

Narcissistic Personality and Reactions to Uncivil Behavior

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Abstract

Uncivil behavior at the working place may lead to extra costs to the company in the long run. Uncivil behavior diminishes well-being and job satisfaction at individual level and decreases productivity, often leading to higher turnover at organizational level. This study focuses on individual experiences and responses of uncivil behavior among Finnish employees. A group of 214 working individuals were asked to complete the questionnaire by thinking about one person who behaved in an uncivil way at work in the past or current working place. They evaluate the uncivil person's behavior with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPI) as well as their own behavior when facing uncivil behavior. NPI produced with principal component analyses six dimensions of Narcissistic behavior instead of seven dimensions, which was case in original version. Respondents were usually avoiding uncivil behavior, and especially respondents who feel insecure around uncivil people tend to avoid such people. However, when respondents appraised themselves as having good psychological eye or narcissistic traits, they did not feel themselves insecure around uncivil behavior nor did they avoid them. The results are discussed in terms of how Finnish culture may impact on experiencing uncivil behavior.

Keywords: Narcissism, Uncivil behavior, Reactions to Uncivil Behavior

Introduction

There has been increased attention by practitioners and scholars to counter-productive work behaviors over the past decade. There are many counter-productive work behaviors that are often interrelated. The focus here is on workplace uncivil behavior that has been described as low intensity deviant acts, such as rude and discourteous verbal and nonverbal behaviors enacted towards another organizational member with ambiguous intent to harm (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Uncivil behavior is characterized by low intensity and

ambiguous intent (Hershcovis, 2011). Common uncivil behaviors include ignoring co-workers, making demeaning comments, using disparaging tones and language, sarcasm, hostile stares, critical remarks, discrediting others' reputation and the "silent treatment" (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim et al., 2008; Porath & Pearson, 2012). Uncivil behavior is experienced as rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others' (Anderson & Pearson, 1999: 457) and it arouses strong emotions all involved (Myers, 2008). The low-intensity and the fact that some are non-verbal make uncivil behaviors difficult to manage. On the other hand, uncivil behavior at the workplace can have far-reaching negative effects on individuals and the whole working community. Research by Cortina et al. (2001) found that up to 71% of the 1,162 employees in the U.S. Eighth Circuit federal court system had experienced uncivil over a period of five years. The inter-personal conflicts, like uncivil behavior, are recognized as significant causes of workplace stress (De Raeye et al., 2008).

While incivility is often regarded as a minor form of mistreatment, it can significantly impact an employee's attitudes and behaviors towards an organization (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Previous studies have focused on the outcomes of uncivil behavior and found numerous negative effects, like reduced work effort, lower work quality and well-being, and increased turnover intention (Lim & Cortina, 2005; Nicholson & Griffin, 2017; Porath & Pearson, 2013; Schilpzand et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2014). Uncivil behavior causes stress to victims, leading to poor performance for the whole unit in the long-term. Previous studies indicate that narcissistic personalities have tendencies to be uncivil way more than others (Aasland et al., 2008). Wasti and Erdas (2019) found cultural difference in uncivil behavior experienced in Turkey. Although there were behaviors considered universally uncivil, such as mocking, belittling, ignoring, scolding or gossiping, they were also behaviors that were culturally specific, including exclusion from social activities and omission of greetings. Here the interest is also to see how the uncivil behavior is interpreted in the Finnish culture and how the respondents will rate the uncivil person's in Narcissistic Personality Disorder – scale. Additionally, this study is interested on the individual aspects when facing uncivil behavior.

Uncivil behavior seems to occur in the context of interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, narcissistic personality has been identified and acknowledged as contributing attributes to many interpersonal negative and damaging work behaviors such as mistreatment of other employees, sabotage, and poor-quality dyadic relationships (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Evidently, narcissism is connected to dimensions of uncivil behavior. However, this relationship appears to be complex, and recent studies have sought to better understand specific dimensions of narcissistic personality that may lead to uncivil behavior (Wang et al. 2022). Secondly, studies have found culturally contingent explanations and perceptions of uncivil behavior (Tran, 2023). This should not be surprising since cultural perceptions of power-distance, masculinity and even collectivism are likely to influence how interpersonal behaviors are perceived and interpreted.

