How rudeness takes its toll

Can incivility lead to a spiral of aggression and tarnish a culture?
Christine L. Porath and Amir Erez investigate.

What do we know about the effects of rudeness? Studies show that even when the target of rudeness does not exact retribution, performance plummets, whether measured using cognitive or creative tasks, or in terms of helpfulness. What’s more, witnesses are affected in similar ways. Rudeness even primes dysfunctional behaviour and aggressive thoughts. Findings suggest that rudeness can tarnish a culture – it takes a toll on people and society in multiple ways.

Does rudeness affect thinking power and performance?

Rude and disrespectful behaviours are very prevalent in organisations – and the situation is getting worse. Onequarter of employees polled in 1998 said they were treated rudely once or more a week; by 2005 that number had risen to nearly half (Porath & Pearson, 2010). In a poll of nearly 800 employees, 25 per cent reported witnessing workplace rudeness daily (Pearson & Porath, 2005), and this number seems to be climbing.

The growing number of reported uncivil acts is not limited to working organisations, nor is it restricted to one country (Truss, 2005). A quarter of customers surveyed report that rude behaviour from service providers is common today. Half of customers surveyed report that it’s not unusual to see employees treat their co-workers rudely, 50 per cent report seeing employees treat customers badly, and about 40 per cent say that they experience rudeness from service employees at least once a month (Porath et al., 2010). Many studies also show the other side – that employees in service organisations are commonly the targets of customers’ uncivil and rude behaviors (Boyd, 2002; Grandey et al., 2004; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Ringstad, 2005). Sixty per cent of teenagers witness uncivil events daily in American schools (Discovery Channel, 2004). In Australia a recent study suggested that rudeness is experienced frequently and that it leaves a memorable and confronting impression on the mind (Phillips & Smith, 2004). In England former Prime Minister Tony Blair asserted that lack of respect was one of the top problems facing the United Kingdom (Rice-Oxley, 2006). It seems that Blair and other international leaders, such as former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard (Stephens, 2004), believe that an uncivil environment has a negative effect on people – even if they’re just ‘around it’. As a society, we believe that incivility matters (Remington & Darden, 2002). Rudeness can destroy collegiality and teamwork, extinguish negotiations across countries or parties, obliterate sportsmanship and safety, and encourage aggression, crime and deviance.

For the past eight years, we have focused on learning more about the effects of rudeness. Survey data across industries suggested that rudeness had a number of detrimental effects on targets, organisations, and even witnesses. A staggering percentage admitted losing time and focus after encountering incivility, intentionally avoiding the perpetrator, spending less time on work and more time slacking off, and thinking about exiting the organisation. However, many scholars remain sceptical because most studies showing the devastating effects of rudeness rely on subjective self-reports of targets or observers of rudeness. Pushed to study if rudeness affected objective behavioural

Employees in service organisations are commonly the targets of customers’ uncivil and rude behaviours

References


Resources


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outcomes, we designed experimental studies to test whether, and to what extent, rudeness hijacked performance.

In our first study (Porath & Erez, 2007) participants were asked to perform identical tasks across three experiments. What we varied for each experiment was the source and the form of rudeness enacted. In Experiment 1 the experimenter was rude to participants by belittling their reference group (students at their university) after a confederate was late for the experiment. In Experiment 2 a stranger that the participants encountered on the way to the study treated participants uncivilly. In Experiment 3 we asked participants to simply think about how they would react to various types of rudeness. In each situation, we measured participants’ performance, creativity, and helping behaviours. To measure performance, we asked participants to solve anagrams and perform a brainstorming task (to come up with as many uses as possible for a brick). The strength (and consistency) of the results surprised us. We found that even with a one-time, relatively low-intensity incident, participants who had been treated rudely were not able to perform as well on these cognitive tasks. Performance also suffered for participants who were asked merely to imagine an uncivil event. In both cases, those treated rudely lost task focus and their performance plummeted. In our first experiment, where the experimenter had belittled participants’ reference group (but not them personally), participants performed 33 per cent worse on the anagram tasks and came up with 39 per cent fewer creative ideas in the brick task. In our second experiment, where a stranger encountered on route to the experiment was rude to participants, their performance was 61 per cent worse on the anagram tasks, and they produced less than half as many ideas in the brick task as those who had not been treated rudely.

