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Explaining situational triggers of incivility in tightly cooperating teams: towards a theory of micro-coordination conflict

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Abstract

Purpose – In teams with tight coordination requirements – such as surgical teams – even small disruptions in smooth coordination (e.g. misaligned timing or insufficient precision) may trigger uncivil behavior, which constitutes a conflict episode. Whereas incivility research investigates broad antecedents of such behaviors (e.g. personality and justice perceptions), conflict research concentrates on differing opinions, values and interests. Neither perspective focuses on impaired task coordination and goal obstruction as potential triggers. The concept of micro-coordination conflict (MCC) addresses this gap.

Design/methodology/approach – Structured around task-coordination requirements, the MCC model draws on literature from incivility, conflict, coordination, interruptions and frustration-aggression to explain emotional responses to coordination failures.

Findings – Insufficient coordination entails risks for efficiency and well-being. The frustration-aggression tradition identifies blocked goal-directed action as inducing anger and, potentially, incivility. When team members' actions are insufficiently aligned regarding timing and precision, performance coordination is disrupted, especially during high-concentration phases. Personal characteristics (e.g. self-regulation), stressful environments and other factors are likely to moderate these associations.

Research limitations/implications – More research is needed on situation- and task-specific coordination failures, their origins in sub-optimal shared mental models and situation awareness and their effects on team processes and outcomes.

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Practical implications – Interventions should address not only reducing uncivil behavior but also improving team coordination, including micro-processes related to shared mental models and situation awareness.
Social implications – The performance of teams that require tight coordination often has an important impact, for instance, on patient outcomes. Optimal coordination is therefore socially important.
Originality/value – By focusing on coordinated task execution rather than disagreements and opposing interests, the MCC model advances understanding of incivility and conflict in tightly coordinated teams. It suggests that task-coordination training may help prevent incivility and conflict.

Keywords Incivility, Conflict, Coordination, Teams, Triggers, Frustration, Interruption, Disruption
Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

"If this were an exam, you would just have failed!" (Keller *et al*., 2016, November), a surgeon exclaims in frustration, after the resident fails to use the suction device quickly enough and obstructs the surgeon's view during an operation. Such remarks have been categorized as disruptive behavior (Cochran and Elder, 2014; Keller *et al*., 2019), which is often attributed to personal characteristics (e.g. "the difficult surgeon"; Hallock, 2015) and to the hierarchical nature of medical teams (Jones *et al*., 2018; Lingard *et al*., 2002). Such explanations may well capture some aspects of the behavior in question, but they cannot explain why somebody displays such behavior in a given situation. A better understanding of aspects that trigger such behavior is theoretically important for a more complete understanding of the processes involved, and it is practically important because it may offer opportunities for interventions aimed at avoiding situations that contain such triggers.

Two research traditions are particularly relevant for a more comprehensive inquiry into this phenomenon. First, such behavior qualifies as workplace incivility – defined as a low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Second, such an incident can be seen as a conflict episode (Pondy, 1967), with conflict involving the perception by one party "that the other has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that he or she cares about" (Thomas, 1992, p. 653), thereby inducing a feeling of being obstructed (Van de Vliert *et al*., 1999, p. 475). Many authors argue that the links between incivility and conflict are closer than the separation of the two pieces of literature suggests (e.g. Hershcovis, 2011; Raver, 2013). Thus, there is a risk that such an episode may escalate into an "incivility spiral" (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Furthermore, according to the definition above, it is sufficient for one party to feel offended; this implies that people may be in a state of conflict without being aware of it – for instance, if the target of the incivility avoids open conflict and does not retaliate in the moment, yet still feels offended.

These considerations imply that research and theory on incivility and conflict are a strong starting point for identifying triggers of "disruptive behavior." Note that our focus is not on general antecedents, such as personality, but on specific situational triggers. This focus reflects the characteristics of the team situation we examine – teams with very high requirements for task coordination. In such teams, even minor disruptions in temporal or spatial coordination can impede progress and trigger frustration and tense behavior. Our review therefore examines the extent to which existing concepts address problems in coordinated task execution in tightly collaborating teams as triggers of incivility.