Our study seeks to advance the knowledge and understanding of specific attributes of narcissism that may lead to uncivil behavior, and response of victims of uncivil behavior. The second research objective is to gain an understanding of these effects in the context of the Finnish culture.

Previous Findings

Uncivil behavior is a kind of psychological harassment and emotional aggression that disrupts the workplace norm of mutual respect (Cortina et al., 2013; Felblinger, 2008). It is a low-intensity behavior meaning that incivility do not have transparent intent and it's not very intense (Ferguson, 2012). Low intensity shows for example in Cortina and Magley's study (2009) where respondents appraised their incivility experiences as moderately frustrating, annoying, and offensive, but not particularly threatening. Uncivil behavior occurs in various ways, such as belittling, interrupting individuals, speaking in a demeaning manner, demonstrating a temper, harassing, spreading rumors or gossip, and causing violence (Pearson et al., 2001; Rau-Foster, 2004). It easily goes unnoticed and ignored, even interpersonal conflicts have noted as prominent causes of workplace stress (De Raeve et al., 2008).

Studies have shown that incivility causes low morale and lost working time (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996), decreased productivity (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996; Pearson et al., 2000), increased absenteeism (Sliter et al., 2012) and turnover intentions (Alola et al., 2018; Cortina et al., 2001; Johnson, 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005). Incivility decreases performance and well-being in multiple areas, for example it reduces individual creativity, performance, motivation, focus, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Estes & Wang, 2008; Pearson, et al., 2000). It causes distress (Lim et al., 2008), mental health problems (Laschinger et al., 2013), and negative effects on employees' psychological and physical health (Lim et al., 2008). According to Huang and Lin (2019) emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intention. Park and Martinez (2021) found that experienced incivility was moderately associated with lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, higher stress and burnout, and greater intention to leave. Victims have reported increased levels of work-family conflict (Lim & Lee, 2011), lower levels of marital satisfaction (Ferguson, 2012), and more withdrawal and angry behavior at home (Lim et al., 2018). Zhou et al. (2015) theorize that because of workplace incivility leads to resource loss when trying to cope with this social stressor and understand the intention of the perpetrator.

Instigators and Targets

Those in power seldom suffer from incivility; instead, they are often perceived as the instigators who negatively impact subordinates (Callahan, 2011; Estes & Wang, 2008). Ashforth (1994) and Tepper (2000) confirmed that interpersonal mistreatment is often instigated from higher-status individuals towards individuals who are of a lower-status. They are usually older, more tenure in the organization. In case of gender, men are twice as likely to be the instigators than women (Pearson et al., 2000, p. 127).

Instigators are generally described as people who tend to be rude to their peers, disrespectful of their subordinates, and hard to get along with (Pearson et al., 2000). The likelihood of uncivil behavior increases when employees have feelings of job insecurity, perceive a violation of their psychological contract with the organization, have work-life conflict, and perceive unfairness in the organization (Park & Martinez, 2021).

In general, narcissistic people have a specific tendency to harm workplace norms and studies of narcissistic leaders indicate that they cause damage to others, through bullying and coercion (Aasland et al., 2008). Narcissists have a strong tendency for self-enhancement

(Rhodewalt et al., 2006; Zuckerman & O'Loughlin, 2006) and a sense of entitlement (Davis et al., 2008; Reidy et al., 2008). Narcissistic leaders use all possible ways, in order to attract the admiration of others, as a way of assuring their feelings of superiority (Higgs, 2009; Maccoby, 2007). Uncivil behavior is more likely to be portrayed by individuals with anger, entitlement, Machiavellianism (i.e., manipulative, amoral, cynical), negative affectivity, emotional instability, and psychopathy (Park & Martinez, 2021).

Victims of incivility are often employees who tend to disagree with others, have a mellow personality or a physical disease experience greater incivility than others (Milam et al., 2009). Further, these employees have tendency to negative affectivity (Han et al., 2021), low emotional stability (Han et al., 2021) and low self-esteem (Yao et al., 2021). It is a bit more likely to experience incivility among racial minorities, younger and lower in rank or tenure (Han et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2021).