In both experiments, participants who experienced rudeness, not only produced significantly fewer ideas than those who did not experience rudeness, their ideas were also less diverse and less creative. When asked what to do with a brick, they’d offer routine and simple ideas like ‘build a house’, ‘build a path’ and ‘build a school’. Ideas generated by people who had not been treated rudely were much more sophisticated and imaginative, such as ‘sell the brick on e-bay’, ‘use it as a goal post for a street soccer game’ and ‘decorate it like a pet and then give it to a kid as a present’.

Why is creativity impaired as a result of rudeness? Psychologists and educators used to believe that creative thinking was spontaneous and that creative ideas come to thinkers in a bolt of insight. Now it’s widely believed that creativity actually requires concentration and the juggling of ideas. Creativity requires an extensive search through possibilities and then an elaboration and integration of those possibilities. Old information must be retrieved from long-term memory and then compared to new information stored only momentarily in working memory. The process demands mental agility and any interference stiffs the process. When rudeness occurs, it appears to rob us of cognitive resources, decreasing attention and overloading working memory, thereby reducing creativity.

We also learned a lot about how rudeness affects helpfulness. When people were treated uncivilly, their inclination to help others dropped, too. In the first experiment, in the condition where no rudeness had occurred, 90 per cent of participants helped pick up something that had been intentionally dropped by the experimenter. But when the experimenter insulted the participants’ reference group, only 35 per cent offered any assistance. In the second experiment, 73 per cent of those who hadn’t experienced incivility volunteered to lend a hand. But when a confederate was rude to participants who were trying to find the location where the study was taking place, only 24 per cent of those who had been treated rudely offered assistance.

Our experiments showed that an act of rudeness delivered by an authority figure (the experimenter in Experiment 1) and by a third party (the confederate in Experiment 2) affected participants’ task performance, creativity, flexibility, and helpfulness. We also found that just imagining a rude incident reduces routine as well as creative and flexible performance. In Experiment 1, rudeness was not directed particularly toward the participant and was subtle enough that it could have been brushed off easily by participants. In Experiment 2, rudeness was directed toward the participants, but was seemingly unrelated to the experimental session. Experiment 3 presents an even more minimal manipulation – just imagining a rude incident. Our manipulations of rudeness were conservative. The robust effects that we found in our experiments are all the more impressive in showing that even one-time, rather mild incidents of rudeness could have serious consequences for objective performance on cognitive tasks (see Prentice & Milkman, 2002).

From a practical perspective, these results show that even if individuals in the workplace report that rudeness is ‘not a problem’ (e.g. in organisations where it is acceptable behaviour), it may have detrimental consequences. Even if people do not report the toll that rudeness is taking on them, are not intentionally getting even, and are not even aware that rudeness is affecting them, they may still exhibit cognitive losses.

Our experiments also provide insight into why individual task performance, creativity, and flexibility may suffer following rudeness. Although the vast majority of research on aggression tends to focus on how retaliation or desire to get even explains individuals’ responses to antisocial behaviour, the ‘desire to strike back cannot explain our results.

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In this experiment, we had a confederate five witnesses' performance would also study. In Experiment 2, we tested whether figure (the experimenter) act rudely to five participants witnessed an authority Porath & Erez, 2009). In Experiment 1, witnesses may have very important people witness rudeness than those innocent bystanders. This implies that rude behaviour can harm our studies influenced not only helpfulness and performance.

Finally, extending previous research, our findings allow us to conclude that rudeness has a spillover effect. Rudeness in our research showed that attitudes may be overlooked (see Bargh, 1989). Across studies we've found that incivility, even if prompted just by words, impacts function in the mind and working memory. Even if small effects are impressive. Psychological Bulletin, 112, 160–164. Remington, R. & Darden, M. (2002). Aggravating circumstances: A status report on rudeness in America. New York: Public Agenda.

Rudeness has a spillover effect – rude behaviour can harm innocent bystanders

rude behaviour to a confederate who had arrived late to the study. In Experiment 2, we tested whether five witnesses’ performance would also decrease as a result of rudeness from peers. In this experiment, we had a confederate rudely berate another participant (a confederate) for taking too long to complete the consent form. Experiment 3 added another condition to test whether a competitive versus cooperative relationship with the target affected our results. We studied performance and creativity using the same tasks and methods that we applied to targets of rudeness in our earlier study. We also tested whether witnessing rudeness affected helpfulness.