As triggers such as interruptions are insufficiently addressed in this literature, we developed a model of "micro-coordination conflict" (MCC) to fill this gap. The MCC model draws on research on emotional and behavioral reactions to interruptions and on theory in the frustration-aggression tradition. This model explains how coordination breakdowns in tightly coupled teams can provoke frustration, which in turn can trigger tendencies toward uncivil and conflictual behavior. The model is structured around four components: the context of coordination, specific triggers, emotional and behavioral responses and key moderating factors. It makes several contributions. First, it adds problems in coordinated task execution to the issues considered in incivility and conflict research. Second, it helps explain antecedents of conflict and incivility in terms of situational triggers, going beyond general antecedents. More broadly, it supports a more unifying view of incivility and conflict, emphasizing their close

links, and reinforces the argument for the central role of tasks and task requirements in teamwork (Kerr, 2017). If confirmed in future research, the model also has important practical implications in terms of improving tight coordination.

Impaired task execution in incivility research

As mentioned, the behavior described in the introduction qualifies as incivility, defined as "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target" (Andersson and Pearson, 1999, p. 457). Negative consequences of incivility are well documented (Cortina *et al*., 2017). Its antecedents have been investigated less frequently, but key triggers related to workplace dynamics and individual dispositions have been identified. A meta-analysis by Park and Martinez (2022) found that instigated incivility tends to emerge when job demands and workplace psychological stressors are high (e.g. burnout, high workload and job insecurity) but also in situations of low team and leadership support, low job-related affective well-being, satisfaction, involvement and commitment. On an individual level, instigated incivility was negatively associated with dispositions such as agreeableness, conscientiousness and positive affect but positively with Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism.

Task execution issues are addressed in research on incivility to some extent, for example, by referring to conditions that impede (joint) task execution, such as workload and task difficulty, to performance constraints or "lack of teamwork" (Keller *et al*., 2020a). However, these categories typically reflect broad evaluations of the situation (e.g. high workload) rather than specific situational triggers. Like stable individual characteristics, general conditions can only explain *tendencies* to engage in uncivil behavior but do not account for its occurrence in a specific episode; situational triggers must also be considered.

Existing studies have pointed out several immediate factors in eliciting uncivil behavior, such as experiencing incivility firsthand (Meier and Gross, 2015; Walker *et al*., 2014), aligning with the incivility spiral proposed by Andersson and Pearson (1999), receiving negative feedback (Andersen *et al*., 2019) and violations of psychological contracts (Sayers *et al*., 2011). However, the specific role of disrupted task execution as a trigger is rarely examined, and to our knowledge, no systematic attempt has been made to embed incivility within issues of coordinated task execution at the situational level. Interestingly, research on anger – a core emotion in the context of incivility (Meier and Semmer, 2013) and counterproductive work behavior in general (Spector and Fox, 2005) – has identified perceiving one's ability to complete a task being hampered by others' incompetent behavior as a frequent trigger of this emotion (Fitness, 2000). Yet, incivility research rarely integrates such findings.

Impaired task execution in conflict research

As discussed, incivility can also be regarded as a conflict episode (Pondy, 1967), with conflict being defined by the perception by at least one party that another party is negatively affecting something they care about (Raver, 2013; Semmer, 2020). A central element of such perceptions is that conflicts elicit negative emotions, a core characteristic of conflict itself (Barki and Hartwick, 2004; Weingart *et al*., 2015), again with the potential to trigger a spiral of increasingly aggressive behavior (Andersson and Pearson, 1999).

Because our focus is on triggers of conflict episodes, we reviewed the current conflict literature to address the extent to which impaired coordination is considered. In this literature, conflict is typically described as "perceived incompatibilities or differences among group members" (De Wit *et al*., 2012, p. 360), as "perceived incompatibilities in the interests, beliefs, or views held by one or more team members" (Salas *et al*., 2015, p. 7) or "situations where people are opposed to one another, advocating for different outcomes" (Weingart *et al*., 2015, p. 236). The emphasis is therefore usually on *disagreements* as triggers of conflict. Consequently, current theorizing often focuses on different conflict types distinguished by the nature of the disagreement. These include *task* conflict (disagreements about task and goal

content), *process* conflict (disagreement about who should do what) and *relationship* conflict (incompatibilities between people, such as differences in norms and values; De Wit *et al*., 2012; Jehn, 2014; Jehn *et al*., 2008). Additional types include *status* conflict (Greer and Dannals, 2017), *entitlement* conflict (Jehn and Techakesari, 2014), *outcome* conflict (Levine and Thompson, 1996), *temporal* conflict (differences in opinion regarding when work should be accomplished; Mohammed *et al*., 2017, p. 3) and *non-task organizational* conflict, which pertains to company policies and procedures (Bruk-Lee *et al*., 2013).

