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## How Personality Shapes Workplace Incivility: A Theoretical View

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### Abstract

Workplace incivility, characterised by low-intensity, ambiguous behaviour such as disrespect, rudeness, and discourtesy, disrupts workplace harmony and erodes organisational culture. Although these behaviours may appear minor, their cumulative impact can significantly harm individuals and organisations, manifesting in decreased morale, productivity, and well-being. Personality traits play a crucial role in shaping how employees perceive, experience, and respond to workplace incivility, influencing its outcomes and associated costs. However, existing literature offers limited insights into how these personality differences exacerbate experiences of workplace incivility, leaving a critical gap in understanding this phenomenon. This conceptual paper draws on victim precipitation theory and trait activation theory to examine the intricate relationships between agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and negative affectivity with workplace incivility. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this paper proposes a framework to understand how personality traits influence susceptibility to incivility and its subsequent effects on individuals and organisations. This study aims to advance theoretical discourse, guide future empirical research, and inform organisational strategies to mitigate the adverse consequences of workplace incivility.

**Keywords:** Workplace Incivility, Malaysia Public Service Organisations, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Negative Affectivity, Victim Precipitation Theory, Trait Activation Theory

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## 1.0 Introduction

For nearly three decades, workplace incivility has emerged as a significant topic in the study of human behaviour and psychology. Various forms of mistreatment in the workplace, such as violent aggression, bullying, domination, harassment, deviance, and incivility, have been found to negatively impact employees' emotional well-being (Itzkovich & Heilbrunn, 2016). Rude or discourteous behaviour in the workplace is increasingly common today (Cortina et al., 2018).

Earlier literature primarily focused on issues such as bullying, abusive supervision, workplace hostility, mistreatment, and deviance, all of which have been shown to affect employee attitudes, work behaviour, and overall well-being adversely. Although physical violence in the workplace is considered more severe than incivility, both can lead to long-term consequences for organisations. Even though the term "workplace incivility" is less commonly recognised, it is a global issue. For instance, Murrell (2018), writing for *Forbes*, highlighted incidents involving prominent figures such as Barry Diller, then-president of Fox Broadcasting, who was notorious for his explosive temper, including throwing videotapes at walls. Similarly, Gary Cohn, the former president of Goldman Sachs, was known for shouting at employees and using the silent treatment to express disappointment. As noted earlier, although incivility is of low intensity, its effects can be substantial.

Research indicates that employees who experience incivility at work are often more emotionally exhausted (Ismail et al., 2018). Studies have also identified the presence of undesirable behaviour, such as incivility, across various industries. Examples include the Malaysian food and beverage sector (Hashim et al., 2019), the Malaysian public sector (Ismail et al., 2018), the Malaysian healthcare industry (Ishak et al., 2018), U.S. federal courts (Cortina et al., 2018), the hotel industry (Intan et al., 2013), the Malaysian private sector (Alias et al., 2013), the banking sector (Sliter & Jones, 2016), and U.S. law enforcement institutions (Miner & Cortina, 2016).

Research suggests that individuals with certain personality characteristics may perceive adverse workplace events differently, increasing their likelihood of labelling such events as harassment (Nielsen et al., 2020). The role of personality traits as

antecedents of workplace incivility remains a subject of debate (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). Jelavić et al. (2021) emphasise the need to examine the characteristics of the target to gain deeper insight into the nature of uncivil behaviour. Milam and Sulea (2013) explored this issue and encountered a dilemma—whether individuals with specific personality traits become targets of incivility due to their own potentially irritating or provocative behaviour or if they merely interpret neutral actions as uncivil. Personality traits are generally examined from two perspectives: the observer's perspective and the self-perspective. The observer's perspective refers to behaviour manifestations of personality as perceived by colleagues, such as social reputation (Hogan, 1991). Individuals with a high social reputation may ignore uncivil behaviour and remain observers. In contrast, the self-perspective reflects internal cognitive processes influencing attitudes, behaviour, self-determination, intentions, and goals (Persson et al., 2018).

This paper explores personality characteristics (i.e., agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, negative affectivity) and workplace incivility within the context of Malaysian public service. Specifically, the paper aims to:

1. Conceptualise workplace incivility by synthesising existing literature on its definitions, characteristics, and impacts.
2. Examine the role of personality traits in shaping employees' experiences of workplace incivility.
3. Contextualise the discussion within the Malaysian public service, considering its unique administrative structure, cultural dynamics, and operational complexities.
4. Develop a conceptual framework that integrates individual factors influencing workplace incivility in public service settings, offering insights for future empirical research and practical interventions.

