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**Cultural Variation in Individuals' Responses to Incivility by Perpetrators of Different Rank: The Mediating Role of Descriptive and Injunctive Norms**

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### Abstract

The present research sought to establish how cultural settings create a normative context that determines individuals' reactions to subtle forms of mistreatment. Two experimental studies ( $n = 449$ ) examined individuals' perceptions of high- and low-ranking individuals' incivility in two national (Study 1) and two organizational (Study 2) cultural settings that varied in power distance. Consistent across studies, the uncivil actions of a high-ranking perpetrator were deemed more acceptable than the uncivil actions of a low-ranking perpetrator in the large power distance cultural settings, but not in a small power distance cultural setting. Differing injunctive norms (acceptability), but not descriptive norms (perceived likelihood of occurrence), contributed to cultural variations in the level of discomfort caused by incivility. In addition, perceptions of descriptive and injunctive norms coincided, but differed markedly in their associations with discomfort. We discuss the practical and theoretical implications of these findings.

*Keywords:* incivility, norms, power, culture, hierarchy

Cultural Variation in Individuals' Responses to Incivility by Perpetrators of Different Rank:  
The Mediating Role of Descriptive and Injunctive Norms

A rare faux-pas by Queen Elizabeth II made the headlines in 2016 when her Majesty was inadvertently caught on camera siding with Lucy D'Orsi, who had been the police officer in charge of operations during a state visit of Chinese officials. In the video, Ms D'Orsi is quick to point out how the behavior of the officials had been "very rude" and created what she felt was a "testing time". News outlets interpreted the fact that Ms D'Orsi seemingly jumped at the opportunity to raise the incident seven months after the state visit as a sign that it had been a very painful experience (Dejevsky, 2016). In the present research, we ask the question if Ms D'Orsi's reactions could, at least in part, be explained by cultural variations in people's perceptions of mistreatment by individuals with different ranks. In particular, we propose that in contexts with large power distance such as China, but not in contexts with a small power distance such as the UK (where Ms D'Orsi is based), people find it more acceptable, and consequently less discomforting, when a senior person (such as a state official) acts in a rude and uncivil manner compared to a junior person. As the example of the Chinese state visit shows, examining how culture and hierarchical relations jointly impact people's perceptions of, and reactions to, rude and uncivil behavior is important and may help counter cultural 'clashes'. Below, we first discuss how hierarchies are linked to mistreatment, followed by a discussion of the role of norms and culture in shaping individuals' responses to mistreatment by high- and low-ranking perpetrators.

### **How Rank is Linked to Mistreating Others**

Mistreatment is more frequently directed downwards than horizontally or upwards (e.g., Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), and this holds both in Western and East Asian cultures (Lim & Lee, 2011; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000; Torelli & Shavitt,

2010). Several factors may contribute to the hierarchical patterning of mistreatment. Echoing Kipnis' (1972) earlier work on the corrupting effects of power, studies indicate that having the ability to control others' outcomes and resources (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007) can foster cheating, deceiving, discrimination, and disrespectful behavior in interpersonal encounters (e.g., DePaulo & Friedman, 1998; Fiske, 1993; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010; Olekalns, Horan, & Smith, 2014; Yap, Wazlawek, Lucas, Cuddy, & Carney, 2013). Similar effects have been obtained for high socio-economic status, which appears to be equally detrimental to individuals' conduct (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012). Power may foster undesirable behavior because power frees individuals from the shackles of rules and obligations (Bowles & Gelfand, 2010; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008), spurring the widespread assumption that powerholders do not face any negative consequences for their misbehaviors (Mondillon et al., 2005; Pearson & Porath, 2005).

### **How Norms May Affect People's Reactions to High- and Low-ranking Perpetrators**

Being the target of someone else's transgressions is unpleasant (e.g., Porath & Pearson, 2012, 2013). At the same time, norms should affect how negatively people experience low- and high-ranking individuals' mistreatments. The widespread belief that high-ranking individuals behave badly—a *descriptive* norm related to people's *actual* behaviors that influences perceivers consciously and unconsciously (e.g., Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993)—may increase the chances that (descriptively counter-normative) acts of incivility by a *low*-ranking individual are brushed aside as an isolated event or attributed to external circumstances (e.g., “must be having a very bad day”). Individuals may also be more attuned to the more (descriptively normative) uncivil acts of a *high*-ranking individual, which could also sway the interpretation of more ambiguous actions

(e.g., “what should I make of this behavior?”), akin to a priming effect. For example, Herr (1986) observed that perceivers who had been primed with obnoxious exemplars were more likely to interpret subsequent ambiguous behaviors as hostile. In this view, descriptive norms may have a *sensitizing* effect and elicit more negative feelings amongst victims when exposed to the rude or uncivil behavior of high compared to low ranking perpetrators.

On the other hand, it is also conceivable that people learn to put up with bad behavior that is descriptively normative as a means of coping with what may be perceived to be uncontrollable events (cf. Porath & Pearson, 2012). Such a *blunting* effect would be broadly consistent with studies that show that in organizational settings individuals are inclined to confront mistreatments by lower ranking perpetrators, but tend to avoid confrontations with higher ranking perpetrators (Porath, Overbeck, & Pearson, 2008). It also aligns with some studies on the physiological correlates of anxiety and depression, which show that prolonged episodes of discomfort can lead to physiological blunting (see Phillips, Ginty, & Hughes, 2013, for an overview). Thus, descriptive norms for the hierarchical patterning of bad behavior could mean that (descriptively counter-normative) mistreatments of low-ranking perpetrators elicit more negative feelings than (descriptively normative) mistreatments of high-ranking perpetrators.

By definition, mistreating others implies a lack of regard and a violation of (injunctive) norms for mutual respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Thus, *injunctive norms* related to how others *ought* to behave and what actions are deemed appropriate should also determine how negative people feel when being mistreated (Bendor & Swistak, 2001; Cialdini et al., 1990; Reno et al., 1993). The more a person’s actions are seen to violate injunctive norms, the more people should experience the incident as unpleasant (see also Costa-Lopes, Dovidio, Pereira, & Jost, 2013).

Research with Anglo-American participants that examined whether people perceive

mistreatments by high-ranking individuals to be more or less injunctive than mistreatments by low-ranking individuals has yielded largely mixed results so far. Some studies indicate that misbehavior or uncivil behaviors displayed by high- (vs. low-) ranking perpetrators can be viewed more negatively, perceived to be more unjust, and are associated with lower lenience and higher propensity to punish (Bowles & Gelfand, 2010; Caza & Cortina, 2007; Cortina & Magley, 2009; Pearson et al., 2000). Such a pattern would be consistent with the view that people expect high-ranking individuals to set an example for others (Bauman, Tost, & Ong, 2016). However, other studies indicate that uncivil behavior displayed by high- (vs. low-) ranking perpetrators is also seen as more legitimate (Chekroun & Brauer, 2002; Porath et al., 2008), and high-ranking perpetrators are evaluated more positively than low-ranking perpetrators as long as their transgressions are not seen to reflect self-interest (Abrams, Randsley de Moura, & Travaglino, 2013). In terms of affective outcomes, research has demonstrated that interacting with expectancy-violating partners can elicit cardiovascular responses associated with a state of threat (Berry Mendes, Blascovich, Hunter, Lickel, & Jost, 2007). Similarly, violation of injunctive norms has been associated with negative feelings (e.g., Ekman, 2004), consistent with the more general tendency of individuals to experience discomfort when expectations are violated (e.g., Topolinski & Strack, 2015).

