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978-0-521-89551-4 - Incivility: The Rude Stranger in Everyday Life

Philip Smith, Timothy L. Phillips and Ryan D. King

Excerpt

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The theme of growing incivility is both a commonplace and a universal of human life. Through the ages and across civilizations there has always been talk of poor public behaviour, of increasingly unruly streets and of the decline and fall of good manners. It is a current journalistic staple to document troublesome youth, identify emergent forms of disorder from ‘road rage’ to ‘cell phone rage’, and to conduct simple experiments or cheap stunts to demonstrate that common courtesies are no longer to be found in the urban jungle (Safe 2000). Books on freefalling manners have long replaced those about etiquette on bestseller lists (Truss 2005). In a related trend, each decade sees an academic leader denounce the triumph of anti-civic individualism whether in the form of the ‘lonely crowd’, ‘narcissism’, the end of ‘public man’ or ‘bowling alone’. What makes our age distinctive is not the presence of such a complaint about the demise of an interpersonally civil society, but rather the intensity and form of the anxiety. A ‘crisis’ of civility has been identified with greater virulence and enthusiasm than ever before. Working in a sometimes uneasy, sometimes convenient, alliance, the media, politicians and academics have come together over the past dozen or so years and located profound dangers which call for desperate remedies. This activity has taken an unhelpful turn. Inspired by a criminological imagination it has come to look telescopically rather than broadly, imagines and investigates incivility in restrictive and extreme ways and stigmatizes the marginalized prematurely. In this book we propose and deploy a new approach. It is one that could radically change the understanding of incivility in our time.

The tyranny of the stereotype

We can begin to substantiate and illustrate our case with an exhibit, the so-called ‘Respect Agenda’ launched with much ballyhoo in January

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2006 by then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair. This initiative framed anti-social behaviour as both symptom and cause of a wider and more insidious malaise in which selfishness and individualism have come to replace civic-mindedness, thus threatening the organic roots of community life. Quoting the social and moral critic R. H. Tawney, Blair claimed in his speech that ‘what we are witnessing is the breakdown of societies on the basis of rights divorced from obligations’. On the one hand, this had given rise to escalating incivility, and on the other hand, to a toothless legal system. There seemed to be little that the police or courts could do to deal with vandalism, graffiti or the youth ‘spitting at an old lady on her way to the shops’. Such unruly behaviour, Blair told us drawing on the work of urban historian Richard Sennett, is ‘more common in poor areas’ and in those with low social capital. It was also associated with ‘families who are out of control and in crisis’ whose ‘children are roaming the streets and disrupting the classrooms’. This sub-proletarian anarchy can lead to a ‘tyranny of a minority’ that generates ‘fear and intimidation’ of the decent majority. What was needed the Prime Minister said was his Respect Action Plan. This would protect the liberty of the worthy and deserving through more efficient enforcement, through new powers that would prevent the antisocial deviant from hiding behind the law, and through social programmes to support constructive activities for young people (Blair 2006).

If somewhat constrained by the pressures of political correctness from pointing the finger directly at those in shell suits and hoodies, Tony Blair’s treatment nevertheless managed to situate antisocial behaviour in a subtle matrix of explicit and implicit cues. These mobilize common sense to imagine the problem in a particular way. His is a representation that makes possible what critics have called a policy of the ‘criminalization of everyday incivility’ (Cohen 2004). Nasty people, it would seem, are encountered in so-called sink estates where satellite TV dishes spring from the walls and cars without licence plates quietly rust away on blocks. These are poverty-ridden neighbourhoods where unruly youths loiter in gangs and the neighbours have a pit bull called Tyson. The consequences are more serious than just an affront to our bourgeois aesthetic. There follow crime, constrained behaviour, fear, drawn curtains and a spiral of decline.¹ Such

¹ Our reconstruction of the connotations behind Blair’s speech was validated by a series of BBC online reports consequent upon the launch of the Respect

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a vision, which amplifies perceptions of low-level deviance by tying it to disreputable classes, exaggerates its consequences through indexing to urban poverty and then looks down the social hierarchy to allocate blame is hardly novel. As the literature on moral panics and moral crusades has long made clear, stories with innocents and victims often draw upon the tacit repertoires of class-based disorder.