The Malaysian public service forms the backbone of the nation's administrative framework, operating under a Federal Government system. This system encompasses three main tiers: the Federal Government, State Governments, and Local Authorities. The public service integrates across these three tiers, serving as the mechanism for implementing policies established by the Government. Article 132 of the Federal

Constitution defines the civil service as comprising several key components, including the Armed Forces, Judiciary and Legal Services, Federal Public Service, Police Force, Joint Public Service, State Public Services, and Educational Services. The Malaysian public service plays a pivotal role in socio-economic development through ministries, departments, and agencies, each with specialised responsibility. Notably, the Malaysian civil service consists of 278 service schemes, reflecting its operational diversity and complexity.

Addressing personality factors and workplace incivility is essential for enhancing service efficiency and strengthening the corporate image of Malaysia's public sector, particularly in the face of global challenges (Abdullah & Halim, 2016; Abdullah et al., 2021). As the backbone of the national administrative framework, the Malaysian public service provides a vital context for this research. Over the past two decades, thousands of employees have reported incidents of workplace mistreatment, with 98% experiencing uncivil behaviour (Cooper, 2017). Research estimates that workplace incivility costs organisations USD 14,000 (RM 59,220) per employee annually (Schilpzand et al., 2016). Alias et al. (2022) concluded that workplace incivility impacts job satisfaction, work-related stress, psychological contracts, and work engagement among Malaysian public service department employees. Their findings further highlight that incivility has the strongest association with work-related stress, imposing a significant burden on employee well-being.

To achieve organisational goals, maintaining employee motivation is always essential (Obumneme & Zainuddin, 2024). Employers must prioritise their workforce, recognising employees as vital strategic assets (Obumneme & Ghapar, 2024). The study provides valuable insights for researchers, managers, and practitioners, particularly in understanding how personality traits influence workplace behaviour. By addressing this gap, the research aims to enhance employee well-being, organisational productivity, and public service delivery in Malaysia. This research makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it enriches the understanding of agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, negative affectivity, and workplace incivility within the Malaysian context. It provides nuanced insights into how personality traits influence workplace incivility, addressing gaps in existing literature. By extending prior research, this study

offers a deeper exploration of these relationships, particularly within the government sector. Thus, it advances theoretical discourse and serves as a foundation for future studies (Dhanani & Wolcott, 2018; Mazuritzky, 2018).

## **2.0 Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**

### **2.1 Workplace Incivility**

Workplace incivility is a form of maltreatment in organisations characterised by covert aggression (Alias et al., 2022). Workplace incivility is distinct from physical violence or bullying, as it involves low-intensity, ambiguous behaviour that violates norms of mutual respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina & Magley, 2009). Typical manifestations include degrading, disrespectful, or discourteous actions (Burnfield et al., 2004). Although these behaviours are not overtly threatening, they disrupt workplace harmony and create a hostile environment. The consequences of workplace incivility can be particularly severe when personality traits exacerbate its impact (Liu et al., 2020). Studies by Abdullah and Halim (2016) and Abdullah et al. (2021) highlight the potential for incivility to lead to mental health issues and other adverse outcomes.

A key distinction between workplace incivility and other forms of workplace mistreatment lies in the ambiguous intent to harm. Sliter and Jones (2016) note that targets of incivility often struggle to determine whether the perpetrator's actions were intentional. For instance, consider a scenario where an employee greets a colleague in the pantry with a "hello," but the colleague offers a blank stare and remains silent. One individual might interpret this as rude or dismissive, while another might assume the colleague was merely distracted or in a rush. This example illustrates how individual personality traits influence perceptions of incivility (Sliter & Jones, 2016). Similarly, Miner and Cortina (2016) identified specific actions commonly associated with workplace incivility, such as being ignored while speaking, receiving irrelevant or dismissive comments, experiencing silent treatment, witnessing eye-rolling in response to communication, or being addressed in an inappropriate manner. Although these subtle

behaviors may seem minor, their impact depends on individual sensitivity and interpretation, making workplace incivility a complex and pervasive issue.

## **2.2 Personality Traits and Workplace Incivility**

Recent studies further examine the influence of personality traits on experiencing or engaging in workplace incivility. For example, Ojewuyi and Alausa (2018) explored personality factors and incivility in Nigeria, Thomas (2017) studied the vulnerability of neuroticism to incivility in the United States, and Amponsah-Tawiah and Annor (2017) investigated the relationship between personality and organisational politics in Ghana. Other research includes Mazuritzky (2018) from Canada, who analysed perceptions of workplace incivility based on personality characteristics, and Arshad and Ismail (2018), who studied the mediating role of personality between workplace incivility and knowledge hiding. Lim (2016) also examined negative emotions as a mediator of workplace incivility in Malaysia's banking sector.

Raman et al. (2016) conducted a study across 17 industries, reporting alarming statistics on workplace incivility. These findings highlight the prevalence of incivility and reinforce the urgency for further research on its antecedents, outcomes, and organisational implications as follows.

