

Witnessing Wrongdoing:

The Effects of Observer Power on Incivility Intervention in the Workplace

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## Abstract

Research often paints a dark portrait of power. Previous work underscores the links between power and self-interested, antisocial behavior. In this paper, we identify a potential bright side to power—namely, that the powerful are more likely to intervene when they witness workplace incivility. In experimental (Studies 1 and 3) and field (Study 2) settings, we find evidence suggesting that power can shape how, why, and when the powerful respond to observed incivility against others. We begin by drawing on research linking power and action orientation. In Study 1, we demonstrate that the powerful respond with agency to witnessed incivility. They are more likely to directly confront perpetrators, and less likely to avoid the perpetrator and offer social support to targets. We explain the motivation that leads the powerful to act by integrating theory on responsibility construals of power and hierarchy maintenance. Study 2 shows that felt responsibility mediates the effect of power on increased confrontation and decreased avoidance. Study 3 demonstrates that incivility leads the powerful to perceive a status challenge, which then triggers feelings of responsibility. In Studies 2 and 3, we also reveal an interesting nuance to the effect of power on supporting the target. While the powerful support targets less as a direct effect, we reveal countervailing indirect effects: To the extent that incivility is seen as a status challenge and triggers felt responsibility, power indirectly increases support toward the target. Together, these results enrich the literature on third-party intervention and incivility, showing how power may free bystanders to intervene in response to observed incivility.

*Keywords:* workplace incivility, observers, power, status threat; witnesses

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### **Witnessing Wrongdoing:**

#### **The Effects of Observer Power on Incivility Intervention in the Workplace**

Workplace incivility is defined as low-intensity deviant acts with ambiguous intent to harm the target (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Despite its low intensity and ambiguous nature, workplace incivility may be associated with outcomes that are as detrimental as more severe forms of workplace aggression, such as abusive supervision (see Hershcovis, 2011). Perhaps because of its low intensity, or because others treat it as innocuous, workplace incivility regularly occurs in front of witnesses (hereafter observers). For instance, among the more than 9,000 employees studied by Porath and Pearson (2010), only 1% reported never having seen incivility occur in their workplace. This might help explain why researchers have begun to turn their attention to observers as important actors in the dynamics of workplace incivility (e.g., Chui & Dietz, 2014; Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015; Porath & Pearson, 2012; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015).

Initial evidence suggests that observers may serve a useful purpose in deterring workplace incivility. For instance, Reich and Hershcovis (2015) found that observers of incivility took advantage of opportunities to punish offenders by allocating them unpleasant tasks. Similarly, Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, and Gee (2002) found that observers are willing to punish the perpetrator, even at a personal cost to themselves. However, such forms of “vigilante” justice can be counterproductive, because they may cause incivility to spread and escalate (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Therefore, in this paper, we consider other forms of third-party responding, including constructive interventions to stop the incivility, the choice to avoid the perpetrator and opt for non-response, and “invisible remedies” of supporting the target (e.g.,



Rosette, Carton, Bowes-Sperry, & Hewlin, 2013).

In particular, we are interested in how power influences each of these possible responses to incivility. At first glance, the literature on the psychology of power would appear to suggest that the powerful might not be particularly helpful as witnesses to incivility directed at others. An influential line of research suggests, for instance, that power can reduce shared distress, compassion, empathy, and perspective taking (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010; van Kleef, Oveis, van der Löwe, LuoKoga, Goetz, & Keltner, 2008). However, there is also a growing body of literature suggesting that under the right conditions, power can free the powerful to behave prosocially (e.g., Magee & Langer, 2008). Despite the ubiquity of power as a factor in the incidence of workplace incivility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), we know little about how power shapes observers' reactions to perpetrators and targets of incivility.

In this paper, we describe in three studies how and why power influences observer responses to incivility. Drawing on power-approach theory, we demonstrate that power leads observers to respond agentically to observed incivility by confronting the perpetrator, and being less likely to avoid the perpetrator and support the target. We demonstrate this effect in a video vignette experiment in which role power was manipulated. In our second study, we focus on why the powerful are motivated to action, considering the prevalent view that the powerful tend to act out of self-interest and in pursuit of their own goals (e.g., Guinote, 2007). Drawing on previous research on the responsibility construal of power (Sassenberg, Ellemers, & Scheepers, 2012), we argue that incivility triggers a sense of responsibility to act. We predict that this felt responsibility will mediate the effect of power on confronting and avoidance, and will indirectly increase social support for the target, attenuating the negative direct effect of power on supporting. We find



evidence supporting this perspective in a field study of university staff, measuring both relative observers' power over the perpetrator, as well as observers' personal sense of power. In our third study, we extend this perspective further by seeking to deepen our understanding of why observing incivility triggers felt responsibility. We draw on research on power and hierarchy-maintenance goals (Willis & Guinote, 2011) to develop theory about the role of status challenge in promoting responsibility and action by the powerful in response to witnessed incivility. We predict that incivility creates a perception of status challenge, which increases feelings of responsibility. We further predict that these mechanisms mediate power's effect on confronting and avoidance, and indirectly reduce its negative effect on supporting. We test this final set of hypotheses in a vignette experiment, in which we manipulated role power and measured status challenge and responsibility as mediating mechanisms.

Together, these studies contribute to the literature on incivility and power in two important ways. First, we move beyond the existing research on observer responses, which tends to focus on retribution and vigilante justice (e.g., Hershcovis & Reich, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2015), to consider *how* observers might engage in more constructive responses to incivility—like confronting the perpetrator directly, or providing support to the target. Secondly, our paper identifies how power can promote positive and prosocial responses to observed incivility, and how some of the darker characteristics of psychological power (for instance, the salience of hierarchy-maintenance goals) may in fact contribute to these desirable outcomes.

### **Power and Intervention**

Power stems from asymmetries in social relations. Power occurs when someone is able to control valuable resources, impose their will on others, and shape their own outcomes and the outcomes of others in ways that others cannot (Sturm & Antonakis, 2014). Though power is



rooted in structures—the control of social and material resources—it can also be a psychological property of the individual. The behavioral effects of power are as much determined by the felt *sense* of power as the structural basis of power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). As Galinsky and colleagues summarize, those with power “roam in a very different psychological space than those without power” (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson & Liljenquist, 2008, p. 1451).

Below, we consider how the experience of power might influence three potential responses to observed incivility. Extending previous research on target responses to incivility (Cortina & Magley, 2009), we focus on three categories of observer responses that are available to witnesses: (1) The assertive response of direct, constructive confrontation of the perpetrator, (2) the avoidant response of minimizing, ignoring or downplaying the transgression, and (3) the compassionate response of offering social support to the target. We consider how power, given its tendency toward action orientation (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), might influence the prevalence of each strategy.

### **Power, Action, and Constructive Confrontation**

Research on psychological power suggests a strong link between the experience of power and the tendency toward action. The powerful make rapid judgments, focus on satisfying their goals, act with automaticity, and exhibit less inhibition and deliberation (Keltner et al., 2003; Galinsky, Gruenfeld & Magee, 2003). They are prone to action, and act without the same considerations others might give to constraints, norms, or limits to their behavior (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Galinsky et al., 2003; Keltner et al., 2003). Power enhances one’s sense of confidence and competence (Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2012; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012), which in turn lowers one’s hesitation to follow impulses toward action. The powerful tend to simplify decisions, and are less likely to weigh the pros and cons. Instead, they are selective in



their processing of information (Guinote, 2007) and tend to make automatic decisions instead of engaging in controlled processing (Scholl & Sassenberg, 2014, 2015).