Resources which Buffer the Harmful Effects of Incivility

Research suggests that employees' reactions to workplace situations may vary depending on the availability of resources to them (Kay et al., 2008; Lam et al., 2010). There has been interest among scholars in understanding workplace relationships, psychological capital and ethical efficacy which seem to be crucial when facing uncivil behavior. Some studies indicate that workplace relationships with colleagues form a major resource pool for employees (Halbesleben, 2006) and co-workers are crucial in determining employees' reactions to workplace events (Rath, 2006). In the case of psychological buffers, the person with higher psychological capital (hope, self-efficacy, resilience, optimism) is more likely to experience fewer negative effects of incivility compared to an individual with lower psychological capital (Roberts et al., 2011). According to social cognitive theory (Bandura et al., 2001; Bandura & Locke, 2003), ethical efficacy defines how to handle job pressures. Ethical efficacy reflects people's confidence in their ability to maintain ethical motivation, such as managing negative emotions to deal with ethical issues. People with higher ethical efficacy beliefs have more capability to resist job pressures (Bandura et al., 2001). Also, those employees are more capable of coping with workplace stressors (Lu et al., 2005; Schaubroeck & Merrit, 1997). Overall, these employees are better at protecting their psychological resources which offer resiliency to various emotional circumstances (Nelson et al., 2012; Mitchell & Palmer, 2010). However, when having higher moral identity, it is more likely to experience a conflict of ethical values and having more sensitivity of negative perceptions of one's work (Watt & Buckley, 2017).

Different Responses to Uncivil Behavior

Studies indicate that silence is one of the most significant responses that employees display in uncivil behavior at work (Rai & Agarwal, 2017; Xu et al., 2015). Like Doshy and Wang (2014) stated it appears that the most popular strategy in these situations is to avoid and escape. However, in their study, some participants chose to confront. The reasons for confronting were due to their fear of the instigator, concern that the situation might deteriorate further, or they might end up losing their job (Doshy & Wang, 2014). Also, Cortina and Magley (2009) have studied different strategies and found that victims respond to incivility in different ways, such as detachment, minimizing contact with the instigators, seeking support, and avoiding conflict. In case of gender, males are more likely to engage in direct, overt revenge against their initiator to try to "get even." Women more likely tend to try to avoid the instigator

(Cortina & Magley, 2009) and they are less likely to “spread the word” about the instigator as men will (Pearson et al., 2000, p. 127).

The importance of current job, personality and experience impact on behavior also. According to Reio and Gosh (2009) the less important job is to an individual, the more likely he or she would choose to confront the instigator. Secondly, a submissive person is unlikely to confront even when the job is unimportant. Thirdly, the more experienced and mature an individual is, the more likely he or she will be able to deal with incivility gracefully and tactfully.

Method

Data and Methods

The data was collected during 2020-2022. In this section we describe the sampling plan, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in the study. Analysis coding protocols and survey materials are available on request. Data were analyzed using statistical analyzes program SPSS. The study design was not preregistered because the data were collected for an applied selection project.

The questionnaire instruments were sent to respondents who have taken courses at the Open University and University of Applied Sciences. A total of 214 respondents completed the questionnaire, indicating a response rate of 30%. All participants had a professional background in business and possessed work experience. The minimum age of respondents was 30 years. The topic under exploration was sensitive, personal, potentially emotional and difficult for the respondents and thus no background information was gathered. It was expected by researchers and participants that data collected in the questionnaires would be more appropriate, with the subjects remaining anonymous and distant, leading to more straightforward and honest answers. For the results, Pearson correlation analyses and ANOVA were used with the SPSS-program.