- 12% admitted that they resigned because of uncivil behaviour.
- 25% admitted to venting their frustration on customers.
- 38% intentionally lessen the value of their work.
- 47% intentionally reduce the working period.
- 48% intentionally reduces work effort.
- 63% lost working time by avoiding the perpetrator.
- 66% said they drop their performance.

- 78% admitted to failing their obligations to the organisation.
- 80% of work time is lost due to distress caused by incidents of rudeness.

Workplace incivility's cost and negative impact on organisations is often indirect, with adverse spillover effects extending to the target's family. For instance, targets of workplace incivility frequently display counterproductive work attitudes and experience heightened conflicts within their families, often resulting in strained relationships and diminished quality of interaction (Demskey et al., 2014). Past research has focused on the frequency of workplace incivility experiences.

Findings from Cortina et al. (2018), De Clercq et al. (2019), and Persson et al. (2018) indicated that the frequency of reported workplace incivility varies over time and is influenced by personality characteristics among the targets. Research by Liu et al. (2020), Mazuritzky (2018), and Sliter and Jones (2016) highlighted that personality traits significantly affect how individuals perceive and respond to workplace incivility, suggesting the need for a detailed examination of these traits. Rada-Bayne (2018) and Jelavić et al. (2021) further underscore the importance of studying personality differences and how individuals respond to incivility, both toward instigators and others. In the context of Malaysia, there is a pressing need to explore the role of personality traits in workplace incivility, particularly among government employees (Arshad & Ismail, 2018).

### **2.3 Theorising Workplace Incivility**

Understanding the role of personality as a factor influencing experiences of incivility is crucial. The proposed framework builds on two major theories: Victim Precipitation Theory and Trait Activation Theory. Initially developed in criminal justice to explain factors contributing to criminal behaviour, Victim Precipitation Theory posits that victims may unintentionally contribute to their mistreatment through their characteristics and behaviours (Cortina et al., 2018). In the context of workplace incivility, the theory suggests that personality traits such as low agreeableness may influence how others perceive and interact with an individual, potentially provoking mistreatment or escalating

incivility. For example, employees with low agreeableness who exhibit confrontational behaviour may be perceived as provoking incivility (Tepper et al., 2006).

This perspective suggests that workplace incivility arises from interactions between both the perpetrator and the victim, rather than being solely the result of the perpetrator's actions. Victims of workplace incivility are not passive; they may inadvertently provoke negative interactions based on their personality traits, which can amplify the deviant behaviour directed at them (Petherick, 2017). Although this framework has been applied in criminology to suggest that victims may contribute to their mistreatment, its relevance to workplace incivility requires further empirical investigation. Existing research indicates that employees with low agreeableness, high neuroticism, or negative affectivity are more vulnerable to incivility (Dhanani et al., 2019; Mazuritsky, 2018). However, studies directly linking these traits to victim precipitation in workplace incivility are still limited, necessitating further research to establish clear causal relationships.

Trait Activation Theory, which originates from research on personality and work performance, explains how situational factors activate certain traits, shaping behavioural responses. According to this theory, certain work conditions, such as stress or incivility, may reveal or trigger certain personality traits, thereby influencing how individuals respond emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally (Tett & Burnett, 2003). The Big Five personality traits — openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism — are central to this model and play a significant role in determining how individuals react to different workplace dynamics (McCrae & Costa, 1987).

Trait Activation Theory posits that workplace incivility can trigger specific personality traits. For example, employees high in neuroticism may experience heightened emotional distress in response to incivility, while those high in agreeableness may be more likely to adopt conflict-avoidant strategies (Tett et al., 1999). This interaction between personality traits and workplace stressors underscores the importance of a more comprehensive understanding of how personality characteristics influence an individual's role as a target, witness, or perpetrator of incivility. While Trait Activation Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how personality

traits influence responses to workplace incivility, the direct application of this theory in organisational settings has been underexplored. Although previous research has highlighted the role of personality traits in shaping incivility experiences (Mazuritsky, 2018; Schilpzand et al., 2016), empirical studies establishing the precise mechanisms through which traits activate responses to incivility are still lacking. More research is needed to validate the theoretical predictions of Trait Activation Theory and explore the causal relationships between personality traits and workplace incivility.

## **2.4 Agreeableness and Workplace Incivility**

Employees with high agreeableness (AG) exhibit qualities such as tolerance, forgiveness, and cooperation, which contribute to fostering a harmonious workplace (Blake et al., 2022). Their inclination to focus on the positive aspects of situations reduces their likelihood of perceiving or engaging in incivility (Raman et al., 2016). Research consistently links high AG to lower workplace incivility, greater job satisfaction, and reduced exposure to uncivil behaviours (Dhanani et al., 2019). These findings suggest that agreeableness plays a protective role in mitigating negative workplace interactions and promoting positive interpersonal dynamics.

