Beyond Thick Skin

Unmasking the Real Impact of Incivility for Young Australian Workers

APS 16th Industrial and Organisational Psychology Conference

Anna Holder-Greaves · PhD Candidate, University of the Sunshine Coast

Supervisors:
Dr Prudence Millear
Dr Christina Driver

“I just tune it out, my anxiety is that bad that I just stand there and listen.”

“I try not to (retaliate) because I work with people all over 30, so [I’d] be too scared to be rude to them cause I’m only 15.”

“I have felt angry, but typically my body just shuts down and I try to defuse the situation. I often cry or have tears in my eyes.”

BACKGROUND & AIM

A well-studied hazard, an under-studied group

Workplace incivility (WI)

Low-intensity, ambiguous deviant behaviour, such as social exclusion or discourteous remarks (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

The gap

Extensively researched in adults. The 15 to 24 age group, entering work during a critical developmental window, remains under-studied.

Aim: examine how common incivility is for workers aged 15 to 24, whether psychosocial safety climate protects against it, and whether that protection differs for 15 to 17 and 18 to 24 year olds.

METHOD

A youth subsample of 181 workers, aged 15 to 24

Survey data, filtered from a larger sample of 406 Australian workers. Validated quantitative scales throughout.

Incivility

UWBQ, experienced (17 items, α = .93) and instigated (UWBQ-I, 20 items, α = .87)

Psychosocial Safety Climate

Psychosocial Safety Climate, PSC-12 (12 items, alpha = .96)

WI Response style

WIRS: proactive, passive, petty subscales

Outcomes

Job satisfaction, intent to stay, Positive Functioning at Work, Satisfaction with Life Scale

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

A youth workforce clustered in casual retail and hospitality roles

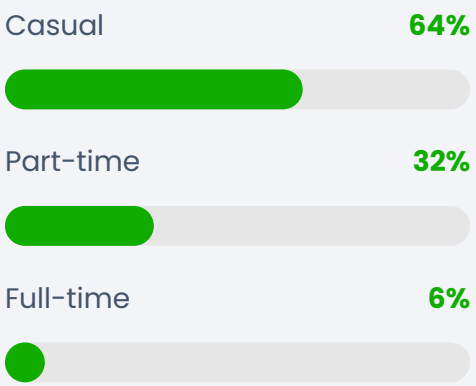
AGE

n = 181 · mean 18.8 years



EMPLOYMENT TYPE

% selecting each (multi-select)



INDUSTRY

primary industry of employment



Youth subsample, n = 181, ages 15 to 24. Employment type is multi-select, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Incivility is common for everyone, not just young workers

YOUTH, 15 TO 24 (n = 181)