Distinguishing conflict types in terms of divergent opinions, status maintenance and interpersonal animosity is certainly useful and important for understanding conflict episodes (see Jehn and Techakesari, 2014; Semmer, 2020). However, narrowing conflict research, or even its definition, to these issues overlooks problems of task execution and coordination. Such issues are occasionally mentioned (e.g. an item by Patterson *et al*. (2012) refers to difficulties coordinating patient care) but are largely absent in general. To the extent that problems in coordinated task execution can trigger disruptive behavior, this omission represents a critical gap in understanding the coordination challenges that may underpin conflicts and incivilities in tightly cooperating teams.

Because they pertain to the details of joint task execution, these problems tend to occur at a "micro-level." This aligns with Paletz *et al*. (2011), who argue that conflict research has overlooked "micro-conflicts" emerging in real-time team interactions. We take up their approach but extend it beyond "brief moment-by-moment disagreements" (p. 314) by focusing on failures of *coordinated task execution* as conflict triggers.

In the next section, we highlight the role of coordination, focusing on task interruptions and goal obstruction as a source of frustration that can provoke negative emotions and uncivil behavior.

The importance of failures in coordinated task execution

Our introductory example describes a problem that is not necessarily rooted in differences of opinion, values or preferences or in personal incompatibilities. Instead, the issue stems from task execution deficiencies that disrupt seamless coordination.

Coordination – defined as "orchestrating the sequence and timing of interdependent actions" (Marks *et al*., 2001, p. 363) – is a fundamental component of teamwork (Dinh and Salas, 2017). Effective coordination involves synchronization, where certain actions have to be performed simultaneously or in a precise or specified sequence (McGrath and Tschan, 2004). When coordination requirements are high, task execution within a team depends on competent performance of others. Mistakes or delays by one team member can disrupt coordination, jeopardizing task completion (Okhuysen and Bechky, 2009). Thus, the issue is not only individual task execution but also joint task execution that aligns with the task execution of other team members.

In some settings, such as surgical teams, coordination requirements can be exceptionally stringent, with precision of temporal synchronization measured in seconds rather than minutes or hours (Keller *et al*., 2019); for example, even minor delays in handing an instrument can interrupt the surgical workflow (Mitchell *et al*., 2011). Furthermore, precision in execution is critical – for instance, an instrument must be placed in the surgeon's hand in the exact position needed for immediate use without requiring further adjustments. Other examples of micro-coordination problems include problems of information transfer such as a failure to confirm a task completion, causing uncertainty and delays or insufficient or excessive information sharing that disturbs concentration, just to name a few.

Other team environments besides surgery requiring such tight coupling include intensive care units (Reddy *et al*., 2006), sports teams (London and London, 1996), restaurant kitchens (Fine, 1990; Mohammed *et al*., 2017), music ensembles (Bishop, 2024) or teams dealing with natural disasters (Jehn and Techakesari, 2014). In all these contexts, team members depend on other team members to perform optimally in terms of time and precision. When coordinative

actions are executed with insufficient quality and precision, task execution may be disrupted (Parker *et al*., 2010). Moreover, this dependency on others' performance can become a source of stress – more specifically, a performance constraint (Irmer *et al*., 2019) also called organizational constraint (Pindek and Spector, 2016).

Is there evidence that problems in the quality of coordinated task execution may trigger incivility? Keller *et al*. (2019) conducted one of the few studies that systematically analyzed triggers of incivility in surgical teams. Observing 137 operations involving 30 different lead surgeons, they identified 340 episodes of tense communication, defined as verbal expressions in an angry or annoyed tone. The vast majority of these episodes (90%) were initiated by the lead surgeon and were most frequently directed at scrub technicians or assisting surgeons. Notably, the study found that situational factors played a much larger role than individual differences in triggering tense communication: Context factors accounted for 75% of the variations in tensions, whereas surgeons explained only 24%. Crucially, nearly three-quarters (72.4%) of tense episodes were triggered by impaired coordination, as when a resident obstructed the surgeon's view or an incorrect thread was handed over. There were task-related triggers, which accounted for 21.2% of the episodes, but they were related to task characteristics, like an unusually complicated anatomy of a patient or to delays by technical problems, such as a device that is not working correctly; none of these triggers fit the classical definition of task-related conflict as disagreement over task content or process. Rather, the majority of triggers stemmed from goal obstruction and task execution failures, such as delays and distractions. Relationship conflict accounted for only 1.2% of the triggers.

Further supporting the role of coordination failures in triggering incivilities, Heslin *et al*. (2019) analyzed reports and complaints of unprofessional behavior in a hospital and found that "ineffective help" during interactions contributed to 41% of disruptive events. Similarly, Al-Hakim *et al*. (2016) identified disruptions linked to "lapses in care-coordination," such as handing wrong instruments. Interview-based research by Mitchell *et al*. (2011, p. 821) also highlights the importance of smooth coordination, for example, scrub technicians anticipating surgeon's needs or a surgeon referring to scrub technicians focusing only on their own task as a "real problem." Conversely, a surgeon illustrated what might be considered "the surgeon's heaven": "you just put your hand out, and you've not even opened your mouth to ask for it and what you need is there."