In sum, people have greater expectations to be mistreated by high-ranking as opposed to low-ranking individuals, but it is unclear whether these descriptive norms have a *blunting* or a *sensitizing* effect (or no effect) on how much discomfort people experience when they are confronted with low- and high-ranking individuals' incivility. Predictions for the association between injunctive norms and people's experiences of discomfort are more straightforward, but we do not know if injunctive norms for high- and low-ranking perpetrators differ.

### **How Norms Related to High -and Low-Ranking Perpetrators May Differ Between Cultures**

Comparative research examining responses to perpetrators at different rank is scarce, but existing evidence points to important cultural variations. For example, compared to Americans, Chinese find insults by a high-status person directed at a subordinate more legitimate, and the insulter more likeable (Bond, Wan, Leung, & Giacalone, 1985). Similarly, Japanese perceive the expression of anger towards individuals with a position of lower power to be more acceptable than Americans do (Matsumoto, 1990). In line with this, a study examining the acceptability of workplace bullying in a sample of 14 cultural groups found that members of Confucian Asian countries find work-related bullying to be more acceptable than members of Anglo, Latin American, and Sub-Saharan African cultures, and physically intimidating bullying to be more acceptable than members of Anglo and Latin American cultures (Power et al., 2013).

Tepper (2007) surmised that in countries with a larger power distance it would be more common and more normative for power holders to treat subordinates badly (see Tyler, Lind, & Huo, 2000). Power distance describes the extent to which hierarchical differences and unequal power distributions are legitimized or accepted in a society (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Members of cultures with a large power distance, including East Asian cultures, value respect and obedience, deference to authority and conformity, and they accept and reinforce power imbalances. In contrast, members of cultures with a small power distance, including Western cultures value egalitarianism and independence (e.g., Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Tyler et al., 2000; Johnson, Kulesa, Cho, & Shavitt, 2005). Furthermore, compared to members of small power distance cultures, members of large power distance cultures are expected to obey and respect higher-ranking individuals, who do not consult lower-ranking individuals in decision-

making (Hofstede, 1980, 2001).

Several correlational studies conducted in either Western or East Asian cultural settings indicate that large power distance buffers against the negative impact of downward abuse in organizational hierarchies, suggesting that cultural norms affect individuals' psychological responses to being the target of mistreatment (Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012; Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2013; Liu, Yang, & Nauta, 2013; Wang, Mao, Wu, & Liu, 2012; but see Kernan, Watson, Fang Chen, & Gyu Kim, 2011). Importantly, these studies examined power distance within the *same* cultural context, for example by studying Chinese participants only, without a comparative framework. In a recent extension, Vogel and colleagues (2015) reported a cross-cultural examination of abusive supervision, showing that subordinates respond more negatively to abusive supervisors in Anglo (Australia and US) countries than in East Asian countries (Singapore and Taiwan).

### **Unanswered Questions**

Cultural prescriptions encompass expectations for high- *and* low-ranking individuals. Moreover, in many ways, cultural prescriptions for low-ranking individuals, such as the need to show respect or to preserve the dignity of those of higher rank, are equally if not more important in shaping hierarchical relations and interpersonal behaviors. There is a need for studies examining both high- *and* low-ranking perpetrators *across* cultures in order to gain a more complete understanding of how hierarchies shape individuals' responses to mistreatment.

Importantly, previous studies only provided indirect evidence for the role of normative considerations as a mechanism that creates variations in individuals' responses to the mistreatment of high- and low-ranking individuals. In particular, previous studies focused on constructs such as *legitimacy* (Porath et al., 2008) and *fairness* (Lian et al., 2012; Vogel et

al., 2015; Wang et al., 2012), which can be subsumed under the more general umbrella of *injunctive norms*, which may underpin cultural variations in individuals' responses to high- and low-ranking perpetrators (Costa-Lopes et al., 2013; Kay et al., 2009). Crucially, previous research did not distinguish between descriptive and injunctive norms. This is problematic as the two constructs are correlated and yet distinct (e.g., Eriksson, Strimling, & Coultas, 2015), and, as discussed earlier, could have similar effects on individuals' responses to mistreatment if descriptive norms blunt individuals' responses, or indeed opposing effects if descriptive norms lead to greater sensitization.

### **The Present Studies**

In the present research, we sought establish for the first time the independent contributions of descriptive and injunctive norms to the hierarchical patterning of individuals' experiences of mistreatment in different cultural settings (see Figure 1, for a summary; see also Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015). We focus in individuals' responses to incivility, which is a subtle form of mistreatment that entails deviant behaviors that violate workplace norms for mutual respect and are somewhat ambiguous in intent (see Andersson & Pearson, 1999). In the studies reported below, we adopted an experimental approach using scenario-based vignettes, thereby responding to a call for further experimental evidence to supplement and extend correlational data derived from surveys examining issues surrounding mistreatment in organizations (see Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016). Our decision to focus on subtler forms of mistreatment was guided by the dearth of cross-cultural studies examining perceptions of incivility, and by the prevalence of incivility across cultures (see Schilpzand et al., 2016), which makes it paramount to understand the potential consequences of incivility for individuals and organizations in a globalized world. We build on the evidence summarized above and examine the extent to which individuals in a small and a large power

distance context find incivility by senior or junior individuals discomfoting and examine potential mediators of the observed cultural differences.

The present studies were conducted with samples of White British and Korean individuals because these cultural groups have been previously shown to differ in the cultural dimension of power distance (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House et al., 2004) and the cultural value of hierarchy (Schwartz, 1999), indicating that Koreans' interactions are more strongly governed by individuals' hierarchical standing compared to Western cultural counterparts. The cultural orientation exhibited by members of the Korean culture has also been discussed as representing vertical collectivism, which emphasizes deference to authority and preservation of harmony in the context of hierarchical relations (Shavitt, Torelli, & Riemer, 2011). Since there are limitations in the extent to which differences between two cultural contexts can be attributed to variations in power distance (Study 1), in Study 2 we use vignettes to manipulate power distance directly at the level of organizations. In so doing, we seek to provide converging evidence for the causal role of power distance as a factor that can shape individuals' responses to low and high ranking perpetrators.

In the present studies, we examine the level of discomfort caused by a more senior versus a more junior individual's incivility. We define discomfort as an unpleasant subjective state. As such, discomfort constitutes an ideal primary outcome because it provides a good indicator of how people experience being mistreated, perhaps more so than behavioral outcomes (e.g., avoidance; retaliation) that are influenced by other downstream processes (e.g., self-advancement motives). It is worth noting that strong manifestations of discomfort (akin to stress and anxiety) are implicated in many if not all of the detrimental outcomes of subtle and blatant mistreatment at the workplace, including absenteeism, loss of productivity, or turnover, to name a few examples (e.g., Hoel, Einarsen, & Cooper, 2003; Laschinger, Leiter, Day, & Gilin, 2009; Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Montero-Marín et al., 2013;

Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2001). Thus, by examining discomfort as a primary outcome, the present studies can provide an impetus for further research into these related constructs.

### **Study 1**

In Study 1 we examined Korean and British participants' perceptions of incivility by lower- and higher-ranking individuals. Participants read and responded to a vignette that involved participants having to decline a request by someone who subsequently exhibits uncivil behaviors, and we measured much discomfort the behaviors caused. To ensure that our findings are generalizable and not idiosyncratic to a particular type of uncivil behavior (see Wells & Windschitl, 1999), we probed individuals' responses to a wide range of behaviors (see Appendix A), adopting a measure from Moon and Han (2013). This measure had appeal as it incorporated many behaviors used in previous (scenario-based) studies on incivility (see Porath & Erez, 2007; Porath et al., 2008) and several items used in measures designed to assess perceptions of incivility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), ensuring that the uncivil behaviors depicted had face validity in both Western and East Asian samples. Finally, we examined injunctive norms (acceptability of the behavior) and descriptive norms (perceived likelihood of occurrence of the behavior) as two pathways mediating cultural variations in individuals' reactions to high- and low-ranking perpetrators (see Figure 1).