Finally, in this series of experiments we also coded the brainstorming task for dysfunctional ideation. We were interested in whether simply being around rudeness could prime dysfunctional or aggressive thoughts and behaviour. There are several reasons to believe that witnessing incivility may prime aggressive and antisocial thoughts, which inadvertently may affect innocent people (cf. Denson et al., 2006; Hoobler & Brass, 2000; Marcus-Newhall et al., 2006). A meta-analysis of laboratory studies on the effects of media aggression and violence (Andison, 1977) and longitudinal studies reveal that viewing aggression may lead to aggressiveness (Eron et al., 1972; Huesmann & Eron, 1986). Although witnessing aggression may not always explicitly influence people, it may still influence them implicitly. Research shows that attitudes may be primed (James, 1890; Lashey, 1951) subconsciously by the mere presence of an object, without intention or awareness (see Bargh, 1989).

The pattern of results for witnessing rudeness in this study was extremely similar to the results we found about the effects of rudeness on targets’ performance, creativity, and helpfulness in our first study. Those who witnessed incivility performed 20 per cent worse on the anagrams and produced nearly 30 per cent fewer ideas in the brainstorming task. Witnesses to incivility were also far less likely to help – even when the experimenter had no apparent connection to the rude participant. In both studies only 23 per cent of those who witnessed incivility volunteered to help, compared to 31 per cent of those who didn’t witness rudeness. In all three experiments participants in the rudeness condition were also more likely to create dysfunctional uses for the brick than in the neutral condition. In fact, respondents in the rudeness condition wrote things like ‘id like to smash the experimenter’s face with a brick,’ as well as ‘break someone’s nose and smash someone’s fingers’. Many stated that a brick could be used to ‘murder someone’, ‘kill people’, ‘attack someone’, ‘beat someone up’, ‘hurt someone’, ‘injure another person’, ‘throw at someone’, ‘trip someone’, and ‘throw through a window’, and could be used as a weapon. Thus, our experiments suggest that an isolated rude comment could provoke the urge to retaliate aggressively. Participants who were exposed to rudeness not only produced more dysfunctional uses but also tended to reassemble the scrambled word ‘remdue’ as ‘murder’ rather than ‘demure’. Thus, our studies suggest that an isolated rude comment could provoke aggressive thoughts that may prime individuals to behave in an aggressive manner. Our latest research shows that people who complete sentence tasks that include some rude words compared to those with only neutral words demonstrate less selective attention. Across studies we’ve found that incivility, even if prompted just by words, impacts the mind and working memory.

These results could be extremely important to organisations and society.

because they suggest the possibility that observing rudeness could be the starting point to a spiral of aggression. Rudeness may provoke people to ‘strike back’, and these aggressive outcomes could deteriorate further as conflict continues (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

One cannot assume that rudeness will influence people in the same way in all situations. For example, in a competitive situation people may actually benefit from the misfortune of others and may therefore not be affected by the rudeness toward others. Thus, in Experiment 3 we tested how competitiveness with a victim of rude behaviour over scarce resources affected witnesses. Our results showed that competitiveness with the victim did reduce the negative effects of witnessing rudeness on the anagram task performance. However, the effects of witnessing rudeness did not disappear under the competitive situation. Those who witnessed rudeness produced less uses for a brick, their uses were rated as less creative, and they were less likely to engage in helpful behaviours regardless whether they were in the cooperative or the competitive conditions. Thus, the effects of these different manipulations converged to reveal that witnessing rudeness has serious consequences for performance.

Our three experiments provide evidence that just witnessing rudeness tends to reduce observers’ performance, creativity, and helpfulness and increase their aggressive thoughts. We believe that these results are important because they illustrate that the rudeness effect is pervasive and has a spillover effect. In other words, our study shows how a ‘bad apple’ can affect observers and ‘spoil the barrel’ by being rude. As the nature of work is rapidly changing from being organised around individuals to teams (O’Toole & Lawler, 2006), these results have important practical implications.

**Conclusion**
The cost of rudeness is difficult to fully quantify. People suffer and retaliate in a myriad of ways: 94 per cent of targets of incivility get even with their offenders, and 88 per cent get even with their organisation (Pearson & Porath, 2009). Our studies show that even when targets or witnesses do not exact retribution though, performance suffers. Targets, witnesses, and organisations pay. Whether measured using cognitive tasks or creative tasks, or in terms of helpfulness, performance plummets. However, these effects extend beyond the target. Witnesses are affected in similar ways. Rudeness even appears to prime dysfunctional behaviour and aggressive thoughts. Our findings suggest that rudeness can tarnish a culture. Rudeness takes a toll on people and society in multiple ways.

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