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Article

Incivility in higher education: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: Incivility is an indicator of the shortfalls of nursing education. As a universal goal, academic education promotes civility and respect among scholars, working professionals, and citizens.

Objectives: This study aimed to explore the student's perception of higher education incivility and the solutions for reducing or managing it.

Methods: This descriptive-qualitative study was conducted in the nursing school of five Iranian medical universities from December 2022 to June 2023. Focus group was used to collect data. A total of 10 group discussions were conducted with 22 PhD nursing students (two discussions in each university). Data were analyzed in MAXQDA V.18 software using conventional content analysis approach.

Results: After encoding and classifying the data, three main categories were identified: "making a civil environment", "incivility cycle breaking", and "building an academic civil culture".

Conclusion: Ethical behaviors included a need for awareness, education, and identification of incivility and organizational standards, policies, and a commitment from all levels of administration to address incivility behaviors. It is important to provide students with opportunities to reflect on their own and others' behaviors to be more aware and adhere to professional values as part of human growth.

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Implications of this paper in nursing and midwifery preventive care:

- The development of an organizational culture that helps students' empowerment in promoting civil behavior can manage incivility in the academic nursing environment.
- It is important to provide students with opportunities to reflect on their own and others' behaviors to be more aware and adhere to professional values as part of human growth.
- The development of approaches to promote civil behaviors should be extended to the clinical environment as one of the important educational and professional fields of nursing practice.
- As is further evident, a multidimensional, comprehensive model of intervention is required to successfully reduce and prevent nursing students' experience of incivility.

Introduction

Education is not just about learning content such as language or math learning. Education includes learning proper academic and professional behavior. One educational purpose is to learn polite behavior or civility [1].

Civility is "genuine respect for others when voicing disagreements, disagreements, or controversies." It takes time, presence, a willingness to participate in honest discussions, and a sincere intention to seek common ground [2]. Academic incivility is defined as "distracting teachers and other students, interfering with classroom learning, discouraging teachers from teaching, discouraging other students from participating, and violating rules" [3]. Uncivil behavior includes both verbal and non-verbal behavior. Verbal such as talking with others in an unprofessional manner, interrupting or cross-talking, or making fun of others. Nonverbal behaviors include eye rolls, turning away, and hostile facial expressions [4].

In higher education, Clarke emphasizes that incivility "can be exhibited by either students or faculty members who violate norms of mutual respect in teaching and learning environments." Clark warns that feelings of fear, anger, hostility, and resentment can arise between those involved if these norms of mutual respect are not recognized and followed [5]. Researchers from

China investigated nursing students' perceptions of incivility and found it to be a significant problem that needs to be addressed [6]. The frequency of incivility behavior in high education nursing is increasing in most countries, impacting teaching and learning processes [7]. Affected students are less likely to do critical thinking and experience frustration and isolation. Students feel that their values, beliefs, and attitudes are different from other students, leading to student retention [8].

Literature indicates that students who practice civil behavior are more possibly to contribute to civility in nursing [9-11]. There is growing concern over incivility in nursing education. Additionally, there is a lack of tools to help teachers and students assess civil behavior and create appropriate environments [12]. In settings wherein incivility continues, it will become a tolerated norm identical to what takes place while bullying, harassment, and violence emerge as normalized [13].

People who experience incivility, blame themselves for their inability to manage the situation or communicate with difficult people [14]. When organizations do not address issues related to a culture of disrespect, it leads to individual and organizational dysfunction. Lack of knowledge, misunderstanding, or incorrect definition of incivility can exacerbate the consequences of rudeness and willfulness, especially in academic settings [15,16].

Incivility may result in retention among nursing students, nurses, or even faculty members [17, 18]. In an academic environment, it is considered that people are less likely to experience incivility. When this notion conflicts with practical experience in the academic community, it has devastating repercussions. A nurse who decides to continue her/his studies at university becomes disillusioned when faced with persistent disrespect, even in academia. This frustration affects many professional aspects of nursing students in training [19]. Although many studies have addressed the issue of incivility among nurses [7,20], we still need to achieve a deeper understanding of the dimensions of incivility in the nursing academic community, especially among postgraduates [21]. This study aimed to explore the student's perception of higher education incivility and the solutions for reducing or managing it.

Methods

This descriptive qualitative study was conducted in five Iranian medical universities from December 2022 to June 2023. Researchers used the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) [22] when planning and conducting the study.

Participants were 22 PhD nursing students from five Iranian medical universities that selected using the purposeful sampling method. They discussed in focus groups regarding incivility in higher education PhD nursing students who were willing to share their experiences were included in the study. Transfer from other universities to the research university was considered as an exclusion criterion for the participants.

