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## No Place for Incivility

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# No Place for Incivility

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When the National Science Foundation released a report (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2014/08/09/uncivil-work-environment-blamed-for-lack-of-women-engineers/>) suggesting that mistreatment or incivility in the workplace may be a reason why women leave STEM fields, Mahima Saxena felt compelled to dig deeper. Saxena, assistant professor of psychology in the Industrial-Organizational Psychology program at Illinois Tech, wanted to better understand the *experience* of being a target of workplace incivility for women in science, technology, engineering, and math fields.

Saxena and her team of graduate and undergraduate students decided to explore the immediate and long-term experience of being a victim of workplace mistreatment.

“We know that incivility leads to a variety of negative outcomes, but we do not know the target’s experiential elements of this mistreatment”, says Saxena.

“What happens to the target in the moment, what happens over time, and

how does this mistreatment influence their work-performance and decisions to stay or leave STEM?”

She was especially interested in a woman’s *lived-through experience* or what is happening at the moment of incivility and how it changes through time, influencing long-term outcomes, such as how women cope after negative interactions.

“We wanted to understand what’s happening when you are the victim—in the moment—what are you feeling, what goes through your mind,” says Saxena. “In an immediate sense, what happens cognitively, and in the long-term, what happens behaviorally.”

To answer questions such as these, Saxena and her team engaged in an in-depth evaluation of the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive consequences of workplace incivility for women in STEM. Standard industrial-organizational psychology literature defines incivility as low-intensity, deviant behavior with an ambiguous intent to harm. Such negative interpersonal acts in the workplace include casual rudeness, covert remarks, ambiguous personal insults, devaluation of work efforts, and speaking over someone.

The team’s study, conducted during 2014–15, found that every female participant had experienced incivility at her workplace in the last 12 months. Additionally, women experienced multiple negative emotions when they became a target of uncivil behavior, each ranging in intensity and duration. These negative emotions lasted through time and were strong enough to disrupt performance by hijacking cognitive or mental resources and causing participants to “re-live” the experience through rumination. The study also found that when female participants politely confronted the perpetrators of incivility, they experienced positive emotions.

“The consequences of incivility can be long-lasting. How targets cope with the incident is key to whether there will be long-term performance decrements or intentions to quit,” says Saxena. “Organizations can prevent long-term

negative outcomes by encouraging dialogue and offering healthier ways for the target to cope”.

Saxena’s research lab at Illinois Tech uses the *experience sampling method* to capture the lived-through experience of working. Real employees respond to questions as they go about their daily work tasks in real time. Aspects of work behaviors, performance, emotions, health, well-being, and various psychological experiences are captured in their natural context (the workplace) using electronic devices such as smart phones or specially created computer programs that work within research participant’s Web browsers.

The team is still analyzing the data, which was collected from women across a variety of age groups and from across the nation; participants had advanced doctoral or post-doctoral degrees in STEM fields. As a next step, Saxena is interested in studying women in STEM in academia versus women in STEM in industry and early career professionals versus more advanced career professionals.

“Human behavior at work fascinates me,” says Saxena. “To understand the inner experience of work and how that influences health and well-being so as to ultimately have a positive impact on people’s work life is my key objective.”

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