Employees with low AG, characterised by traits such as argumentativeness, scepticism, and mistrust, are more susceptible to workplace incivility. Individuals with low AG may perceive neutral actions or minor social breaches as uncivil, exacerbating interpersonal tensions. Additionally, their confrontational attitudes often make them targets of incivility, as instigators may perceive them as less cooperative and more likely to engage in conflict (Milam & Sulea, 2013). This suggests that AG not only influences individuals' experiences of workplace incivility but also shapes their perceptions of such behaviours. Further, Jelavić (2021) found that individuals with high levels of agreeableness tend to experience less incivility, regardless of the workplace context. In contrast, individuals with lower agreeableness are more likely to experience workplace incivility.

Empirical evidence also underscores the relationship between AG and workplace incivility across diverse contexts. For instance, Dhanani et al. (2019) found a modest but statistically significant negative correlation ( $r = -0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) between AG and workplace incivility. Thomas (2017) reported that low AG significantly increased vulnerability to supervisor-instigated incivility among 179 participants in the USA ( $r = -0.18$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). Similarly, Ojewuyi and Alausa (2018) identified a strong negative relationship ( $r = -0.341$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) in a study of Nigerian government employees, emphasising the protective effect of high AG. Mazuritsky (2018) further revealed that individuals with low AG are more likely to be targets of incivility due to their argumentative and uncooperative behaviour ( $r = -0.19$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Collectively, these findings underscore the critical role of AG in shaping workplace experiences and interactions. The following hypothesis is supported by a robust body of literature indicating that high AG serves as a protective factor against workplace incivility. At the same time, low AG increases the likelihood of experiencing and perceiving incivility. By examining this relationship in the Malaysian public sector, this study aims to provide deeper insights into how personality traits influence workplace interactions in this unique organisational context. Based on the reviewed literature, this study posits the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a significant relationship between agreeableness and workplace incivility among employees in Malaysian public service organisations.

## **2.5 Neuroticism and Workplace Incivility**

Neuroticism (NR) is characterised by emotional instability, self-consciousness, anxiety, insecurity, excessive worrying, hostility, and impulsiveness (Mazuritsky, 2018; Yusoff et al., 2021). People with neurotic tendencies often feel uncertain about their viewpoints and are easily embarrassed (Srivastava et al., 2023). Individuals with high NR often interpret positive situations negatively due to their heightened sensitivity to negative emotions (Milam & Sulea, 2013). This tendency increases the likelihood that neurotic individuals will perceive and experience workplace incivility, as they often interpret situations more negatively.

In contrast, individuals with low levels of NR are less prone to making negative judgments and are less likely to engage in arguments over minor adverse events (Mazuritsky, 2018; Rada-Bayne, 2018; Zhou et al., 2015). These individuals often adopt a submissive approach and ignore uncivil behaviours, which may inadvertently encourage instigators to continue their actions (Sliter & Jones, 2016). Research by Dhanani et al. (2019) revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between NR and workplace incivility ( $r = .22, p < .05$ ), suggesting that higher NR levels are associated with greater exposure to incivility. The study, grounded in victim precipitation theory, explained that the personality traits of targets influence their likelihood of experiencing mistreatment. Specifically, employees high in NR may respond in ways perceived as provocative or offensive, thereby increasing their susceptibility to workplace incivility. Building on these findings, Arshad and Ismail (2018) conducted a cross-sectional survey among 108 private-sector employees in Malaysia to examine how personality traits influence workplace incivility and knowledge hiding. The findings showed that employees with high levels of NR exhibited a stronger relationship with being targets of incivility instigated by team members compared to those with low levels of NR ( $r = .25, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the study highlighted that neurotic employees are more likely to hide knowledge from their team members, indicating a broader impact of this personality trait on workplace dynamics.

Another study by Amponsah-Tawiah and Annor (2017) explored the relationship between personality traits and workplace victimisation among 631 full-time employees across various industries in Ghana. Their findings emphasised that NR is significantly associated with workplace mistreatment and victimisation ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ). Empirical research by Jelavić et al. (2021) on a sample of 251 employees from 11 heterogeneous organisations has shown that the perceptions and occurrence of workplace incivility can be significantly related to NR. Another study by Fernández-del-Río et al. (2021), which sampled 613 employees (54% female) from various Spanish organisations, found that neuroticism was positively associated with being targeted by negative related behaviours.

The study also found that individuals high in NR often display low self-confidence, nervousness, introversion, and passivity, increasing their vulnerability to mistreatment. The following hypothesis is supported by a growing body of research

demonstrating that NR is a key predictor of workplace incivility across various organisational contexts. Employees high in NR are more likely to perceive workplace interactions as negative, exhibit stress-reactive behaviours, and engage in maladaptive coping mechanisms, all of which increase their vulnerability to workplace mistreatment. By examining this relationship in the Malaysian public sector, this study aims to provide deeper insights into how NR influences workplace interactions and contributes to organisational inefficiencies. Based on these findings, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a significant relationship between neuroticism and workplace incivility among employees in the Malaysian public service organisation.