The study used focus group discussions to collect data. A total of 10 group discussions were conducted in the nursing school of five main universities (two discussions in each university). The interview guide was the same in each group discussion. The group discussions started by asking a general and open question from participants about their experience with incivility. After the students were comfortable with the discussion climate, questions gradually turned to the theme of the study. The interviews started with a general question. Please express your distaste for incivility in your educational environment. The interview continued with additional questions. Please explain how you feel about this experience. What feedback did you give? How did you manage the situation? Interaction among the students in group discussions was encouraged with the facilitators asking probing questions to clarify answers. A third focus group was found to be unnecessary in each university as there was data saturation after the first two group interviews. Data saturation meant that new findings and codes were not added to the previous data [23]. The researchers observed participants' facial expressions and nonverbal responses and recorded field notes. Each group discussion consisted of 4-8 participants. Finally, data saturation was achieved with 3400 codes.

Transcripts of group discussions and field notes were analyzed based on Graneheim and Ludman's

(2004) conventional qualitative content analysis method [24]. Conventional content analysis uses data collected through open-ended questions to understand a phenomenon in which the knowledge is limited. In the present study, there was a need to expand the knowledge related to PhD nursing students' perspectives about incivility in the nursing higher education community and ways to manage it.

They reviewed the transcript word by word, captured key concepts, and generated codes and categories directly from the data. They named, defined, classified data and supported them with transcript excerpts (table 1). Two reviewers independently analyzed the data. As the authors reviewed and discussed the themes, it became clear that several themes overlapped so some of the themes and subthemes were merged at a more abstract level. Finally, three main categories and eight Subcategories were created. MAXQDA software V.18 was used to manage the data.

Table1: Examples of the steps in the analysis: meaning units, abstractions/codes, Subcategories and, main categories

Meaning units (Excerpts)	Codes	Subcategories	Main categories
"Conflict, incivility, and arguments are inevitable in any organization… if the conditions aren't properly managed a crisis will arise, and this crisis itself requires choosing the right leadership style…"	Improve leadership skills	Empowerment	Incivility cycle breaking
"If all the people working in a discipline adhere to work ethically, the level of incivility is less. Conscience never allows you to judge someone cruelly or to insult their character and identity."	Morality	Reducing the impact of the toxic work environment	Making civil environment

Trustworthiness was applied using the criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln, namely credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability [25]. Credibility was established using member- and peer-checking, prolonged engagement, and maximum variance of participants' selection. For instance, for member-checking, a brief report of the findings was given to two students, they were asked to ensure the researcher of the reflection of their experiences and perspectives to the analysis report. For peer-checking, two qualitative researchers approved the primary codes and categorizing process. Transferability was achieved through the provision of a rich description of data collection and analysis processes and findings, which allowed the readers to match the findings with their contexts.

Results

Each focus group lasted 60 to 80 minutes. All students had an experience of incivility that was both verbal and nonverbal. All participants revealed negative physical or emotional outcomes following the incivility experience. Physical outcomes refer to psychological symptoms such as chest pain, and fatigue or headache. Emotional outcomes pertain to psychological symptoms ranging from mild stress symptoms to major depression. Students were mainly impressed emotional responses to incivility which has been stressful for them. Many of the participants felt that the incivility experience damaged their professional relationships. As a consequence, participants shared concepts of loss of trust, distancing oneself, strained relations, and loss of confidence in interactions. They described the everyday impact of incivility on their ability to perform their tasks to the best of their abilities. The majority of reported incivility was nonverbal such as making bad gestures, not allowing discussion, leaving early, coming late, rigidity in accepting new methods, refusing to answer questions, refusing to listen or communicate, etc.

The demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic profile of the participants

Participants code	Age (year)	Sex	Year at the PhD	Having teaching experience	Type of incivility	Outcome
P 1	35	Male	3rd year	Yes	verbal	Emotional
P 2	42	Male	3rd year	Yes	nonverbal	Emotional
P 3	32	Female	4th year	No	verbal	Emotional
P 4	33	Female	3rd year	Yes	verbal	Emotional
P 5	49	Female	3rd year	No	nonverbal	Physical/emotional
P 6	29	Female	3rd year	No	nonverbal	physical
P 7	43	Female	4th year	Yes	nonverbal	Emotional
P 8	37	Male	3rd year	No	Both	Emotional
P 9	33	Female	3rd year	Yes	verbal	Emotional
P 10	42	Male	4th year	Yes	verbal	Emotional
P 11	35	Female	3rd year	No	verbal	physical
P 12	36	Female	3rd year	Yes	verbal	physical
P 13	38	Female	4th year	No	Both	Emotional
P 14	34	Female	4th year	Yes	nonverbal	Emotional
P 15	50	Female	4th year	No	nonverbal	Emotional
P 16	33	Male	3rd year	No	nonverbal	Physical/emotional
P 17	35	Female	4th year	Yes	nonverbal	Emotional
P 18	31	Male	3rd year	Yes	nonverbal	Emotional
P 19	35	Male	4th year	Yes	nonverbal	Physical/emotional
P 20	36	Female	4th year	Yes	nonverbal	Emotional
P 21	35	Male	3rd year	Yes	nonverbal	Emotional
P 22	30	Male	4th year	Yes	nonverbal	physical