### **Method**

#### **Participants and Design**

The sample consisted of 97 British students from a university in the UK who identified themselves as White British (79 women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.53$ ,  $SD = 4.74$ ) and 109 Korean students from a university in Korea (71 women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.60$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ) who self-identified as Korean. Participants received either course credit or a small financial incentive (£2) in

exchange for their participation. All participants were randomly assigned to one of two hierarchical relationship conditions (perpetrator position: junior vs. senior).

### **Procedure and Materials**

Participants took part in what was described as a study on managing relationships. Upon arrival in the laboratory, participants were seated in front of individual computers in cubicles (UK) or apart from each other in a large computer room (Korea). The presentation of all materials was controlled by computer software. Next, participants read one of two imaginary scenarios involving either a person occupying a junior (lower rank) or a senior (higher rank) position (relative to themselves) putting forward a request. The scenario was accompanied by a visual ladder to provide an illustration of the hierarchical relationship between the participant and the requester, who was depicted as equidistantly lower or higher on the ladder (see Figure 2). The imaginary scenario read as follows [wording in the senior (higher rank) condition in parentheses]:

Please imagine that you received an email from a person who knows you well and is of the same sex as you. This person occupies a junior [senior] role in comparison to you. The ladder below illustrates society. Lower steps imply a lower position in society, and higher steps imply a higher position. You can see the junior [senior] person's position compared to yours. In her/his email, s/he asks you to write a character reference letter for her/him. However, you are very busy due to a group project and an essay, so you attempt to decline her/his request.

In line with a recent research (Porath & Pearson, 2012), the gender of the requester depicted in the scenario was matched with the gender of each participant because individuals' responses to mistreatment may be affected by gender (Aquino & Douglas, 2003). After reading the scenario, participants were asked to write an email in which they declined the request. Following the completion of the email task, two manipulation check items probed

participants' impressions of relative rank vis-à-vis the requester (1 = *has much less power and influence than me* to 7 = *has much more power and influence than me* and 1 = *enjoys much less status and respect than me* to 7 = *enjoys much more status and respect than me*;  $r_{UK} = .77, p < .001$ ;  $r_{KOR} = .89, p < .001$ ). After the manipulation check, participants indicated how negative they would feel in response to a series of 18 hypothetical uncivil behaviors displayed by the more junior [senior] person whose request they had declined (e.g., '*Not returning my greeting*', '*Gossiping and criticizing me behind my back*'; 1 = *little discomfort* to 7 = *great discomfort*;  $\alpha_{UK} = .93, \alpha_{KOR} = .92$ ) (see Appendix A). This measure of discomfort was compiled in Korean and translated into English following guidelines by Brislin (1986). To measure *injunctive norms*, participants indicated how acceptable each of the uncivil behaviors was using a 7-point scale (1 = *completely unacceptable* to 7 = *perfectly acceptable*;  $\alpha_{UK} = .90, \alpha_{KOR} = .94$ ). The order of the discomfort and injunctive norms items was counterbalanced. Participants also indicated their perceptions of *descriptive norms* on two items that read '*How common is it that a junior [senior] person would behave in the ways described above after their request was declined by a senior [junior] person?*' (1 = *not very common at all* to 7 = *extremely common*), and '*How likely is it to witness people in a junior [senior] position acting in the ways described above after their request was declined by a senior [junior] person?*' (1 = *not very likely at all* to 7 = *to extremely likely*;  $r_{UK} = .65, p < .001$ ;  $r_{KOR} = .75, p < .001$ ). The two measures of injunctive and descriptive norms followed the example of similar measures employed in the health domain (e.g., Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004; Lee, Geisner, Lewis, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2007). At the end, and after having provided further information on their cultural and demographic background, participants were thanked and debriefed.<sup>1</sup>

## Results and Discussion

To examine construct equivalence of the measure of discomfort across the two cultural groups (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997), we computed Tucker's phi coefficients to quantify the degree of factorial agreement between cultures. Tucker's phi coefficient was above .98, indicating that a good cross-cultural equivalence of the 18 discomfort items (Lorenzo-Seva & Berge, 2006).

### Manipulation Check

We submitted the averaged index of perceived rank to a 2 (cultural group: British vs. Korean) x 2 (perpetrator position: junior vs. senior) analysis of variance. The results confirmed that the perpetrator with a junior position ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = .90$ ) was perceived to have a lower rank than the perpetrator with a senior position ( $M = 5.21$ ,  $SD = .92$ ),  $F(1, 202) = 230.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .53$ . The main effect of cultural group and the interaction effect were not significant,  $F(1, 202) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .171$  and  $F(1, 202) = 1.67$ ,  $p = .198$ , respectively. Thus, the manipulation worked as expected.

### Responses to Incivility

**Discomfort.** We repeated the analysis described above with the average of participants' discomfort ratings in response to the uncivility scenarios as the dependent measure. The results revealed significant main effects of cultural group,  $F(1, 202) = 27.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .12$ , and perpetrator position,  $F(1, 202) = 4.92$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ , which were qualified by a significant interaction,  $F(1, 202) = 5.51$ ,  $p = .020$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ . An examination of simple effects revealed that Korean participants experienced greater discomfort when they imagined being confronted with uncivil behaviors displayed by someone junior compared to someone senior ( $M_s = 5.72$  vs. 5.16,  $SD_s = .76$  vs. .83),  $F(1, 202) = 11.07$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . In contrast, British participants did not draw a distinction between junior and senior perpetrators ( $M_s = 4.78$  vs. 4.79,  $SD_s = .95$  vs. 1.02, respectively),  $F < 1$ .<sup>2</sup> Thus, as predicted

Koreans appeared to be more strongly affected by hierarchical relations in their responses to incivility when compared to their British counterparts.

**Injunctive norms.** We repeated the previous analysis using an average score of acceptability of the uncivil behavior as the dependent measure. The analysis yielded a marginally significant main effect of culture,  $F(1, 202) = 3.37, p = .068, \eta_p^2 = .02$ , and a significant main effect of perpetrator position,  $F(1, 202) = 13.54, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ , which were qualified by a significant interaction,  $F(1, 202) = 15.34, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$  (see Figure 3a). Further analyses revealed that Korean participants found that incivility exhibited by someone in a senior position was more acceptable than incivility exhibited by someone in a junior position ( $M_s = 3.44$  vs.  $2.53, SD_s = 1.02$  vs.  $.81$ ),  $F(1, 202) = 30.63, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .13$ . In contrast, British participants responded to incivility with equal disapproval regardless of the rank of the perpetrator ( $M_s = 2.75$  vs.  $2.78, SD_s = .86$  vs.  $.69$ ),  $F < 1$ .<sup>3</sup>

**Descriptive norms.** We also examined people's expectations of how common or likely it is to witness low and high ranking individuals act in an uncivil manner (perceived likelihood of occurrence). There was a significant main effect of cultural group,  $F(1, 202) = 16.47, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$ , qualified by a significant interaction with perpetrator position,  $F(1, 202) = 4.75, p = .031, \eta_p^2 = .02$  (see Figure 3b). Korean participants felt that individuals in senior positions ( $M = 5.13, SD = 1.07$ ) displayed uncivil behaviors more often than individuals in junior positions ( $M = 3.41, SD = 1.51$ ),  $F(1, 202) = 46.23, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$ . British participants echoed this view; the discrepancy in perceived likelihood judgments between senior and junior perpetrators was significant, but somewhat less pronounced in this sample ( $M_s = 3.98$  vs.  $3.06, SD_s = 1.40$  vs.  $1.26$ , respectively),  $F(1, 202) = 11.69, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . Overall, perpetrator position exerted a strong main effect ( $M_{\text{junior}} = 3.25, SD_{\text{junior}} = 1.40; M_{\text{senior}} = 4.58, SD_{\text{senior}} = 1.36$ ),  $F(1, 202) = 51.16, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .20$ .