## **2.6 Conscientiousness and Workplace Incivility**

Conscientiousness (CS) is a personality trait characterised by reliability, steadiness, organisation, achievement orientation, systematic behaviour, responsibility, and a tendency toward workaholism (Bogg & Roberts, 2013). It encompasses self-discipline, meticulous planning, and a propensity for thinking deeply before acting, whether in interpersonal relationships, career, and business contexts (Hagger et al., 2021). As a result, individuals high in CS often set high standards for interpersonal communication and professional interactions. They are also adept at recognising subtle instances of uncivil behaviour.

Conscientious individuals tend to be perfectionists, performance-focused, and attuned to rules and norms, which can sometimes lead to antagonistic attitudes toward those who do not meet their expectations (Sliter & Jones, 2016). These characteristics make them more likely to perceive uncivil behaviours, as they are particularly sensitive to deviations from established rules and procedures (Dhanani et al., 2019). A study by Ojewuyi and Alausa (2018) investigated the relationship between CS and workplace incivility among government workers in various ministries in Oyo State, Nigeria. Using a cross-sectional survey design, the study sampled 216 participants (116 males and 100 females). The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between CS and

workplace incivility ( $r = -.225$ ;  $p < .01$ ), indicating that employees who are organised, hardworking, and well-planned are less likely to engage in or become targets of workplace incivility.

Similarly, Dhanani et al. (2019) found that individuals low in CS—characterised as undependable, untrustworthy, and less disciplined—are more likely to experience and become targets of workplace incivility ( $r = -.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ), underscoring the protective nature of CS against such negative experiences. Another study by Amponsah-Tawiah and Annor (2017) echoed these findings, highlighting that employee with low levels of CS—marked by disorganisation, lack of focus, and a tendency to be taken for granted—are more prone to workplace incivility. Although the study noted that personality traits play a smaller role compared to organisational politics, it still reported a significant negative relationship between CS and workplace incivility ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

In conclusion, CS serves as a protective factor against workplace incivility, with individuals high in this trait being less likely to experience or engage in uncivil behaviours (Rice & Reed, 2022). Conversely, those low in CS are more vulnerable to becoming targets of incivility, emphasising the importance of fostering CS in workplace environments. The following hypothesis is supported by empirical evidence demonstrating the role of CS in mitigating workplace incivility. Employees high in CS tend to uphold workplace norms, engage in ethical conduct, and avoid negative interactions, reducing their likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating incivility. Conversely, individuals low in CS who exhibit disorganisation, lack of self-discipline, and poor interpersonal management are more likely to be vulnerable to incivility. By examining this relationship in the Malaysian public sector, this study aims to provide further insights into how CS influences workplace incivility. Accordingly, the study proposes the following hypothesis.

H3: There is a significant relationship between conscientiousness and workplace incivility among employees in the Malaysian public service organisations.

## 2.7 Negative Affectivity and Incivility

Negative affectivity (NA) refers to the predisposition to experience negative emotions such as hatred, anger, and disrespect (Jordan et al., 2021). Although NA is not a distinct personality trait, it contributes to character stability and shapes interactions and perceptions (Ismail et al., 2018). Individuals with high NA are more likely to view others' behaviour through a pessimistic lens, often interpreting situations negatively (An & Wang, 2016). A meta-analysis conducted in the United States examined the relationship between NA and workplace mistreatment through the victim precipitation model. The findings revealed a significant association between NA and experiences of workplace mistreatment ( $r = .29, p < .05$ ), indicating that individuals with high NA are consistently more likely to be targets of uncivil behaviour (Dhanani et al., 2019). Similarly, Zhou et al. (2015) found a significant connection between NA and the experience of uncivil behaviour, particularly in low workload situations ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ). This suggests that employees with high NA are often victimised, as their negative perceptions may contribute to difficult workplace interactions.

Further evidence is provided by Mazuritsky (2018), who studied full-time graduate students at the University of Guelph, Canada. The survey involved participants aged 18 years and older, with 68% identifying as female. The study explored how personality characteristics influence the perception of workplace incivility. Mazuritsky (2018) revealed that individuals with high NA are more likely to be victims of uncivil behaviours ( $r = .08, p < .01$ ). This is attributed to their tendency to perceive others' behaviours negatively and interpret interpersonal interactions as uncivil. Moreover, individuals with high NA frequently experience incivility, as their predisposition leads them to interpret others' behaviour unfavourably.

