College instruction is not so stress free after all: A qualitative and quantitative study of academic entitlement, uncivil behaviors, and instructor strain and burnout

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College instruction is not so stress free after all: A qualitative and quantitative study of academic entitlement, uncivil behaviors, and instructor strain and burnout

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Abstract

The vast majority of today’s college students are millennials, who have traits of confidence, tolerance, but also of entitlement and narcissism (Twenge, 2006). Therefore, college instructors face a unique challenge: dealing with the requests from academically entitled students, who have unreasonable expectations of receiving academic success, regardless of performance (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). We conducted two studies to examine whether student academic entitlement would increase instructors’ strain and burnout via uncivil behaviors. A qualitative inquiry asked 136 instructors with college-teaching experience to describe types of behaviors entitled students display, their responses to entitled students, and the influence of these interactions on instructors’ well-being. Next, a quantitative study with data from 857 college students nested in 34 instructors tested a multilevel mediation model where students’ academic entitlement was related to instructor-reported uncivil behaviors, which in turn related to instructors’ strain and burnout. Both studies largely support our hypothesis that uncivil behaviors fully mediate the relationship between students’ academic entitlement and instructors’ strain and burnout. We recommend employing behavioral modification strategies to decrease uncivil behaviors (e.g., class rules regarding uncivil behaviors might be specified in the course syllabus and consistently enforced) because academic entitlement attitudes are largely stable beliefs and thus may be less amenable to modification.

KEYWORDS

academic entitlement, burnout, incivility, strain

1 INTRODUCTION

CareerCast, along with popular job-search websites and business publications, asserts that university professor is 2013’s least stressful job in America (Kensing, 2013). Similarly, an article published at Forbes claims that university professor is 2014’s fourth most stress-free job in America (Adams, 2014). These claims suggesting an easy life inside the ivory tower run contrary to the empirical literature suggesting that college teaching is a particularly stressful occupation (Abel & Sewell, 1999).

Stress from teaching may be increasing in colleges. Currently, college students are millennials (born between 1982 and 2002), who started arriving on university campuses in 2000, and will continue to make up student bodies until 2020 and beyond (Rickes, 2011). They are unusually confident, tolerant, entitled, and narcissistic (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004; Twenge, 2006). Thus, how these traits and behaviors, especially the negative ones (e.g., being entitled), may affect college instructors is worthy of exploring. This study focuses on student academic entitlement (AE; i.e., unreasonable expectations of receiving academic success, regardless of performance; Chowning & Campbell, 2009) and examines how and why AE may increase instructors’ strain and burnout.

Specifically, we propose that student AE manifests itself as uncivil behaviors inside and outside the classroom, which, in turn, increases instructors’ work strain and burnout. We tested this proposal using both qualitative and quantitative methods, attempting to provide converging evidence and overcome weaknesses found in single-method designs (Jick, 1979). In the qualitative study, we used open-ended questions to explore college instructors’ experiences with academically entitled students and how instructors might be physically and psychologically affected by encounters with those students. In the quantitative study, we collected self-report data from both the instructor and their students to test our multilevel mediation model, where individual
students' AE (level-1 predictor) increases the instructor-reported uncivil behaviors (level-2 mediator), which, in turn, increases instructors' work strain and burnout (level-2 outcomes). As such, the qualitative and quantitative methods are complementary to each other, and provide converging evidence for our model (Sale, Lohfeld, & Brazil, 2002).

In doing so, we make several theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions. Theoretically speaking, we extend the occupational stress literature by identifying one potential source of work stress (i.e., stressor) for college instructors. Identifying the sources of work stress, rather than only addressing the consequences of stress, is highly recommended by stress scholars (e.g., Cooper & Cartwright, 1997). After all, targeting sources of work stress could potentially prevent stress, instead of individuals having to develop their resistance to work stress (Cooper & Cartwright, 1997) or cope with stress. Moreover, we test the theoretical claim by workplace incivility scholars that power differences are necessary for the incidents of workplace incivility (e.g., Pearson & Porath, 2005). That is, the perpetrator tends to hold a more powerful formal position in the organization while the victim tends to be powerless and have low status. Yet, we explore and find that uncivil behaviors are committed by those assumed to be relatively powerless members of the organization (i.e., students). Thus, the classroom context may provide an important expansion of the workplace incivility theory.

Empirically, because we refute social media portrayals of college instructor as a stress-free occupation (e.g., Kensing, 2013), we may motivate occupational stress and incivility scholars to explore college instructors as worthy of study. This research also contributes to educational psychology in several ways. First, previous research has focused on the negative impacts of AE on students, while we demonstrate the negative impacts of AE on instructors. Second, unlike previous research linking AE and students' uncivil behaviors using self-reported single-source data (e.g., Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008), we collected AE from students and uncivil behaviors from their instructors, thus overcoming the potential problem from the common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Practically, by understanding how students' AE increases instructors' strain and burnout via students' uncivil behaviors, we may be able to recommend effective mechanisms to reduce the problem (e.g., by encouraging civil behaviors and discouraging uncivil behaviors rather than focusing on entitlement, which is a relatively stable belief). Indeed, evidence from clinical psychology indicates that those who might be resistant to changing entitled beliefs may better respond to behavioral interventions (Coffman, Martell, Dimidjian, Gallop, & Hollon, 2007; Dimidjian et al., 2006). Additionally, if uncivilly treated instructors get even with students by intentionally decreasing the effort, time, and quality that instructors put into their teaching (cf., Pearson & Porath, 2005), then preventing student incivility may not only reduce faculty strain and burnout but also may enhance student learning.