Survey Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of two parts: 1) Uncivil persons' behavior and 2) Respondents' own behavior. *Uncivil persons' behavior* questionnaire was developed and modified from Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and research of uncivil behavior at working place (e.g. Raskin & Terry, 1988). The NPI is based on self-appraisals and either/or options. Here the modified questionnaire was formed with respondents evaluating the uncivilly behaving person's behavior with NPI-questions in the Likert-scale 1 (=Disagree strongly) to 5 (=Agree strongly). There were 40 items in the questionnaire and respondents were asked to evaluate one uncivil person from the past or the current workplace. The results were analyzed in the SPSS-Program with principal component analyses (Varimax) to identify uncivil behavior dimensions. Dimensions formed were as follows: *Authority* 4 items, α : 0,901, *Vanity* 5 items, α : 0,873, *Entitlement* 6 items, α : 0,761, *Exhibitionism* 4 items, α : 0,893, *Superiority* 5 items, α : 0,748, *Impactful* 4 items, α : 0,687. The dimensions were different from those in the original version (authority, exhibitionism, superiority, entitlement, exploitativeness, self-sufficiency, and vanity). There are two reasons for this. First, respondents in our study did not do self-evaluation, but evaluated others. Secondly, Finnish culture might have culturally different impact on how narcissism is perceived and reflected.

Respondents' own behavior and traits were measured with four items on a Likert-scale: 1(=Does not suit me at all) to 5 (=Suits me very well). The items were: "I try to avoid him/her (uncivil person)", "I feel myself insecure with him/her" (uncivil person). Regarding respondents' own traits, the items were: "I have myself narcissistic traits", "I notice easily social games and use of power". Additional items were: "The person I think has a lot of narcissistic traits" and "I have met a lot of people with narcissistic traits".

Results

The respondents rated Entitlement as the most occurring behavior of uncivil people (see Table 1), followed by Authority and Superiority. The lowest ratings given were for Impactful and Vanity.

Table 2 shows respondents' own qualities and behavior. The highest rating was given to Trying to avoid uncivil person (mean 4,43). Respondents felt insecure with the uncivil person's company (mean 3,15). Most respondents thought that they could easily notice social games and use of power in social situations (mean 4,02) and some of them regarded themselves as having narcissistic traits (mean 2,43).

Table 1

Uncivil Behavior: Means and Standard Deviations (Likert scale 1-5)

Uncivil behavior dimensions	Mean (SD)
Authority	4.04 (0.954)
Vanity	2.60 (0.983)
Entitlement	4.29 (0.597)
Exhibitionism	3.90 (0.893)
Superiority	4.02 (0.650)
Impactful	3.40 (0.798)
Total – Uncivil behavior	3.71 (0.560)

Note. N=290

Table 2

Own Behavior and Qualities: Means and Standard Deviations (Likert scale 1-5)

Own behavior when facing uncivil behavior	Mean (SD)
If possible, I try to avoid working with this kind of persons	4.43 (0.947)
With this kind of persons, I feel myself unsecure	3.15 (1.364)
Own qualities	
I also have narcissistic traits	2.43 (1.115)
I notice easily social games and use of power in my surroundings	4.02 (0.915)

Note. N=290

Table 3 shows correlations between appraisals of narcissism, own behavior and qualities of uncivil behavior. All dimensions correlated with narcissistic traits. Respondents who indicated they had met a lot of narcissistic people also correlated with uncivil behavior of Vanity and Overall Uncivil Behavior.

Avoiding uncivil behavior related to people with Authority, Entitlement, Superiority, and Overall Uncivil Behavior. Those who Felt insecure had experienced uncivil behavior as other than Authority and Vanity. Respondents who reported having Narcistic traits were not correlated with any dimensions. Respondents who felt that they easily Notice social games and use of power in social situations were especially correlated with Authority, Entitlement and Superiority.

Table 3

Pearson correlations between appraisals of narcissism, own behavior and qualities with uncivil behavior dimensions

The person with uncivil behavior	Has a lot of narcissistic traits	I have met a lot of people with narcissistic traits	I avoid s/he	I feel insecure with s/he	I have also narcissistic traits	I easily notice social games and use of power
Authority	0.414**	0.102	0.248**	0.060	0.059	0.128*
Vanity	0.217**	0.154**	0.008	0.072	0.037	-0.033
Entitlement	0.555**	0.126	0.398**	0.198**	-0.100	0.203**
Exhibitionism	0.408**	0.098	0.77	0.205**	0.020	0.051
Superiority	0.451**	0.075	0.300**	0.098	-0.083	0.182**
Impactful	0.244**	0.034	0.07	0.335**	-0.062	-0.009
Overall Uncivil Behavior	0.530**	0.169**	0.259**	0.189**	-0.016	0.111

Note. N=290

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4 reports the results indicating own qualities and behavior as well as narcissistic traits with person of uncivil behavior. Respondents who thought that uncivil people had narcissistic traits correlated with the following items, "I have met a lot of people with narcissistic traits", "If possible, I try to avoid working with this kind of persons", and "I easily notice social games and use of power". Individuals, who had met people with narcissistic traits, correlated with insecure feelings, evaluating having also narcissistic traits themselves, and they easily notice social games and use of power.

