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# Psychological Contract Disruptions by Uncivil Behavior

Tiina Brandt and Anna Ruohonen

Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki, Finland

[tiina.brandt@haaga-helia.fi](mailto:tiina.brandt@haaga-helia.fi)

[anna.ruohonen@haaga-helia.fi](mailto:anna.ruohonen@haaga-helia.fi)

**Abstract:** This research focuses the conceptualization and modeling of psychological contract (PC) dynamics in co-worker communication under the conditions of counterproductive or uncivil behavior acting as a PC disruption. It also studies differences of individual responses when having the exposure of the difficult person behavior. A sample of 98 experienced working professionals responded to an open-ended questionnaire regarding the difficult person behavior in their place of work. The content analysis was used as analyzing method. Findings indicated that different strategies that people employed in repairing PC following a negative disruption were identified. These included the call to supervisors for mediation, launching a straightforward opposition to contain difficult person behavior, using acquiescence and accommodation as tactics, responding with avoidance and/or praise. According to analyzes the dynamics of PC-model impacted by uncivil disruption is presented. The results of the research benefit organizational leaders and HR in facilitating the processes of organizational support of supervisors in mitigating negative PC disruptions that are caused by difficult person behavior. This study is among the firsts when studying different individual responses when facing uncivil behavior and this study fulfils this gap. This study extends the psychological contract theory, showing how the uncivil behavior impacts on PC.

**Keywords:** Uncivil behavior, narcissistic behavior, psychological contract

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## 1. Introduction

Workplaces without shared organizational values or attentive leaders can become places where uncivil behavior flourishes and spreads causing negative outcomes, including taxing individuals' mental health and work withdrawal (Bunk and Magley, 2013). Survey conducted by Cortina *et al.* (2001) found that up to 71% of the 1 162 employees in the U.S. Eighth Circuit federal court system reported that they experienced such kinds of behaviors within the five years time.

Common uncivil behaviors include ignoring coworkers, or making demeaning comments about coworkers or subordinates (Cortina *et al.*, 2001). Difficult behavior practiced by difficult persons or narcissists is defined as "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others" (Anderson and Pearson, 1999: 457). As consequence, the uncivil or disruptive behavior is always upsetting to the milieu and arouses high emotions in all of those involved (Myers, 2008).

There are increasing amounts of studies about narcissistic leadership and their uncivil behavior, but fewer about narcissistic behavior executed by colleagues, additionally studies of individual responses in this uncivil behavior are rare. Studies of narcissistic leaders indicate that they inflict damage on others, for example, by bullying and coercion (Aasland *et al.*, 2008). Narcissists have strong propensity for self-enhancement (Rhodewalt *et al.*, 2006; Zuckerman and O'Loughlin, 2006) and sense of entitlement (Davis *et al.*, 2008; Reidy *et al.*, 2008). Further, narcissistic leaders use all the resources available to them to attract the admiration of others as a way of confirming their feelings of superiority (Higgs, 2009; Maccoby, 2007).

When entering a psychological contract (PC) construct, uncivil behavior will act as a disruption and impact the contract. Psychological contract is utilized in employment context, addressing an employee's relationship with the employer. At the same time, it is increasingly applied to other exchange contexts, in reference to the relationships with customers, suppliers, and especially notable for the present study, relationships with colleagues (e.g., Laulie & Tekleab, 2016). Psychological contract refers to a cognitive schema, or system of beliefs, representing an individual's perceptions of his or her own and another's obligations, defined as the duties or responsibilities one feels bound to perform (Rousseau, 1989). In contrast to legal commitments, psychological contracts are informal and often implicit and indirect, casting perceptions and interpretations of the other's attitudes and behavior in a central role.