In sum, across cultures, incivility by a high-ranking individual was perceived to be more common (descriptive norm) than incivility by a low-ranking individual. Koreans found it not only more likely, but also more acceptable to be exposed to incivility exhibited by a high-ranking perpetrator compared to a low-ranking perpetrator. In contrast, British participants felt it was more likely, albeit not more acceptable, to witness a high-ranking individual being rude and discourteous compared to a low-ranking individual.

### **Mediation Analysis**

The previous analyses established cross-cultural differences in how incivility of low and high ranking individuals was judged on normative dimensions (acceptability and perceived likelihood of occurrence). To see if these norms can account for differences in the way British and Korean participants experience incivility by senior versus junior perpetrators, we performed a mediated moderation analysis following the procedure outlined in Hayes (2013, Model 8). Perpetrator position served as a predictor variable (IV: coded 0 = junior, 1 = senior), and perceived discomfort served as outcome variable (DV). In our model, the two indices denoting injunctive (acceptability) and descriptive (perceived likelihood of occurrence) norms served as mediating variables, whilst cultural group (coded 0 = UK, 1 = Korea) moderated the relationship between the IV and the DV, and the IV and the mediators (see Figure 4a). All continuous variables were standardized prior to analysis in order to obtain standardized coefficients (see Friedrich, 1982). We generated 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals using 10000 bootstrap samples.

Controlling for the mediators, the interaction between culture and perpetrator position was no longer significant ( $B = -.07$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.49$  to  $.34$  vs.  $B = -.60$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -1.11$  vs.  $-.10$ ), while both acceptability and perceived likelihood of occurrence emerged as reliable predictors of discomfort,  $B = -.61$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.72$  to  $-.51$  and  $B = .18$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = .06$  to  $.30$ , respectively. To further inspect this mediated moderation, we

proceeded to examine the mediating role of descriptive and injunctive norms separately for the two cultures. In the British sample, perpetrator position had a small indirect effect on discomfort via perceived likelihood of occurrence,  $B = .11$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = .03$  to  $.25$ , but no effect via perceived acceptability,  $B = .02$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.19$  to  $.23$ . This suggests that in the British sample the greater perceived prevalence of incivility amongst high (vs. low) ranking individuals translated into somewhat greater discomfort. In the Korean sample, perpetrator position also had a relatively small indirect effect on discomfort via perceived likelihood of occurrence,  $B = .20$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = .07$  to  $.37$ . The direction of this effect indicates that, controlling for acceptability, the greater perceived likelihood of incivility exhibited by high (vs. low) ranking individuals translated into somewhat greater discomfort in the Korean sample, similarly to the British sample. However, unlike in the British sample, in the Korean sample the small (positive) indirect effect of perceived likelihood of occurrence was negated by a large (negative) indirect effect of perpetrator position via perceived acceptability,  $B = -.61$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.88$  to  $-.36$ . Thus, Korean participants experienced less discomfort when confronted with the uncivil behavior of a high-ranking person compared to the uncivil behavior of a low-ranking person because the former was perceived to be more acceptable than the latter. To sum up, differences in injunctive norms fully mediated the interaction between culture and perpetrator position.

## **Discussion**

Study 1 provides evidence that the relative rank of a hypothetical person led to different responses in Korean and British participants when faced with incivility. Korean participants experienced less discomfort when they imagined being confronted with uncivil actions of a higher-ranking person compared to a lower-ranking person. In contrast, British participants reported similar levels of discomfort in relation to low and high-ranking individuals' uncivil behaviors.

Furthermore, we were able to confirm that these observed cultural differences can be explained by injunctive (acceptability of incivility) norms, which fully mediated the interaction between cultural group and perpetrator position. Korean participants, but not British participants, felt it was more acceptable for someone in a high-ranking position to exhibit incivility than it was for someone in a low-ranking position; as a result, they experienced less discomfort in the face of uncivil behaviors displayed by a high ranking perpetrator compared to a low ranking perpetrator. Furthermore, we found that variations in descriptive norms (perceived likelihood of occurrence) did not explain cultural differences in participants' responses to low- and high-ranking individuals' incivility. Instead, both British and Korean participants indicated that high ranking individuals were more likely than low ranking individuals to act in an uncivil manner, and this was associated with an increase in discomfort in both cultural groups. This latter result is noteworthy and suggests that descriptive norms had a *sensitizing* effect and exacerbated individuals' feelings of discomfort when being treated in a rude or uncivil manner.

Taken together, Study 1 confirmed that individuals from Korea—a large power distance culture—are more strongly affected by hierarchical relations in their responses to incivility than individuals from the UK—a small power distance culture. Next, we sought to provide more direct evidence for the role of power distance as a variable that contributes to variations in individuals' responses to low- and high-ranking perpetrators.

## Study 2

In Study 2, we asked participants to imagine themselves working in an organizational setting that is structured vertically reflecting hierarchical values, or horizontally reflecting egalitarian values. We anticipated that working in a vertically structured organization with a hierarchical work environment would emulate the prevailing cultural setting encountered by

Korean participants in Study 1, and being subjected to incivility exhibited by a high-ranking colleague would be seen as more common, but also as more acceptable and elicit lower levels of discomfort, than being subjected to incivility by a low-ranking colleague. Conversely, working in a horizontally structured organization with an egalitarian work environment would emulate the prevailing cultural setting encountered by British participants, and people's reactions to being subjected to incivility would differ less as a function of the rank occupied by the uncivil colleague.

Our reasoning in this study is rooted in past research that examined culture as situated cognition (for reviews see Oyserman, 2011; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Drawing on this body of research, we posit that thinking about vertical organizational settings can activate hierarchical expectations akin to those chronically accessible to Korean individuals, and thinking about horizontal organizational settings can activate egalitarian expectations akin to those chronically accessible to British individuals. By manipulating culture experimentally, we extend previous studies that took at measurement approach (e.g., Vogel et al., 2015), providing more direct evidence for the causal role of variations in power distance as factor that may contribute to variations in individuals' responses (cf. Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005).

Even though we sampled both Korean and British participants we did not have clear predictions concerning the effect of priming different organizational settings in a Korean versus a British sample given that past cultural priming research has demonstrated effects that varied across studies in direction, with some showing stronger effects when primes are consistent with chronic cultural orientations, some showing that effects work similarly in different cultural groups, and some finding contrast effects whereby primes that are inconsistent with chronic cultural orientations elicit stronger effects than primes that are consistent (Guo & Main, in press; Oyserman, 2011; Oyserman & Lee, 2007).

## Method

### Participants and Design

Our sample consisted of 134 British students from a university in the UK (100 women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.78$ ,  $SD = 2.93$ ) and 109 Korean students from a university in Korea (50 women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 23.94$ ,  $SD = 3.62$ ), who self-identified as White British or Korean, respectively. They received either course credit (UK) or small rewards (Korea; e.g., chocolate) for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: 2 (organizational setting priming: vertical vs. horizontal) x 2 (perpetrator position: junior vs. senior).