Considering the purpose of the study, which was rooting and providing solutions for managing higher education incivility, proposed student solutions are divided into three main themes and eight sub-themes, including making a civil environment, incivility cycle breaking, and building a civil academic culture. Themes, sub-themes, and subcategories are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Themes, sub-themes, and subcategories

Themes	Subthemes	Subcategories
Making the civil environment	Reducing the impact of the toxic work environment	Open communication
		Change management style
		Morality
	Lateral horizontal violence rooting	Promoting teamwork culture
		Self-management
Incivility cycle breaking	Empowerment	Improve leadership skills
		Having a systemic view
	Promoting professionalism	Social awareness skills
		Self-awareness skills
		Professional Commitment
Build an academic civil culture	Proper cultural setting	Make opportunities for counseling
		Annual reassessing the level of civility
	Use of role modeling	Fulfill the promises
		Optimistic view
		Show empathy

1. Making the civil environment

Sometimes, the workplace does not positive and civil atmosphere. As human beings, when we are frustrated, hurt, or angry, our ability to use our emotional intelligence and control our behavior is often sorely challenged. Based on students'

comments and stories about making a civil environment in higher education, two main subthemes were extracted: Reducing the impact of the toxic work environment and lateral horizontal violence rooting.

1.1. Reducing the impact of the toxic work environment

Toxic work cultures negatively impact self-esteem, productivity, creativity, and spiritual health, which in turn can contribute to burnout, relational challenges, and negative health issues. In this theme, participants have mentioned that open communication, change management style, and morality can help to make a safe environment.

1.1.1. Open communication

Open communication is the key to expressing oneself and understanding others. Good communication facilitates tackling complicated behavioral and emotional issues such as hostility in the workplace.

"…when face-to-face communication is not possible, gestures and writings are misinterpreted; the meaning of the message may not be conveyed correctly and cause misunderstanding. In the presence of negativity bias, bad interpretation is more likely to happen…" (Participant 5)

1.1.2. Change management style

Successful organizations need an organizational culture of adapting to changes. The institutionalization of such a culture improves the acceptance of changes by other employees following the appointment of new managers. Senior employees help build such a culture by embracing the new management style and not being defensive about it.

"There is a possibility of change in every educational department; the previous manager replaced by a new one, with new rules and discipline. But sometimes it can be seen that there are still some fans of the previous manager and the old discipline. We need to accept the reality that any change in the system is for improvement… we are all for one…" (Participant 8)

1.1.3. Morality

The concept of morality and how to apply it in social situations is required to be taught in universities. The reason-based ethics learning helps students deeply understand the reason to be moral and how they can develop and progress morally.

"If all the people working in a discipline adhere to work ethics and conscience, the level of incivility decreases. Conscience never allows you to judge someone cruelly or to insult their character and identity." (Participant 14)

1.2. Lateral horizontal violence rooting

Although many students experience lateral violence in their educational life, few speak about it openly. This is necessary that clearly define lateral horizontal violence for all faculties and students. They need to learn about the actions and consequences, and resources help to handle horizontal violence. Participants indicated that promoting teamwork culture, and self-management are good solutions to reduce horizontal violence and, consequently, incivility in higher education.

1.2.1. Promoting teamwork culture

Participants believed they were an educational team, and a healthy team provides benefits for the individual, the organization, and society. In a teamwork environment, people understand and believe that thinking, planning, decisions, and actions are better when done cooperatively.

"Everyone got used to working alone, when we are in a team, being alone makes no sense. It causes challenges and ultimately impoliteness towards other team members." (Participant 9)

1.2.2. Self-management

Self-management means taking responsibility for your actions and doing things as well as you can. Self-management skills are those abilities that allow individuals to feel more productive when doing daily routines regardless of the working environment. Well-developed self-management skills will help you efficiently communicate with others, make the right decisions, plan working time, and stay healthy. Participants believed that having self-management skills is essential for preventing the incidence of incivility in the educational environment.