The present research responds to the current call for the additional work on how social influence affects psychological contract dynamics (Rousseau *et al.*, 2018), in the context of facing narcissistic behavior by colleagues or leaders. This research builds on psychological contract theory to advance the understanding of the

processes and outcomes behind the exposure of employees to difficult people's behavior in the workplace. Our interest is to study how people experience behavior by difficult persons and how this might impact on their state of their psychological contract. Also, the interest is to study how this negative behavior affect the workplace's milieu, what are the psychological contract repair strategies and finally what are the outcomes of negative psychological capital disruption? More specifically, the present research was designed to address the following questions:

- RQ1: How do the individual responses of the exposure to difficult person behavior reflect the current state of their PC?
- RQ2: How does the exposure to difficult person behavior affect the workplace's social and organizational context?
- RQ3: How does the organizations' responses to negative PC disruption impact on forming on PC?
- RQ4: What are the PC repair strategies following a negative disruption caused by difficult person or narcissistic behavior?
- RQ5: What are the outcomes of negative PC disruption and how these reflect PC phases and transitions?

## **2. Earlier studies**

### **2.1 Uncivil behavior**

The phenomenon of uncivil behaviors has been studied in different fields, e.g. industry, health care, and higher education (Stecker & Stecker, 2014). Reasons for uncivil behaviors are various, and they can include professional jealousy; unclear, amplified, competing, and/or overly demanding work expectations; low salaries and salary compression; the need to adopt new technologies; stressful, volatile work settings; competition for scarce resources; and pursuit of professional advancement (Clark, 2013; Clark et al., 2013).

Studies describe uncivil behavior as a specific type of workplace deviance (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), usually experienced as a workplace mistreatment (Sliter et al., 2012); but distinguished from aggression (Ferguson, 2012). It is defined as a low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson, et al., 2000). Low intensity behavior means that the uncivil acts are less intense; do not carry transparent intent (Ferguson, 2012). According to study of Andersson and Pearson (1999), incivility is a minor form of mistreatment, but can significantly impact an employee's attitudes and behaviors towards the organization.

In general, incivility is a kind of psychological harassment and emotional aggression that disrupts the workplace norm of mutual respect (Felblinger, 2008). It exhibits an absence of respect for others (Cortina et al, 2013) and its harmful on employees as well as on organizations (Zhou, 2015). Workplace incivility has been found to be associated with numerous negative effects including increased absenteeism (Sliter et al., 2012), higher turnover (Johnson, 2001), decreased productivity (Pearson et al., 2000) and negative affect employee's psychological and physical health (Lim et al., 2008).

### **2.2 Social exchange and negative PC disruption caused by uncivil behavior of narcissistic personalities**

Social exchange influence is constructed around the notion that one party needs to trust in the other that the benefits received will be reciprocated. The foundations for the social exchange lie within the idea that the parties to the relationship develop trusting, loyal and mutual commitments over time, given that the parties abide by certain rules of exchange, with reciprocity being the main one (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Reciprocity implies that one party's actions are contingent upon those of the other party. In a work setting, this means employees repay a favorable work environment and conditions, with positive work-related attitudes and behaviors. In contrast, unfavorable treatment is likely to result in downwards adjustments of those attitudes and behaviors (Parzefall and Salin, 2010), with the exposure to difficult people behavior by a colleague as the case of such unfavorable treatment.

### **2.3 Emotional responses in negative PC disruption**

Emotions have been considered as an important mechanism for explaining why incivility is related to some negative outcomes. Majority of research shows the effect of incivility on general emotional states such as negative affect (Sakurai and Jex, 2012). Anger occurs when the event is seen as being caused by an entity outside of oneself, while guilt is experienced once the event is regarded as self-caused. Fear or anxiety is experienced when people have low coping potential and low future expectancy (Lazarus, 2001). Studies have demonstrated the associations between workplace mistreatment and anger/guilt (e.g. Bunk and Magley, 2013).

There is a positive link between narcissism and the propensity for aggression in the form of verbal or physical violence toward others (Barry *et al.*, 2009; Reidy *et al.*, 2008) which can be seen, for example, as bullying and coercion towards others (Aasland *et al.*, 2008). Narcissistic people have insensitivity to social constraints that undermine appropriate behavioral adjustments (Collins and Stukas, 2008). The narcissistic behavior causes strong emotional responses.