Taken together, we contribute to and extend (a) the occupational health literature by identifying an overlooked work stressor among college instructors (i.e., student AE), (b) the workplace incivility literature by examining the impact of incivility from relatively powerless students to instructors who hold a more powerful position, (c) the AE literature by examining the consequences of AE on instructors, and (d) instructors' practice by offering effective strategies (i.e., via targeting uncivil behaviors) to reduce the effect of student AE on instructors.

2 ACADEMIC ENTITLEMENT AND INCIVILITY

AE has been operationalized as an individual difference and as a belief (Boswell, 2012; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Ciani, Summers, & Easter, 2008; Lippmann, Bulanda, & Wagenaar, 2009). For example, Chowning and Campbell (2009) operationalized AE as “a stable individual difference in personality” (p. 982; also see Lippmann et al., 2009) and defined it as one's “expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success” (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; p. 982). Greenberger et al. (2008) defined academically entitled beliefs (also see Boswell, 2012; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, & Reinhardt, 2010) as “expectations of high rewards for modest effort, expectations of special consideration and accommodation by teachers when it comes to grades, and impatience and anger when their expectations and perceived needs are not met” (p. 1194). Similarly, Dubovsky (1986) suggests that AE is a set of beliefs that includes five factors: (a) belief that knowledge should be acquired with minimal effort; (b) belief that others will offer all the necessary information for learning (i.e., high dependence on instructors for external guidance); (c) belief that inadequate performance results from problems associated with the instructor or the system; (d) belief that equal recognition or equal rewards should be granted to every student, regardless of a student's effort or ability; and (e) belief that aggression or confrontational interactions with the instructor or administrators is acceptable (also see Achacoso, 2002; Ciani et al., 2008; Kopp, Zinn, Finney, & Jurich, 2011). Although AE has been defined in different ways, we chose to adopt the widely accepted definition offered by Chowning and Campbell (2009), which defines AE as a relatively stable belief that one should receive academic success, regardless of performance.

Students with high AE may display entitlement through uncivil behaviors (e.g., demanding credits for incomplete coursework and expressing anger because of a low grade; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Ciani et al., 2008; Greenberger et al., 2008; Lippmann et al., 2009). Uncivil classroom behaviors are defined as “any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere” (Feldmann, 2001: p.137), including but not limited to “behaviors that distract the instructor or the students, disrupt classroom learning, discourage the instructor from teaching, discourage other students from participating, or derail the instructor's goal for the period” (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2009: p.16). Consistent with researchers' definition of workplace incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), our measure of students' uncivil behaviors also excludes violent behavior (Clark & Springer, 2007; Nutt, 2013).

Previous researchers have proposed that AE increases students' uncivil behaviors (e.g., Achacoso, 2002). Greenberger et al. (2008) found that AE is positively associated with academic dishonesty, even after controlling for relevant variables (e.g., parents' use of socially comparative achievement pressure; parental rewards; students' achievement anxiety). Also, academically entitled students rated vignettes describing inappropriate student behavior as appropriate (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). AE is also negatively associated with student compliance with small requests. Specifically, Kopp and Finney (2013) found that noncompliant students (i.e., those who did not attend a required but low-stakes assessment session) reported a...
significantly higher AE score than did compliant students (i.e., those who did attend the low-stakes assessment sessions). Despite some limitations (e.g., using only one incident to represent uncivil behaviors and using self-reported single-source data), the literature largely supports the prediction that AE can cause uncivil behaviors (Chrowning & Campbell, 2009; Greenberger et al., 2008; Kopp & Finney, 2013). As such, we propose that

**Hypothesis 1.** student academic entitlement increases student incivility.

### 3 | IMPACTS OF STUDENT INCIVILITY ON INSTRUCTOR STRAIN AND BURNOUT

Workplace incivility—that is, deviant behaviors that are low intensity and ambiguous in intent to harm (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina et al., 2001)—is a weekly concern for 50% of employees in organizations (Porath & Pearson, 2013). A recent review of the workplace incivility literature (Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2014) concludes that incivility increases psychological stress, negative affect, depression, and emotional exhaustion, and it also decreases health, wellbeing, organizational commitment, and several forms of satisfaction. In short, harmful interpersonal behaviors in the workplace setting, such as incivility, are stressors.

However, as robust as the incivility well-being link may be, it remains an empirical question whether it operates in the context of a college classroom. Unlike in the workplace, in the classroom, the perpetrators (i.e., students) are relatively less powerful compared to their targets (i.e., instructors). This distinction is important because research shows that in the workplace, perpetrators target a “safer,” less powerful victim (e.g., men targeting women; Bowling & Beehr, 2006), perhaps because the costs (e.g., retaliation) are lower (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001, 2006). Workplace incivility may even function as a means of asserting power (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim & Lee, 2011; Raven & French, 1958). Either way, previous research finds that perpetrators tend to be more powerful than their victims (see Miner & Eischeid, 2012; Pearson & Porath, 2004 for exceptions). Specifically, proportionately more victims identify supervisors as perpetrators of abuse (57.8%) than identify coworkers (37.7%) and subordinates (5.0%; Keasleyh, Trott, & MacLean, 1994). Similar results were also found among employees from Asian cultures (Lim & Lee, 2011). So, given that students are, in many ways, less powerful than the instructors they target, it is not a given that the incivility well-being link may operate in the classroom context. Indeed, we wonder what could drive relatively powerless students to act uncivility toward powerful instructors.