Altogether, the indications and the empirical evidence linking uncivil behavior to task execution are substantial enough to justify the development of a theoretical approach capturing this phenomenon. MCC conceptualizes how deficiencies in coordinated task execution can serve as direct triggers of workplace incivility. Our approach builds upon research on interruptions, both in general (e.g. Baethge and Rigotti, 2013) and in the context of tightly coordinated teams (Antoniadis *et al*., 2014; Cohen *et al*., 2022), as well as on the frustration-aggression hypothesis, which explains how goal obstruction can escalate into negative emotional and behavioral responses (e.g. Berkowitz, 1989; Fox and Spector, 1999).

Interruptions

At its core, interruptions entail the "suspension of an ongoing work task's execution" (Puranik *et al*., 2020, p. 808), and they tend to "disturb the workflow" (Koch *et al*., 2023b, p. 1119) and require shifting attention to a secondary task (Monk *et al*., 2002). Interruptions often impair performance by slowing execution, reducing precision and hindering the resumption of the interrupted task. They can also increase affective strain and elicit negative emotional responses, especially under high workload (Puranik *et al*., 2020). Overall, their impact is well documented in general work settings (Baethge and Rigotti, 2013) and in medical teams specifically (Cohen *et al*., 2022; Koch *et al*., 2023a; Mcmullan *et al*., 2021).

Performance effects of interruptions

A first pathway through which interruptions affect performance is through their demands on attention and working memory (e.g. Puranik *et al*., 2020). While attention shifts to the secondary task, the primary task must be retained in memory for successful resumption. This increases workload and raises the risk for failures, such as forgetting the next steps (e.g. Altmann *et al*., 2014; Baethge and Rigotti, 2013; Monk *et al*., 2002; Weigl *et al*., 2012) or failing to resume the interrupted activity correctly (Chevalley and Bangerter, 2010). As a result, interruptions can delay work, reduce precision and lead to serious errors (Baethge and Rigotti, 2013; Danesh *et al*., 2022; Dismukes, 2012; Elfering *et al*., 2014; Mcmullan *et al*., 2021).

However, effects on performance vary (Koch *et al*., 2020). Some interruptions are beneficial – such as an alert about patient drug intolerances (Catchpole *et al*., 2022; Gao *et al*., 2021) and constitute a "legitimate interruption" (Parker *et al*., 2024; Weigl *et al*., 2012). Timing also matters: interruptions are most disruptive when they occur mid-task or near completion, because that implies heavy demands on reconstructing task progress and recalling pending steps (Monk *et al*., 2002), which does not apply to natural breakpoints (Feldman and Greenway, 2021; Puranik *et al*., 2020). Thus, interruptions differ in the extent to which they are disruptive.

Individuals and teams develop strategies to mitigate interruption effects (Gao *et al*., 2021; Grundgeiger *et al*., 2010), such as timing (e.g. wait for an appropriate moment before interrupting), using memory cues to facilitate task resumption (e.g. holding on to a syringe as a reminder of the primary task; Grundgeiger *et al*., 2010) or monitoring each other's activities and providing support as needed (Salas *et al*., 2008).

However, such strategies come at a cost. Protecting performance requires compensatory control mechanisms that demand additional cognitive effort (Hockey, 1997), increasing workload (Koch *et al*., 2023a). This reduces available resources and increases vulnerability. Moreover, performance protection predominantly relates to primary tasks, whereas attention to secondary tasks may be reduced, which can lead to delayed problems that may not be immediately linked to prior interruptions. An example is a decline in non-technical skills, such as communication, which can emerge as a secondary consequence (Arora *et al*., 2010).

Affective effects of interruptions

Interruptions are described as stress-inducing (Arora and Sevdalis, 2010), frustrating (Baethge and Rigotti, 2013) or "jarring" (Altmann *et al*., 2014). Empirical studies show that they can reduce positive affect (Zijlstra *et al*., 2010) and increase irritation and annoyance (Adamczyk and Bailey, 2004). These emotional responses are central to how interruptions are experienced and managed in real time. Puranik *et al*. (2020) propose an affective pathway in which interruptions act as goal hindrances, thereby triggering stress. Supporting this, Ma *et al*. (2020) found that the relationship between interruptions and performance is mediated by their appraisal as hindrance stressors.