#### **2.4 Individual differences in negative PC disruption**

The individual differences have been acknowledged to play an important role in PC processes (e.g. Rousseau *et al.*, 2018), reflected in their recognized impact in the PC literature (e.g., Raja *et al.*, 2004). There are multiple studies showing that individual differences, such as one's personality, impact employees' behavior in the working place (see e.g., meta-analysis Chiaburu *et al.*, 2011).

In the uncivil behavior situation people essentially try to meet their individual needs in their own ways. Central to the causal processes underlying the PC is the dynamics of self-regulation in response to external conflict or cues. This socio-cognitive process allocates effort and attention over time as a function of an individual's goals and the feedback regarding goal progress (Lord *et al.*, 2010). Feedback mechanisms are processes for detecting discrepancies between an environmental cue and a standard (Carver and Scheier, 1990).

#### **2.5 Dealing with difficult behavior: outcomes and strategies**

Introduced by Rousseau *et al.* (2018), "negative disruption occurs when employees encounter circumstances at odds with their personal goals and beyond their capacity or willingness to assimilate into their existing PC, thus shifting employees into repair". When an employee is in the situation, where the negative affect is not or cannot be mitigated, research shows that (s)he is likely to withdraw leading to turnover intentions and even quitting one's work (e.g., Thoresen *et al.*, 2003). Another possible scenario is for the employee to be too dependent on the work to leave it, the cost of doing so would be perceived as too high, and s(he) chooses to stay with the employing organization (Meyer and Allen, 1997), in which case, however, the motivation drops and so does his/her perception of the employment-associated obligations.

### **3. Research design and methodology**

In selecting the research design, the focus was maintained on the lived workplace experiences, with the aim to give the research participants the space and confidentiality to reflect and express their inner thoughts, feelings, share their stories.

#### **3.1 Data**

The data was collected during 2019-2020. The questionnaire was sent to people who have been taken part via Open University and University of Applied Sciences courses based in Finland. Altogether, the questionnaire was sent to 323 persons, and 98 persons responded and filled in the questionnaire, indicating the response rate 30%. All the participants had professional background in business settings and possessed work experience. The minimum age of respondents was 30 years. The research data technique included an anonymous open-ended questionnaire survey. The topic under the exploration was sensitive, personal, potentially emotional and difficult for the respondents. Therefore, it was believed that the data collected by questionnaires would be more appropriate, the subject may then remain anonymous and distant, leading to more straightforward and honest answers.

#### **3.2 Questionnaire**

The open-ended questions were formed based on the earlier studies of counterproductive and narcissistic behavior at work (see, e.g., Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The purpose was to keep the questions open and not restricted or leading questions to give the possibility for variation of the answers. The respondents were asked to think about one person who has been acting in a destructive way and think about his/her behavior when answering the questions. There were four open-ended questions in total. The questionnaire was kept short, in order to get answers as much as possible. The following four questions were stated:

- Who believed in s/he?
- How his/her behavior could have been restrained?
- What kind of impact s/he had on your workplace?
- What else do you want to say?

### **3.3 Data analysis**

The focus of the data analysis was on interpreting phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them, giving voice to people and co-creating relevant constructs (see, e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

The data was collected and transcribed in Finnish language, with key parts of it translated to English by the authors. The data analysis was conducted in two stages. *First*, the first author and the lead in the data collection coded the responses utilizing four broad themes: 1) individual responses on how people tolerate or get along with difficult people, 2) strategies that people adopted in interacting with difficult people, 3) the observable outcomes of a difficult person's behavior. *Second*, the authors placed portions of the text for these interviews under these broad themes and allowed various codes to emerge. The goal of this process was to attain what Kvale termed "dialogical intersubjectivity" (1994, 152). This form of reliability was achieved by discussing complex phenomena. Each coded portion of text was compared and, if differences existed, discussed until consensus was attained.