When witnessing incivility in the workplace, we propose that the powerful will tend toward “fixing the problem” through constructive confrontation. This form of response is externally-focused; it directly targets the source of the undesirable behavior. Of course, this course of action is also confrontational, and perhaps risky. But research suggests that the powerful tend to be more optimistic and risk-tolerant in pursuit of their aims (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). They have the tendency towards harsh social judgments (van Prooijen, Coffeng, & Vermeer, 2014), moral condemnation of others (Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010), and a greater tendency to confront others for unacceptable behavior (Ashburn-Nardo, Blanchard, Peterson, Morris, & Goodwin, 2014), often employing a dominant conflict-resolution style (de Reuver, 2006). Thus, they may be more likely to engage in constructive confrontation.

Beyond their disinhibition and willingness to confront, there is another factor that may promote constructive confrontation by the powerful—that is, the belief the powerful have in their own influence over others. Research suggests that the powerful are more prone to trying to influence others (Ferguson, Ormiston, & Moon, 2010), a tendency that may spring from their high estimates of their own ability to shape others’ behavior. Fast and colleagues, for instance, demonstrate that power enhances the illusion of personal control (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009), while Anderson, John, and Keltner (2012) conceptualize the assumed ability to influence others as a central characteristic of felt power. In short, when faced with observed incivility, we expect the powerful to tend toward a mode of responses that is direct, disinhibited, and focused on exerting control and influence over the source of the incivility.

By contrast, the powerful are less likely to engage in *avoidant* responses to observed



incivility. These kinds of responses are enacted by witnesses concerned with not becoming targets themselves (Cortina & Magley, 2003). This can involve avoiding interactions with the perpetrator, convincing themselves that the incivility was not worth acting on, denying its severity or ignoring it altogether (e.g. Cortina & Wasti, 2005; Wasti & Cortina, 2002). We argue that these kinds of reactions are less likely among the powerful, because those with power are not motivated by risks, sanctions, or punishments (Keltner et al., 2003). The powerful, inclined toward action and unafraid of confrontation, are unlikely to engage in avoidance.

*Hypothesis 1: High-powered observers will be (1a) more likely than low-powered observers to confront, and (1b) less likely than low-powered observers to engage in avoidant responses toward the perpetrator of witnessed incivility.*

### **Power and Support**

The third category of response we consider is target-focused: Offering social and emotional support to the target of incivility. Although we argue that the powerful may respond more readily, we expect that the form of their response will be less likely to include behavior that supports the target. Unlike confronting, supportive behavior is not aimed at rectifying the mistreatment; it is aimed at helping the target to feel better. While this might not address the source of the problem as confronting does, it is a compassionate form of response. Power tends to diminish shared distress, compassion, and empathy (van Kleef et al., 2008; Woltin, Cornielle, Yzerbyt & Förster, 2011), creates a sense of social distance from others (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2012; Magee & Smith, 2013), and diminishes the neural processes that produce interpersonal sensitivity (Hogeveen, Inzlicht, & Obhi, 2014). We therefore expect that:

*Hypothesis 2: High-powered observers will be less likely than low-powered observers to offer support to the targets of witnessed incivility.*



### Study 1<sup>1</sup>

In Study 1, we test our first three hypotheses—namely, that high power will lead observers to engage in more assertive responses (confronting the perpetrator), and fewer avoidant and passive (supporting to the target) responses to observed incivility. Study 1 manipulates role power, and measures responses to observed incivility in a video vignette.

#### Method

**Participants and procedure.** Participants in Study 1 were 166 part-time employees drawn from undergraduate psychology classes, who completed the study for partial credit. Participants watched a short video depicting an interaction between two coworkers. The first coworker, Alex, behaved uncivilly towards the second coworker, Taylor. Names were intentionally androgynous so that we could match participants based on the sex of the actors in the video. We matched participant based on sex to control for power imbalance inherent in gender dynamics (Carli, 1999). Following Cortina et al.'s (2001) workplace incivility measure, the perpetrator ignores, doubts, and behaves condescendingly toward the target in the context of a 3-minute work interaction. Participants were randomly assigned to either a high, equal (control), or low power condition by an instruction before the video that asked participants to imagine that: “Taylor and Alex hold a higher position than you and you are their subordinate” (low power condition) or “Taylor and Alex are your coworkers” (control condition), or “Taylor and Alex are your employees and you are their supervisor” (high power condition). After

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<sup>1</sup> Note that an online Appendix containing two original studies can be found on the OBHDP website, and data for all studies (including the online appendix) can be found at: <https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/jxkznffwsw/1>



watching the video, participants answered questions about their intentions to confront the perpetrator, avoid the perpetrator, and support the target<sup>2</sup>.

We removed 13 participants who displayed careless responding by failing to answer the quality control question correctly (e.g., “answer ‘strongly agree’ to this question”)<sup>3</sup>. We checked our manipulation by asking participants whether they were Alex and Taylor’s supervisor, coworker, or subordinate. Ninety-one percent of participants answered the manipulation check correctly. One of our results changed with the inclusion of participants who failed the manipulation check; therefore, our analysis was only based on those who successfully passed the manipulation check ( $n = 153$ ).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, our final sample of part-time workers was 153. Participants were 75% female, and they averaged 15 hours of work per week ( $SD = 8.76$ ). All scales were assessed on five-point Likert scale (1 = *definitely not* to 5 = *definitely*).

**Confrontation.** We measured participants’ intention to confront using four items adapted from Fitzgerald (1990). Following the stem participants responded to the following items: “After witnessing the interaction between Alex and Taylor, please indicate the likelihood that you would...”, participants answered the following items: “Confront Alex,” “Let Alex know you don’t like what’s happening,” “Tell Alex to stop mistreating Taylor,” and “Make clear that Alex is out of line.” Cronbach’s alpha = .89.

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<sup>2</sup> We conducted a pretest of the video on 234 undergraduate students in a mid-sized university in North America. We compared the uncivil video used in the present study with a neutral version of the interaction in which Alex responds to Taylor without ignoring or making snide remarks. We examined the following manipulation check items: “Alex was uncivil towards Taylor,” and “Alex was rude to Taylor.” Our results showed that in the uncivil condition, participants rated Alex as more uncivil ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ) than in the neutral condition ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ),  $F(1, 230) = 22.42$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similarly, participants rated Alex as more rude in the uncivil ( $M = 5.07$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) than in the neutral condition ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $F(1, 230) = 13.41$ ,  $p < .001$ .

<sup>3</sup> Including those who were inattentive in their responding yielded two changes. Those with low power were more likely than those with equal power ( $p = .044$ ) to avoid the perpetrator, and those with high power were only marginally less likely than those with low power to support the target ( $p = .073$ ).

<sup>4</sup> Including those who failed the manipulation check, all results remain the same except that those with low power ( $M = 2.58$ ) are significantly more likely to avoid the perpetrator than those with equal power ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $p = .05$ ).



***Avoidance.*** We measured the extent to which participants would avoid the perpetrator using the following four items adapted from Fitzgerald (1990): “Just try to forget it”, “Just ignore it,” “pretend you didn’t notice” and “Try to avoid Alex”. Cronbach’s alpha = .72.

***Social support.*** We measured the extent to which participants would support the target using four items: “Show your support for Taylor”, “Show that you care about Taylor,” “Show concern for Taylor,” and “Make clear you are on Taylor’s side”. Cronbach’s alpha = .74.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, reliability estimates, and intercorrelations appear in Table 1. To investigate the direct effect of power, we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) using power condition (high, equal, or low) as the independent variable and participants’ intention to confront and avoid the perpetrator, and offer support to the target as the dependent variables. The overall test was significant,  $F(3, 149) = 22.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.32$ ; as such, we proceeded to examine the between-subjects effects.

