EMOTION REGULATION AND INCIVILITY: KEEP IT CIVIL EVEN THOUGH IT MAY NOT BE HONEST

By

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Abstract

Emotions are an inescapable a part of our daily experiences and we spend much of our time regulating them either deliberately or subconsciously. While we understand what it means to regulate our emotions and the toll it can take, it remains unclear how another individual’s perceptions of our emotion regulation patterns may vary, especially when our behavior crosses the line into incivility. Building on theories of emotion regulation and incivility, this paper proposes that perceptions of emotion regulation can change based on displays of incivility, which occur when emotion regulation or lack thereof reach an extreme. In a study with a simulated online customer service interaction, this paper finds that (1) civility increases perceptions of trust, (2) angry uncivil behavior is viewed as the most honest but least moral, and (3) angry civil behavior is viewed as particularly benevolent. This research shows how while civility may increase trust, honest and authentic behavior may not always be viewed in a positive manner.
Introduction

Imagine that you are a little upset about a faulty product purchase and wish to get a refund. The company does not do refunds outside a specific window of time that you have now exceeded only slightly. While the inconvenience was minimal, you consider playing up your display of anger towards the customer service representative because you think it will increase your chances of getting what you want. How do people perceive this instance of emotion regulation with anger for personal benefit? How does this perception perhaps change when the emotion display crosses the line into an instance of incivility? While scholars have studied the idea of emotion regulation since the late 1990s, there is little research looking at perceptions of emotion regulation in various contexts and no research regarding the interplay of perceptions emotion regulation and perceptions of incivility. This paper aims to look at this intersection to better understand the perceptions of emotional displays that cross the line into incivility and the value we assign to emotional authenticity. The study will be conducted in the Wharton Behavioral Lab with online surveys to participants at the University of Pennsylvania. Participants will be asked to watch a short video of an online customer service interaction and then answer questions about the interaction. In the analysis of the results, this paper will identify statistically significant differences in perceptions across the four conditions: Angry Civil, Angry Uncivil, Neutral Civil, and Neutral Uncivil. Noteworthy asymmetries in perceptions such as trust and morality, as well as generally striking findings will also be discussed. Applications and future directions of research will also be touched on at the end.
Significance

This research will contribute to the expanding literature on emotion regulation by providing more perspective on how it is received. While there has been extensive work done on how emotion regulation manifests and how it may impact the person doing the emotion regulation especially in the workplace, there is still work to be done in looking at the social perceptions for those around the regulator in specific contexts. This paper aims to help answer the broader question of how we perceive emotion regulation of anger, as well as the more specific question of how that may or may not change when norms of courtesy and civility are violated for the specific purpose of personal gain. Incivility has mainly been studied in the context of workplace aggression. As the field has evolved, civility has taken on a moral aspect definitionally, but researchers have yet to study how incivility for personal gain is perceived by others. While the field of emotion regulation and incivility exist on their own, there is yet to be work to join the two. This paper aims to look at that intersection.

Target Audience

The target audience of this paper is other scholars in the field of emotion regulation and more broadly psychology, as well as those who have less experience but are interested in learning more about the topic. As such, the paper will first outline the major foundational findings in the field and provide a brief overview of the key terms and findings that are relevant for the proposed studies on perception of emotion regulation and acts of incivility.
Literature Review

Emotion Regulation

According to Gross (1998), the field of emotion regulation “studies how individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them.” These processes can vary in structure greatly, from automatic to controlled and from conscious to unconscious. Emotion regulation abilities can be discussed in terms of two connected skills: managing one’s own emotions and managing others’ emotions (Côté, 2005; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1997). The field of emotional labor is closely related—scholars study the emotion regulation strategies employees use to conform more closely to the prevailing organizational norms and expectations concerning emotional expressions known as “display rules” (Ekman, 1993; Shields, 2005). In a foundational piece to the field of emotional labor, Hochschild (1983) outlines two emotional labor strategies that employees to regulate emotions in the workplace: deep acting and surface acting. While both aim to produce a desired emotional display result, deep acting refers to modifying emotions that one actually feels, while surface acting refers to only modifying motions that one displays superficially. (Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005; Grandey, 2003).