## **4. Findings and analysis**

The findings are presented and analyzed under three themes. The first subsection 5.1 introduces a scope of individual responses in how people tolerate and get along with difficult people. The second subsection 5.2 analyzes the strategies people employed in interacting with difficult people, and thirdly in subsection 5.3, the overall outcomes of a difficult person's behavior. Findings and analysis build up towards the links and relations to psychological contract; and subsections 5.2 and 5.3 work towards an understanding of what kind of interaction strategy might result from different kinds of PCs, what is the impact of a difficult person's behavior and respective organization's response on an employee's PC.

### **4.1 Individual responses to difficult person behavior**

The respondents were asked what kind of a person believed in or got along with a difficult person. The respondents gave the most mentions to the kind and nice people, followed by narcissists. In addition to these two categories, other responses included singular, random comments that could not be grouped.

#### *4.1.1 Kind, insecure, naïve*

The respondents mentioned that nice and conscientious people are easily influenced by difficult people. The reasons mentioned are that such people want to believe the best or the most positive things about everyone, insecure people are easily influenced by flatter, seek to adapt to situations and want to avoid conflicts. They are easily led by fear or are young and have limited life experience.

*"The sentimental, the kind, the humble, who respect authority. Those who are timid, afraid of losing their position, afraid of change."*

#### *4.1.2 Narcissists*

Some respondents said that other narcissists also get along with a difficult person. Many said both; kind people and narcissists, do.

*"People who are too naive or who are themselves narcissistic and, therefore, do not recognize narcissistic traits."*

#### *4.1.3 Many others; those under the sphere of influence, indifferent*

Some respondents said that those who are too close to a difficult person, that is, are under his influence, do not clearly see the problems caused by his behavior. Some commented that not everyone notices problems if they work in different departments and are not in contact often. Other people recognize problems, but if they think they benefit from the person in some way, then they do not care about his/her behavior.

*"Those who are not motivated by their own work or content themselves with it. They don't want to take a stand and let the other person treat them as they please."*

These results support the discoveries of Wallace *et al.* (2015) where narcissistic qualities were reliably viewed unfavorably, but narcissistic participants were comparatively less bothered by target narcissism and less positive in their judgments of targets without narcissistic qualities. In each study, symptoms of the presence or absence of narcissism had less impact on the social judgments of participants who were narcissistic.

From the perspective of PC processes, the findings advance the impact of the individual differences and their importance for the PC formation (e.g. Rousseau *et al.*, 2018).

#### **4.2 Different strategies to interact with difficult persons**

The responses were analyzed based on the strategies people think that should be used with difficult persons, resulting in five different strategy groups. The first group believed that organizations or supervisors should do something about the problem and mitigate the situation. The second group consisted of people who found that straightforward opposition is the best strategy. In contrast the third group thought that agreeing and accommodating is the best strategy. In the fourth group there were the respondents who thought that avoidance or praise strategies are the most effective. The fifth and last group offered a combination of the above.

##### *4.2.1 Contacting the supervisor about the problem*

It was felt that managers should take a hard line with how things are done and set clear rules of acceptable workplace behavior. Some said the supervisor should be contacted immediately, if unacceptable behavior arises. In some work communities, work guidance had been tested or senior staff had tried to control the behavior of a difficult person. Sometimes, these would provoke retaliations from a difficult person.

*“The only way to restrain behavior was by the higher authority, when the power of the person got limited. All other attempts, such as discussions and warnings, were ignored. On the other hand, higher authority intervention then led to deliberate neglect.”*

##### *4.2.2 Being straightforward and outspoken in restraining difficult person behavior*

The plenty of comments came from the fact that a difficult person should be restrained. People found that it should not be allowed for the behavior to continue. The respondents said that other employees need to be able to speak up, refuse their requests and speak directly and firmly. Some said you have to stand up for yourself and not let the person “get the better of you”. Responding back and staying professional came up in several comments. One had to be firm with a difficult person and communicate strongly: to state it clearly, if you disagreed.