Although Chrowning and Campbell (2009) have acknowledged that, “student incivility is arguably a more salient and pervasive daily concern for instructors” (p. 996) than AE, to the best of our knowledge, there exists no empirical research to demonstrate the positive relationship between student incivility and instructors’ strain and burnout. However, related research exists: that is, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), when daily hassles are perceived as threatening (e.g., inappropriate) and occur frequently over time, daily hassles damage individuals’ psychosomatic well-being, including increasing strain and burnout. Work strain is chronic changes in response to a stressor (Sulsky & Smith, 2005). Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and callous or uncaring attitudes toward one’s job (Maslach, 1982). Dealing with uncivil behaviors (e.g., late arrivals or early departures from class without any explanation to the instructor and threatening to file complaints against the instructor) may require more sustained effort from the instructor (Lippmann et al., 2009). Instructors who frequently and intensively face students’ uncivil behaviors may experience more daily hassles and need to allocate more resources to disruptive students, ultimately resulting in higher rates of strain and burnout (e.g., Chemiss, 1980; Friedman, 1991; Maslach, 1982). As such, we propose that

**Hypothesis 2.** student incivility is associated with (2a) instructors’ work strain, (2b) emotional exhaustion, and (2c) cynicism.

On the basis of the aforementioned literature, student AE manifests itself as uncivil behaviors, which, in turn, increase instructors’ strain and burnout. Linking Hypotheses 1 and 2, we propose that

**Hypothesis 3.** student incivility mediates the relationship of academic entitlement with (3a) instructors’ work strain, (3b) emotional exhaustion, and (3c) cynicism.

We examined our hypotheses using both qualitative and quantitative methods. In the qualitative study, we asked instructors to complete an open-ended questionnaire where they provided detailed descriptions of their experiences with an academically entitled student, their responses to the student, and the potential impact of the entitled encounter. In the quantitative study, we collected the level-1 predictor of AE data from students, and both the level-2 mediator of uncivil behaviors and level-2 outcomes of work strain and burnout from the instructor.

### 4 | STUDY 1: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

#### 4.1 | Method

**4.1.1 | Participants and procedure**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board from a Midwestern university. In order to increase the number of participants, we used the snowball sampling method to generate a convenience sample of instructors from the United States. All authors sent the study link to instructors’ email addresses, including current and previous colleagues and collaborators. In addition, participants were encouraged to pass along this study link to qualified instructors who might be interested in this study. This led to 80 instructors from the Midwestern university (representing a 13% response rate), 16 business instructors at a university in the Pacific Northwest (representing a 70% response rate), 23 instructors at an online university (unknown response rate), 13 instructors from other universities (unknown response rate), and four instructors failed to provide this information (unknown response rate). Thus, a total of 136 instructors with college teaching experiences participated in this online study, and the majority of instructors (at least 71%) teach in the traditional classroom. Instructors’ mean age was 49.09 (standard deviation [SD] = 12.01). Of the
total sample, 66% of the sample was female and 32% of the sample was male. Forty percent of the sample held a tenure-track position and 57% held a non-tenure-track position. The majority of the sample was Anglo or White (n = 123) and nine participants were racial minorities. Four participants failed to provide this information. The population of business faculty sampled at the Pacific Northwest University included 78% full-time instructors and 22% part-time instructors; however, data for this work status were not collected in the other samples.

To ensure that participants reported on incidents that corresponded to the definition of the focal construct, at the beginning of this questionnaire, participants read the following definition of AE: a “tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for achieving that success” (Chowning & Campbell, 2009, p. 982). Following this definition, participants were prompted to think of a student and an incident that exemplified this definition and recall specific exemplars of the student’s AE. After that, participants described their responses to the student’s entitled behaviors and any physical and psychological consequences resulted from the interaction with the student.

4.1.2 Coding of participant responses

On the basis of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we developed a preliminary coding scheme. Behavioral dimensions of AE identified in previous research served as the basis for the codes. In line with Miles and Huberman (1994), we used two steps to code the data. First, on the basis of relevant research studies (Achacoso, 2002; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Kopp & Finney, 2013; Kopp et al., 2011; Dubovsky, 1986), we created a list of themes. The first author conducted an initial examination of the data and identified emergent themes that were not well captured by our theoretically derived themes. Next, because each raw response from a respondent typically ran several sentences long and contained multiple ideas, we broke participants’ long-form responses into individual thought units, each containing only one idea about the question. For example, one respondent replied to the student-entitled-behavior question with, “Complaining about grades; feeling they deserved high marks for merely completing the assignment.” Although this response focused on grades, it contained two separate thoughts: (a) complaining about grades and (b) students feeling they deserved high marks for merely completing the assignment. We analyzed all responses both at the thought-unit level and at the respondent level. Specifically, two hypothesis-blind, trained coders coded each response at both the thought-unit level and the respondent level into one of the themes named in the previous stage. At the thought-unit level, we assessed the reliability of our coding using Cohen’s kappa, a chance-corrected measure of inter-rater agreement, and found that Cohen’s kappa ranged from .62 to .85, indicating an acceptable level of agreement (Hallgren, 2012). Finally, the coders discussed discrepant items and achieved final consensus for all responses. Coding categories and counts are presented in Table 1.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Behaviors of academically entitled student

The most common academically entitled behavior is to ask for accommodations from the instructor (40.47%) in the form of asking for higher grade, an exception to class rules, or extra help from the instructor. Although it is not surprising that students are most likely to ask for a higher grade, the most common reasons students gave to the instructor include that one has always been an A student (e.g., “The student believed that a 4.0 was warranted because no one else had kept her from getting one — despite doing less than stellar work!”) and that effort should be reflected in one’s grade (e.g., “they wanted an A for effort rather than quality of work.”).