Much of recent research has focused on the implications of emotional labor on workplace interactions, both between employees and between customer and employee in the service sector. In terms of within-organization behavior, Grant (2013) finds that emotion regulation knowledge predicts more frequent voice, as employees more easily overcome the fear and risks of speaking up, and also enhances the contributions of voice to performance evaluations. In terms of customer interactions, deep acting provides benefits for customers in terms of satisfaction, while surface acting had either no benefit when customers did not recognize the strategy or even
created a negative impact when customers become aware of its usage (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009). This negative impact from surface acting is in line with the finding that in mundane service interactions, displays of intense happiness or sadness are interpreted as inappropriate and inauthentic, and thus lead to reduced trust in the service provider (Cheshin, Amit, & Van Kleef, 2018).

Several researchers have found the perception of authenticity and appropriateness to be particularly relevant in the way they moderate the relationship between emotion regulation and perception. While emotion regulation aims to produce a desired outcome, the perception of emotional authenticity can affect the outcome. When one engages in surface acting, true feelings can sometimes “leak out” through channels that are less controllable and often beyond what one’s awareness (Ruch & Ekman, 2001; Ekman & Friesen, 1969). As previously mentioned, Groth et al. (2009) find that customers where less satisfied when they recognized surface acting in their service provider. Across a number of studies, participants who reported frequent surface acting not only felt less authentic (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Gross & John, 2003), but also reported weaker social support (Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009) and were perceived by others as having lower quality relationships (Gross & John, 2003). Scholars have, in addition to authenticity, studied how perception of appropriateness play a role. The extent to which emotional expressions are perceived as appropriate for the context largely influence the response to the expressions (Ekman, 1993; Shields, 2005; Van Kleef, 2009). Côté et al. (2013) also find that appropriateness and authenticity are key determinants of interpersonal trust, just as Boone and Buck (2003) find that emotional displays serve as social cues of trustworthiness. Thus, emotional intensity can damage trust when the display is perceived as inappropriate or inauthentic. (Cheshin, Amit, & Van Kleef, 2018). This relationship has also been studied by Lee
and Ching Lim (2010), who find that consumers feel greater liking towards marketers when there is a close match between their emotional receptivity, which is defined as a person’s disposition toward experiencing a preferred level of emotional intensity, and the level of emotional intensity displayed by the marketer. Whether one judges an emotional display to be inappropriate or inauthentic seems to largely depend on one’s own preferences for emotional intensity. Overall, there seems to be consensus that emotional authenticity both benefits the person experiencing the emotions and is also perceived in a more positive light by others.

Multiple studies also show that people are willing to instrumentally use emotion regulation for some sort of personal gain, whether financial or social. In negotiations, for example, emotion tactics can be viewed more favorably than informational tactics because they are less likely to be discovered and thus less likely to provoke the retribution associated with discovered informational deception (Boles, Croson, & Murnighan, 2000; Shapiro and Bies, 1994). This finding is supported by Fulmer, Barry, and Long (2009), who find that individuals viewed emotionally misleading tactics as more ethically appropriate than informational deception. Here, researchers have measured moral perceptions of emotional regulation in the context of negotiation, but as the norms of negotiation are significantly different from those in personal interactions, the results may lack generality. Outside the context of a negotiation, there is substantial impression management literature that finds that in social interaction, people are willing to control or modify their displays for strategic reasons (Baumeister, 1982; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005). In terms of gaining likeability, Clark, Pataki, and Carver (1996) find that people deliberately report higher levels of happiness when the goal is to get others to like them; people operate under the baseline assumption that happiness and likeability are positively associated. The same strategies can be used for financial gain. In a
series of three experiments, Andrade and Ho (2009) find that people deliberately overstate their anger when they believe this strategy to be financially beneficial; they even seem quite comfortable in acknowledging it when asked.