87%
occasional experienced incivility

52%
weekly or more often

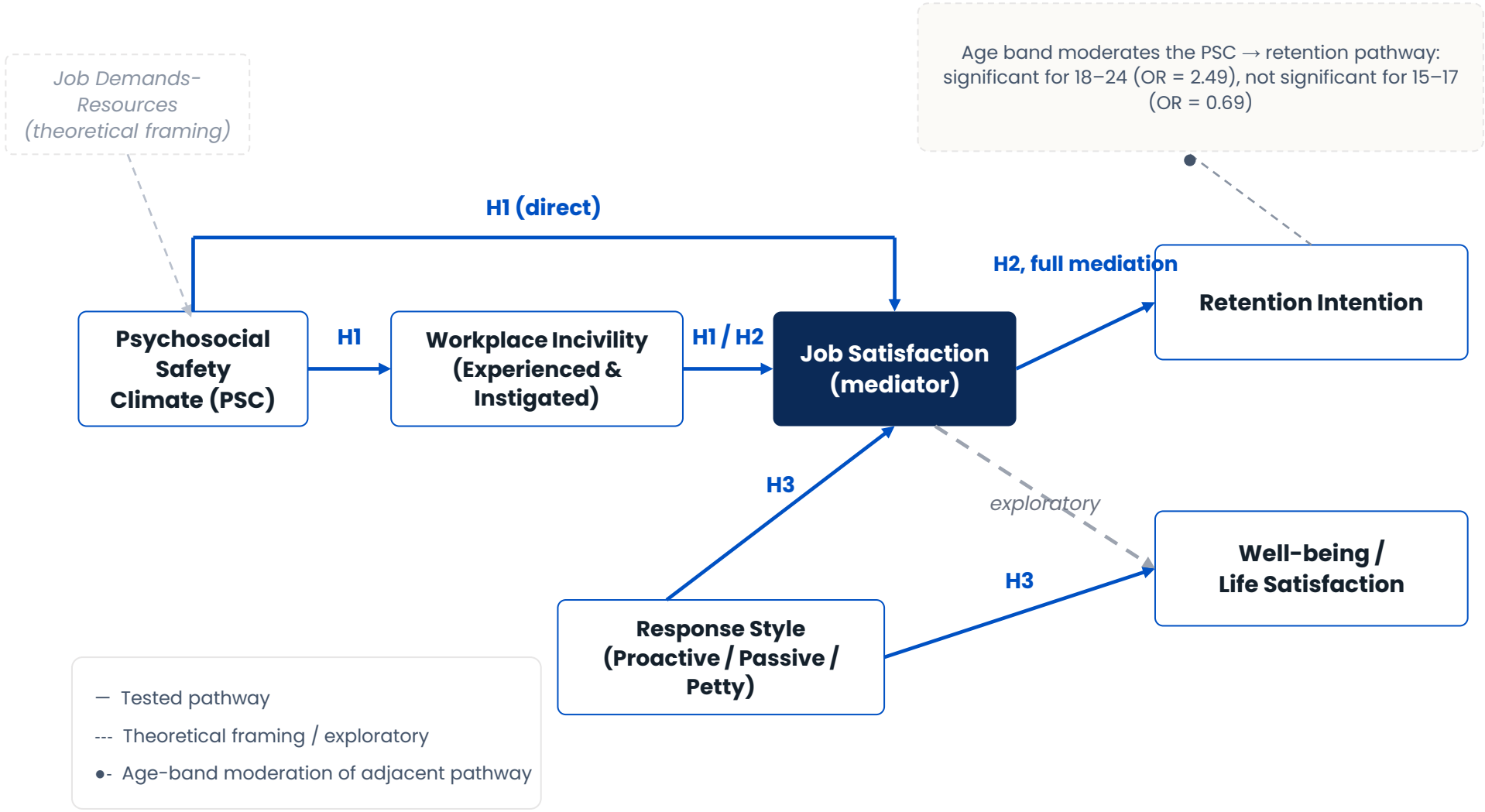
ADULTS, 25+ (n = 225, same survey)

91%
occasional experienced incivility

65%
weekly or more often

On the validated incivility scale, adults actually reported more frequent incivility than youth (UWBQ mean 1.34 vs 0.81, $p < .001$).

Three hypotheses, one connected model



HOW WE TESTED EACH RESULT

Different questions, different statistical tests

Result	Statistical approach
H1 · climate, incivility & satisfaction	Pearson correlations
H2 · climate & incivility → intent to stay	Mediation analysis (bootstrapped, logistic outcome)
H3 · response style → outcomes	Multiple regression, controlling for incivility
Headline finding · does age change this?	Moderated logistic regression + subgroup analyses
Additional finding · climate's buffering effect	Moderated regression (interaction term)

Full statistics, confidence intervals and model fit for each result are reported on its own slide.

RESULT 1 · H1 SUPPORTED

A safer climate means less incivility, more satisfaction

r = -.45***

PSC with experienced incivility

r = -.29***

PSC with instigated incivility

r = .58***

PSC with job satisfaction

All correlations significant at p < .001

RESULT 2 · H2 SUPPORTED

Climate and incivility are linked to intent to stay, through satisfaction.