We used pairwise comparisons to examine differences between conditions. In support of *H1a*, those with high power were significantly more likely to report that they would confront the perpetrator ( $M = 3.87, SD = 0.89$ ) than those with low power ( $M = 2.91, SD = 1.12, p < .001$ ), and those with equal power ( $M = 3.38, SD = .98, p = .035$ ). There was no difference between those with equal and low power in their propensity to confront ( $p = .06$ ). In support of *H1b*, those with high power ( $M = 1.76, SD = 0.67$ ) were significantly less likely than those with low ( $M = 2.53, SD = 0.95, p < .001$ ) and equal power ( $M = 2.22, SD = 0.80, p = .01$ ) to avoid the perpetrator. There was no significant difference between low power and equal power ( $p = .17$ ).

In support of *H2*, those with high ( $M = 3.52, SD = 0.77$ ) were significantly less likely to report that they would support the target than those with low ( $M = 3.92, SD = .67, p = .02$ ) and



equal power ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ,  $p = .01$ ). There was no significant difference between low and equal power in their propensity to support the target ( $p = 1.00$ ).

## Discussion

In Study 1, we find support for our basic hypotheses that high power will increase the use of constructive confrontation, and decrease both observers' efforts to avoid taking action, and their social support toward the target. Consistent with our predictions about power and action orientation, we find that the powerful are more likely to try and control or influence the source of incivility, rather than focusing their efforts on the target, or trying to minimize or dismiss the transgression in order to reduce the need to respond. For each, we find that the effect is about the psychology of power, rather than powerlessness. That is, our findings were driven by differences in those in roles of power (as compared with both peer and subordinate roles).

The study's experimental design allows for a high degree of control and internal validity, allowing for clear causal inference. It is important to establish internal validity before assessing external validity (Mook, 1983). However, the design asks participants to imagine their reaction to video-recorded actors in a hypothetical job environment. The reality of responding to an incident of incivility may be quite different from imagined responses. Before generalizing from these results, it is important to replicate the effects in a study with greater naturalism.

In addition to the questions of ecological validity, our experimental manipulation focused on role-based power (i.e., telling participants that they were the supervisor or subordinate of the individuals in the video). Although this is a common manipulation in the power literature (e.g., Jordan, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2011; Mooijman, van Dijk, Ellemers, & van Dijk, 2015; Wiltermuth & Flynn, 2013), in Study 2 we aim to examine whether this effect is about the perception of one's power, rather than the expectations associated with a hierarchical role.



Lastly, our interpretation of our finding hinges on the premise that the powerful are approach-oriented, disinhibited, and predisposed to take action. However, the research on which this premise is based makes quite clear that this action orientation is usually in furtherance of powerful people's own goals (e.g., Guinote, 2007; Hirsch, Galinsky, & Zhong, 2011; Slabu & Guinote, 2010). We have not yet made a clear case for why the powerful would see intervention as a goal worth pursuing. In Study 2, we develop and test an explanation for this phenomenon, focusing on responsibility construals of power.

### **Power and Responsibility**

Tost (2015) argues that the power literature has overemphasized the effects of power on agency, to the neglect of considering power's ability to activate communal orientations. She argues that a sense of power often triggers a sense of responsibility, and activates a cognitive network that includes not only feelings of agency, but also feelings of obligation. This conception of power as deeply intertwined with responsibility has been less central in recent work on the psychology of felt power than the agency perspective. However, responsibility construals of power have been considered in the sociological and psychological traditions of research on power. Weber (1919/1949) emphasized that power should be accompanied by responsibility that cannot be avoided or delegated away. Power without this responsibility he describes as mere demagoguery and vanity, leading to striving for the "semblance of power rather than... actual power" (Weber, 1919/1949, p. 37). In his seminal work on reciprocity, Gouldner (1960) describes how expectations around exchange "safeguards powerful people against the temptations of their own status" (p. 174) and guards against exploitative behavior by the powerful. In order to preserve the stability of the social structures that afford them power, the powerful may reciprocate the benefits of their power with those dependent on them. Bennis and



colleagues (1958) suggested a similar constraint around power: Power is bound up with responsibility, they argue, because the ability to influence is very often a function of the power holder's ability to satisfy the needs of those over whom he or she has authority.

In the field of management, Davis (1960) also described responsibility as a function of social power. He argued that "...the idea that responsibility and power go hand in hand appears to be as old as civilization itself." The opposite may be equally true: Power creates responsibility, but responsibility can confer power. When responsibility and duty to others is transferred through delegation, Mechanic (1962) suggested that informal social power is often transferred alongside it.

More contemporary work on power and concern for others also suggests that the powerful may act in ways that reflect a sense of responsibility. Tjosvold (1985) found that those with high power, if placed in cooperative contexts, are more likely to use their expertise to help subordinates. Moreover, when power is construed in terms of responsibility, it can enhance concern for others (Sassenberg, Ellemers, & Scheepers, 2012; Scholl, Ellemers, Sassenberg, & Scheepers, 2015). For example, power among those with an other-oriented leadership style can enhance interpersonal sensitivity (Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). Further, when the powerful are made to feel accountable, they treat power like a responsibility, behaving in less self-serving ways (Pitesa & Thau, 2013). Together, these perspectives suggest that power holders can experience a sense of responsibility or duty for those they see as their charges. This inferred responsibility, or sense that power is accompanied by duty toward others, may help to explain the pattern of results we found in our first study, in which the powerful were found to take action to confront the perpetrators of incivility directed toward others.

The link between responsibility and action has been articulated in previous work on



bystander intervention. Latané and Darley's (1970) argued that acceptance of responsibility is a critical step in the bystander intervention process; provided one has noticed the situation and defined it as one requiring action, an individual is only likely to intervene if they accept that it is their personal responsibility to do so. Given our arguments above that a sense of responsibility to intervene should be more likely among the powerful than the powerless, we further argue that felt responsibility is the mechanism tying the experience of power to prosocial responses to observed incivility. We predict that it will mediate the positive relationship between power and constructive confrontation (i.e., the powerful confront because, in part, of felt responsibility) and the negative relationship between power and avoidance (i.e., the powerful avoid less because of felt responsibility).

However, if power can increase a sense of responsibility, this seems at odds with our portrait of the powerful as lacking in empathy and being unwilling to offer support to targets. As Sassenberg and colleagues (2014) note, a responsibility construal of power often involves a sense of obligation to care for and ensure the well-being of others. Research suggests that power can result in prosocial and generous behaviour, if the power is paired with a communal and other-focused orientation (Chen, Lee-Chai & Bargh, 2001). Indeed, the usual effect that power reduces empathy and the ability to take others' perspectives holds only for power holders with a self-orientation (Gordon & Chen, 2013).

Our results in Study 1 demonstrate that power will directly reduce target supporting. But we introduce the possibility of a countervailing effect: While supporting is reduced by power directly, it may be increased by power to the extent that power results in a feeling of responsibility for others. In short, power will directly lead to fewer offers of social support to targets of workplace incivility. However, we expect that the *indirect* effect of power, mediated



through felt responsibility, will be to produce more offers of support to targets. In summary:

*Hypothesis 3a: Power will increase perceived responsibility in response to observed incivility.*

*Hypothesis 4a: Power will indirectly increase confrontation through felt responsibility.*

*Hypothesis 4b: Power will indirectly reduce avoidance through felt responsibility.*

*Hypothesis 4c: Power will indirectly increase supporting through felt responsibility.*

## Study 2

In Study 2, we replicate our original finding in a field context (a sample of university employees), using a retrospective recall design in which we elicit participants' most recent experiences of observed incivility. In contrast to our first study's role manipulation of power, this study measures subjective felt power, and tests its associations with confrontation, avoidance, and supporting. We also test our mediation predictions, examining the role of felt responsibility in each form of response.