Despite being employed to produce desired outcomes, emotion regulation has also been found to incur certain social costs. In a negotiations study done by Wang, Northcraft, and Van Kleef (2012) we learn that participants covertly sabotaged their opponents who expressed increased anger for personal gain. Feelings of mistreatment mediated the relationship between anger expression and the other negotiator’s covert retaliation. In situations where emotion regulation is perceived as deception, there can be a cost associated with employing emotion regulation strategies. Aside from studying emotional deception, researchers have also studied the effects of expressive suppression on social perceptions and interactions. Studies have shown that suppression acts as a barrier to forming close relationships and building social support (Butler, Egloff, Wlhelm, Smith, Erickson, & Gross, 2003; Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009). Tackman and Srivastava (2016) find that individuals who suppressed either amusement or sadness were perceived as less extraverted, less agreeable, and more interpersonally avoidant and anxious than those who expressed emotions. Moreover, others were less interested in affiliating with suppressors than with expressers. Côté, Hideg, and Van Kleef (2013) find costs associated with surface acting anger in a negotiation setting mediated by trust. Participants who expressed increased anger through surface acting were met with increased demands from their opponent, relative to showing no emotion, and this effect was mediated by reduced trust. This suggest that in addition to factors such as likeability, agreeability, and interest in affiliation, trust may be another perception that can be impacted by certain emotion regulation behaviors.
Incivility

In recent decades of research, the word “civility” has gone beyond its dictionary definition of courtesy and politeness toward fellow human beings and has developed a moral implication that involves preserving the social norms of dignity and respect, as well as regard for others’ feelings (Carter, 1998; Elias, 1982; Bushman & Morris, 1996). Similarly, the definition of “incivility” has evolved to take on various meanings such as breaches of etiquette, professional misconduct, general civil unrest, and even moral decay (Carter, 1998; Gladwell, 1996; Martin, 1996). Here, we define incivility as Andersson and Pearson (1999) do: acting without regard for others in a rude manner, violating of norms for respect in social interactions. Nonetheless, the moral connotation that civility has come to encompass in scholars’ conceptions of the term remains important for this study, as this paper seeks to better understand perceptions of morality in uncivil behavior. As Boyd (2007) says, though civility serves the functional purpose of facilitating social interactions, it may also have an intrinsic moral value.

As the business world of professionalism is thought by many to be a bastion of civility, recent years of research have largely focused on the topic of workplace incivility as a specific manifestation of aggression. While a large range of acts from vandalism to harassment to physical violence constitute workplace aggression (Neuman & Baron, 1997), incivility is characterized by relatively low intensity and ambiguous intent to harm (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Recent research has in particular highlighted both the prevalence of and negative psychological impacts of workplace incivility as a form of interpersonal mistreatment in organizations. Cortina, Magley, Williams, and Langhout (2001) find in data collected from 1,180 public-sector employees that 71% reported some experiences of workplace incivility in the past five years. In the same study, results show that as many as one third of the most powerful
individuals in the organization instigated these uncivil acts and that both men and women experienced similarly negative effects on job satisfaction and withdrawal. Pearson and Porath (2005) studied 2,400 people across the U.S. and Canada, and they find that incivility in the workplaces caused employees to act in ways that undermine organizational values and deplete organizational resources. In 2008, Lim, Cortina, and Magley studied an organization where employees largely work in cohesive groups and note that workplace incivility has negative impacts on job satisfaction and mental health at the group level beyond the targeted individuals. While significant research has been conducted on the effects of incivility in the workplace, there is still work to be done around personal interactions where incivility comes into play. This paper aims to address perceptions of incivility in a non-workplace interaction.
Research Question and Hypotheses

**Research Question:** How do people perceive authentic and inauthentic displays of incivility for personal gain in a customer service exchange?

**Design:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chat transcript</th>
<th>Actual felt emotions (facial expression)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil</td>
<td>Civil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncivil</td>
<td>Uncivil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hypotheses:**

(1) Civility paired with anger boosts trust compared to civility paired with neutral emotions.