MODEL A: PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY CLIMATE



Indirect (ab) = .75, 95% CI [.46, 1.22] · direct effect p = .748

MODEL B · EXPERIENCED INCIVILITY



Indirect (ab) = -.73, 95% CI [-1.30, -.37] · direct effect p = .810

Step 2 of the hierarchical model (PSC, incivility and job satisfaction added to age and gender): $\chi^2(3) = 48.07$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .334$, 73% correctly classified.

RESULT 3 · H3 PARTIALLY SUPPORTED

It’s not just exposure. It’s what happens next.

Response style	Job satisfaction b	Wellbeing b	Life satisfaction b
Proactive response	.22*	.18*	.27*
Passive response	-.30**	-.14	.09
Petty response	-.29*	-.33***	-.14

Regression coefficients controlling for experienced incivility, age and gender (n = 175).
Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Once exposure to incivility is accounted for, proactive responding is linked to slightly better outcomes. Petty responding carries the broadest cost; passive responding is linked to lower job satisfaction only.

A protective climate doesn't protect everyone equally

Ages 18-24 (n = 131)

OR = 2.49***

Each 1-point rise in PSC is linked to about 2.5 times the odds of staying

Ages 15-17 (n = 45)

OR = 0.69

PSC shows no protective association

PSC × age-band interaction: b = -1.07, OR = 0.34, p = .011 (exploratory; small 15–17 cell, n = 42).

There is still no evidence the 15-17 group is more exposed to incivility or worse off: stay rates are, if anything, slightly higher at 15-17 (61.9% vs 57.9%).

INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS

Why might the pathway not be “switched on” yet?

Work as identity exploration

For the youngest workers, a job may be a step toward identity formation rather than a career commitment, so organisational climate may not yet drive retention decisions (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006).

Peers may matter more than management

For 16- and 17-year-olds, peer conflict eroded organisational commitment more than supervisor conflict (Frone, 2000), so peers may outweigh climate in decisions to stay.

Other factors, such as school terms, casual job norms and parental involvement, may carry more weight for the youngest workers’ job decisions than workplace climate does.

ADDITIONAL FINDING

Climate appears to buffer the impact of incivility

Psychosocial safety climate changes how strongly incivility is linked to satisfaction (interaction b = .34, p = .003, robust to HC3).

Life satisfaction showed a similar pattern, with incivility linked to lower life satisfaction only where climate was poor (interaction b = .32, p = .012).

Incivility's link to job satisfaction, by climate (±1 SD)

Low PSC	**-.65*** **
High PSC	**.01**

LIMITATIONS

What this study can and can’t tell us

Design

Cross-sectional and self-report, so these are associations, not causes.

Sample

Convenience sample; 82% female, 97% Queensland, mostly retail and hospitality.

The Youngest Group

Only 45 workers aged 15 to 17, so the age finding is exploratory.

Measures

Single-item job satisfaction and intent to stay; the WIRS is a newly developed scale.

SIGNIFICANCE

Incivility isn’t a rite of passage. It’s a psychosocial risk, with an age question attached.

Psychosocial safety climate is consistently associated with better outcomes and appears to buffer incivility, but that protection is conditional, not automatic, and isn’t linked to retention for the youngest workers.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Three things organisations can act on now

1

Invest in psychosocial safety climate as a measurable, manageable workplace factor, not an abstract value statement.

2

For the youngest workers, measure climate by how they experience work, not whether they stay, and give them channels to speak up that don't depend on tenure.

3

Move beyond "build resilience" framing. Responding proactively costs nothing; the common passive and petty patterns come at a real cost.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

Young workers don’t need thicker skin. They need a climate that protects them, at every age.

Anna Holder-Greaves

Anna.Holder-Greaves@research.usc.edu.au

Thank you

References

Andersson, L. M., & Pearson, C. M. (1999). Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), 452–471. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1999.2202131

Frone, M. R. (2000). Interpersonal conflict at work and psychological outcomes: Testing a model among young workers. Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 5(2), 246–255. https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.5.2.246

Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., & Mortimer, J. T. (2006). Adolescent work, vocational development, and education. *Review of Educational Research, 76*(4), 537–566. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543076004537