.22***
Step 3	.01*	
Gender		.02
Negative affectivity		-.61***
Customer incivility		.02
Transformational leadership (TFL)		.23***
Customer incivility X TFL		.12*
Total R ²	.38*	
n	213	

* p< .05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Figure 1

Moderating effect of transformational leadership on the relationship between experiencing customer incivility and employee psychological well-being



TFL = Transformational leadership