### Procedure and Materials

Participants provided information on their demographic background and were asked to imagine themselves being hired by a reputable company, 'ABC Inc.', which was described as an 'industry leader' and 'successful creative business' that is currently expanding operations in China and India. The work environment was described as 'fair' and 'trusting'; and the company as a place where 'job seekers would like to work'. Next, participants were randomly assigned to read one of two paragraphs that depicted the organizational setting as either vertical or horizontal:

**Vertical organization (large power distance culture).** One important feature of the ABC is that there are clear hierarchical structures that all employees are expected to follow and respect. Those in authority openly demonstrate their rank and expect those in junior positions to be aware of the existing ranks and show respect towards seniors. One consequence of this organizational culture is that work gets done efficiently as the highly-ranked employees make most, if not all, decisions and convey to their juniors how best they can follow these decisions. Thus, the company puts strong emphasis on compliance and rule following, as a result, junior employees hardly

challenge their seniors and respect their decisions. Juniors expect clear guidance from higher ranks to deliver the jobs they are assigned to complete. The relationships between seniors and juniors are not very close, and people rarely socialize with others who have different ranks in the organization.

**Horizontal organization (small power distance culture).** One important feature of the ABC is that there are no clear hierarchical structures that all employees are expected to follow and respect. Those in authority treat juniors with respect and do not pull rank. One consequence of this organizational culture is that work gets done efficiently as employees in senior and junior positions work together to make decisions; input and feedback is regularly sought from employees at all levels. Thus, the company puts strong emphasis on equality and critical thinking; as a result seniors and their decisions are often challenged. Juniors are free to decide on courses of action and encouraged to take initiative to deliver the jobs they are assigned to complete. The relationships between seniors and juniors are close, and people often socialize with others who have different ranks in the organization.

Participants then responded to four manipulation check items that assessed participants' impressions of the hierarchical structure of ABC (e.g., *'To what extent is the power unequally distributed between the seniors and the juniors at the ABC?'*; *'How hierarchical is the structure of the ABC?'*; 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much so*;  $\alpha_{UK} = .97$ ,  $\alpha_{KOR} = .68$ ). Following the same procedure employed in Study 1, participants were then randomly assigned to imagine themselves in the role of a junior or a senior employee in this company and read one of the two imaginary scenarios about a colleague of the same sex in a more senior or a more junior position requesting help with 'writing a proposal' due 'tomorrow'. Further, participants read that they were very busy working on their own project and consequently decided against the request which they conveyed to their colleague by email. After reading

the scenario, participants responded to the same manipulation check items of perceived rank employed in Study 1 ( $r_{\text{Combined}} = .86$ ,  $r_{\text{UK}} = .88$ ,  $r_{\text{KOR}} = .83$ ,  $ps < .001$ ), and to the same measure of discomfort ( $\alpha_{\text{Combined}} = .91$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{UK}} = .89$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{KOR}} = .93$ ; Tucker's phi coefficient in Study 2 was .99). Participants also responded to three items that assessed the extent to which they felt the behaviors depicted in the scenarios were acceptable (1 = *completely unacceptable/inappropriate/intolerable* to 7 = *perfectly acceptable/appropriate/tolerable*;  $\alpha_{\text{Combined}} = .73$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{UK}} = .80$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{KOR}} = .59$ ). Finally, participants indicated how likely and common it was for them to witness these behaviors exhibited by a senior (vs. junior) person using the same two items employed in Study 1 ( $r_{\text{Combined}} = .70$ ,  $r_{\text{UK}} = .68$ ,  $r_{\text{KOR}} = .75$ ,  $ps < .001$ ). At the end, participants were thanked and debriefed.

### Results and Discussion

Initial analyses revealed that cultural group (British vs. Korean) did not moderate the predicted interaction between organizational setting priming (vertical vs. horizontal) and perpetrator position (junior vs. senior),  $F_{\text{Discomfort}} < 1$ ,  $F_{\text{IncunctiveNorms}} < 1$ ,  $F_{\text{DescriptiveNorm}} < 1.5$ , and the experimental manipulations were successful for both British ( $F_s \geq 389.60$ ,  $ps < .001$ ) and Korean ( $F_s \geq 230.93$ ,  $ps < .001$ ) participants.<sup>4</sup> To facilitate the presentation of the results below, we collapsed the data across the two cultural groups and focus our report of the results on the organizational setting priming and perpetrator position variables only. In parenthesis, we supplement inferential statistics with the corresponding results obtained when cultural group (British vs. Korean) was added as an additional factor to the model (i.e., controlling for variations between cultural groups, see Yzerbyt, Muller, & Judd, 2004).

#### Manipulation Checks

**Organizational setting priming.** As expected, participants in the vertical condition indicated that the organization was more hierarchical ( $M = 5.87$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) than participants

in the horizontal condition ( $M = 2.31$ ,  $SD = .97$ ),  $t(241) = -31.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 4.03$  [ $F(1, 239) = 1562.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .87$ ].

**Perpetrator position.** A 2 (organizational setting priming: horizontal vs. vertical) x 2 (perpetrator position: junior vs. senior) analysis of variance confirmed that participants evaluated the colleague in the senior condition as having more power and status ( $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = .96$ ) than the colleague in the junior condition ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = .99$ ),  $F(1, 239) = 599.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .72$  [ $F(1, 235) = 601.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .72$ ]. The differentiation between the junior and the senior role was significant in both priming conditions, albeit more pronounced in the vertical setting condition ( $F(1, 239) = 493.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .67$  [ $F(1, 235) = 488.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .68$ ]) than in the horizontal setting condition ( $F(1, 239) = 152.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .39$  [ $F(1, 235) = 155.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .40$ ]), resulting in a significant interaction,  $F(1, 239) = 51.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .18$  [ $F(1, 235) = 4.01$ ,  $p = .046$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ]. In sum, both the organizational setting priming and perpetrator position manipulations were deemed successful.

### Responses to Incivility

**Discomfort.** An ANOVA with discomfort as the outcome variable did not reveal significant main ( $F_s < 1$  [ $F_s < 1.2$ ]) or interaction ( $F(1, 239) = 1.44$ ,  $p = .232$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .006$  [ $F(1, 235) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .148$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ]) effects. However, an inspection of descriptive statistics revealed that incivility exhibited by a junior colleague elicited somewhat greater discomfort than incivility exhibited by a senior colleague in the vertical organizational setting priming condition ( $M_s = 5.37$  vs.  $5.15$ ,  $SD_s = .89$  vs.  $.99$ , respectively,  $F(1, 239) = 1.88$ ,  $p = .172$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .008$  [ $F(1, 235) = 3.16$ ,  $p = .077$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .013$ ]), but not in the horizontal organizational setting priming condition ( $M_s = 5.25$  vs.  $5.30$ ,  $SD_s = .82$  vs.  $.92$ , respectively,  $F < 1$  [ $F < .$ ]). However these differences were small and no conclusions should be drawn.

**Injunctive norms.** We repeated the previous analysis, this time examining perceptions of acceptability. The predicted interaction between organizational setting priming and perpetrator position was significant,  $F(1, 239) = 6.19, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .025$  [ $F(1, 235) = 6.09, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .025$ ] (see Figure 3c). In the vertical organizational setting priming condition, participants felt it was more acceptable for someone senior to exhibit incivility than for someone junior ( $M_s = 2.84$  vs.  $2.30, SD_s = 1.17$  vs.  $.94$ , respectively),  $F(1, 293) = 7.17, p = .008, \eta_p^2 = .025$  [ $F(1, 235) = 6.94, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = .029$ ]. This discrepancy was absent in the horizontal organizational setting priming condition ( $M_s = 2.54$  vs.  $2.71, SD_s = 1.11$  vs.  $1.18$ , respectively),  $F < 1$  [ $F < 1$ ]. The main effects of organizational setting priming,  $F < 1$  [ $F < 1$ ], and perpetrator position were not significant,  $F(1, 239) = 1.76, p = .186, \eta_p^2 = .007$  [ $F(1, 235) = 1.66, p = .199, \eta_p^2 = .007$ ].