(2) Civility paired with anger boosts trust compared to incivility paired with anger.
Methodology

Procedure

First, I hired a student actress to play a neutral and then angry customer during a short video of their facial display while she is typing on the computer. I then separately filmed screen recordings of a civil chat transcript and an uncivil chat transcript that simulated a customer service interaction online (please see below for the chat transcripts). Finally, I used iMovie to overlay the two chat transcript videos with the two facial expression videos in the top right corner, so that participants would be able to view both at the same time. This resulted in overlaid videos across four conditions: Neutral Civil, Angry Civil, Neutral Uncivil, Angry Uncivil. An example is shown in the image below. These four overlaid video conditions were randomized and only one was shown to each participant.

Before running the study, I ran two pilot studies and also used an algorithm called FaceReader to perform a manipulation check on the facial expression videos. FaceReader was able to read the neutral facial expression video as neutral, and the angry facial expression video has having negative valence emotions, such as sadness and anger. These results were in line with expectation, so I then ran the first pilot study with the facial expression videos with thirty participants on Amazon’s MTurk to verify with human participants that the display emotions were indeed being perceived as Neutral and Angry. After seeing that the manipulation was working, I ran a second sixty person pilot study on MTurk with the full survey from the study to ensure that the manipulation was working for the study with the overlaid videos. This second pilot helped inform my two hypotheses regarding trust mentioned in the previous section. Results from FaceReader and from the second pilot study can be seen in the Appendix.
Finally, I ran the full study in the Wharton Behavioral Lab over the course of three days with a total of 215 college student participants at the University of Pennsylvania. We measured perceptions of honesty, morality, appropriateness, trust, affective trust, cognitive trust, ability, benevolence, and integrity. The items used for each measure are listed in the Measures section.

Civil Chat Transcript

Customer: Hi, I’d like a refund of my headphones. They’re broken.

Rep: Hi, thank you for reaching out. We are sorry to hear that and will work with you to resolve it. Please describe the issue you are facing.

Customer: The headphones I recently bought stopped working. I have been charging them and taking care of them but they have just stopped working.

Rep: I’m sorry to hear that. Can you please provide me with your order number so that I may assist you further?

Customer: NL673917

Rep: Thank you

10 seconds later

Rep: I have located your order in our system. Unfortunately, we have passed the return deadline already.
Customer: I understand but it has only been two weeks. I have taken good care of them but they just don’t work. Is there anything else you could do?

Rep: I can send you a free exchange. Is that ok?

Customer: Ok. Thank you!

Uncivil Chat Transcript

Customer: I need a refund for your terrible product.

Rep: Hi, thank you for reaching out. We are sorry to hear that and will work with you to resolve it. Please describe the issue you are facing.

Customer: After only TWO WEEKS, the headphones stopped working. This is ridiculous and I want a refund. This is a scam!!

Rep: I’m sorry to hear that. Can you please provide me with your order number so that I may assist you further?

Customer: NL673917
Rep: Thank you

10 seconds later

Rep: I have located your order in our system. Unfortunately, we have passed the return deadline already.

Customer: Don’t be an idiot. It’s not my fault that your company sent me a piece of crap. I want one that actually works.

Rep: I can send you a free exchange. Is that ok?

Customer: Ok.
Measures

Items used for measures are listed below and are drawn from studies done by Mayer et al. (1995) and Levine and Schweitzer (2015). Participants indicated the extent to which they agree with each statement using a 7-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

[Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Agree, and Strongly agree]

Honesty
- This person was honest in representing how they felt.
- This was an honest representation of their feelings.

Morality
- This person has good moral character.
- This person is an ethical person.

Appropriateness
- This person behaves appropriately.
- This person's behavior is appropriate.

Trust
- I trust this person.
- I am willing to make myself vulnerable to this person.

Affective Trust
- I would share my most outlandish ideas and hopes with this person.
- I would talk with this person about difficulties I am having at school and work.

Cognitive Trust
- I would take this person's advice about school and work.
- I would rely on this person to follow through on commitments.

Ability
- This person is competent.
- This person is skilled.
- This person has expertise.