It is easy and somewhat cheap to point the finger at politicians. It would be a rare leader who could resist the lure of populism, especially in the context of the law-and-order debate. More troubling is the way that this cultural pattern has filtered into academic production. It is to be found at the heart of the influential ‘broken windows’ criminology that has somewhat unfortunately set the agenda for thinking about incivility on our campuses and in our think tanks.

As is now perhaps well known, ‘broken windows’ was courageously announced in an *Atlantic Monthly* article nearly thirty years ago. The authors, political scientist James Q. Wilson and criminologist George Kelling (1982), ingeniously claimed that small acts of incivility, if left unchecked in an area, would eventually lead to major crime. Squeegee bandits, graffiti writers, winos, card sharks and peddlers seem capable of only low-level harm. However, we need to be mindful that they send out a signal that an area is going out of control. The law-abiding feel hassled and threatened. As their quality of life starts to drop, those who can afford to do so abandon ship. They move out, thus removing those watchful guardians of the street who deter crime. Petty vice escalates unchecked. Perceiving that nobody cares, more serious criminal elements move in. The result is a feedback cycle of signs and behaviours that leads to neighbourhood decline, much as one broken window left unfixed is an invitation to smash the next. What is called for, Wilson and Kelling suggest, is a rigorous clamp-down on low-level incivilities before things get out of control. This is an intuitively appealing hypothesis. Further, it has the great theoretical merit of suggesting that situated interpretation by real social actors can play a role in mediating the impact of structural inequality. There is space here for agency and culture. Practical implications are

Agenda. These documented the lives of ordinary people who were prisoners in their own homes or who had been terrorized by bad neighbours in poor housing estates.

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also to be found. The broken windows paradigm has led, albeit in indirect and much debated ways, to experiments with ‘zero tolerance policing’ and to a renewed interest in incivility research among criminologists and urban planners. However, the theory has not always held its ground in empirical tests.

Studies have shown that real and perceived incivilities map onto the reported crime rates that make up official statistics. They also map onto residents’ perceptions of crime in the neighbourhood. We further know that areas with low social and economic status are indeed characterized by higher levels of incivility – at least as conventionally measured. All this is pretty much as predicted. The problem is that the independent causal influence of incivility on crime and decline has been less often investigated (e.g., Harcourt 2001). For the most part, research suggests that both crime and incivility have been generated by underlying structural disadvantage (Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Taylor 2000). Or in common-sense terms, a bad area is a bad area – one that gives rise to both more trivial and more serious offending. Although much money has been spent and much ink spilled in this effort at evaluation, to our thinking the success or failure of the ‘broken windows’ hypothesis should not be the main game in town. What has been missed is the distorting effect – perhaps unintended – that ‘broken windows’ has had on our thinking about incivility. As a paradigm it defines such activity as the province of marginal populations. In one short paragraph Wilson and Kelling conjure up the image of streets full of teenagers, drinkers, fighters and panhandlers (1982, p. 32). The activity of such types is understood to generate fear and to take place in grim inner city settings. Finally, incivility is perceived as falling almost entirely within the purview of criminology and inner-urban sociology – it is something we should study with respect to crime and renewal rather than open up to a more general sociological investigation. This is a narrow understanding that has pushed theory and research in a particular direction. It has produced a new common sense about where incivility ‘naturally’ takes place, one that we argue can be seen tacitly shaping Tony Blair’s ‘Respect Agenda’. In the very process of testing ‘broken windows’ academic research has been unwittingly complicit in a process that has closed down broader and more creative thinking. Let’s explore this problematic legacy more closely.