The second common entitled behavior is not to take personal responsibility for one’s performance (25.82%). In other words, when not getting what they want, students externalized responsibility by blaming instructors or outside reasons for their poor performance. For example, one instructor stated, “After the fifth assignment that was once again 100% plagiarized, the student wrote me a long message going on and on about how everything was my fault. He was an ‘honest, hardworking family man’ who was just trying to get an education and I had single-handedly ruined his life and turned him off of the whole university.”

A third theme is grandiosity (7.53%). Academically entitled students tended to have the mentality that they are more knowledgeable in the course content than other students and/or the instructor. As such, students were unwilling to accept constructive feedback from the instructor; instead, academically entitled students expected instructors to defer to the students’ judgment and accommodate their demands. For example, one instructor mentioned one of his/her students, “Demand (ed) individual assignments, and permission to not attend class, as a result of feeling ‘superior’ to other students.”

Consequently, entitled students tended to have negative interactions with the instructor (7.89%). For example, they displayed negative attitudes toward the instructor in person, via emails or phone calls. One instructor described that academically entitled students “become extremely hostile, disrespectful, and defensive if (requested) favors were not granted.” Also, academically entitled students might question the authority of the instructor. One instructor mentioned that a student “challenged how I scored tests, how items were worded, materials in the course (e.g., too many slides),”

When the instructor did not meet academically entitled students’ demands, these students complained to the instructor, the department chair, the Dean, the instructor’s colleagues, or other students (4.66%). Some of these students filed grade appeals or grievances against the instructor. Another instructor stated that, “The student demanded to have assignments and grading policies suit their wants and needs. If junior faculty did not facilitate this process, the student would complain to senior faculty.” Some students even threatened the instructor in order to get what they want (e.g., “He’d be talking to his lawyer about bringing charges against me.”).

Academically entitled students also often violated class rules set by the instructor (2.51%; e.g., “When the student was supposed to be engaged in group work, she was talking on her cell phone”). They also tended to show negative emotions or mood in front of the instructor (4.30%; e.g., “Anger that the student had to do their own thinking about what was important to know vs. what was peripheral”).
The most frequent instructor-reported response was to acknowledge the request but not provide any accommodation (60.02%). When not accommodating, some instructors gave students an explanation, referring to grading rubrics or syllabi, reemphasizing their expectations, and justifying their decisions or grades. Some instructors also gave students constructive feedback and offered students suggestions to help them improve their grade. Other instructors who refused to accommodate the academically entitled student did not give the student any explanation. Still other instructors pointed out the inappropriateness of the students’ behaviors, gave students a warning, and held students accountable for their own course work. One instructor wrote that he/she filed formal reports about the student’s misbehavior (e.g., plagiarism).

### TABLE 1  The displayed behaviors of academically entitled students: categories and themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Number of respondents mentioning theme once or more</th>
<th>Total statements mentioning theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Accommodation of higher grades</td>
<td>Ask for higher grades (e.g., a passing grade, an A) without meeting the requirements</td>
<td>76(29.02%)</td>
<td>79(28.28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exception to rules</td>
<td>Ask for exception to a class rule, which is unavailable to the other students</td>
<td>21(8.02%)</td>
<td>22(7.89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accommodations of instructor time</td>
<td>Ask for accommodations from the instructor: the instructor’s extra effort and time to meet this particular student’s needs</td>
<td>10(3.82%)</td>
<td>12(4.30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not take personal responsibility</td>
<td>No personal effort</td>
<td>Not make any personal effort.</td>
<td>35(13.36%)</td>
<td>41(14.70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blaming the instructor</td>
<td>It is the instructor’s fault for student’s poor performance</td>
<td>22(8.4%)</td>
<td>22(7.89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blaming outside reasons</td>
<td>Making excuses; attributing their poor performance to outside reasons beyond their control</td>
<td>8(3.05%)</td>
<td>9(3.23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandiosity</td>
<td>Too superior to accept feedback</td>
<td>Mentality of being superior to other students and/or the instructor</td>
<td>6(2.29%)</td>
<td>6(2.15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not willing to accept constructive feedback; instead, expecting the instructor to accommodate</td>
<td>14(5.34%)</td>
<td>15(5.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>Negative attitudes towards the instructor</td>
<td>Showing disrespect towards the instructor in person or via emails or phone calls</td>
<td>15(5.73%)</td>
<td>15(5.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Threatening the instructor that student will complain to authority</td>
<td>4(1.53%)</td>
<td>4(1.43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questioning instructor’s authority</td>
<td>Challenging instructor on grading methods and appropriateness of course material</td>
<td>3(1.15%)</td>
<td>3(1.08%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complain*</td>
<td>Badmouthing the instructor</td>
<td>Actually complaining to authority or badmouthing the instructor to others</td>
<td>13(4.97%)</td>
<td>13(4.66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule violation</td>
<td>Rule violation</td>
<td>Violating class rules set by the instructor</td>
<td>7(2.67%)</td>
<td>7(2.51%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affect*</td>
<td>Negative affect</td>
<td>Showing negative mood or emotions such as anger</td>
<td>11(4.20%)</td>
<td>12(4.30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclassified</td>
<td>Unclassified</td>
<td>Off-topic, unrelated, or unclassifiable comments</td>
<td>17(6.49%)</td>
<td>19(6.81%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*emergent category/theme.
Although some instructors indicated that they did not respond to students’ requests (2.62%), others reported that they gave small concessions (1.33%), sought alternative solutions (1.31%), and even made full accommodations including grade or course adjustments to meet student demands (1.31%). Other instructors indicated that they took the initiative to help students, motivate students, or meet with them outside the classroom (5.25%). Some instructors showed empathy by trying to be understanding, encouraging, and supportive of the student (3.93%). Still, others emphasized the importance of staying calm (0.98%), being tactful to address students’ requests (0.98%), and being assertive, firm, and professional when talking with students (2.30%). Others (20%) cannot be classified into any themes because the instructors did not directly answer the question regarding their responses to entitled students (e.g., “My school has a policy that teachers are required to respond to a student’s post only if they ask a question. And, responding to a student when they are ‘venting’ at us is usually seen as the teacher ‘baiting’ the student”).