## Method

**Participants and procedure.** Participants in Study 2 were faculty and staff at a mid-sized North American university ( $N = 565$ ; 72% female, average tenure = 10 years,  $SD = 9.2$ ). We used a critical incident technique that asked participants to recall an incident of witnessed incivility between two employees at work. Participants were then asked to describe the incident and their response, and to enter the initials of the perpetrator and target, which were then piped through the remainder of the survey questions. Participants then answered questions about their power relative to the perpetrator, their feelings of approach and inhibition, and the extent to which they confronted the perpetrator, supported the target, or avoided the perpetrator.



**Power.** We assessed power using two measures, general power (i.e., a sense of power across situations) and relative power (i.e., power over the perpetrator). We measured participants' *general* power (before participants were asked to recall the event) using Anderson and Galinsky's (2006) personal sense of power measure. This scale consists of eight items (e.g., "I can get people to listen to what I say"; "I can get others to do what I want"). Participants responded to these questions using a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). We measured participants' power *relative* to the perpetrator with three questions that followed their recollection of the uncivil incident: "How much influence do you have over [perpetrator initials]," "How much control do you have over [perpetrator initials]," and "How much power do you have over [perpetrator initials]" (1 = *none* to 4 = *a great deal*). Cronbach's alpha is .88 and .86 for the general and relative measures, respectively.

**Confrontation.** We used the same four items used in Study 1 adapted to reflect what the participant actually did (e.g., "I confronted [perpetrator initials]"). Cronbach's alpha = .91.

**Avoidance.** We used three of the items used in Study 1 adapted to reflect what the participant actually did (e.g., "I just ignored it"). Cronbach's alpha = .73.

**Social support.** We assessed the extent to which participants supported the target using four items adapted from the affective support scale (Ducharme & Martin, 2000). Originally designed to assess support from a coworker, these items were altered to assess support *towards* a coworker. For example, an original item was "Your coworkers take a personal interest in you," and we modified it to "I took a personal interest in [target initials]" (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *a great deal*). Cronbach's alpha = .83.

**Perceived responsibility.** We measured perceived responsibility using three items, adapted from Goei and Boster's (2005) perceived obligation scale: "I felt obligated to act," "I



had no choice, I simply had to do something,” and “After seeing what happened, I felt pressure to take action in response” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha = .92.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among study variables appear in Table 4. To test *H1a*, *H1b*, *H2*, and *H3*, we examined the correlations among the independent variable (general and relative power) and the dependent variables (confrontation, avoidance, and support). General power correlated significantly with confrontation of the perpetrator ( $r = .17, p < 0.001$ ), avoidance ( $r = -.18, p < .001$ ), and social support to the target ( $r = -.08, p = .05$ ). Relative power was also significantly correlated with confrontation ( $r = .41, p < .001$ ), avoidance ( $r = -.19, p < .001$ ), and support ( $r = -.12, p = .003$ ). General power ( $r = .12, p = .003$ ) and relative power ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ) also related to perceived responsibility. Overall, these results support *H1a*, *H1b*, *H2* and *H3*.

To assess *H4a-H4c*, we used Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro (model 4) to examine the mediating effect of perceived responsibility on the relationship between general power and relative power and our dependent variables. In support of *H4a*, perceived responsibility mediated the relationship between general power and confronting, point estimate = .10,  $SE = .03$ , 95%  $CI (.04, .17)$ . General power was positively related to perceived responsibility ( $b = .21, p = .002$ ), and perceived responsibility was related to confronting ( $b = .48, p < .001$ ). In further support of this hypothesis, perceived responsibility mediated the relationship between relative power and confronting, point estimate = .19,  $SE = .03$ , 95%  $CI (.14, .26)$ . Relative power was positively related to perceived responsibility ( $b = .47, p < .001$ ), and perceived responsibility was related to confronting ( $b = .42, p < .001$ ).



In support of *H4b*, perceived responsibility mediated the relationship between general power and avoidance, point estimate =  $-.08$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95%  $CI (-.13, -.03)$ . Power was positively related to perceived responsibility ( $b = .20$ ,  $p = .002$ ), and perceived responsibility was negatively related to avoidance ( $b = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In further support of this hypothesis, perceived responsibility mediated the relationship between relative power and avoidance, point estimate =  $-.18$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95%  $CI (-.23, -.13)$ . Relative power was positively related to perceived responsibility ( $b = .47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and perceived responsibility was negatively related to avoidance ( $b = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Consistent with our Study 1 results and our prediction in *H2*, we again found that the total effect of general power on supporting was negative (effect of general power:  $b = -.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ; effect of relative power:  $b = .19$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Examining the direct and indirect paths offers support for *H4c*. While the direct path between power and supporting is negative ( $b_{\text{general}} = -.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $b_{\text{relative}} = -.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the indirect effects of general and relative power through responsibility were both positive. Perceived responsibility mediated the relationship between general power and supporting, point estimate =  $.05$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95%  $CI (.02, .09)$ . Power was related to perceived responsibility ( $b = .20$ ,  $p = .002$ ), and perceived responsibility was related to supporting ( $b = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In further support of this hypothesis, perceived responsibility mediated the relationship between relative power and supporting, point estimate =  $.13$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95%  $CI (.08, .19)$ . Relative power was related to perceived responsibility ( $b = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and perceived responsibility was related to supporting ( $b = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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## Discussion

In Study 2, we find the same pattern of results in a critical incident survey that we found in Study 1; the powerful tend to engage in constructive confrontation more often, and in avoidance and target support less often, compared to those with less power. We also found that felt responsibility mediated the effect of power on increased confrontation and decreased avoidance, and we uncovered an interesting dynamic in how power shapes social support. While the direct effect of power is to suppress expressions of support toward targets, the indirect effect runs in the opposite direction: To the extent that power triggers feelings of responsibility, being powerful may actually lead witnesses to engage in more acts of target support. Power, therefore, may be Janus-faced, leading observers to be pulled both toward and away from acts of support.

Our theorizing (and our findings) in Study 2 have a rather optimistic view of power as triggering a sense of responsibility and care for others. However, this conceptualization of power as enhancing caring diverges somewhat from the previous literature on power and prosociality. Most previous research suggests that power intensifies dispositional tendencies toward prosocial behavior — allowing the kind to behave even more kindly, and the selfless to pursue unfettered their selfless aims (e.g., Côté, Kraus, Cheng, Oveis, van der Lowe, Lian, & Keltner, 2011; DeMarree, Briñol, & Petty, 2014; Hirsch, Galinsky, & Zhong, 2011; Hoogervorst, de Cremer, van Dijke, & Mayer, 2012; Magee & Langner, 2008). By contrast, we examine responsibility as a mediator, not as a dispositional moderator. Our argument is that in cases of incivility, power is contributing to a sense of responsibility for others. The unresolved question is *why*. That is, what is it about incivility that would lead to a responsibility construal of power?

In our third study, we tackle this question directly, considering a potentially dark predictor (status challenge) of a light phenomenon (felt responsibility), and seek to replicate our



findings about responsibility with the control afforded by an experimental design.