*“By holding on to the grounded opinions, with good self-esteem, by minimizing interaction.”*

##### *4.2.3 Acquiescence*

Instead of opposing, some of the respondents used agreeing as a getting along tactic. Perhaps more timid people who avoid conflict prefer to use this tactic. In this context, avoidance was also mentioned as a tactic, i.e., the defendants both acquiesced and avoided. One defendant said he acts extremely positive about the difficult person. Not all respondents said they would use compliance, but said that it would be the only way for some people.

*“By flattering and doing exactly what he wants. Be a humble lamb without opinions of your own.”*

##### *4.2.4 Avoidance or praise or both*

Several respondents said that the only way to get along with someone who is difficult is to avoid them. Avoidance was also included in the mentions of the previous paragraph, for example, saying directly to a difficult person and avoiding when it is possible to do so, as well as flattering and avoiding.

It was also mentioned that it was not worth bringing forward your own opinion out loud or otherwise telling your own stories in the presence of a difficult person, who always had a dissenting opinion and an answer to everything. While some commented that it is worth minimizing interaction, you can still keep your own reasoned opinions. Some of the respondents commented that you should not get into playing the game of a difficult person.

*“That’s quite an issue – when you can’t get along. Or you can only get along by avoiding his company or cooperation with him was possible.”*

##### *4.2.5 Other comments; manipulation, no possibility of influence*

Some of the respondents felt that there was no way to control the behavior of a difficult person, or mentioned that they themselves did not know what they could have done. Some of them said that the only workable solution was the dismissal of the person. Some protected more sensitive members of the working community, others manipulated a difficult person.

*“In the past, I sometimes acted as an ‘armor’ to suppress or absorb this person’s reactions so that they are not directed at the most sensitive of the working community, because I felt that as a tough person I can handle conflict situations better than someone else.”*

*“Present ideas and things in such a way that the difficult person can bring them as his own ideas into practice.”*

The polarity of the answers in interaction strategies were notable. Most of the answers were completely opposites, indicating either acting against the difficult person or then trying to please him/her. These response strategies from opposing sides of the spectrum are likely to cause extra tensions in organizations because employees with different strategies might feel cross with each other. Thus, a difficult person directly impacts other employees as well indirectly via other people’s responses to his/her behavior.

From the PC perspective, the study brings forward a scope of emotional responses that are generated by the exposure to difficult person’s behavior, which interrupts the ongoing state of affairs and existing exchange. Conditional also to individual differences, it may arise feelings, negative emotions, such as anger, fear, disappointment. The results show that the exposure to difficult person behavior results in individual outcomes, such as those portrayed e.g. by Laulie and Tekleab (2016) and including, for example, turnover intentions, attitudes and emotions. The transition from the negative PC disruption to individual outcomes takes place through the lens of individual differences and the influence of social and organizational influence. In support of Rousseau *et al.* (2018), the study demonstrates that ultimately a negative disruption leads to PC repair or exit in terms of employment termination. In support of Rousseau *et al.* (2018), the research participants demonstrated twofold motivations of PC repair following the difficult person exposure: to reduce negative affect and reestablish a functional and goal-consistent PC.

#### **4.3 Workplace outcomes due to difficult people behavior**

Here, the answer was sought as to the effects that difficult people have had or still have in respondents’ workplaces. Common to the answers was that various kinds of difficult people’s behaviors directly or indirectly weakened the working atmosphere. The plenty of comments came from the tightening of or even falling out of the workplace atmosphere.

Numerous comments were received about the fact that the troublesome person brings down the atmosphere by dominating, bossing or being negative. Some respondents described that a difficult person “in his own opinion raises and creates a good spirit, but in reality, heats up the mood and makes coming to work tenuous”.