Such negative emotions do not merely reflect internal discomfort; they can compromise cognitive functioning (Arora *et al*., 2010), increase susceptibility to distraction (Dismukes, 2012) and erode team communication (Mentis *et al*., 2016). This suggests that affective effects may not only reduce individual well-being but may also trigger interpersonal tensions. Theories of frustration and aggression provide a pertinent framework for understanding how emotions linked to interruptions can escalate into negative interpersonal interactions. This will be treated in the next section.

Frustration, attribution and interpersonal responses to coordination failures

Dollard *et al*. (1939) established the frustration-aggression hypothesis, defining frustration as "an interference with the occurrence of an instigated goal-response at its proper time in the

behavior sequence" (p. 7), which is particularly relevant in contexts where people strive towards specific goals and expect goal gratification. Disrupted coordination in tightly coordinated teams, notably with regard to the primary task, aligns well with this model, as goal obstruction can readily occur. According to Dollard *et al*. (1939), "the primary and characteristic reaction to frustration" is aggression, specifically hostile aggression. This conceptualization closely corresponds to uncivil acts triggered by micro-coordination problems.

Contemporary research has distinguished the direct frustration–aggression link identifying negative emotions as critical mediators. These emotions increase the likelihood – but not certainty – of aggressive and uncivil responses (Averill, 1983; Berkowitz, 1989; Fox and Spector, 1999; Semmer, 2020).

Attribution processes significantly shape emotional and behavioral responses to goal obstructions. Goal obstructions perceived as legitimate, justified or aligned with socially accepted rules (Dill and Anderson, 1995; Kulik and Brown, 1979; Pastore, 1952) typically produce moderated emotional responses. Conversely, disruptions perceived as intentional, harmful or negligent provoke stronger negative affect and subsequent uncivil behaviors (Averill, 1983; Kulik and Brown, 1979; Rule and Nesdale, 1976). Attributing disruptive events to inappropriate behavior of others who could, and should, have acted differently tends to induce blame (Cropanzano *et al*., 2001), triggering feelings of injustice, disrespect and "relational devaluation" (Gerhardt *et al*., 2021; Leary and Allen, 2011) and often eliciting anger (Kruglanski *et al*., 2023; Mikula, 2003). Such reactions may prompt uncivil behavior (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Tripp and Bies, 2015), even when the triggering actions are actually unintentional or simply negligent (Averill, 1983).

Expectations about diligent and highly professional collaboration influence how team members interpret disruptions. For example, trained nurses might be expected to anticipate the surgeon's needs (Mitchell *et al*., 2011) or chefs might expect timely side-dish preparations from experienced staff (Mohammed *et al*., 2017). Therefore, the perceived competence of cooperation partners shapes judgments about coordination failures; mistakes by less experienced members may be perceived as less illegitimate than those by seasoned professionals, with whom one expects more implicit coordination and thus less reliance on explicit demands and information (Entin and Serfaty, 1999; Kolbe *et al*., 2013; Rico *et al*., 2019).

Note that affective responses to disruptions and goal obstruction do not solely depend on perceived performance impairments, although expecting serious consequences is likely to intensify emotional reactions. Goal obstructions are inherently frustrating and thus capable of triggering negative emotions regardless of performance impact, notably if they interrupt flow experiences. Attributions of negligence or intent exacerbate these emotions and tendencies toward retaliation.

In summary, failing to meet coordination requirements – timing, precision and quality – in tightly coordinating teams are likely to trigger negative emotions and incivility due to goal obstruction caused by disrupted workflow. These negative emotions are exaggerated by unmet professional expectations, but neither attributions of intent nor explicit disagreement about task execution are necessary for these reactions.

Of course, other factors play a role, including status and gender (Jones *et al*., 2018), personal traits such as negative affectivity or hostility (Spector and Fox, 2005), as well as the psychological safety culture of the organization or unit (Dollard *et al*., 2019; Edmondson and Lei, 2014). Nevertheless, micro-coordination failures merit attention as critical triggers of negative interpersonal responses.