### **Power and Status Challenge**

Our second study suggests an important question: Why does the experience of observed incivility trigger a sense of responsibility among the powerful that drives them to confront the perpetrator and support the target? To explain this phenomenon, we turn to theories of hierarchy maintenance. We focus on how incivility can be construed as a status challenge, disrupting the status quo and threatening the stability of hierarchical relationships. We argue that the responsible, benevolent, and even caring behavior we report in our earlier studies may be due, in part, to an impulse to defend and preserve the structures and status hierarchies which afford and legitimate power.

*The powerful seek to maintain hierarchies.* We begin with the observation that the powerful seek to preserve their power and maintain it against rivals and challengers (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Williams, 2014). The powerful tend to be competitive (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012), and they respond aggressively to those who might supplant them (Georgesens & Harris, 1998). Those in positions of power seek to remain there, and defend the systems and status-quo arrangements that provide them with power (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Willis and Guinote (2011) argue that the powerful are more likely to choose to pursue hierarchy-maintenance goals. The powerful are goal-directed, and quite often, that goal is the preservation of power.

*Incivility as status challenge.* Incivility is, by definition, counter-normative (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2005). It is inherently a political behavior; that is more often enacted by the more powerful towards the less powerful (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Being targeted by incivility robs targets of felt power; they often seek to regain power by



enacting incivility toward others (Gallus, Bunk, Matthews, Barnes-Farrell, & Magley, 2014). A recent line of research shows that these kinds of norm violations are means of expressing and gaining power. As deviant acts, they demonstrate autonomy and control (van Kleef, Wanders, Stamkou, & Homan, 2015). Those who violate norms are seen by others as powerful (van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Gundemir, & Stamkou, 2011), and in some cases may be afforded power as a consequence (van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Blaker, & Heerdink, 2012). In short, being uncivil towards others can be used to signal power, and uncivil acts—even those as minor as an eye roll—can be interpreted as a status challenge (Porath, Overbeck, & Pearson, 2008).

Powerholders are likely to perceive a status challenge even if they are not the victim because the mere act of incivility is an expression of power, and the powerful will thus be motivated to maintain their status (Willis & Guinote, 2011). High power is associated with heightened competitiveness (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012), and the powerful often respond aggressively to those who might seek to supplant their place (see, for instance, Georgesén & Harris, 1998, on power and evaluation of subordinates). We therefore expect the powerful to take action in response to potential status competitions.

*Hypothesis 5: Power will increase the degree to which observers perceive incivility as a status challenge.*

*Status challenge and responsibility.* In situations where dominance hierarchies are unstable, the powerful tend to be conservative, taking action to preserve the status quo (Maner, Gailliot, Butz, & Peruche, 2007). We expect that responsibility construals of power are more likely to occur when the position of the powerful is challenged (for instance, by incivility). One way to defend one's power is to behave in a way that emphasizes the legitimacy of that power and the desirability of existing power arrangements. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the usual



disinhibited self-interest that characterizes power tends to be lower when power is seen as unstable, revocable, or usurpable (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008; Magee, Gruenfeld, Keltner, & Galinsky 2005). When uncivil behavior occurs, it signals a potential status challenge. One way to defend the hierarchy and one's place in it is to demonstrate control over the perpetrator (and potential rival) and care for targeted subordinates, underscoring the legitimacy of one's power.

Incivility that is construed as a status challenge should also tend to be noticed and rated as a situation requiring intervention (i.e., the steps preceding bystanders' acceptance of responsibility; Latané & Darley, 1970) by those who are vigilant to threats against the status quo (i.e., the powerful). Moreover, as "agents of the organization", the powerful should have greater clarity in terms of the social appropriateness of their role in the intervention process (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005) and relatively fewer organizational peers, both of which should remove barriers (such as diffusion of responsibility; Latané & Darley, 1968), that may inhibit acceptance of responsibility by those with low power. Status challenge, therefore, should contribute to felt responsibility, and in serial with responsibility, should mediate the previously reported effects of power on confrontation, avoidance, and support:

*Hypothesis 6a: Power's effect on confrontation will be serially mediated through status challenge and felt responsibility.*

*Hypothesis 6b: Power's effect on avoidance will be serially mediated through status challenge and felt responsibility.*

*Hypothesis 6c: The negative effect of power on supporting will be attenuated by a positive effect of power as serially mediated through status challenge and felt responsibility.*

### **Study 3**



In Study 3, we again seek to replicate our findings about power and three modes of responding to witnessed incivility—constructively confronting the perpetrator, avoiding or ignoring the behavior, and offering support to the target. The study, a vignette experiment, manipulates role power, and measures these three dependent variables, as well as perceptions of status challenge and felt responsibility as serial mediators.

## Method

**Participants and procedure.** Participants in Study 3 were 165 employees residing in North America (49% female, average tenure = 4.75 years,  $SD = 5$ ,  $M_{age} = 35$ ,  $SD = 10.46$ ) recruited through an on-line panel provider (MTurk) in exchange for US \$2. Participants, in the role of the “observer,” read a short vignette in which we manipulated observer power (high vs. low) by telling participants that they were either a supervisor (high power) or member (low power) of a project implementation team in which they witness workplace incivility (see the Appendix for the full vignette). Participants then responded to questions about the vignette. We measured the extent to which participants would confront the perpetrator ( $\alpha=.93$ ), and avoid the perpetrator ( $\alpha=.93$ ), and support the target ( $\alpha=.88$ ) using the same scales used in Study 2 adapted to refer to the people described in the vignette.

**Perceived challenge.** We measured status challenge using five items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), two of which were adapted from Porath, Overbeck, and Pearson (2008) and three of which were developed for the present study (building on Porath et al., 2008). Porath et al.’s measure was designed to assess status challenge to the target of incivility rather than to an observer; therefore, several items did not fit this context. The items used in the present study ( $\alpha=.83$ ) were: “Alex’s behavior towards Taylor threatens me personally,” “Alex’s actions



undermine my authority,” “By acting this way to Taylor, Alex is showing me a lack of respect,” “Alex’s behavior is a direct challenge to me,” and “I will look weak if I don’t respond to Alex.”

**Perceived responsibility.** We measured responsibility using three items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha=.96$ ): “It is my responsibility to ensure that my team gets along,” “It is my duty to maintain team cohesion,” and “I am responsible for ensuring a positive environment in my team.”

**Manipulation Check.** At the end of the study, we asked participants the following: “In the situation you read earlier, you were...” followed by the following options: “A member of a project implementation team,” “the leader/supervisor of a project implementation team,” or “can’t recall/other.” Out of 203 participants, 172 (85%) answered this question correctly. To remain consistent with Study 1, we excluded those who failed the manipulation check, as well as anyone who failed to correctly answer an attention check (e.g., “please answer ‘strongly agree’ to this question”); however, results did not change substantively by including these participants.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, reliability estimates, and intercorrelations appear in Table 3. To investigate the direct effect of power, we conducted a MANOVA using power condition (high vs. low) as the independent variable and participants’ intention to confront and avoid the perpetrator, offer support to the target, perceived obligation, and status challenge as the dependent variables. The overall test was significant,  $F(5, 159) = 11.02, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.26$ ; as such we proceeded to examine the between-subjects effects.