Table 4

Pearson correlations between appraisals of narcissism, own behavior and qualities

	The uncivil person has a lot of narcissistic traits	I have met a lot of people with narcissistic traits	I avoid uncivil persons that I describe here	I feel insecure with uncivil people	I also have narcissistic traits	I easily notice social games and use of power
Has a lot of narcissistic traits	1					
I have met a lot of people with narcissistic traits	0.190**	1				
I avoid uncivil persons that I describe here	0.376**	0.650	1			
I feel insecure with uncivil people	0.103	0.116*	0.180**	1		
I also have narcissistic traits	-0.039	0.131*	-0.100	-0.027	1	
I easily notice social games and use of power	0.155**	0.301**	0.110	0.056	0.022	1

Note. N=290

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

Among the respondents, the dimension of Entitlement was the most occurring behavior of uncivil people, followed by Authority and Superiority. The least prevalent uncivil behavior was acting in an Impactful way and Vanity. Our results have some similarities with Park and Martinez (2021), where uncivil behavior was found to be more likely for people with anger, entitlement, Machiavellianism (i.e., manipulative, amoral, cynical), negative affectivity, emotional instability, and psychopathy. It seems that Finnish people evaluate strong-willed people, people who want to be in positions of charge, and people who want to be in the center of the attention as having tendency to behave in an uncivil way. Sometimes all these qualities are necessary, if used in positive and respectful way. In Finnish culture uncivil people do not have a tendency focus on their looks too much or having natural impact on others was not regarded as uncivil behavior.

Respondents' that thought the uncivil person had a narcissistic tendency correlated with all questionnaire's dimensions, so the questionnaire seems to measure narcissistic behavior well in Finland, even though the assessment method was not self-evaluation. Our dimensions were different from the original version since our version did not produce Exploitativeness dimension in statistical analyses. According to factor analysis there are six dimensions, when original questionnaire measures narcissism with seven dimensions. Items measuring Impactful were not negative like most of the items in the questionnaire. Instead, those items were more like neutral statements of persons ability to read others and have skill to impact on others. However, despite neutrality of Impactful, it still correlated with item which stated that uncivil person has narcissistic qualities.

According to Lewis (2005), Finnish people are the only Europeans that have communication style of clearly reactive. Reactive people are described as intensive listeners, which means that they usually have monologue, pause, reflection, monologue in their communication style (Lewis, 2005, 71). This communication style describes well old Finnish saying, "silence is gold". Finnish people tend to appreciate modesty, and they have difficulty to praise themselves (Nishimura et al., 2008). As Lewis (2005, 68) states, Finnish people do not like big talkers. They are among 'listening countries', where silence can be experienced as constructive and those who are speaking, are rarely interrupted (Nishimura et al., 2008). It seems like these results reflect well the Finnish culture, where the silent culture is easily broken with visible, noisy and attention seeking communication.

Respondents reported that they tend to avoid uncivil behavior. Earlier studies indicate that when facing bullying or mistreatment at work, the passive reaction of silence is most typical (Rai & Agarwal, 2017; Xu et al., 2015). It seems that facing uncivil behavior will cause so much stress to most people, that many people choose to avoid rather than confront that person. This behavior is quite logical especially for Finns, who generally do not take an active role in conversations (Lewis, 2005).

Respondents who felt insecure with uncivil people tend to choose avoidance. These respondents were also correlation with Entitlement, Exhibitionism, and Impactful. Impactful and manipulative behaviors can cause confusion due to unclear communication and might arise possible feelings of being misled. People with high Entitlement and Exhibitionism may dominate others in discussions and make others feel slow and weak if they are not as verbally talented and fast. They can also cause confusion when people do not know how to respond to their behavior. In Finnish culture, boastfulness and bragging are still rare behaviors that can make others feeling unsure and unpleasant.