4.2.3 Effects of the entitled encounter(s) on Instructors’ wellbeing

Although some instructors (13.62%) indicated that they did not perceive any physical or psychological ill effects from the entitled encounter, many instructors reported work strain (38.56%). For example, one instructor mentioned, “I receive many of these types of requests. They are stressful, because if you say ‘no’ then the student may complain to the next higher level (i.e., the Dean’s office).” Another instructor stated that, “I was stressed out all semester. I probably had an upset stomach and some lost sleep that semester as well.” One respondent gave another example: “I get very stressed out about each of these encounters because I am shocked at the questions, treatment by, and expectations of students.”

The second most common consequence is burnout (26.38%). Examples of burnout included emotional exhaustion, described by one instructor as, “Their attitudes and treatment of professors with such a lack of respect is exhausting.” Other instructors wrote about their experiences with cynicism: for example, “This is what our education system is producing??!!” and “Mostly for this student I feel a sense of disappointment and worry about the next generation.”

Others (16.81%) cannot be classified into any themes because the instructors did not directly answer the question (e.g., “I have seen this before, and it usually ends with the student dropping or failing”).

5 STUDY 2: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY

The qualitative study provides a typology of how entitlement manifests itself in a classroom setting, as well as preliminary results about the negative consequences on instructors from dealing with academically entitled students, including work strain and burnout. Building upon these results, our goal for Study 2 was to constructively replicate and extend the findings of the previous study in four key ways. First, we conducted a quantitative study to replicate the findings from the qualitative study using a complementary methodology (Jick, 1979). Second, Study 1 examined student AE solely from the perspective of instructors, who may or may not know if students actually feel entitled. The instructors know only the students’ behaviors, from which they infer student beliefs, attitudes, and expectations. Because of this limitation, Study 2 measures students’ actual entitlement beliefs. Third, Study 1 may over simplify students’ displayed behaviors as a specific incident that may or may not be uncivil, and fail to cover the full range of uncivil behaviors as proposed by previous researchers (Clark & Springer, 2007). Also, previous studies (e.g., Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Greenberger et al., 2008; Menon & Sharland, 2011) operationalize uncivil behaviors as either dishonesty (Greenberger et al., 2008; Menon & Sharland, 2011) or one noncompliant behavior (e.g., failure to attend a low-stakes assessment session; Kopp & Finney, 2013). Therefore, Study 2 uses a comprehensive measure of incivility to assess a variety of student uncivil behaviors.

Fourth, by collecting data from both students and instructors, Study 2 overcomes the common method bias of previous studies linking student AE with their self-reported uncivil behaviors (e.g., Greenberger et al., 2008). Controlling the common-method bias thus reduces alternative explanations for observed relationships between variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

5.1 Method

5.1.1 Participants and procedure

After the approval of the Institutional Review Board of a midsize Midwestern university, all instructors from that university were invited to participate in this study via a survey invitation to instructors’ email addresses. The invitation included a personalized online survey link, which served to match instructors’ responses with their students’ responses. Moreover, the email invitation informed instructors that if they decided to participate, they would be asked to list all the courses they were currently teaching, and students from one of the listed courses would be randomly selected to participate in a student survey regarding their learning experiences. After instructors finished their survey, the first author randomly selected one of the listed courses, and contacted the instructor to request students’ participation from the randomly selected course. All identifiable information about the participating instructor was replaced by a random code. All participation was voluntary. All responses from the students were collected anonymously and placed in a large envelope, which was then compiled by research assistants.

In total, 59 instructors participated in the online instructor survey (representing a 10% response rate) and 41 instructors listed courses they were currently teaching. After contacting all 41 instructors, 34 of them gave us permission to collect data from students enrolled in one of their listed courses. Research assistants administered the student survey in the classroom for 31 courses. Because of tight course schedules, students from the other three courses completed an online survey. The average students’ participation rate was 93%. The final data consisted of 857 students nested in 34 instructors. The average class size was 25, ranging from 7 to 125.