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A relentless focus on the deprived inner city area means we know quite a lot about underclass environments. However, scholars have excluded from intensive research the experiences of the middle and working classes who live in more typical neighbourhoods, those who are affluent or simply not welfare dependent. This restrictive focus helps to perpetuate the moral binary that separates the unruly from the socially respectable, and propagates the myth that incivility is a problem only in certain parts of the city. There is selection afoot whereby the places that are scrutinized seemingly correspond to the urban iconography of video games such as ‘Grand Theft Auto’ with associated lurkers, drug dealers and thugs. It would seem as if there is no incivility in Surbiton, Surrey or Fairfield, Connecticut. Stigma aside, all this information on the inner city is limited in its scientific value as there has been precious little effort at benchmarking against such ‘respectable’ places. The microscopic attention given to the urban underclass environment creates real problems for generalizing knowledge. These are atypical environments in which the nature and interpretation of incivility is hard to disentangle from the effects of race, crime, place and poverty. Might it not make more sense to first explore incivility in settings that could be variously described as more neutral, simple or typical? For instance, what about incivilities transpiring in supermarkets, car parks or leafy suburbs?

It is not only the focus on one part of the city that is problematic about the criminological agenda. By emphasizing the distinctive incivility patterns of the spatially fixed ghetto and failed housing project the ‘broken windows’ legacy understands where people sleep as the defining feature of our urban experience. Even the best research has this ‘neighbourhood’ quality. The British Crime Survey, for example, provides a list of rude behaviours and incivilities (‘noisy neighbours’, ‘rubbish or litter lying around’, ‘people using or dealing drugs’) and asks respondents how much of a problem these are in their local area, this being defined as within a 15-minute walk from the respondent’s home (Home Office 2006). Yet residential areas are just part of the total matrix of life. During the daily round we move to and from work, visit shops and consumption zones, make use of cars and public transport, go to watch live sporting events or sit in a bar. These are the little understood public environments in which many people are perhaps most likely to encounter incivility, especially those living in single-family dwellings in the dormitory suburbs. In

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their path-breaking paper, Wilson and Kelling themselves open up this possibility for a more mobile, non-residential understanding of the city. For example:

One of us (Kelling) spent many hours walking with Newark foot-patrol officers to see how they defined 'order' and what they did to maintain it. One beat was typical: a busy but dilapidated area in the heart of Newark, with many abandoned buildings, marginal shops (several of which prominently displayed knives and straight-edged razors in their windows), *one large department store*, and, most important, *a train station and several major bus stops*. Though the area was run-down, its streets were filled with people, because it was *a major transportation centre*. The good order of this area was important not only to those who lived and worked there but also to *many others, who had to move through it on their way home, to supermarkets, or to factories*. (Wilson and Kelling 1982, p. 30, italics added)

Asking survey questions about incivility in 'your local area' or 'where you live' will miss this fluid experience of social mixing completely. The understanding of the city that is at play in current research is remarkably static. Methodological convenience has led to studies that try to merge census data with crime reports and household surveys. It ties incivility to place, not to activity in any profound way. It is an approach that comes nowhere near understanding urban life as a surface of movements, and incivilities as the product of chance encounters. The possibility for such a rethinking was indicated long ago in the work of the German aesthete and philosopher, Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin (1983) the city even in Victorian times was all about circulations of anonymous publics through civic and consumption spaces. It was the anxious surging of the crowd and the strolling of the indolent flâneur that were truly constitutive features of urban modernity, not the 'hood' or the council estate.