In support of *H1a*, results showed that those with high power were significantly more likely to report that they would confront the perpetrator ( $M = 4.15, SD = .65$ ) than those with low power ( $M = 3.63, SD = 1.05, p < .001$ ). In support of *H1b*, those with high power ( $M = 1.59, SD$



= 0.90) were significantly less likely than those with low ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ,  $p = .001$ ) to report that they would avoid the perpetrator. Support for  $H2$  failed to reach statistical significance, though participants with high power ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) were marginally less likely to report that they would support the target than those with low power ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .87$ ,  $p = .089$ ). In support of  $H3$ , those with high power ( $M = 6.09$ ,  $SD = .74$ ) were more likely to report felt responsibility than those with low power ( $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In support of  $H5$ , those with high power ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) were more likely to report a status challenge than those with low power ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

We followed the same procedures as those used in Study 2 to examine our mediating hypotheses. In support of  $H4a$ , perceived responsibility mediated the relationship between power and confronting, point estimate = .47,  $SE = .10$ , 95%  $CI (.30, .70)$ . Power was positively related to perceived responsibility ( $b = 1.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and perceived responsibility was related to confronting ( $b = .39$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In support of  $H4b$ , perceived responsibility mediated the relationship between power and avoidance, point estimate = -.049,  $SE = .10$ , 95%  $CI (-.71, -.31)$ . Power was positively related to perceived responsibility ( $b = 1.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and perceived responsibility was negatively related to avoidance ( $b = -.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In support of  $H4c$ , perceived responsibility mediated the relationship between power and supporting, point estimate = .12,  $SE = .07$ , 95%  $CI (.01, .28)$ . Power was associated with perceived responsibility ( $b = 1.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and perceived responsibility was negatively related to supporting ( $b = .10$ ,  $p < .04$ ).

To assess  $H6a-H6c$ , we used Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (model 6) to examine the serial mediating effect of status challenge and perceived responsibility on the relationship between power and our dependent variables. Status challenge and perceived responsibility serially mediated the relationship between power and confronting, point estimate = .16,  $SE = .06$ ,



95% *CI* (.08, .30). As predicted in *H5*, power was positively related to perceived status challenge ( $b = .94, p < .001$ ). In turn, perceived status challenge was positively related to perceived responsibility ( $b = .44, p < .001$ ), and perceived responsibility was related to confronting ( $b = .39, p < .001$ ), providing support for *H6a*.

Consistent with *H6b*, status challenge and perceived responsibility serially mediated the relationship between power and confronting, point estimate =  $-.18$ ,  $SE = .06$ , 95% *CI* ( $-.33, -.10$ ). Power was positively related to perceived status challenge ( $b = .94, p < .001$ ), perceived status challenge was positively related to perceived responsibility ( $b = .44, p < .001$ ), and perceived responsibility was negatively related to avoidance ( $b = -.44, p < .001$ ).

We did not find that status challenge and felt responsibility serially mediated the effect of power on supporting, as we had predicted in *H6c* (point estimate =  $.02$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95% *CI*s  $-.03$  to  $.09$ ). However, we did find that status challenge singly mediated the effect, with an indirect effect of  $b = .12$ ,  $SE = .06$ , with 95% *CI*s from  $.01$  to  $.27$ . Power was positively related to perceived status challenge ( $b = .94, p < .001$ ) and perceived status challenge was positively related to support ( $b = .12, p = .02$ ). As in Study 2, the total was comprised of significant direct and indirect effects, in countervailing directions: The direct effect of power was to reduce supporting ( $b = -.39$ ,  $SE = .14$ , 95% *CI*s  $-.66$  to  $-.12$ ), while the indirect effect of power through status challenge was to increase supporting ( $b = .12$ ,  $SE = .06$ , 95% *CI*s  $.02$  to  $.27$ ).

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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## Discussion



Study 3 provides evidence that perceptions of status challenge play an important role in how the powerful respond to observed incivility. Using a different scenario and population, we replicate the main effects reported in our first two studies — that is, that power enhances confronting and reduces avoidance and target support. Our findings from Study 2 were generally replicated in Study 3. Responsibility mediated the effect between power and both confrontation and avoidance. The data also supported our predictions that these effects would be serially mediated through status challenge and responsibility; power leads people to see incivility as a status challenge, which promotes a sense of responsibility.

Our one anomalous finding in Study 3 relates to the provision of social support. Though we replicated the main effect that the powerful are less likely to support targets, we found that the effect of power was mediated through status challenge alone. The serial mediation through status challenge and felt responsibility was not significant. This may be due to a different measure of responsibility, which focuses on a general responsibility to promote team cohesion, instead of a specific sense of duty and obligation to respond to the incivility (as in Study 2). Despite this anomaly, we again find evidence of countervailing effects of power. Directly, power reduces observers' tendency to support targets of incivility, but indirectly (here, through perceived status challenge), power increases the likelihood that an observer will support targets.

### **General Discussion**

To date, we know very little about observer intervention in ambiguous forms of mistreatment (Reich & Hershcovis, 2015). Collectively, our studies examined the effects of power on how, when, and towards whom an observer responds to witnessed incivility. Across three studies, we found that those with high power are more likely than those with low power to report that they would confront a perpetrator, and those with low power are more likely those



with high power to report that they would avoid the perpetrator and support the target. We found that these effects are because acts of incivility serve as a status challenge to the powerful, focusing them on preserving the stability of the hierarchy and the legitimacy of their place within it. Partially in response to status challenge, the powerful are guided towards action by a sense of felt responsibility. We also find that these motives serve to reverse the usual dynamics of power when it comes to offering social support: The powerful are less likely to report that they would provide social and emotional support to the targets of workplace incivility, except when that incivility invokes a sense of responsibility (Study 2) or triggers perceptions of status challenge (Study 3). In short, our findings suggest that the powerful, even if driven by the slightly impure goals of hierarchy maintenance, may respond to incivility in desirable and prosocial ways.

Our findings have important theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, previous research has demonstrated that, when all else is equal, observers of workplace mistreatment tend to be perpetrator-focused and punitive in their reactions to workplace incivility (Reich & Hershcovis, 2015). But in the workplace, all else is rarely equal. Organizational life is defined by power relationships (e.g., Aquino, 2000; Pitesa & Thau, 2013; Russell, 1938), and observers may vary in their power relative to the perpetrator of incivility. Understanding these power dynamics is critical to understanding and predicting how third-parties respond to acts of incivility in organizations. Therefore, our studies provide valuable contributions by contextualizing theory and research on observer's reported reactions in the dynamic relationships in which they occur. Moreover, incivility research, and mistreatment research more generally, tends to examine third-party reactions towards perpetrators (See Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015 for an exception). The present study extends this examination



towards targets to understand when the powerful are more or less likely to report that they would lend targets support.

Our paper also extends previous work on power and prosociality. While much of the previous work considers power as an intensifier of existing prosocial motives or generous dispositions, our studies identify a means by which power can trigger reports of responsibility and care for others without necessarily relying on dispositional kindness or interest in others. Our theory, which integrates power approach theory, responsibility construals of power, and hierarchy maintenance goals, shows a dark path to a bright phenomenon. Motivated by a concern over disruptions to the hierarchy and their own power, the powerful are nonetheless led to feel a sense of duty and responsibility to others that increases their perception that they would behave in effective and ultimately helpful ways. While prior research can paint a dark picture of the powerful (as self-interested or lacking in empathy), our findings suggest that power may act in prosocial ways, even if driven by self-interested motives, in response to low-level and ambiguous forms of workplace aggression.