A model of micro-coordination conflict (MCC)

Based on the previous considerations, we develop a model explaining emotional – particularly angry – responses to disruptions in coordinative task execution and the resulting risk of uncivil

behavior. Drawing on Pondy's (1967) concept of conflict episodes and focusing on two key dimensions of Barki and Hartwick's (2004) conflict definition – negative emotional reactions and interference with goal attainment – we propose the concept of micro-coordination conflicts. The MCC model defines a type of conflict independent of disagreement. Rather, MCC specifically refers to situations where the way team members act (or fail to act) disrupts immediate task execution of other team members, subgroups or the whole team. This model thus applies particularly to teams with tight coordination requirements, where coordination can be disrupted by minor misalignments of different members' coordination. MCCs are similar to "micro-conflicts" (Paletz *et al*., 2011; Paletz and Schunn, 2018) in that they refer to tense verbal expressions on a situational level; however, MCC refers specifically to disrupted task execution and does not require disagreements; rather, it may be due to an inadequate understanding of the procedure and the coordination requirements involved (mental model), to insufficient anticipation of action necessities (situation awareness) or to a momentary lapse of attention. Bearman *et al*. (2015, 2010) refer to such disruptions as operational disconnects.

We discuss the model across four aspects: (1) context, (2) triggers (3) responses and (4) moderators.

(1) Context: Tight coordination requirements

Coordination is fundamental to teamwork, but coordination requirements vary widely. Some teams have loose coordination requirements, with tasks being performed individually, based on agreed-upon plans and procedures or professional standards. For example, when restaurant staff individually prepare drinks, meals and flower arrangements for an event, team members largely work independently, communicating intermittently and tracking each other's progress only generally. In contrast, other teams must tightly coordinate their action, necessitating precise synchronization. Examples include Formula 1 pit crews, where mechanics precisely coordinate tire changes within seconds; surgical teams, when an instrument must be handed to the surgeon exactly when needed; music ensembles that have to coordinate in many way to achieve "togetherness" (Bishop, 2024) or moving staff carefully coordinating their movements while carrying a piano through a narrow staircase. Obviously, such tight coordination is inherently vulnerable to disruptions: delays may count in seconds, and lack of precision may refer to centimeters or even millimeters.

For some teams, tight coordination is a frequent requirement (e.g. surgery teams; Tschan *et al*., 2024); for others, tight coordination becomes pivotal only at specific stages of task execution. The MCC model specifically addresses teams or situations characterized by tight coordination requirements.

(2) Triggers of MCC: Coordination-based disruptions

Triggers for MCC are disruptions – often resulting from inept, mistimed or misaligned behaviors by team members whose performance is a prerequisite for others' task progress. These behaviors disrupt ongoing actions, disturb the workflow and divert attention from the main task. We posit that several situational conditions influence the likelihood that such disruptions will induce MCC.

First, the risk of MCC is greater when disruptions occur during actions demanding high concentration. It is lower when actions are highly routinized or when the disruption occurs between two action phases. Disruptions are especially problematic under conditions of psychological flow, defined as "a gratifying state of deep involvement and absorption that individuals report when facing a challenging activity and they perceive adequate abilities to cope with it" (European Flow Researchers Network, cited by Peifer *et al*., 2022, p. 1). Flow is characterized by deep immersion and high concentration (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2021; Norsworthy *et al*., 2021). Collective flow can emerge during highly interdependent, moment-to-moment interactions that require mutual adjustment and high synchronization (Lavoie *et al*., 2025; Pels *et al*., 2018). However, the state of flow is fragile; even minor

coordination failures can abruptly disrupt the flow experience (Peifer *et al*., 2022), and such disruptions may induce negative emotions even if they do not lead to noteworthy performance impairments.

Second, interruptions are perceived as more disruptive and more likely to provoke negative reactions when they are perceived as illegitimate. Judgments of legitimacy typically depend on expectations regarding the appropriateness, usefulness and role-conformity of behaviors. For example, an interruption caused by an inexperienced scrub nurse in training may be judged as more legitimate – thus as less disruptive – than one caused by an experienced professional. Legitimate interruptions will be perceived as less disruptive and thus less likely to trigger MCC.

(3) Responses: Frustration and incivility

Disruptions constitute negative affective events that induce frustration and corresponding affective responses; these may range from mild irritation to outright anger. As the affective response intensifies, the likelihood of "translation" into uncivil behavior increases, whether or not uncivil behavior ensues depends on how the emotional response is managed. People may suppress emotions (e.g. by diverting attention or through reappraisal; Gross, 2015), or they may convey their emotions in a polite and constructive way (Davidson *et al*., 2000). If the emotion or its spontaneous expression is not effectively regulated, uncivil behavior becomes more likely. Incivility is often directed at a specific person (or group) held responsible for the disruption. If these individuals can rightfully be expected to perform professionally, their inept behavior violates entitlements and invites an attribution in terms of blame; neither disagreement nor perceived intent is necessary – negligence suffices.