The mean age of the 34 participating instructors was 47.21 (SD = 10.81). The mean number of courses they were currently

1Students were informed that if they had participated in this study for another class, they should not participate again.
teaching was 3.21 (SD = 1.57). With regard to instructor status, 67.6% of the instructor sample held a tenure-track position and 32.4% held a nontenure track position; 61.8% of the instructor sample was female and 38.2% of the sample was male; and 32 instructors were Anglo or White and two instructors were racial minorities.2

The mean age of the participating students was 21.97 (SD = 4.26). The majority of students was female (65.6%, 30.9% male, and 3.5% did not answer), Anglo or White (86.5%; 1.6%, Hispanic or Latino, 1.8% Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.5% African American or Black, 2.6% biracial or multiracial, 1.1% identified as "other," and 5.8% of the sample did not answer), and in their fourth year of college (31.4%; 12.4% in their 1st year, 11.2% in their 2nd year, 18% in their 3rd year, and 20.9% in their 5th year; 2.9% were graduate students; and 4.1% did not answer).

5.1.2 | Measures

5.1.2.1 | Student survey

Academic Entitlement was measured using a 15-item scale developed by Chowning and Campbell (2009). Items were rated along a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree; and α = .94). A sample item was, “My professors are obligated to help me prepare for exams.”

5.1.2.2 | Instructor survey

Frequency of Student Incivility was measured by 21 items from Nutt (2013) rated along a 7-point scale (0 = Never; 6 = Always; α = .94). The prompt for all items (e.g., “arriving late for class”) was, “how often did you experience the following student behaviors during this semester?” Work Strain was measured by the stress in general scale (Stanton, Balzer, Smith, Parra, & Ironson, 2001), rated along a 3-point scales (yes, ?, and no), based on the extent to which 15 words or phrases described their job strain (e.g., demanding, pressured, and calm; α = .87).

Exhaustion and Cynicism were assessed by adapting 10 items from the Exhaustion and Cynicism subscales of Maslach burnout inventory (MBI) general survey (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996) using a 7-point scale (0 = Never; 6 = Daily). A sample item for emotional exhaustion (α = .94) was “I feel emotionally drained from my teaching” and a sample item for cynicism (α = .76) was “I have become less interested in teaching since I started this job.”

5.1.2.3 | Multilevel analytic approach

We used a two-level mediation model to test our model. Because students are nested within their instructor, observations at the individual student level are not statistically independent, and thus multilevel analysis is mandatory. We, therefore, take the multilevel nature of our data into account when testing for mediation. In the recent methods literature, this type of model is referred to as a 1-2-2 multilevel mediation model (Preacher, Zyphur, & Zhang, 2010), where the instructor-level frequency of incivility (level 2) serves as a mediator in a linkage between individual AE data (level 1) and instructor strain-related outcomes (level 2).

We estimate the model using Mplus (version 7.11; Muthen & Muthen, 2013), and follow the one-stage procedure developed by Preacher and his colleagues (2010). In comparison to the more conventional, multilevel modeling paradigm (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) that has been suggested to test multilevel moderated mediation (Bauer, Preacher, & Gil, 2006), this method does not require multiple stages of analysis, and offers results that are less biased (Preacher et al., 2010). This approach specified student AE as the level 1 predictor; instructor reported frequency of incivility as the level 2 mediator; and instructor strain and burnout as the level 2 outcomes.

5.2 | Results

All measures were coded such that higher scores reflect higher levels of each construct. Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among variables.

5.2.1 | Multilevel mediation model

The results from the multilevel-mediation model assessing the relationships among AE, frequency of incivility, work strain, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism are presented in Table 3, where Part A summarizes the direct effect of AE on the frequency of incivility, as well as the direct effects of the frequency of incivility on work strain, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism. We found support for Hypothesis 1: student AE was positively related to instructor-reported frequency of incivility (Estimate = 2.99 and p < .05). Supporting Hypotheses 2a and 2b, instructor-reported frequency of student incivility was positively related to work strain (Estimate = .30 and p < .05) and emotional exhaustion (Estimate = .58 and p < .05), such that a higher frequency of student incivility was associated with greater work strain and burnout. However, frequency of student incivility was not significantly related to cynicism, failing to support Hypothesis 2c.

Using the procedures outlined by Preacher et al. (2010), the lower part of Table 3 (Part B; also see Figure 1) reports the indirect effects of AE on instructor work strain, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism through incivility. Although the indirect effects of AE on work strain and emotional exhaustion via incivility were not statistically significant at p < .05, these indirect effects were positive (Estimatestrain = .89 and p = .089; Estimateexhaustion = 1.73 and p = .054). Similarly, the indirect effect of AE on cynicism via incivility was not significant (Estimate = .77 and p = .182). This model as a whole explained 10.6% of work strain, 8.9% of exhaustion, and 4.5% of cynicism, which were considered as “practically” significant effects for social science research (Ferguson, 2009). As such, our results provide limited support for Hypotheses 3a and 3b, but no support for Hypothesis 3c.

2Instructors’ gender, race, age, status, and number of courses they were currently teaching were included as potential control variables impacting instructors’ strain and burnout. These demographic variables had no significant impacts on outcomes. On the basis of Becker’s (2005) recommendation that the inclusion of unnecessary control variables reduces statistical power and yields biased estimates (also see Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016), we excluded these variables from reported results.