Our finding also speaks to the focus of powerful observers' responses. We find that the powerful tend to attend to the perpetrator, and take corrective action to influence and control their behavior; they report that they would constructively confront the source of uncivil behavior. Their expressions of support toward the targets of incivility, by contrast, are weaker and more contingent. The powerful tend not to expend their efforts on offering support, except where they see it as a part of their broader sense of responsibility, or when they see it as an effective means of resisting an uncivil perpetrator's status challenge. From a practical perspective, our findings may suggest ways of encouraging observers to confront perpetrators, or to break their inclination to ignore the targets of incivility. How targets and others in the workplace discuss and describe



incivility, for instance, may trigger cognitions that move the powerful to action—for instance, by framing instances of incivility as a challenge to a leader's authority, or by emphasizing the responsibility to protect that accompanies legitimate power.

Further, although we assume that observer intervention (i.e., confronting the perpetrator or supporting the target) is desirable, future research should test whether this is indeed always the case. Intervening in an incident of workplace mistreatment could make observers more likely to be targeted for mistreatment themselves (e.g., a secondary spiral of incivility; Andersson & Pearson, 1999). It is also possible that observer intervention could exacerbate the negative outcomes of incivility for the target, as it may draw attention to a situation that the target would prefer to minimize. Additional research is needed to understand conditions under which observer intervention is helpful, harmful, or simply ineffective.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

As with all research, our studies have some limitations. First, our research designs are susceptible to potential validity threats due to our reliance on hypothetical and recall techniques. Hypothetical vignettes were adopted in Studies 1 and 3, so participants' responses reflected behavioral *intentions* rather than actual behaviors. Meta-analytic research (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2001; Sheeran, 2002) has found that the correlation between intention and behavior ranges from .40 to .82, and that intention explains 28% of the variance in actual behavior (Sheeran, 2002). According to Cohen (1992), the effects sizes are fairly strong; however, the relationship is far from perfect, which presents a threat to both internal and external validity. We attempted to address this issue in our critical incident study (i.e., Study 2), which uses a critical incident design that affords the opportunity to examine reports of actual responses to incivility witnessed in actual places of work. However, there are also concerns with the validity of recall



measures as the retrospective nature of the reports may bias individuals to perceive that their responses were stronger than they were (Rubin & Wetzel, 1996).

Second, the present study puts participants in the position where they are given a choice to confront. That is, they are asked directly whether they will confront the perpetrator. In actuality, witnesses are not given a direct choice, but instead they must intervene of their own volition. Although power may fuel observer intervention, the likelihood of perpetrator-directed intervention in the first place is relatively low as demonstrated by the body of research on bystander intervention (Latane & Darley, 1968). More recently, Hershcovis and Bhatnagar (2017) investigated intervention in a customer service setting. They examined whether customers would who witnessed fellow customers mistreat a server would intervene, and found that only 11% of participants confronted the perpetrator. Our findings in the present study imply that if the witness had power over the fellow customer in that study, then the base rate may have been higher. However, future research needs to investigate whether this is indeed the case when participants are not presented with the choice to intervene, but instead must do so on their own.

Collectively, the above two limitations present a threat to ecological, internal, and external validity; therefore, findings should be treated with caution until they can be replicated. Ideally, future research could increase the realism of the study by adopting a field experimental design in which actual relative role power would be measured, responsibility construals of power would be manipulated (e.g., in leadership training) and actual reactions toward witnessed incivility would be measured (e.g., using momentary time sampling). Such designs are very difficult to conduct, but would certainly strengthen the validity of the findings.

Third, our experimental studies focused on only one aspect of observer power—namely, status (i.e., “supervisor”, “subordinate”). We addressed this in our critical incident studies by



measuring observer power in two ways. Specifically, we operationalized general and relative power as participants' personal sense of power and their ability to influence, control, and exert power over the perpetrator, respectively. Given the consistency of our findings across studies in which we operationalized power in different ways, we have greater confidence that our effects are robust. Nonetheless, future research would benefit from examining how other types of power may interact to influence observer reactions. Another potential avenue for future research is to distinguish power from status and investigate how the interplay between power and status can affect observers' reaction to workplace incivility. Specifically, we found that power's effects partially come from concerns about status challenges. In a similar vein, Fast and colleagues found power without status had a negative impact on interpersonal behaviors (Anicich, Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2015; Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012). Building on these findings, future research might consider whether the effects found in this paper are intensified by the experience of high power coupled with low status.

Finally, although our studies theoretically build on Reich and Hershcovis' (2015) by manipulating observers' power relative to the perpetrator, we did not examine how power differences *between* the perpetrator and target might influence target reactions (i.e., perpetrator and target power were equal in experimental Studies 1 and 3). For example, Kanekar, Mazumdar, Bulsara, and Kolsawalla (1979) found that third parties tend to view aggression as more acceptable when coming from low-power individuals; the authors reasoned that this was because low (compared to high) power perpetrators elicited positive attributions (i.e., bravery, idealism). Similarly, the *observers'* power relative to the *target* may also be important. Less-powerful observers should be less inclined to intervene in witnessed incivility, because the higher-power target seems less in need of assistance. Additionally, intervention by a low-power



observer could be less effective, as the high-power target might be in a better position to defend her or himself (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). Additionally, our studies only opted for the constructive aspects of confrontation without examining more destructive confrontation behaviors such as retaliation. However, the powerful are likely to engage in such punitive behaviors after witnessing incivility, especially when they perceive incivility as status threat and destructive confrontation serves as a means to restore power. Future research could benefit from focusing on observer power's effect on negative confrontations toward incivility perpetrators.

### **Conclusion**

Workplace incivility is instigated by people operating within structures of power and hierarchy (Cortina & Magley, 2003), and the powerful tend to react to their environments very differently than the powerless (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2003). These power dynamics are complicated, and they extend to observers of incivility as much as targets and perpetrators. A better understanding of observer reactions and the power that influences them will advance theory, research, and interventions surrounding mistreatment at work.



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## Appendix

### Study 3 Vignettes

#### *High Power Condition*

You are the supervisor of a project implementation team.

Your team is responsible for implementing a new product launch for a product that is expected to be a huge success for the company. The company's goal is to sell 30,000 units of the new product in the first month after its launch.

Every Monday you call a staff meeting to discuss important project-related goals with your team. During today's meeting, you witness one of your employees, Alex, dismiss an idea that your other employee, Taylor, is sharing with everyone. Taylor is eventually able to contribute ideas to the discussion, but Alex interrupts and treats Taylor dismissively throughout the meeting.

#### *Low Power Condition*

You are a member of a project implementation team.

The team is responsible for implementing a new product launch for a product that is expected to be a huge success for the company. The company's goal is to sell 30,000 units of the new product in the first month after its launch.

Every Monday you attend a staff meeting to discuss important project-related goals. During today's meeting, you witness one of your coworkers, Alex, dismiss an idea that your other coworker, Taylor, is sharing with everyone. Taylor is eventually able to contribute ideas to the discussion, but Alex interrupts and treats Taylor dismissively throughout the meeting.



Table 1

*Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	
1. Power condition	-	-	-			
2. Confrontation	3.41	1.06	.37**	.89		
3. Avoidance	2.56	1.24	-.37**	-.52**	.72	
4. Support	3.59	0.84	-.23*	.35**	-.07	.74

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; Cronbach's alpha along the diagonal.