In some cases, the entire working community had gone into lockdown. The crumbling of the atmosphere affected the company’s ability to achieve results and in some work communities the decrease in motivation was reflected in the results metrics by the difficult person’s management style. A few comments mentioned that a difficult person made the work atmosphere negative internally, but according to the respondents, outsiders and external partners would have received a very well-liked impression of the difficult person. Some of the troublesome people were outright workplace bullies, who always had a member of the working community targeted. In general, the strong will of difficult people was reflected in the fact that there was no alternative but to behave in a certain way, otherwise even to be dismissed.

*“Broke the whole working community. At first showed strong results, but at the end it was a big loss and the whole work unit had to be shut down.”*

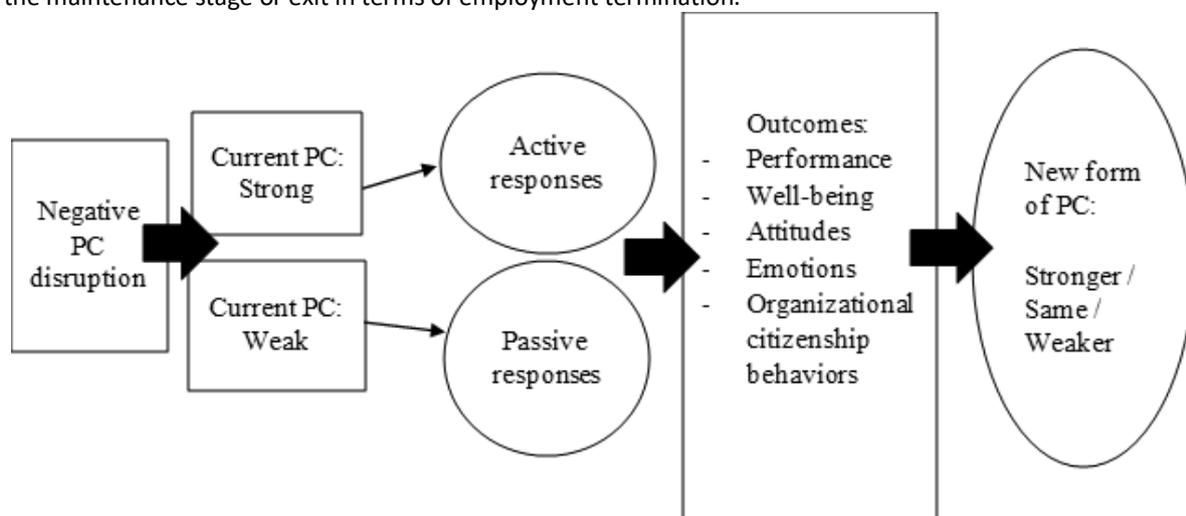
According to Thoresen *et al.*, (2003), when an employee is in the situation, where the negative affect is not or cannot be mitigated, it appears that the person is likely to withdraw leading to turnover intentions and even quitting one’s work. From the social exchange perspective, the present research supports the notions of reciprocity in the workplace and the discoveries made by Parzefall and Salin (2010), where unfavorable treatment is likely to result in downwards adjustments of employee’s attitudes and behaviors with those colleagues that exhibit unfavorable treatment.

## 5. Toward the conceptualization of PC dynamics in exposure to difficult people in workplace

Based on the research finding, we advance that when the exposure to difficult person behavior occurs, it creates a negative PC disruption, which results outcomes based on current strength of PC and the outcomes of the disruption form the new state of PC (Figure 1).

If the PC is strong and members have good faith to the organization there is strong probability that a person noticing negative behavior is responding in an active way, turns to the supervisor for help and asks the supervisor to mitigate the problem. Also, individual differences impact the next transition phases of PC. This is in support of, e.g., Rousseau *et al.* (2018) on the role of individual differences in PC dynamics and, e.g., Chiaburu *et al.* (2011) in portraying individual personalities' impact on employees' behavior in working place (see ch. 2.2.). Social networks and social information processing play a role in PC phases and in application to exposure to difficult person behavior in particular: as a result of the exposure, employees may seek information from higher status employees to update their PC, whereas during repair they may seek out similar-status peers for support and confirmation.