3A model with the direct links between AE and instructors’ work strain and burnout was also tested. However, the direct impacts from AE to instructors’ work strain, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism were found to be nonsignificant. In order to have a more parsimonious model, we omitted the direct links from AE to instructors’ outcomes.
In sum, Study 2 found that student academically entitled attitudes were associated with their uncivil behaviors as reported by instructors. Moreover, instructors’ reported frequency of students’ uncivil behaviors was associated with their experienced strain and emotional exhaustion, but not cynicism.

### TABLE 2  
Mean (M), standard deviations (SD), reliabilities and correlations among the study variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Academic entitlement</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>857</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Frequency of incivility</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>(.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Work strain</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>(.87)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.82**</td>
<td>(94)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cynicism</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>(.76)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .01. 
Correlations are instructor-level correlations with student-level academic entitlement aggregated to the instructor level. Reliability estimates (coefficient alpha) are on the diagonal.

### TABLE 3  
Two-level mediation model: paths, coefficients, and their significance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part A: direct effects</th>
<th>Coefficient (SE)</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entitlement → frequency of incivility</td>
<td>2.99(1.50)</td>
<td>2.00*</td>
<td>.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of incivility → work strain</td>
<td>0.30(0.12)</td>
<td>2.41*</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of incivility → emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>0.58(0.26)</td>
<td>2.10*</td>
<td>.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of incivility → cynicism</td>
<td>0.26(0.17)</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>.136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part B: indirect effects</th>
<th>Coefficient (SE)</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entitlement → frequency of incivility → work stress</td>
<td>0.89(0.52)</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entitlement → frequency of incivility → emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>1.73(0.90)</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entitlement → frequency of incivility → cynicism</td>
<td>0.77(0.58)</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>.182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. SE = standard error of estimate; N = 34 instructors; N = 857 students; 
*p < .05.

In sum, Study 2 found that student academically entitled attitudes were associated with their uncivil behaviors as reported by instructors. Moreover, instructors’ reported frequency of students’ uncivil behaviors was associated with their experienced strain and emotional exhaustion, but not cynicism.

#### 6 | DISCUSSION

The qualitative study uncovered instructor’s perceptions of AE and its effects on instructors’ well-being and strain. Instructors described academically entitled students as those who engage in many of the following behaviors: ask for special accommodations or exceptions to the class rules, take little personal responsibility for their poor performance, and possess grandiose beliefs that they are more knowledgeable than other students or even than their instructor. When such entitled students do not get what they want—and most do not, according to our sample, in which instructors mostly stated that they did not accommodate students’ requests—these students often engage in the following uncivil behaviors: challenge authority, show hostility and anger, show disrespect, file complaints and grade-appeals, and violate class rules. Most instructors report that such actions caused them strain and burnout.

Building upon the qualitative Study 1, the quantitative Study 2 found that student AE was related to student uncivil behavior, which was related to instructors’ work strain and emotional exhaustion, but

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1**: Unstandardized coefficients (standard error) of Study 2. Multilevel mediation results from 857 students nested in 34 instructors. The dash line indicates a nonsignificant relationship.
not to cynicism, thus partly supporting Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) daily hassles theory. The full-mediation model suggested that not all AE produces uncivil behaviors and that AE only bothers instructors when it produces uncivil student behaviors. For example, those academically entitled students who already get what they want (e.g., the instructor assigns them high grades to begin with) may not engage in uncivil behaviors (e.g., challenging the instructor or grades); and therefore, they may not negatively affect the instructor or even be noticed by the instructor.

Indeed, instructors reported that many, but not all, students engage in uncivil behaviors. Overall, our findings suggest AE is not merely annoying, but rather, when linked to uncivil behaviors, is an impediment to rigorously-conducted courses because it burns out instructors. Ultimately, AE undermines the civility of the college classroom and higher education, and threatens the profession of college teaching.

6.1 Theoretical and practical implications

We make several contributions to the literature. First, we identified one of the sources of work stress for a unique occupation (i.e., college instructor), which has been mislabeled as “stress-free” by social media (Kensing, 2013). Second, we extended the study of negative consequences of students’ AE onto another population (i.e., instructors), and with data from two sources, thus overcoming the potential issue of the common method bias.

Moreover, the finding of the negative impact of uncivil behaviors from supposedly “powerless” students on “powerful” instructors challenges and enriches workplace incivility theory. In the organizational setting, the perpetrator of workplace incivility tends to hold a more powerful position while the victim tends to be powerless (Pearson & Porath, 2005). We demonstrated that subordinates (in our case, students) might also be an important source of uncivil behaviors. Yet, most of the workplace incivility scales only focus on uncivil behaviors from coworkers and supervisors, ignoring the possible uncivil behaviors from one’s subordinates (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001). As such, previous workplace incivility research may underestimate the experiences of workplace incivility. Therefore, workplace incivility scales may be modified to include uncivil behaviors from subordinates, in addition to coworkers and supervisors (e.g., Lim & Lee, 2011). Such modification may be especially important given that as millennial students continue entering the workforce, their AE may manifest itself in other entitled ways that may burn out their supervisors. Indeed, a sense of entitlement, coupled with increased materialistic values and decreased work centrality (Twenge & Kasser, 2013), can negatively impact millennial employees’ interactions with their coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates.

In the occupational health and clinical literatures, individuals (employees or therapists) who experience burnout distance themselves both emotionally and cognitively from their work and are less efficient at their jobs (Maslach & Jackson, 1984). By extension, instructors experiencing high strain and burnout may distance themselves from their students and become less engaged, less approachable, and less invested; ultimately, teaching quality may diminish as instructors fail to improve upon course content. In turn, students may learn less, perceive the instructor more negatively, rate the instructor lower on course evaluations, or even engage in more uncivil, hostile behaviors in retaliation.