The ghetto/crime context that conditions thinking about incivility has generated a body of academic research that almost exclusively focuses on fear as the emotion of interest and aversion as the focal behavioural response. To interrogate this relationship researchers have made use of survey modules from the criminological tradition. These typically ask about fear without offering alternative emotional responses. This is partly a methodological convenience and partly a function of a narrowly defined research agenda. With just a little

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creative thinking we might reasonably hypothesize several different scenarios.² The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1980 [1893]) suggested that norm breaking generated intense anger and the desire for vengeance. The Berlin-dwelling Georg Simmel (1997) spoke of the blasé attitude which we must develop in order to survive the psychic shocks of modern life. For the thinker Norbert Elias (1978 [1939]) rude behaviour could generate disgust. It was a crude or ‘uncivilized’ activity, often involving failures to control the body. Outside of the deprived inner city and the street gang encounter we might reasonably expect these emotional possibilities to appear with some frequency.

Finally, we note that incivilities are measured in the existing research agenda in a narrow way. Early theoretical treatments within the ‘broken windows’ tradition made mention of tricky interpersonal confrontations, ‘hey-honey’ hassles, the degradation of solicitation, the intimidating presence of the squeegee bandit and so forth. Indeed, the original Wilson and Kelling article speaks almost exclusively of badly behaved individuals – drunks, panhandlers and intimidating youth – as generating a sense of fear and disorder. One feels that the catchy metaphor of the ‘broken window’ was taken all too literally by subsequent researchers who started to fixate on built and visible forms of disorder. To be fair, capturing the verbal and embodied has proven to be too difficult so far (although we believe we have started to crack the problem). Current observational research has taken the methodologically convenient path of measuring what can be counted by the passing observer. In practice this has entailed looking for graffiti, burnt-out cars, empty lots, boarded up buildings, drug needles and so forth. These can be coded by researchers on their clipboards as they tour blighted neighbourhoods.³ The resulting information can then be correlated with census data or crime data. The problem here is that researchers are counting things, not exploring the interactions that we – and we

² To its credit the British Crime Survey does offer a range of emotional reactions to respondents. Commonly reported were annoyance, frustration, anger and worry.

³ Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) attempted to code behaviours as well as spaces in a systematic block coding exercise involving the videotaping of streetscapes from an anonymous cruising SUV. Although good data were collected for the urban fabric, unruly interpersonal activity was elusive. Aside from loitering, other antisocial behaviours were observed so rarely as to have little value for statistical purposes. It would seem that low-level incivility is too subtle and infrequent to be amenable to observational sociology.

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think Wilson and Kelling – feel are at the heart of incivility. Survey research does somewhat better. The British Crime Survey, for example, asks not only about ‘vandalism and graffiti’ and ‘abandoned cars’, but also about ‘being insulted, pestered or intimidated’, ‘racial attacks and harassment’ and ‘people being drunk or rowdy’ in the respondent’s area (Home Office 2006). These turn out to be quite common in everyday life, but are not investigated in depth as personally experienced incidents. Rather respondents make blanket statements about whether such and such an activity goes on ‘in general’. Whether we are counting things or asking about general modes of incivil interaction, it is deeply problematic that many of these indicators are of decay (abandoned buildings and cars) and others are quite simply crimes (drug needles, racial attacks). So the tie of incivility to more serious social breakdown is implicit in both the *weltanschauung* and methodology of such research. Minor breaches of social norms are off the radar. Whether in block coding or in survey research there has been no real effort to investigate fleeting, micro-level interactions. Videotapes and surveys cannot capture rude gestures, foul talk, poor body management and the dirty look. These are the little bits of grit which that most brilliant and eclectic observer of social life, Erving Goffman (1971), suggested were central to social interaction and the management of relations in public. Found wherever there are people, these are a universal irritant.

Another kind of incivility

In order to understand just how far the criminological gaze has taken us from the everyday experience of the majority, consider the following examples of routine incivility. The first two are taken from internet help pages, bulletin boards and blogs, these being a growing and convenient source of discussion and advice on matters of practical ethics.