The organizational response to the negative disruption and social influence effect whether the disruption and its consequences will be positive or negative for the individually held PC. Ultimately, the interplay of individual differences, organizational response and social influence that impact the PC dynamics following a negative disruption, lead towards either positive or negative PC effects. For example, if the organizational response to difficult person behavior is strong and achieved via the support of co-workers and a supervisor, handling of the negative disruption is perceived as positive, offering the transition to PC renegotiation and further to the maintenance stage. In contrast, a negative disruption leads to PC repair, which may be followed by achieving the maintenance stage or exit in terms of employment termination.



**Figure 1:** Relationship of PC and negative disruption when forming the new PC

Salin and Notelaers (2017) had concluded that when an employee is exposed to difficult person behavior in the workplace, (s)he is likely to perceive a failing on the part of the employer to fulfil its obligations. Psychological contract captures a highly subjective interpretation of the employment relationship (e.g. Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1995; 2001). Therefore, the precise contents of such contracts are challenging to define and establish. Salin and Notelaers (2017) argue that even prior to employment, employees have certain schemas related to “acceptable” workplace behavior, which are further refined through actual employment experiences and implicit and explicit promises made. We argue that employees are likely to have expectations of organizational intervention in case of exposure to various forms of difficult people behavior incorporated into their pre-employment schemas as part of the employer’s obligations. For example, Hoel and Einarsen (2010), who studied the effects of anti-bullying legislation in Sweden, found that although the legislation was not necessarily successful in preventing and ending bullying, it clearly raised employees’ expectations of swift and effective intervention.

The model focuses on the employee's lived experiences and transitions through the emotional and respective cognitive stages reflected in PC. At the same time, organizational culture is in the play in the background of this individual process and projects as a behavioral feedback loop on other employees, organization's shared values, beliefs and norms.

## **6. Conclusions**

According to this study, the negative disruptions can be poisoning to work communities and cause serious negative outcomes to the whole organization. Many respondents said that eventually the whole team was damaged in terms of work spirit and efficiency. The negative disruption gets people to be on guard when encountering a harmful person and that is not normal in workplaces with a positive atmosphere and supportive organizational culture. Employees should not have to operate in fight-or-flight mode, neither try to avoid or manipulate those harmful colleagues.

Workplaces are becoming increasingly diverse, with the differences in views and approaches appreciated and fostered, and the difficulties encouraged to be mitigated by getting along for the overall benefit of organizational goals and success. The results of the present research may be employed by organizational leaders and HR in order to facilitate the processes of organizational supports of supervisors in mitigating negative PC disruptions that are caused by difficult person behavior, even if they are sometimes regarded as only minor accidents. As our research shows, even negative PC disruptions may be supported into the transition to revision phase with the positive connotation – handling a challenging situation well might reinforce an employee's PC rather than lead to exit.

It is the increased leadership challenge to learn separate the genuinely unacceptable disruptive behavior from the different communication styles of a diverse body of employees, each with their own backgrounds, views, work approaches. Appreciating and learning to lead the differences in people is essential for keeping a team together and everybody in it getting along.

The research offers multiple avenues for future exploration. It would be essential to address the phenomenon of successful mitigation in order to give organizations different tools and ideas of how to solve the problems caused by negative interruptions. The conceptualizations presented in the paper are derived via qualitative exploration and their validation with quantitative methods would reinforce the body of knowledge on PC dynamics in the negative disruption context, and with the consideration of individual outcomes. Further investigation is needed into organizational and leadership tools for identifying, acknowledging and mitigating difficult person behavior as well into fostering constructive response strategies to such behavior – as individuals, teams and organizations.

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