"There is never a one-sided fault in any discussion. When I learn to manage my feelings, other people's impoliteness cannot create stress for me… the negative stress which leads me to continue impoliteness…" (Participant 1)

2. Incivility cycle breaking

Incivility may have a cyclical nature. Preventing the formation of such a cycle is effective in managing incivility. From the perspective of participants, the vicious cycle can be managed in these ways: empowerment and promoting professionalism.

2.1. Empowerment

An empowered individual is said to have the skills and knowledge to act on a complicated situation or even improve it positively. It derives from

feeling qualified and capable of performing the work.

2.1.1. Improve leadership skills

Leadership is a critical aspect of all social endeavors. Academic leadership skills can be learned. It is helpful to teach these skills to all faculty members and students in the form of specialized courses. Empowered leaders with great skills can provide appropriate strategies for preventing incivility.

"Conflict, incivility, and arguments are inevitable in any organization, if the conditions are not properly managed, a crisis will arise, and this crisis itself requires choosing the right leadership style." (Participant 21)

2.1.2. Having a systemic view

Similar to managing errors and problems, the systemic view is also an important and primary solution for finding the root of impoliteness.

"If instead of focusing on the rude person, we focus on finding the systemic-based reason, we'll achieve the desired goal faster." (Participant 18)

2.2. Promoting professionalism

Exhibiting professional behavior is not simple. Workplace professionalism is about improving responsibility, knowledge, standards, and ethics.

2.2.1. Social awareness skills

Social awareness gives you the ability to understand and respond to the needs and expectations of others.

"We must learn to care about the needs of others and put ourselves in their place and see what we would do if it were us." (Participant 14)

2.2.2. Self-awareness skills

Throughout the process of collaborating, individuals learn their feelings, thoughts, and actions. Then, they practice ways to properly identify and express their feelings.

"From our religious point of view, self-awareness is the best knowledge. When you know yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, you can manage the situation better." (Participant 12)

2.2.3. Professional Commitment

Professional commitment refers to committed individuals who believe in the goals and values of their careers. Committed professionals are inclined to show significant efforts in professional activities and are proud of their careers.

"Impoliteness in the professional nursing environment can be a sign of distorted professional commitment… a person who has a high professional commitment adheres to the values of the profession." (Participant 9)

3. Build an academic civil culture

Creating an academic civil culture in the organization is effective in defining and preventing incivility. Culture has five basic characteristics: It is learned, shared, based on symbols, integrated, and dynamic. Hence, in higher education, civil culture must be defined and taught.

3.1. Proper cultural setting

Each organization and its members should keep in mind that change is not easy for humans. To approach the change process central themes are the three Ps: peace, patience, and perception. This understanding leads us to build culturally competent organizations.

3.1.1. Make opportunities for counseling

The counseling process is about providing a sounding board for students, giving them a safe place to talk about issues, and allowing counselors to help them find their solutions to manage issues. It is not about giving advice, but about providing a non-judgmental, empathic, and accessible means to allow them to find a way forward.

"Having opportunities for counseling about established behaviors… so, that it is unbiased or without advice, can help in resolving the conflict between the two parties." (Participant 4)

3.1.2. Annual reassessing the level of civility

When incivility and reported behaviors are analyzed annually, there is a possibility to provide a solution.

"Examining the system's offices in terms of compliance with ethical standards and behavior analysis gives the system the readiness to periodically hold training workshops or provide individual counseling to resolve these conflicts." (Participant 1)

3.2. Use of role modeling

The faculty members and authorities have an important role to play in reducing incivility and creating a good workplace culture. If their behavior is uncivil, then many students may follow their lead.

3.2.1. Fulfill the promises

According to the experiences of the participants, one of the factors that cause incivility in the educational environment is a lack of commitment to promises. Adherence to the promise is effective in reducing conflict and incivility.

"When a promise is made to do something on a certain date, we must be faithful to that promise. This is respecting people's personality." (Participant 7)

3.2.2. Optimistic view

An optimistic view towards others and expressing it leads to improving their self-esteem and helping them to be happier.

"Having a positive feeling towards people can be spreading... That is, everyone learns from each other to be positive and convey this positive feeling to each other..." (P19)

3.2.3. Show empathy

Empathy is the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

"As human beings, we may have a common language to share ideas but may lack the ability to sympathize… lack of empathy reduces our ability to understand each other's feelings." (Participant 16)

Discussion

Our study aimed to determine the following: the situations in which nursing students confronted incivility during their course, the type of incivility they confronted, and the way their behaviors and feelings were influenced following this experience as well as their solutions for reducing or managing incivility.