First up a BabyCenter.com mom-to-be says:

When I’m out in public, whether I’m grocery shopping or waiting in line at the post office, people ask personal questions about my pregnancy and sometimes even put their hand on my belly. How can I tell them to mind their business without being rude? (Anon. 2001)

Notice that here the routinely experienced incivility takes place in a ‘safe’ environment. It is to be found inside respectable commercial

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establishments, not on the street. Unlike spraying graffiti, burning-out a car or dealing drugs, talking to or touching a pregnant woman is unlikely to be regarded as a crime. The victim of the incivility feels frustration and anger at the intrusion into her personal space and privacy, but it seems not fear. She will probably go back to the post office again.

Here is another example, this time a response to the question ‘Have you ever had an experience with an extremely rude stranger?’ from a discussion thread at ‘Yahoo Answers?’ The context is that the writer has lost her cell phone in the cinema and has gone back in with the usher to try to find it:

The usher was trying to get under the seat with his flashlight to look for my phone and still the lady would not move. He said ‘excuse me’ but she was like, ‘No I’m not moving’. She was making the situation very difficult. The usher was getting annoyed as she wouldn’t move and she was in his way. After a few minutes he found my phone and gave it to me. He got up and I thanked him, then the lady said ‘I can’t believe the rudeness of that, trying to watch a movie and he’s looking for a stupid phone!’ While the movie hadn’t even started! (Anon. 2008)

Here we have another non-violent, non-threatening situation in a regular public space. Both the phone’s owner and the lady in the seat feel they have certain rights and hold reasonable expectations about public behaviour. Drugs, drink, panhandling and violence are conspicuously absent.

How about the great outdoors? Puget Sound is in the Pacific Northwest, joining Washington State in the United States with British Columbia, Canada. This is a beautiful area of sheltered water, surrounded by mountains and dotted with picturesque islands linked by cute boats. Tourists can go whale watching and retired folk from Seattle might enjoy the water views from their log cabin style homes. We could not be further from the inner city ghetto, yet even in this watery temperate paradise we find incivility afoot. In April 2007 the *New York Times* (Yardley 2007) reported on the growing problem of people cutting into line at the sometimes lengthy queues for the car ferry. Brad Collins, the supervisor at one terminal, reported that there were ‘two kinds of line cutters – the person who knows what they are doing and the person who doesn’t know what they are doing’. The

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laid back locals were sometimes being disadvantaged by tourists who were unfamiliar with local customs and conventions about where to queue. Other, more aggressive newcomers had imported city norms. These were 'me centred' people with 'Darwinian driving inclinations' who simply exploited the courtesy of the locals. For example, they might slip into a spot that had been left clear in front of someone's driveway. Frustration could boil over. When a car pushed in front of 89-year-old Jack Welden he bumped it with his own until the arriviste got the message and took off. Reports the *Times*: 'the civility practiced with such reason and rigor in parts of the Pacific Northwest has not necessarily expanded with the population'. Legislation was now being mooted in the state assembly that would criminalize automotive queue jumping with a \$101 fine and help to maintain 'politeness' and 'sensitivity' in the region. What are the issues here? Not fear, not poverty and urban decay, not violent crime. Rather the relevant themes we might investigate are time scarcity, space competition, a sense of fairness, local knowledge, selfishness and ignorance, the distribution of community norms and the availability of low-level interpersonal sanction.

These three examples suggest a very different social and experiential universe from the one opened up by criminological inquiry into incivility. It is a more general and encompassing arena, yet paradoxically one about which we know far less. Where do such low-key unpleasant events take place and how can we predict them? Just how do people feel about rude and inconsiderate behaviour? Who is at risk? Why do some events escalate and result in retaliation when others get quietly dropped? These are just some of the questions we set out to answer in our study.

Researching everyday incivility: a new approach

So far we have established that existing research has severe limitations. It looks for the most part at problem neighbourhoods and not at a representative sample of spaces and communities; it has a geo-static approach that does not fully come to terms with the movements central to urban and rural experiences and lifestyles; it imposes closed researcher-led definitions of incivility, these replicating the political orthodoxy by tapping into more serious or even criminal behaviours; it misses out on low-level rudeness and fleeting encounters. In this