**Descriptive norms.** Perpetrator position exerted a strong main effect on perceived likelihood of occurrence,  $F(1, 239) = 217.94, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .477$  [ $F(1, 235) = 226.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .491$ ] (see Figure 3d). Participants believed that a senior colleague would be more likely to exhibit incivility than a junior colleague ( $M_s = 4.95$  vs.  $2.73, SD_s = 1.20$  vs.  $1.14$ , respectively). No other significant effects emerged from the analysis,  $F_s < 1$ .

### Mediation Analysis

The previous analyses established differences in how incivility exhibited by senior and junior colleagues was judged on normative dimensions (acceptability, perceived likelihood of occurrence) in horizontal and vertical organizational settings. Whilst perpetrator position and organizational structure did not have a *direct* effect on the discomfort participants expressed when exposed to incivility, we sought to examine the possibility of an *indirect* effect via injunctive (acceptability) and descriptive (perceived likelihood of occurrence) norms, in line with the findings of Study 1. Thus, we repeated the same mediation analysis outlined earlier, this time examining organizational setting priming as a

moderator of the relationship between perpetrator position and perceived discomfort (see Figure 4b). In parenthesis, we present the corresponding result partialling out cultural group (British vs. Korean).

In the presence of the two mediators, neither the main effects nor the interaction between organizational setting priming and perpetrator position were significant, and acceptability emerged as the only reliable predictor with greater (lower) acceptability eliciting lower (higher) level of perceived discomfort,  $B = -.13$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.26$  to  $-.002$  [ $B = -.38$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.50$  to  $-.25$ ]. Importantly, the analysis revealed that organizational setting priming moderated the *indirect* effect of perpetrator position on perceived discomfort via acceptability,  $B_{Moderation} = -.08$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.23$  to  $-.008$  [ $B_{Moderation} = -.22$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.45$  to  $-.05$ ]. When primed with a horizontal organizational setting, perpetrator position did not affect participants' levels of discomfort,  $B_{indirect} = .02$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.02$  to  $.11$  [ $B_{indirect} = .06$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.06$  to  $.20$ ]. However, when primed with a vertical organizational setting, a senior colleague exhibiting incivility elicited less discomfort than a junior colleague exhibiting incivility since the behavior of the former was perceived to be more acceptable than the behavior of the latter,  $B_{indirect} = -.06$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.18$  to  $-.007$  [ $B_{indirect} = -.16$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.32$  to  $-.04$ ]. Effects involving the perceived likelihood of occurrence were not significant, but followed a similar pattern as in Study 1 (see Figure 4a and b).

## Discussion

In Study 2, we sought to provide more direct evidence for the causal role of power distance as a factor that contributes to variations in individuals' responses to low- and high-ranking perpetrators. We examined how perceptions of incivility exhibited by high or low ranking individuals differ when participants are primed with organizational contexts characterized by large (vertical) or small (horizontal) power differences. Participants felt it

was more acceptable for someone senior (high ranking) than for someone junior (low ranking) to exhibit incivility when the organization was structured vertically with a large power distance culture, but not when it was structured horizontally with a small power distance culture. There was no indication that this effect was moderated by participants' cultural background, suggesting that Korean and British participants were similarly responsive to in the cultural prescriptions conveyed by the organizational vignettes. Furthermore, participants indicated that high ranking individuals were more likely to act in an uncivil manner than low ranking individuals, irrespective of the organizational setting priming, consistent with Study 1.

Even though organizational setting priming did not significantly moderate the effect of perpetrator position on reported discomfort, descriptive statistics revealed a pattern similar to the one observed in Study 1, with incivility by a junior person fostering somewhat greater discomfort than incivility by a senior person when participants were primed with a vertical organizational setting (akin to the Korean culture), but not when they were primed with a horizontal organizational setting (akin to the British culture). Importantly, we found a significant indirect effect of perpetrator position on perceived discomfort via acceptability, which was moderated by organizational setting priming. In particular, when primed with a vertical organizational setting, uncivil behaviors were perceived to be more acceptable when displayed by a senior (high ranking) colleague compared to a junior (low ranking) colleague, and this led individuals to experience less discomfort when confronted with incivility exhibited by a senior perpetrator compared to a junior perpetrator.

### **General Discussion**

The aim of the current research was to explore the ways in which cultural settings provide a normative context that determines individuals' responses to subtle forms of

mistreatment by high- and low-ranking perpetrators. In two experiments, we probed individuals' reactions to a wide range of uncivil behaviors in national (British vs. Korean; Study 1) and organizational (horizontal vs. vertical organizations; Study 2) cultural settings that varied in power distance (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). We found that incivility by a high-ranking individual was perceived to be more common (descriptive norm) than incivility by a low-ranking individual in different cultural settings. In contrast, incivility by a senior colleague was perceived to be more acceptable (injunctive norm) than incivility by a junior colleague in a large power distance cultural setting (Study 1: Korea; Study 2: vertical organizational structure), but not in a small power distance cultural setting (Study 1: UK; Study 2: horizontal organizational structure).

Cultural variations in the hierarchical patterning of norms affected the level of discomfort caused by incivility (directly in Study 1, and indirectly in Study 2). In a large power distance cultural setting (Study 1: Korea; Study 2: vertical organizational structure), the fact that the uncivil behavior of a senior colleague was considered more acceptable than the uncivil behavior of a junior colleague translated into lower levels of discomfort vis-à-vis a senior perpetrator compared to a junior perpetrator. Conversely, in a small power distance cultural setting (Study 1: UK; Study 2: horizontal organizational structure), incivility was perceived to be equally unacceptable and elicited the same levels of discomfort irrespective of the ranking of the perpetrator. Thus, differing injunctive norms, but not descriptive norms, accounted for cultural variations in the level of discomfort caused by incivility.

### **Theoretical implications**

The present work corroborates and extends correlational studies conducted in either Western or East Asian settings (Lian et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2012) or focused on supervisory abuse (Vogel et al., 2015). Examining both high- and

low-ranking perpetrators using an experimental approach, we found converging evidence that in Korea—a large power distance cultural setting where individuals' actions are prescribed by hierarchical relations, rank determines individuals' responses to mistreatment. In contrast, in the UK—a small power distance cultural setting where individuals' actions are less affected by hierarchical relations, people respond to high- and low-ranking perpetrators in similar ways. Thus, the present findings add to a body of evidence showing that individuals' responses to mistreatment are hierarchically patterned, and further confirm that this patterning varies between some large and small power distance cultures.

Previous studies invoked normative constructs such as *legitimacy* (Porath et al., 2008) or *fairness* (Lian et al., 2012; Vogel et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2012) to explain cultural variations in individuals' responses to high- and low-ranking perpetrators. In the present work, we sought to further clarify how norms shape individuals' reactions to mistreatment, establishing, to our knowledge for the first time, the independent contributions of *descriptive* and *injunctive* norms to the hierarchical patterning of individuals' responses to mistreatment. Our results underscore the importance of separating the two constructs. In particular, we found that injunctive norms that define how one ought to behave fully mediated cross-cultural variations in individuals' responses to mistreatment. The more uncivil actions were perceived to be acceptable, the *less* negative were individuals' responses.

In contrast, we found descriptive norms to be broadly similar across the cultural settings studied. Incivility was perceived as more likely and common when the perpetrators was someone senior compared to someone junior, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001; Lim & Lee, 2011; Pearson et al., 2000; Torelli & Shavitt, 2010). Importantly, controlling for injunctive norms, we observed a positive association between descriptive norms and discomfort, which was reliable pooled across studies ( $r_{\text{Study1}} = .210$ ;  $r_{\text{Study2}} = .075$ ;  $r_{\text{combined}} = .138$ ;  $p_{\text{combined}} = .004$ ;  $n_{\text{combined}} = 449$ ). In other words, the more

uncivil actions were perceived to be common, the more *negative* were individuals' responses. Thus, the present studies unveiled notable differences in the association between descriptive norms and discomfort on the one hand, and the association between injunctive norms and discomfort on the other hand, which were opposite in direction. This is of note given that descriptive and injunctive norms are positively correlated, both theoretically (see Eriksson et al., 2015) and also empirically in the present studies ( $r_{\text{Study1}} = .156$ ;  $r_{\text{Study2}} = .205$ ;  $r_{\text{combined}} = .179$ ;  $p_{\text{combined}} < .001$ ;  $n_{\text{combined}} = 449$ ).