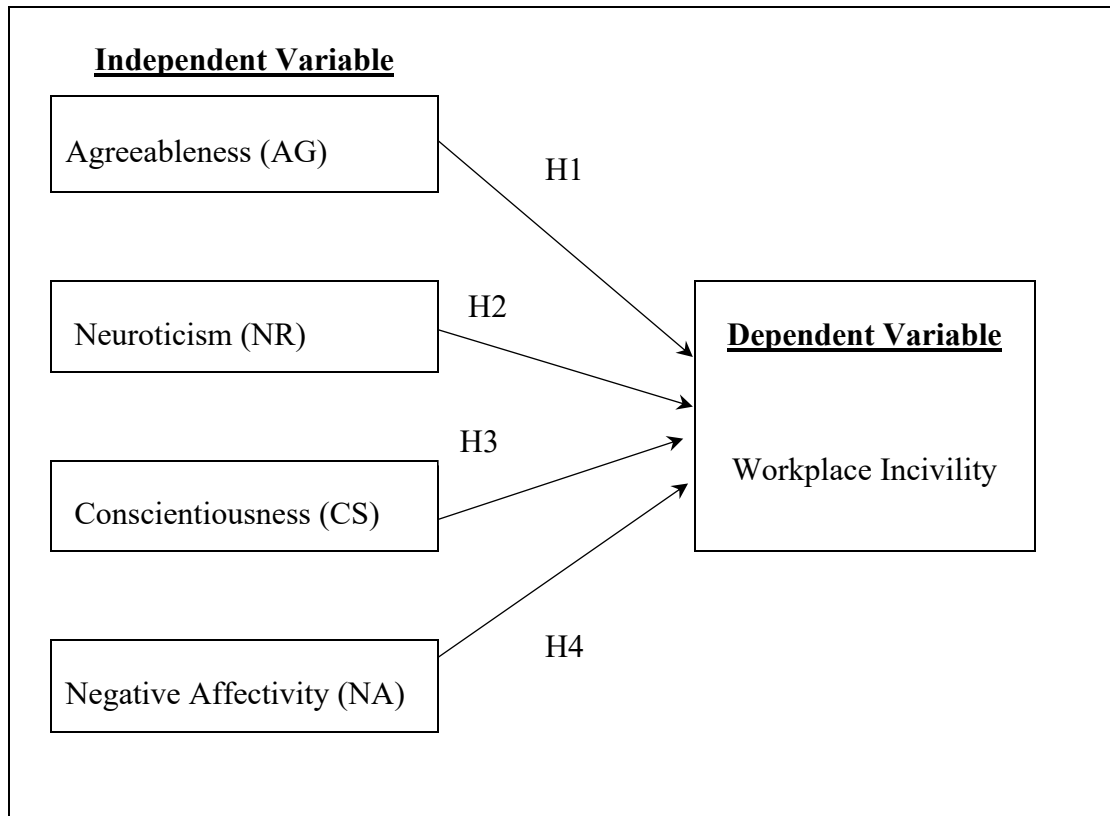
Additional support comes from Sliter et al. (2015), who demonstrated a significant relationship between NA and workplace incivility in an autonomous model ( $r = .10, p < .01$ ). Their study suggested that NA influences judgment processes, leading individuals with high NA to interpret personal misbehaviour as incivility and identify themselves as targets. Similarly, Houkes et al. (2003) found that individuals with extreme NA levels are more prone to emotional distress in response to workplace mistreatment.

In conclusion, individuals with high NA are more likely to perceive themselves as targets due to their negative perception of others and the environment (Jordan et al., 2021). The following hypothesis is supported by a substantial body of research indicating that NA plays a crucial role in workplace incivility. Employees high in NA are more likely to interpret workplace behaviours through a negative lens, increasing their self-reported experiences of incivility. By examining this relationship in Malaysian public service organisations, this study aims to provide further insights into how personality traits influence workplace interactions, particularly in hierarchical and bureaucratic work environments, such as those found in Malaysian government organisations. Based on this, the study proposes the following hypothesis.

H4: There is a significant relationship between negative affectivity and workplace incivility among employees in the Malaysian public service organisations

## **2.8 Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in two key theoretical perspectives: Victim Precipitation Theory and Trait Activation Theory. These frameworks form the basis of the constructed theoretical framework, which guides the development of hypotheses and identifies significant relationships among the four independent and dependent variables. The research aims to explore whether personality factors, specifically agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and negative affectivity, influence the occurrence of workplace incivility in Malaysian public service organisations.



**Figure 1: Framework of Personality Characteristics on Workplace Incivility in the Malaysia Public Service Organisation**

### 3.0 Methodology

To frame the study, this research focused on specific keywords that capture the essence of personality characteristics influencing workplace incivility: "workplace incivility," "agreeableness," "negative affectivity," "neuroticism," "Malaysian public service organisation," "Trait Activation Theory," and "Victim Precipitation Theory." A comprehensive literature search was conducted using electronic databases available through the university library, including IJOMFA, Emerald, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, Springer, and Blackwell Synergy. These databases provided access to a broad range of sources, including theoretical models, empirical studies, and conceptual analyses. A systematic search targeted studies from the past two decades for relevance while incorporating foundational research.