Sometimes, however, people simply "let off steam" and behave in an uncivil way towards others who are not involved in the incident ("displaced aggression"; Marcus-Newhall *et al*., 2000). In teams, misdirected behavior can also have cascading effects, especially when individuals vary in their thresholds for frustration and their capacity for emotional regulation (Barsade *et al*., 2018).

(4) Moderators: Individual, team and context

As discussed above, the elements of MCC – frustration, negative affect, uncivil behavior – may vary widely, and they are by no means automatically connected. Rather, there are influencing factors (moderators) with regard to the situation as well as the more stable context.

On the situational level, aspects such as tight coordination requirements, attribution (e.g. based on the expertise of collaborators) or timing are moderators. In addition, there is a range of "chronic" moderating variables – related to individual characteristics, team factors and the broader organizational context. These aspects are not specific to MCC but are well established in the broader literature on conflict (Semmer, 2020) and incivility (Cortina *et al*., 2017; Han *et al*., 2022). Therefore, they are mentioned here only briefly.

At the individual level, personality traits such as neuroticism or negative affectivity, hostile attribution bias and self-regulation capacities are frequently identified as factors that can amplify or dampen negative affect and its expression. Job attitudes may play a similar moderating role. In addition, status and gender differences are commonly cited as relevant moderators (Jones *et al*., 2018). However, although people in superior positions often have fewer constraints to vent negative emotions (e.g. Sloan, 2008), incivility does occur among peers as well (e.g. Crawford *et al*., 2019).

At the team or departmental level, norms around incivility (Park and Martinez, 2022), psychological safety (Edmondson and Lei, 2014) and error management culture (Klamar *et al*., 2022) may shape reactions on disrupted coordination. Finally, broader organizational factors such as stress, understaffing, time pressure or performance constraints may exert influence across all levels simultaneously (e.g. Cortina *et al*., 2017; Semmer, 2020).

The core elements of the MCC model are displayed in Figure 1.

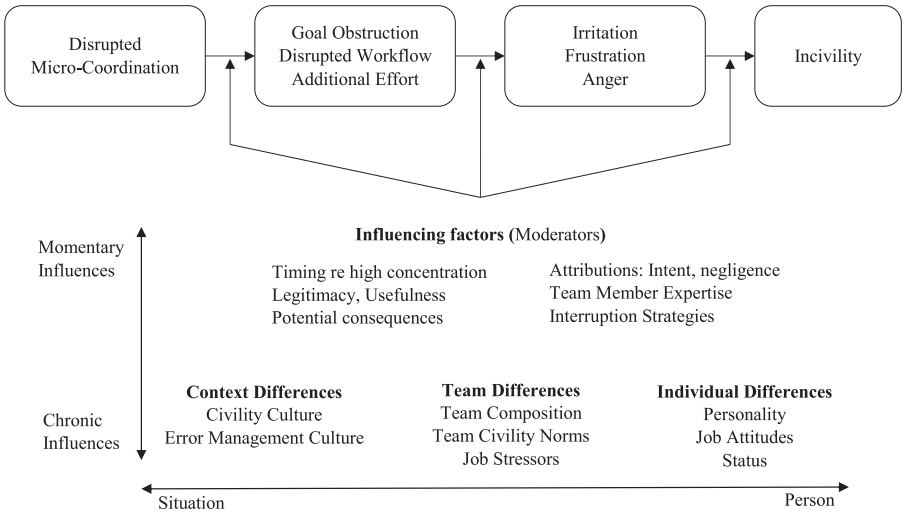

Figure 1. Model of micro-coordination conflict in tightly coordinating teams; influencing factors are examples and not exhaustive. Figure by authors

Implications of the MCC model

Theoretical implications

Our model offers a theoretical complement to existing conflict classifications, which, as discussed above, emphasize disagreements, opposing interests or personal incompatibilities. In its purest form, MCC does not presuppose such differences. Team members may agree on what should be done, how to do it and what outcome is desired, and they may also have good personal relationships. Yet, they may still trigger uncivil behavior by violating coordination requirements. These uncivil behaviors can escalate into open conflict (incivility spirals; Andersson and Pearson, 1999), and individuals may harbor resentments against one another after experiencing such situations of incivility, even without open escalation (Semmer, 2020). Although the postulated mechanisms may evolve into exactly the mechanisms described in theories about conflict and incivility, the initial triggers differ substantially: These triggers are rooted in problems of task execution, specifically in impaired coordination in situations requiring tightly coupled coordination. Accordingly, the focus shifts to task-coordination requirements and how individual actions align or misalign with these requirements, emphasizing the centrality of task processes in work-related dynamics (Zacher *et al*., 2016).