Table 2

*Study 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. General Power	3.19	0.71	.88					
2. Relative power	1.45	0.67	.31**	.86				
3. Confrontation	1.60	0.99	.17**	.41**	.91			
4. Avoidance	1.80	0.76	-.18*	-.19**	-.35**	.73		
5. Social support	2.55	1.09	-.08	-.12*	.05	-.07	.87	
6. Perceived responsibility	2.93	1.11	.12*	.29**	.54**	-.37**	.26**	.92

*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , Cronbach's alpha along the diagonal



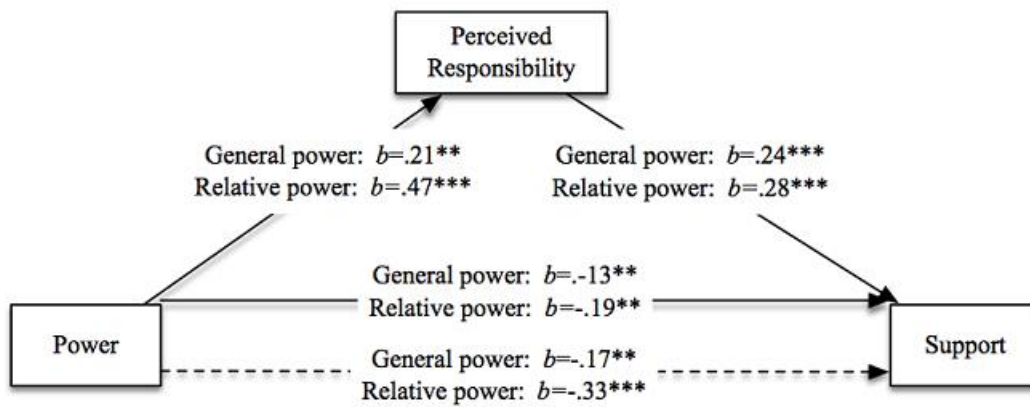
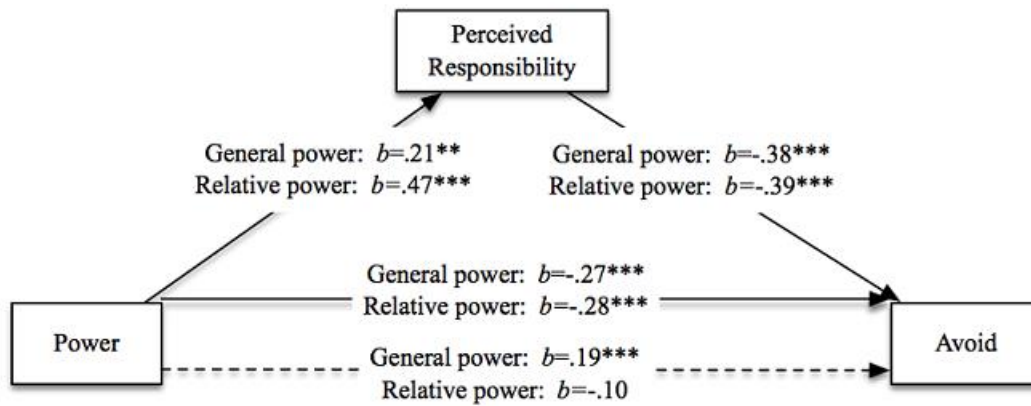
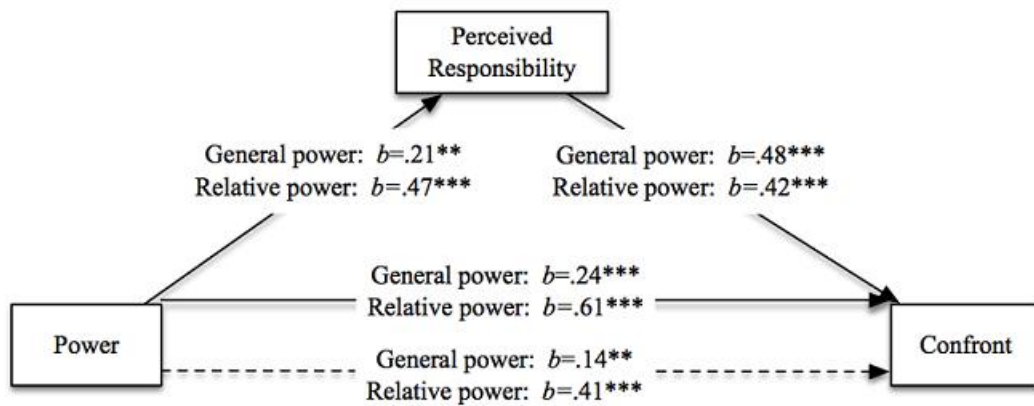
Table 3

*Study 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Power	-	-	-					
2. Confrontation	3.89	0.91	.29**	.93	.			
3. Avoidance	1.82	0.90	-.26**	-.62**	.93			
4. Social support	3.30	0.84	-.13†	.12	-.06	.88		
5. Status challenge	3.82	1.31	.36**	.32**	-.24**	.16*	.83	
6. Perceived responsibility	5.51	1.39	.44**	.61**	-.61**	.09	.52**	.96

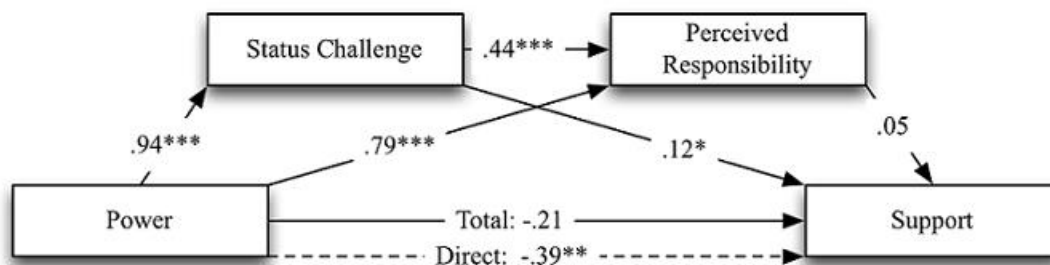
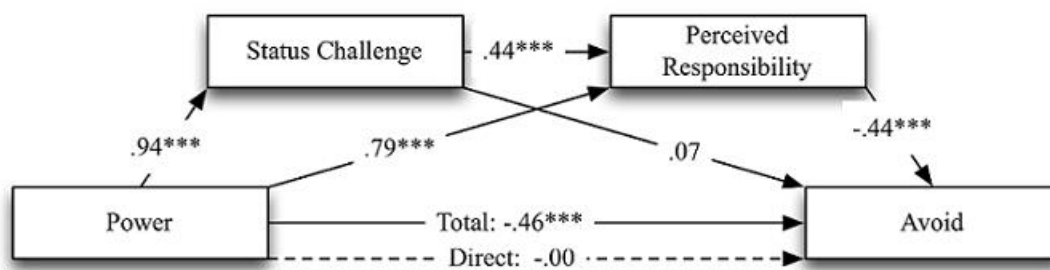
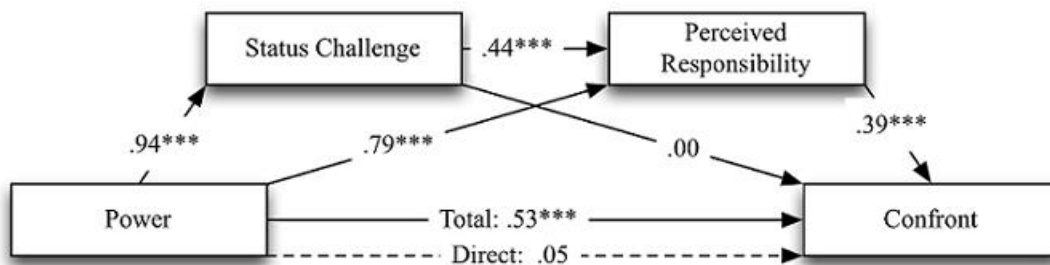
*Note.* † $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , Cronbach's alpha along the diagonal





\* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$   
 Dashed path represents the direct effect.





\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$