It has been noted that employees with higher efficacy beliefs are more self-regulated to resist job pressures (Bandura, et al., 2001) and more capable of coping with stressors in their workplace (Lu et al., 2005; Schaubroeck & Merrit, 1997). In this study, respondents who reported noticing easily social games, did not feel insecure or try to avoid uncivil people. Despite that, they had been meeting many people with narcissistic traits and the person they were thinking had in their mind narcissistic traits, they did not feel unsecure or avoiding. So, it might be that those people with good psychological sight have higher efficacy and thus they do not have any special reactions towards incivility.

Interestingly, those respondents who reported having narcissistic traits, did not correlate with uncivil behavior dimensions. It seems that the narcissistic people themselves do not so easily estimate behavior as uncivil, at least when it is measured in the questionnaire. This result is in accordance with earlier study by Watt and Buckley (2017) where they noted that employees having greater moral identity are more likely to perceive a conflict of ethical values (Watt & Buckley, 2017). The lack of moral identity of narcissistic people might be the reason why they do not regard uncivil behavior in the same way as other respondents.

Practical Implications and Limitations

Creating security in the workplaces would require uncivil behavior patterns to be recognized and discussed. Uncivil behavior is a subjective experience, and it can be harmful

to some but not all. It would be interesting to see cultural differences in this regard. Finnish people may tend to appraise as uncivil behavior something else than e.g. culturally different areas like South-European and US cultures.

The results showed that people with good psychological knowledge did not feel threatened or did not need to avoid uncivil behavior. It may be that they have gained this psychological eye and knowledge with their past experiences, because there was correlation of them having met a lot of people with narcissistic traits. Without uncivil experiences people might think that something is wrong in themselves, and normally people easily start blaming themselves when co-operation is not working well with uncivil behavior. Education and sharing knowledge from darker side of organizational behavior would be important, so that people would more easily recognize narcissistic people and uncivil behavior and thus save their energy when facing incivility. Stress and anxiety can arise and cause well-being problems, when not realizing that the problems are because of uncivility.

The organizations should have clear rules of what kind of behavior is expected and what to do when facing uncivil behavior. Employees usually do not want to raise issues concerning other people, due to being afraid of negative consequences for themselves, and it might take years, before supervisors and HR realize the problems in organization. Anonymous links to the organization's intranet would be helpful in this kind of cases.

There are studies that show positive effects of interventions with CREW-method. CREW means Civility, Respect, and Engagement at Work, and this method was developed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and implemented in more than 1000 workplaces as of 2014 (Osatuke et al., 2014). CREW involves weekly facilitated group discussions and activities to improve the work climate through more civil and respectful interactions among employees, and engagement. Further details can be found at the VA's National Center for Organization Development. It may be that this kind of group discussions are more efficient in improving behavior and communication than one-to-one discussions.

This study makes several contributions to the burgeoning knowledge of narcissistic personality and uncivil behavior at the workplace. While the relationship between narcissistic and uncivil behavior is known, this study is the first of its kind to investigate culture-specific quantitative interrelationships between dimensions of narcissistic personality and uncivil behavior at the workplace. By examining the Finnish culture, the study highlights an important contextual variable and culture-specific coping mechanisms of Finnish victims of uncivil behavior. Uncivil behavior is pervasive and damaging behavior across organizations, and our study makes a meaningful contribution to related areas of human resources and industrial psychology. By identifying unique aspects of narcissistic personality that are significantly related to uncivil behavior, this study provides a basis for mitigating actions through hiring, education and training frameworks.

This study has some limitations. A wider collection of background information would have been fruitful, to get more specific information about the respondents' gender, age, and working experience. Also, respondents had to choose one uncivil person who they were thinking of when filling in the questionnaire, but we do not know the number of uncivil people the respondents have met. This would have been interesting to know as well, because there

must be more individual differences in this regard. Additionally, for further studies, it would be interesting to know the gender, age and position of the uncivil person.

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