The positive link between descriptive norms and discomfort controlling for variations in injunctive norms suggests that a higher frequency of mistreatments may have a *sensitizing* effect, not a blunting effect, on individuals. This is consistent with studies that have shown a link between acute stress and increased inflammatory responses, which, over time, can give rise to illness (e.g., Slavich, Way, Eisenberger, & Taylor, 2010), and with studies documenting a link between incidental and chronic pain (e.g., Porreca, Ossipov, & Gebhart, 2002). It is important to note that in absolute terms the effects of injunctive norms were stronger ( $r_{\text{Study1}} = -.622$ ;  $r_{\text{Study2}} = -.128$ ;  $r_{\text{combined}} = -.383$ ;  $p_{\text{combined}} < .001$ ;  $n_{\text{combined}} = 449$ ) than the effects of descriptive norms. This discrepancy could explain the results of field studies in Western cultural settings, which found that mistreatments instigated by supervisors and by co-workers tend to have similar effects on employee well-being (see Hershcovis & Barling, 2010), presumably because injunctive norms for the different perpetrator groups do not differ in these cultural settings.

### **Practical Implication**

In a globalized world, it is important for professionals and officials to understand cultural dynamics. Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings, exacerbating conflict and contributing to a loss of productivity (e.g., Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007). The present

work points to hierarchical relations as an important source of variation between cultural groups. Individuals from a small power distance culture akin to the UK may benefit from understanding how those in large power distance cultural setting akin to Korea construe uncivil behaviors according to the relative rank of the perpetrators, and vice versa. For example, whilst individuals from some large power distance cultures may be more accepting of uncivil behavior by someone senior, individuals from some small power distance cultures are not and would perceive such behaviors as offensive. Our introductory example of Ms Lucy D'Orsi's encounter with Chinese state officials is perhaps a point in case. Conversely, individuals from some large power distance cultures may be particularly taken aback by the uncivil behavior of someone junior, failing to realize that in some small power distance cultural settings hierarchical relations have little importance and do not dictate whether or not uncivil behaviors are deemed appropriate.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that in our studies participants had high expectations to encounter uncivil behavior by someone more senior (all means at or above the scale midpoint;  $M_s > 3.98$ ), which paints a bleak picture and highlights once again the importance of tackling incivility (e.g., Porath & Pearson, 2013). In absolute terms scores for injunctive norms were low across cultures and perpetrators groups (all means below the scale midpoint;  $M_s < 4.00$ ). In other words, the present work should not be taken as an indication that uncivil behaviors exhibited by senior colleagues are completely permissible in the large power distance cultures studied.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several limitations of the present studies that offer opportunities for future research. First, we cannot be absolutely certain about the cultural dimensions that underlie the observed cultural differences reported in Study 1. Vogel and colleagues (2015) demonstrated

empirically that power distance mediates cultural differences between Anglo-American and Confucian Asian individuals' responses to supervisory abuse. Their results align with a body of research that has demonstrated differences between Korea and the UK in the power distance cultural dimension (e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 2001; House et al., 2004) and research that has shown differences between Korea and several western cultural groups in the ways hierarchical relationships are experienced and approached (e.g., Shavitt et al., 2011). However, we did not include a suitable measure of power distance in Study 1, so must remain open to the possibility that other variables contributed to the observed differences between Korean and British participants.

Second, and related to the previous point, our comparative design included one western, small power distance cultural group (the UK) and one East Asian large power distance cultural group (Korea). Even though we sought to provide evidence for the causal role of power distance through an experimental manipulation (Study 2), a two-group comparison does not allow generalizations to all small power distance or large power distance cultures. In this regard, it is important to note that recent studies have documented differences between cultural groups that have traditionally been grouped together (e.g., western individualistic cultures, see Kitayama, Park, Sevincer, Karasawa, & Uskul, 2009, or eastern collectivistic cultures, see Uskul, Oyserman, Schwarz, Lee, & Xu, 2013). Future research should establish the extent to which the current findings apply to different high and low power distance cultures by sampling a wider range of cultural groups.

Third, in order to provide a context for the interactions with the perpetrators, in the present studies participants imagined a situation in which a colleague exhibits uncivil behaviors after his or her request was declined. A defining feature of incivility is that uncivil acts are somewhat ambiguous and can be “interpreted differently by different parties”, requiring a consideration of the “actions and perceptions of the instigator, the target, any

observers of the incident, and the social setting in which the incident took place.” (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000, p. 126). By declining a request, we sought to provide a context in which the interaction takes place and a degree of ambiguity. However, it is conceivable that Korean participants responded more strongly to low- compared to high-ranking perpetrators because in high power distance cultural settings there is a strong expectation for low-ranking requestees to oblige (e.g., Han, Li, & Hwang, 2005). Similarly, in Study 2 the organizational vignette depicting a high power distance culture set out clear expectations for low-ranking employees to comply with requests by high-ranking employees. To address this concern, we recruited another sample of Korean participants ( $N = 188$ , 85 women,  $M_{age} = 37.35$ ,  $SD = 10.82$ ), who either responded to the same scenario as in Study 1 (trigger present), or an alternative scenario in which participants did *not* decline any requests from the perpetrator (trigger absent). The results (using standardized continuous scores) showed that Korean participants considered a senior colleague’s incivility to be more common ( $B_{PerpetratorPosition} = .79$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $t(186) = 6.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and more acceptable than a junior colleague’s incivility ( $B_{PerpetratorPosition} = .36$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t(186) = 2.88$ ,  $p = .005$ ). Differences in perceived acceptability ( $B_{indirect} = -.20$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.38$  to  $-.06$ ), but not differences in perceived prevalence ( $B_{indirect} = .01$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.11$  to  $.13$ ) contributed to variations in participants’ feelings of discomfort. Importantly, the presence of a trigger did not modulate participants’ perceptions of acceptability ( $ps \geq .129$ ), nor the carry-on effect of perceived acceptability on feelings of discomfort (trigger absent:  $B_{indirect} = -.16$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.35$  to  $-.009$ ; trigger present:  $B_{indirect} = -.21$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = -.45$  to  $-.03$ ). These results provide some initial evidence that the present findings may generalize to different interaction settings. Nevertheless, future research should examine in more depth different circumstances in which transgressions by low- and high-ranking individuals may be more or less permissible *within* different cultural settings.

Fourth, and related to the previous point, it may come as a surprise that uncivil acts by higher-ranked perpetrators did not elicit more discomfort than uncivil acts by lower-ranked perpetrators in low power distance cultural settings. Such a pattern of results may be expected on the basis that, irrespective of normative considerations, higher-ranked individuals tend to have greater impact on one's outcomes than lower-ranked individuals (e.g., Fiske & Dépret, 1996). On the other hand, especially in organizational settings higher-ranking roles may demand stronger responses to the transgressions of lower-ranking individuals than vice versa (cf. Joshi & Fast, 2013). Furthermore, work by Stamkou, van Kleef, Homan and Galinsky (2016) suggests that the motivation to achieve hierarchical differentiation can affect individuals' responses to transgressions in low power distance cultural settings (see also Mooijman, van Dijk, Ellemers, & van Dijk, 2015). This is consistent with studies conducted with British and Australian samples showing that powerholders not accustomed to having power are inclined to seek retaliation against perpetrators (Strelan, Weick, & Vasiljevic, 2014). Future studies are needed to elucidate mechanisms and boundary conditions that determine individuals' responses to low- and high-ranking perpetrators in different cultural settings.