Benevolence
- This person is kind.
- This person is nice.
Integrity
- This person has a great deal of integrity.
- This person cares about honesty and truth.
- I can trust this person's word.

Demographics questions
- Gender, Age, Level of education, Work experience
- In your own words what was the purpose of this study?
- Do you know the person in the video?
Results

Figure 1: Angry Uncivil was perceived as being the most honest.

Figure 2: Angry Uncivil was perceived as being the least moral, with Civility in general being perceived as more moral.

Figure 3: Perceptions of appropriateness were in line with perceptions of morality, with civility being the driving factor.
**Figure 4:** Manipulation check confirms that the Uncivil conditions were viewed as more uncivil as the Civil conditions.

**Figure 5:** Civility was viewed as more trustworthy.

**Figure 6:** Civility was perceived as having higher ability and competence.
**Figure 7**: Angry Civil is seen as the most benevolent.

**Figure 8**: Neutral Civil is perceived as having higher integrity than Neutral Uncivil.
Discussion

Perceptions of Incivility

First, we find several broad patterns across civil and uncivil conditions. In many of the results, we see a stark contrast in perceptions between the Civil and Uncivil conditions. Civil is seen as more moral (Figure 2), appropriate (Figure 3), and trustworthy (Figure 5) than Uncivil. Furthermore, it does not seem to matter whether or not the civility is emotionally authentic. Civil is viewed as more competent than Uncivil (Figure 6), and Neutral Civil is perceived as having the highest ability and competence. Civil behavior is also seen as having greater integrity than cases of incivility, even when the uncivil behavior was congruent with the felt emotion of anger (Figure 8). Perceptions of trust overall tend to be driven by civility rather than authenticity; however, the differences in perceptions of trust between Neutral Civil and Angry Civil were not statistically significant. That is, the first hypothesis that civility paired with anger would boost trust compared to civility paired with neutral emotions was not found in the data. On the other hand, the second hypothesis that civility paired with anger boosts trust compared to incivility paired with anger was confirmed by the data in a statistically significant manner. As previously mentioned, Angry Civil created higher perceptions of trust than Angry Uncivil (Figure 5).

Aside from the two hypotheses regarding trust, two other significant findings stood out as being noteworthy: (1) the contrast between perceptions of honesty and of morality and (2) the asymmetric perceptions of benevolence, both of which are discussed further below.
Perceptions of Honesty vs Morality

Figure 9: Perceptions of Honesty vs Morality in the Angry Uncivil condition. Size of circle corresponds to number of respondents.

The Angry Uncivil condition scores highest among the four conditions in honesty but lowest in morality (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Figure 9 shows that many respondents rated the Angry Uncivil condition a 7 (Strongly Agree) on honesty, but those same respondents rated the same condition only a 3 (Somewhat Disagree) on morality. When people are angry we expect incivility, so this congruent and authentic behavior seems the most honest, but the data suggests that we do not like the honesty, judging it to be immoral despite its honesty. Angry Uncivil is seen as more slightly honest than Neutral Civil, which is also a congruent condition, because Angry Uncivil may simply be seen as providing more emotional cues and information overall. Though Neutral Civil is honest, there may not be as much information for the respondents to confirm or deny its honesty as with the Angry Uncivil condition. In light of the high scores on honesty for Angry Uncivil, the low score on morality seems to say, “I don’t care how you feel or how emotionally honest you are being; incivility is immoral.” Much of the literature in emotion
regulation suggests that authentic expression is associated with positive outcomes and perceptions. In this case, authentic expression is actually punished in terms of perceptions of morality. This may suggest that emotion regulation is likely advisable when authentic expression crosses the line into incivility, and indicates that emotional honesty may not come across as positive, moral behavior.