The incidence rate of verbal or nonverbal incivility in higher education was high, suggesting they lack effective management for rudeness behaviors. The results of other studies in this field also showed that students mainly have experienced emotional outcomes following facing incivility. This shows that postgraduate nursing students have poor stress management skills and difficulty in communicating and expressing their feelings. Without adequate coping skills to address incivility and following consequences, students may experience impaired physical and mental health. High levels of stress can also negatively impact a student's physical health. Researchers have found that nursing students with high levels of stress may experience fatigue, headaches, and backaches [7,26].

When incivility has gone unaddressed over time and becomes a cultural workplace norm [15], it is defined as a toxic workplace. In such environments, productivity is often stifled, morale is low, and retention becomes a problem [27]. Clark's study (2019), also showed that workshops can engage team members in a conversation help develop civility contracts and establish norms for behaviors [5].

Empowerment has also been noted as a strategy to promote a civil educational environment. Shanta and Eliason (2014) described empowerment as providing the resources necessary to promote the ability and effectiveness to reach personal and communal goals. Four components of empowerment were discussed in focus groups including clear and accurate sharing of information (communication), mutual respect and meaningful relationships (collegiality), possessing or granting others authority to function independently (autonomy), and assuming responsibility for actions and outcomes of one's behavior (accountability). The interaction of the components helps achieve and maintain civility [28].

According to the results, the ability to solve problems and think critically, along with the possession of "soft skills", is essential for the workplace today and in the future [29]. Song et al (2020), also concluded that by conducting a study on students Promoting Professionalism has been suggested to reduce incivility in higher education. Socialization is a key component of one's acceptance of a professional role. Although nurses in higher education are prepared for a variety of professional responsibilities, little attention is paid to the acquisition of values, behaviors, and attitudes necessary to attain these professional roles [30].

The environment and culture of higher education and nursing faculties are the basis through which students develop professional identities as nurses or nurse educators [31]. Clark suggested several policies and procedures needed to create a culture of civility by encouraging personal responsibility, improving teaching methodologies, and improving the quality of faculty and students [5]. In addition, faculty members, clinical instructors, and students should be held accountable and assume responsibility for conducting themselves in a professional, respectful, and civil manner. An organizational unit's shared commitment to a culture of civility is essential. Another measure to help provide skills to deal with incivility includes cognitive rehearsal, an intervention that allows individuals to acquire the skill set necessary to address incivility in a safe environment through role-playing.

In their study in this field, Sharifi et al. (2019), showed that culturally competent nursing

education is defined as the process of applying teaching-learning methods that value nursing student diversity. This process commences with a need assessment of the learner in different aspects of curriculum, class considerations, student interactions, and culturally appropriate policies and procedures [32].

The use of faculty as role models is an effective strategy for enhancing the culture of civility. Bayer and Braxton (2004) discussed that faculty members need to have a code of conduct that reflects professional behavior in the classroom and institute integrity committees [33]. Other strategies mentioned in the literature include faculty having good communication skills and the institution having a clear grievance process [34]. Reassessing the level of civility each year may allow the faculty to know whether interventions are having their desired effect and demonstrate the school of nursing's continued commitment to promoting a culture of civility. Nurse educators are required to set the standard by modeling civility and promoting open and clear communication with students and colleagues.

While literature supports these actions as noted above, many comments also supported them within this study. Comments included the need for clear expectations in the classroom, faculty role modeling of appropriate behavior, and the need for the administration to uphold policies that outline civil action. All these strategies hinge on a campus culture committed to open discussion of incivility, committed faculty, staff, and students to create and maintain a civil culture, and an administration supportive of the culture [35].

The most important limitation of this study was the investigation of incivility in higher education from the perspective of students. It is recommended to use the experiences of nursing professors in further studies.

Conclusion

In higher education, the extent to which a student is motivated to learn is an important component of academic success .Participants described that they mainly have experienced emotional outcomes following facing incivility. Creating a positive learning environment would help students' professional quality of caring relationships and ethical behaviors. Ethical behaviors included a need for awareness, education, and identification of incivility and organizational standards, policies, and a commitment from all levels of administration to address incivility behaviors.

Ethical Consideration

The project was approved by the institutional review board of the Tehran University of Medical Science with which the second author was affiliated (approval code**:** 95-03-28-32764-232674).

All participants had a full explanation of the study, both in writing and verbally. They signed the consent form and permitted their interview to be recorded. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty; their identities were protected, and all information provided was held in confidence.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Authors' contributions

M. Sepehrinia and M. Shali contributed in designing the study, M. Shali collected the data, which was analyzed by A. vaezi, the final report and article were written by M. Sepehrinia and it was read and approved by all the authors.

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