The framework examines the independent variables —AG, NR, CS, and NA — in relation to the dependent variable, workplace incivility. Additionally, it outlines the development of hypotheses that explore the impact of these personality traits and affective tendencies on workplace incivility, intending to advance the understanding of interpersonal dynamics in organisational settings. The research framework is designed to investigate how personality characteristics influence workplace incivility within Malaysian public service organisations. This research is particularly significant in the context of Malaysian public sector organisations, providing practical insights for promoting a more harmonious and respectful workplace.

This study employs a literature-based conceptual approach, systematically reviewing existing research to construct the theoretical framework. Since this is a theoretical study, it does not involve the collection of primary data. Instead, relevant scholarly articles, empirical studies, and theoretical contributions were systematically analysed to identify key constructs and relationships that inform the conceptual model. The selection of literature was guided by established criteria, ensuring the inclusion of credible and high-impact studies from peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference proceedings. This approach allows for a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge, providing a solid foundation for the theoretical discussion while addressing gaps in workplace incivility research, particularly within the Malaysian public sector.

#### **4.0 Discussion**

Workplace incivility, although low in intensity, presents a significant challenge within organisational settings, particularly due to its subtle nature and the ambiguous intent to harm. Unlike overt forms of workplace mistreatment, such as bullying or harassment, incivility is often difficult to identify and address, yet its cumulative effects can have a profound impact on employees and organisations. This study examines how personality traits AG, NR, CS, and NA impact individuals' perceptions and experiences of workplace incivility, with a focus on the unique context of the Malaysian public service sector. The conceptual paper highlights the crucial interplay between individual personality

characteristics and workplace dynamics, identifying new avenues for intervention and policy development.

Personality traits serve as a lens through which individuals interpret and respond to workplace interactions, playing a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of incivility. High AG fosters harmonious dynamics through tolerance and cooperation, reducing conflict escalation, whereas low AG, marked by scepticism, often amplifies interpersonal tensions. NR, characterised by emotional instability, heightens sensitivity to stressors, making individuals more prone to perceive and experience incivility, perpetuating negative interactions. CS, associated with diligence and high standards, can act as a protective factor but may also increase sensitivity to minor rule violations, potentially causing friction. NA further complicates workplace dynamics, as individuals with this trait are predisposed to negative interpretations and a heightened sense of victimisation. These findings emphasise the need for targeted interventions such as emotional regulation training, interpersonal skills development, and supportive work cultures to mitigate the impact of these traits on workplace incivility.

The Victim Precipitation Theory emphasises that individual traits and behaviours can provoke or mitigate experiences of mistreatment. For instance, low AG and high NR may inadvertently invite negative responses, as these traits can be perceived as confrontational or overly sensitive by others. This theory underscores the duality of individuals as both targets and contributors to workplace dynamics, highlighting the need to address personality-driven vulnerabilities to mitigate incivility. Trait Activation Theory complements this perspective by examining how workplace environments interact with individual traits to shape behaviour. Situational triggers, such as organisational stressors or ambiguous interpersonal interactions, can activate traits like CS and NR, intensifying perceptions of incivility. High-CS employees, for example, may interpret deviations from norms more acutely, while highly neurotic individuals are prone to heightened emotional responses, reinforcing their susceptibility to incivility.

Workplace incivility in the Malaysian public service is shaped by the country's organisational culture, hierarchical structures, and bureaucratic challenges, all of which contribute to how incivility manifests and persists. The collectivist work culture in

Malaysia emphasises harmony, respect for authority, and deference to seniority, which can often lead to the suppression of grievances and the normalisation of workplace incivility. Employees may hesitate to report or confront mistreatment due to the cultural expectation of maintaining politeness and avoiding direct conflict. Additionally, Malaysia's high-power distance reinforces an environment where subordinates are less likely to challenge authority figures, allowing workplace incivility—particularly from superiors—to go unchecked. Unequal policy enforcement exacerbates this issue, as senior officials may receive leniency despite engaging in incivility, while lower-ranking employees face stricter discipline. Furthermore, power dynamics in public service create a setting where passive-aggressive behaviours, micromanagement, and exclusionary practices thrive, contributing to a toxic workplace climate. A rigid top-down decision-making structure limits employee participation, fostering resentment and dissatisfaction that may escalate into incivility.

## **5.0 Practical Implications**

From a Human Resource Development (HRD) perspective, the study's findings have significant implications. Training and development programs on emotional intelligence, interpersonal communication, and conflict resolution can equip employees with the skills needed to navigate and mitigate workplace incivility. Furthermore, organisational interventions that promote a culture of mutual respect, inclusivity, and transparency can help reduce the prevalence of uncivil behaviours. Establishing clear policies and reporting mechanisms is essential to fostering a supportive and respectful work environment.