What can be done to help instructors manage student AE and uncivil behavior? Our studies imply that effective strategies to decrease the negative impact of student AE should directly target student uncivil behaviors rather than targeting academically entitled beliefs, which are relatively stable and less amendable to modification (Alkandari, 2011; Chowning & Campbell, 2009). For example, class rules regarding uncivil behaviors might be specified in the syllabus and consistently enforced (Alkandari, 2011; Morrisette, 2001). Similarly, such rules also could be stated in student codes of conduct. For example, according to Utah State University’s code (2002, p. 1), “disruptive classroom behavior involves physical actions, verbal utterance, or other activities which interfere with either the faculty member’s ability to conduct the class or the ability of other students to profit from the instructional program” and the faculty has the right to remove the student from the class when the "student has compromised the faculty member’s right to teach or the students’ right to learn" (p. 2; also see Alkandari, 2011). Indeed, the highly recommended organizational-level intervention is to target the sources of stress and change the stressful environment (Cooper & Cartwright, 1997). Finally, instructors could discuss negative impacts of uncivil behaviors, such as texting and using electronic devices in class (e.g., Gingerich & Lineweaver, 2014), on grades and learning, to help students understand that these behaviors cause a hostile, less effective learning environment.

In the absence of institutional change or support, we might ameliorate instructors’ burnout by teaching instructors to practice mindfulness, emotion regulation, interpersonal effectiveness, and distress-tolerance skills to promote their well-being (Linehan, 1993).

6.2 Limitations and future research

Both studies have some limitations. First, Study 1 examined student AE solely from the perspective of instructors, who can only infer student beliefs from student behaviors. Moreover, Study 1 only asked for one specific incident, and thus overlooked the frequency of students’ uncivil behaviors. Additionally, Study 1 employed instructors’ self-reported data, rather than objective behavioral measures from another source (e.g., students).

Study 2 improved upon Study 1 by using multisource data from both the students and their instructor. However, the cross-sectional nature of Study 2 limited our ability to draw conclusions about causality. Also, Study 2 assessed instructors’ perceptions of uncivil behaviors from a class as a whole, but not from individual students in the class. As such, we cannot match specific behaviors to specific students and their individual levels of entitlement. Thus, Study 2 likely underestimates the influence of AE on uncivil behaviors. In addition, not all instructors who chose to participate allowed us to collect students’ entitlement data, leading to a biased sample. Indeed, when one instructor denied our request to collect data from her students, she mentioned that, “I think students will just see it as one more thing they should do for me. Sorry. I really shouldn’t have taken the survey.” It is possible that those who participated in our survey and gave us the permission to collect students’ data are those who have experienced students’ uncivil behaviors and found a somewhat effective strategy to cope with those behaviors.
Another possible limitation of Study 2 is low power of our analyses. Although no research to date has investigated the appropriate sample size in the multilevel mediation model that was tested in Study 2, an agreed-on rule-of-thumb for power in multilevel mediation models is that the number of level-2 groups is more important than the number of level-1 participants (Preacher et al., 2010). Although we had 857 students (level-1) in Study 2, our relatively small instructor-level (i.e., level-2) sample size (N = 34) might partly explain the statistically nonsignificant (albeit practically significant) findings of indirect effects in Study 2.

Although instructor gender was not significantly related to Study 2 outcomes, the majority of instructor participants in both Study 1 and Study 2 were female. Thus, this may limit the generalization of our findings. However, Cortina’s selective incivility theory (2008) suggests that women and minorities might be especially vulnerable to incivility, and thus show more interest in participation in this study.

Given that being entitled might be a generational characteristic (Twenge, 2006) partially derived from encouraging students to “shop” for higher education (Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010), future research might investigate the cohort effect on AE. In addition to AE, more research may be devoted to exploring the dispositional (e.g., Machiavellianism) and situational (e.g., large vs. small classroom) causes of student uncivil behaviors. Also, future research may explore the contagion effect (cf., Foulk, Woolum, & Erez, 2016) and spiraling effect (cf., Andersson & Pearson, 1999) of incivility in the classroom and the mechanisms that explain these effects.

There is also the need of a theory that details which variables moderate the relationship between AE and uncivil behaviors. Not all students high in AE engage in uncivil behaviors. One such moderator variable may be the grades entitled students receive: perhaps as long as entitled students receive high grades that confirm their entitlement, they would not engage in uncivil behaviors. Another moderator might be student personality. For example, proactive personality may impact whether one would take actions to change their unsatisfactory grades. Even better would be to find moderator variables over which the instructor may have some control, so that instructors can reduce uncivil behavior without inflating grades.

Future research may uncover how burnout and strain affect instructor teaching effectiveness. For instance, do burnt-out instructors slow their innovation in teaching? Might exhausted instructors assign fewer challenging (and often upsetting) assignments so that they can spend less time grading and addressing student complaints? Even worse, do these instructors leave the teaching profession? All of these may diminish student higher education experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared that they have no conflict of interest.

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7 | CONCLUSION

The current research shows that a sense of AE increases uncivil behaviors from students toward instructors, which in turn, increase instructors’ strain and emotional exhaustion. If students increasingly become entitled, as some fear, because of the current trend of universities treating students as “customers who are always right” (Wright, 2008), then contemporary college instructors face a growing challenge.


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