The origins of such coordination failures lie in an inability to recognize or anticipate task-coordination requirements (e.g. not realizing that a specific instrument is needed). These failures may be due to inadequate understanding of the procedure (mental model), insufficient monitoring or understanding of acute developments (situation awareness) or limited technical skills. Contributing factors include poor preparation (e.g. unfamiliarity with a particular recipe), momentary lapses in attention (e.g. due to fatigue or distraction) or information gaps (e.g. not being informed about the strategy of the surgeon; Tschan *et al*., 2022).

While surgery represents a prototypical context for tight coordination requirements, the concept also applies to other teams such as restaurant kitchens (Mohammed *et al*., 2017), aviation crews (Zijlstra *et al*., 2012), search and rescue teams (Plant and Stanton, 2016), team sports (Thonhauser, 2022) or music ensembles (Bishop, 2024).

Assessment implications

The most direct way to assess MCC is through situation-specific observation, involving the identification of triggering events as well as behavioral responses such as uncivil reactions – including overt signs of irritation, like eye rolling or sighing (Jones *et al*., 2018; Keller *et al*., 2019). Paletz and Schunn (2018) provide a micro-conflict coding scheme that emphasizes turn-by-turn communication observation. A similar micro-observational lens could be adapted to MCC, including triggers of tense behaviors. As observation is time-intensive, alternative approaches include situation-specific interviews or questionnaires – either during an ongoing collaboration if feasible, or shortly after a period of collaboration. Keller *et al*. (2020b), for example, used "guided recall" immediately after a surgery to capture tense episodes. Asking participants about uncivil behavior and their presumed triggers immediately after a situation reduces memory biases (Beal, 2015) compared to general surveys. Situational assessments can help distinguish between interruptions that are strongly disruptive (e.g. occurring during periods of highly focused attention or being perceived as illegitimate) and those that are more benign. A situational focus thus can isolate core characteristics more effectively.

Practical implications

Many scholars advocate for interventions aiming at reducing incivility, including zero-tolerance policies (Pearson and Porath, 2005), fostering an error management culture (Klamar *et al*., 2022), promoting psychological safety (Edmondson and Lei, 2014), supporting effective strategies of emotion work (Zapf *et al*., 2021) or strengthening conflict management, including a constructive expression of negative emotions such as anger and attempts to "repair" offenses (Semmer, 2020). Such approaches can undoubtedly be valuable. The MCC model implies an additional intervention focus: task- and coordination-related training. If inept task behavior can trigger uncivil reactions and conflict, training team members about their specific tasks in a collaborative setting may help prevent such incidents. Such training should include a focus on coordination processes, shared knowledge of task flow and awareness of other team members' coordination needs. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on shared mental models and situational awareness (Mohammed *et al*., 2017) as well as on tools and practices that facilitate task coordination, such as checklists (Russ *et al*., 2015), team reflexivity (Kündig *et al*., 2020; Schmutz *et al*., 2018; Widmer *et al*., 2009) or in-process communication protocols like "StOP?" (Tschan *et al*., 2022). Thus, a key implication of our approach is that conflict and incivility can, to some extent, be prevented by interventions that target not only interpersonal behavior but also the processes that trigger such behaviors in the first place, such as disruptions in coordinated task execution.

Future research

We have presented evidence that triggers related to MCC can be found and that they represent a potential problem. However, to our knowledge, only one study has compared such triggers to other antecedents, such as disagreements (Keller *et al*., 2019). Further comparative research is warranted that systematically examines a range of potential triggers, including negative reactions to disliked behavior tendencies or personal characteristics of other team members (as in relationship conflict), displaced aggression from unrelated annoyances (e.g. noise or impolite customer behavior) and other situational stressors. Further work should also explore moderators identified in our model – such as tightness of task coupling and attribution of intent – to determine when MCC is most likely to escalate.

In addition, there is a need to develop and evaluate interventions aimed at preventing MCC. Potential approaches include simulation-based training, structured briefings or protocols that reinforce implicit coordination. Such interventions should be systematically tested for their impact on coordination quality and team climate. It is also important to develop robust methods to measure MCC triggers in the field, for instance structured observation.

Concluding remarks

In summary, our analysis underscores that conflict and incivility are closely linked, as uncivil behavior constitutes a conflict episode. The conflict literature has identified a number of underlying issues, and the MCC model adds a further issue that may be crucial for understanding and preventing conflict that involves uncivil behavior (or "relational devaluations," Semmer, 2020). Furthermore, our model highlights the centrality of tasks and their coordination requirements as a core aspect of teamwork and a potential driver of incivility and conflict.

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