HRD professionals are crucial in cultivating a culture of respect, inclusivity, and psychological safety. Organisational learning mechanisms, such as team-building activities, cross-departmental collaborations, and workshops on diversity and inclusion, can help reduce biases and foster mutual understanding. Continuous learning initiatives that encourage self-reflection and interpersonal skill development ensure that employees and leaders remain attuned to the importance of respect and civility. Additionally, HRD interventions should promote diverse perspectives and equitable treatment, fostering an environment where all employees feel empowered to contribute.

Assessing AG, NR, CS, and NA through personality tests can help identify employees' behavioural tendencies and align them with suitable roles. Profiling employees based on personality traits can enhance job placement, career development, and overall public service efficiency. Furthermore, these insights can inform practices to prevent uncivil behaviour, thus improving the work environment and organisational outcomes. The impact of workplace incivility extends beyond organisational boundaries, influencing employees' mental health, family dynamics, and community engagement. By addressing incivility, HRD practitioners contribute to broader societal well-being, fostering healthier work-life integration and reducing the societal costs associated with workplace stress. Promoting respect and inclusivity within organisations sets a standard for civility that can inspire positive change in other spheres of life.

To reduce workplace incivility, HRD interventions can be designed by considering personality factors such as agreeableness, neuroticism, and extraversion, which influence individual responses to workplace interactions. HRD can implement personality assessments during recruitment to identify potential risk factors for incivility and tailor interventions accordingly. For example, individuals with low agreeableness could benefit from conflict management training, while those with high neuroticism may benefit from emotional intelligence (EI) training to better manage emotions and improve interpersonal interactions. Behavioural coaching, conflict resolution programs, and personality-focused team-building exercises can help employees develop constructive responses to stress and navigate interpersonal challenges. Creating a culture of feedback where employees can share constructive input will help employees adjust their behaviour, particularly those with challenging personality traits.

These personality-driven dynamics hold particular significance in the Malaysian public service sector. The hierarchical and complex administrative structures inherent in public organisations may inadvertently foster environments where incivility can thrive. Employees operating within rigid bureaucracies often face high levels of stress and pressure, which, coupled with diverse personality traits, can exacerbate the perception and experience of uncivil behaviour. Addressing these issues is particularly critical in the public sector, as it plays a pivotal role in national socio-economic development and the delivery of essential services. By mitigating workplace incivility, public organisations

can enhance employee satisfaction, productivity, and the overall quality of service delivery.

## **6.0 Conclusion and Future Research**

Future studies are encouraged to replicate this model across different populations and industries, such as the Ministry of Health in Malaysia, where job roles involve significant public interaction. Expanding the scope to include additional personality traits, such as openness, extraversion, and locus of control, could enhance the understanding of personality influences in workplace incivility. Longitudinal studies are particularly recommended to explore the evolution of personality traits and workplace experiences over time, offering insights into dynamic coping strategies and their implications. Exploring situational factors such as leadership styles, team dynamics, and cultural values can yield a more holistic perspective on incivility. Comparative research across sectors and countries can further elucidate cultural variations in the perception and impact of incivility, informing the design of culturally sensitive interventions. Future research could explore additional mediators or moderators that influence these relationships. For example, examining the role of organisational culture, leadership styles, or job stressors as mediating or moderating factors could provide valuable insights. These variables could deepen the understanding of how and why certain dynamics influence workplace incivility, enriching the theoretical framework and HRD applications. Future research should also focus on investigating real-world workplace interactions, using experimental and longitudinal studies to assess how personality traits are activated in response to incivility. This approach would provide a stronger empirical foundation for understanding the nuanced interplay between individual differences and workplace behaviour.

Research applying Victim Precipitation Theory to directly connect personality traits with workplace incivility remains limited, highlighting the need for further investigation. There remains a lack of empirical studies examining the precise mechanisms by which these traits influence responses to workplace incivility. Further research is needed to validate the theoretical assumptions of Trait Activation Theory and

clarify the causal relationships between personality traits and workplace incivility. This study highlights the significant role of personality traits in shaping workplace dynamics, particularly in the context of incivility. This study highlights the significant impact of personality traits on shaping workplace dynamics, particularly in the context of incivility. Addressing workplace incivility, therefore, should be regarded as both an organisational and societal imperative. Fostering an organisational culture that prioritises psychological safety, mutual respect, and inclusivity can yield significant benefits in terms of employee well-being, engagement, and organisational performance. Furthermore, the impact of these efforts extends beyond organisational boundaries, contributing to broader societal harmony by reducing stress, improving work-life balance, and fostering healthier interpersonal relationships. As such, organisations that proactively address incivility can play a pivotal role in promoting social cohesion and enhancing both individual and collective well-being. By integrating theoretical insights, strategic HRD practices, and a commitment to fostering a culture of respect, organisations can create environments where employees thrive both personally and professionally.

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