Fifth, the current studies focused on discomfort as a primary outcome variable. Future research should examine how the cultural and hierarchical patterning of people's reactions to incivility affects different health- and work-related outcomes. It could be the case that incivility, in particular recurring or prolonged incivility, exhibited by a senior colleague has a stronger impact on outcomes such as job performance or job satisfaction when compared to incivility exhibited by a junior colleague, especially in small power distance cultures (cf. Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). Relatedly, our measure of discomfort assessed general negative affect. Future research can focus on specific emotions to tease out which emotions are evoked more or less strongly in the face of uncivil behaviors by junior and senior individuals.

Sixth, in our studies we matched the participant's gender with the gender of the perpetrator. This design feature did not allow us to examine interactions between perpetrator gender and participant gender. As gender is often associated with status, hierarchy and norms (e.g., Eagly & Wood, 1982; Ridgeway, 2001), future research is needed to unfold the potential effects of gender-related dynamics, and how those may differ between cultural contexts. Finally, our studies included students as participants which might explain some of the weaker effects that we observed in Study 2 where we asked our participants to imagine themselves working in an organization. Collecting data from employees in organizations would help individuals imagine themselves in settings more familiar to them than to students.

### **Concluding remarks**

In conclusion, we have argued and shown that cultural settings provide a normative context that affects individuals' responses to subtle forms of mistreatment at work. Even though descriptive and injunctive norms coincided, we found that their impact on individuals' responses to mistreatment differed: *higher* levels of acceptability and *lower* levels of perceived prevalence buffered against, and *lower* levels of acceptability and *higher* levels of perceived prevalence exacerbated, the negative impact of incivility. Furthermore, we have shown that injunctive norms, but not descriptive norms, account for variations in individuals' responses to high- and low-ranking perpetrators between selected cultures that differ in power distance. It remains for future research to probe the generalizability of the present findings and to further elucidate the contributions of norms to the joint effects of culture and hierarchies (see also Morris et al., 2015).

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In Study 1, we also included the Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Collectivism scale developed by Triandis and Gelfand (1998). Several subscales had low internal consistency ( $\alpha < .70$ ) and the measure did not yield any meaningful results. For exploratory purposes, other secondary measures were also included in Studies 1 and 2, after the primary measures reported in the present manuscript. In the present manuscript, we focus on the primary measures that were assessed consistently across studies. Further information on the secondary measures can be obtained from the authors.

<sup>2</sup> A comparison of the two cultural groups within each perpetrator position condition revealed that Korean participants reported greater discomfort than did British participants in both the senior and junior perpetrator conditions,  $F_{\text{Junior}}(1, 202) = 28.97, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .13, F_{\text{Senior}}(1, 202) = 4.27, p = .040, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . However, cultural differences in discomfort were more pronounced in the junior perpetrator condition than in the senior perpetrator condition.

<sup>3</sup> An inspection of cultural differences within each perpetrator position condition revealed that Korean participants felt it was more acceptable for a senior person to exhibit incivility than did British participants,  $F(1, 202) = 16.56, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$ ; the two groups did not differ in their ratings of acceptability when the perpetrator had a junior status,  $F(1, 202) = 2.17, p = .143$ .

<sup>4</sup> Cultural group (British vs. Korean) did not moderate the individual main effects of the experimental manipulations,  $F_s < 1.8$ . The only exception was the effect of perpetrator position on the perceived likelihood of occurrence, which varied by cultural group,  $F(1, 235) = 5.55, p = .019, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . Koreans thought it was more likely to encounter a high-ranking perpetrator than did UK participants,  $F(1, 235) = 8.49, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .04$ . The two groups did not differ in their perceptions of how likely it was to encounter a low-ranking perpetrator in the organization,  $F < 1$ .

## Appendix A

## List of uncivil behaviors (outcome measure)

*Instructions:* Imagine that, after you declined his/her request, s/he starts behaving in the ways listed below. Using the items shown below, please indicate how 'comfortable' you would feel if this person acted in the following ways:

1. Not returning my greeting
2. Ignoring a favor I did for him or her
3. Interrupting my speech by starting to talk about him/herself
4. Speaking in a disrespectful way
5. Addressing me ignoring title and status
6. Sending an email to convey a point without a courteous greeting
7. Requesting something by an email without informing me ahead of time
8. Addressing me like a friend without the appropriate level of formality
9. Not replying to a message I sent to him/her
10. Not saying 'thank you' when I paid for a meal
11. Sending a text message to cancel an appointment with me an hour before the appointment was due
12. Gossiping and criticizing me behind my back
13. Giving me a direct order without using forms of polite request
14. Always insisting on his/her own way, disregarding my opinions and preferences
15. Frequently attempting to impose him/herself in activities
16. Trying to force me to do things against my will
17. Taking his/her frustration out on me
18. Being arrogant

Appendix B  
Supplemental Statistics

Table B1.

*Descriptive statistics for the manipulation check of perpetrator position (Studies 1 & 2)*

| Cultural group | Organizational setting priming | Perpetrator position | n  | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|----------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|----|------|--------------------|
| Study 1        |                                |                      |    |      |                    |
| UK             | --                             | Junior               | 48 | 3.45 | .77                |
|                |                                | Senior               | 49 | 5.21 | .91                |
| Korea          | --                             | Junior               | 55 | 3.11 | .98                |
|                |                                | Senior               | 54 | 5.20 | .94                |
| Study 2        |                                |                      |    |      |                    |
| UK             | Horizontal                     | Junior               | 33 | 3.06 | .73                |
|                |                                | Senior               | 35 | 4.97 | 1.11               |
|                | Vertical                       | Junior               | 38 | 1.97 | .94                |
|                |                                | Senior               | 28 | 6.04 | .61                |
| Korea          | Horizontal                     | Junior               | 26 | 3.17 | .91                |
|                |                                | Senior               | 29 | 5.21 | .77                |
|                | Vertical                       | Junior               | 27 | 2.50 | .87                |
|                |                                | Senior               | 27 | 5.54 | .88                |

Table B2.

*Means and standard deviations for each Cultural Group in Study 1*

| Measure  | UK ( <i>n</i> = 97) |                    | Korea ( <i>n</i> = 109) |                    |
|--|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
|  | Mean                | Standard Deviation | Mean                    | Standard Deviation |
| Manipulation check for perpetrator position            | 4.34                | 1.22               | 4.15                    | 1.43               |
| Discomfort   | 4.79                | .98                | 5.44                    | .84                |
| Injunctive norms (Acceptability)                       | 2.77                | .77                | 2.98                    | 1.02               |
| Descriptive norms (Perceived likelihood of occurrence) | 3.53                | 1.40               | 4.26                    | 1.56               |

Table B3.

*Means and standard deviations for each Cultural Group in Study 2*

| Measure  | UK ( <i>n</i> = 134) |                    | Korea ( <i>n</i> = 109) |                    |
|--|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
|  | Mean                 | Standard Deviation | Mean                    | Standard Deviation |
| Manipulation check for perpetrator position            | 3.87                 | 1.81               | 4.13                    | 1.55               |
| Manipulation check for organizational setting priming  | 4.03                 | 2.38               | 4.12                    | 1.39               |
| Discomfort   | 4.95                 | .79                | 5.66                    | .88                |
| Injunctive norms (Acceptability)                       | 2.14                 | .90                | 3.13                    | 1.11               |
| Descriptive norms (Perceived likelihood of occurrence) | 3.66                 | 1.49               | 4.01                    | 1.74               |