**Perceptions of Benevolence**

Although civility was viewed as more moral and trustworthy (Figure 2 and Figure 5), the same effect was not found for benevolence (Figure 7). Angry Civil was seen by far to be the most benevolent condition, whereas the other three conditions were all statistically very similar. It seems that perceptions of benevolence were driven less by the morality and trustworthiness associated with civility but were rather perhaps rewarding the effortful downregulation of anger uniquely seen in the Angry Civil condition. Just as people conceptualize emotional regulation as work, or what scholars refer to as emotional labor, there seems potentially to be an effortful component to downregulating anger to act in a civil manner that is accorded a perception of higher benevolence. This is confirmed by the surprising finding that Neutral Civil is perceived to have the same level of benevolence as both Uncivil conditions; civility when the facial expression is neutral is accorded no added perception of benevolence even compared to Uncivil behavior. Perception of benevolence has not yet been studied in the current literature in the context of effort and/or emotion regulation.
Limitations and Conclusion

Limitations and Future Research

The above findings have several limitations, some of which may provide context and direction for future research in the fields of emotion regulation and incivility. First, Civility is shown to score highly on morality, appropriateness, trust. This study does not establish a robust causal relationship between civility and these variables. As the relationship between civility and appropriateness is more obvious, future research may look more closely at the relationship between civility and morality and between civility and trust. Most of the recent literature in incivility has focused on workplace incivility, so it may be of interest to look at civility in building team trust. One could also look at the link between civility and trust in a more long-term, personal relationship.

Second, this paper finds that Angry Uncivil is seen as highly honest but not very moral. This relationship is limited to the context of this study: an online customer service interaction. Future research many look at this asymmetry in other contexts where morality is considered to be critical. Though there exists some research on how morality has been incorporated into our conception of civility, future research may study the relationship between civility and honesty more closely

Third, a surprising finding from the study was that Angry Uncivil was seen as the most benevolent, with the other three conditions scoring statistically very similarly to one another. Though I proposed that this may be because the downregulation of angry to act in a civil manner was perceived as an effortful process that was perceived as benevolent, this relationship has not explicitly been tested, as perception of effort was not something that I measured. Future research may test this relationship in isolation and better our understanding of civility and benevolence.
Conclusion

This research has implications for interpersonal relationships as well as the workplace. When trying to establish trust in relationships, it may be in our interest to act in a civil manner even when that civility is inauthentic. This civil behavior not only fosters trust, but it also appears generally to be more moral and appropriate. In the workplace, explicit enforcement of civility through rules and implicit enforcement through culture can both help foster a deeper sense of team trust. Further, this study finds that the authentic condition Angry Uncivil appears highly honest but not very moral. Extensive literature on emotion regulation demonstrates the positive effect authenticity has on both outcomes and perceptions. This research qualifies that statement, showing that authenticity may not always be viewed in a favorable light. Moreover, the downregulation of the Angry Civil condition outperforms the other conditions in perceptions of benevolence. Though previous research in emotion regulation may have shown that inauthentic expressions of emotion can be viewed negatively, this study shows that inauthenticity in favor of civility may be seen as particularly benevolent, perhaps as it shows restraint.
References


Appendix

Photo Consent Form for Video

Photograph Consent Form

I, ________________Ariel Epstein________________, give Amy Qu my permission to use my likeness, image, and/or appearance as such may be embodied in any pictures, photos, digital images, and the like, taken or made on behalf of his research activities at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. I agree that Amy Qu and the Wharton School have complete ownership of such pictures, etc., including the entire copyright, and may use them for any purpose consistent with their behavioral research mission.

I have read and understood this consent.

I give my consent to Amy Qu and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania to use my image for their behavioral research activities.

_________________ Ariel Epstein ______________________  __2/23/19________________
Signature Date
FaceReader Results

Neutral condition reads as largely neutral.

Angry condition reads as sad and angry (negative valence).
Second Pilot Results

**Benevolence**

- Neutral Incivil: 3.11
- Neutral Civil: 4.97
- Angry Civil: 4.87
- Angry Incivil: 3.22

**Integrity**

- Neutral Incivil: 3.33
- Neutral Civil: 5.04
- Angry Civil: 4.91
- Angry Incivil: 3.98

**Ability**

- Neutral Incivil: 3.52
- Neutral Civil: 4.71
- Angry Civil: 4.84
- Angry Incivil: 3.94