

Family Incivility as a Predictor of Psychological Distress in Adults: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Psychological distress is a pervasive global concern characterized by elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Although incivility has been extensively examined in organizational contexts, its manifestation within family environments and its direct relationship to psychological distress remains understudied.

Objective: This study investigated the relationship between family incivility and psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress) in adults, and examined the extent to which family incivility predicts psychological distress.

Method: A cross-sectional design was employed with a purposive sample of 500 adults (250 males, 250 females; age range 18–50 years) residing in Delhi NCR and Shimla, Himachal Pradesh. Participants completed the Family Incivility Scale (Lim & Tai, 2014; $\alpha = .90$) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales–21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; α 's = .82–.93). Pearson's correlation, simple linear regression, and analysis of variance were employed for data analysis.

Results: Family incivility demonstrated a significant, moderate-to-strong positive correlation with overall psychological distress. Regression analyses indicated that family incivility accounted for 34.8% of the variance in psychological distress ($R^2 = .348$), constituting a meaningful effect size within the psychological sciences.

Conclusion: Subtle, low-intensity acts of disrespect within families constitute a significant direct predictor of psychological distress in adults. The findings underscore the need for practitioners to assess family incivility in therapeutic contexts, and highlight the importance of culturally sensitive interventions in collectivistic societies.

Keywords: family incivility, psychological distress, depression, anxiety, stress, DASS-21, Indian adults, cross-sectional study

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychological distress is a prevalent global issue disproportionately associated with higher rates of disability and mortality. It encompasses non-specific symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and depression, characterizing an uncomfortable emotional state triggered by specific stressors or demands (Ridner, 2004). According to Cohen et al. (2007), it manifests as a broad emotional and behavioral response to internal or external pressures. Among the numerous stressors implicated in psychological distress, incivility has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years.

Incivility refers to everyday rudeness or disregard for others that is often subtle but cumulatively stressful. Cortina et al. (2001) established that incivility does not ordinarily manifest as overt aggression or physical conflict; rather, it appears in everyday interactions through low-intensity but hurtful acts—such as interrupting others, making sarcastic or indirect remarks, or dismissing another person's viewpoint. Because these behaviors are frequently ambiguous in intent, they are easy to overlook yet, over time, quietly erode trust, cooperation, and relational respect.

Incivility often emerges from a confluence of personal stress, poor communication skills, and strained social environments. When individuals feel overworked, undervalued, or unsupported, they may behave dismissively or disrespectfully, sometimes without conscious intent. Differences in personality, insufficient empathy, and inadequate conflict-management skills can further amplify uncivil interactions. In family contexts specifically, unresolved tensions, role confusion, and unmet emotional needs may create conditions in which small acts of disregard become habitual.

Incivility can assume many forms, ranging from verbal to nonverbal expression. Verbal incivility manifests through sarcasm, dismissive comments, or speaking over others in conversation. Nonverbal incivility may appear as eye-rolling, deliberately ignoring someone's presence, or providing minimal acknowledgment of contributions. Passive forms include withholding important information or exclusion from discussions, whereas more active forms involve openly questioning another person's competence in social settings. In close relationships, these patterns may present as neglect, lack of appreciation, or persistent interruptions that, in aggregate, cultivate an atmosphere of disrespect.

Incivility can surface across multiple life domains. In professional settings, it emerges through interruptions, dismissal of input, and delayed communication—behaviors that gradually reduce morale and productivity. In digital environments, cyber incivility takes the form of trolling, passive-aggressive commentary, and deliberate exclusion. In public spaces, queue-jumping, aggressive driving, and disruptive noise contribute to a broader culture of disconnection. Within families, incivility materializes when feelings are dismissed, siblings belittle one another, or relatives substitute open communication with passive-aggressive exchanges. Though individually minor, these behaviors collectively undermine trust and relational well-being.

1.1. Family Incivility

Family incivility is a relatively recent construct defined as subtle, low-intensity forms of interpersonal mistreatment within the family, including dismissiveness, rudeness, sarcasm, exclusion, and passive disrespect (Lim & Tai, 2014). Unlike overt aggression, family incivility is ambiguous in intent and often minimized by those involved, yet accumulating evidence points to its substantial implications for mental and physical health.

The concept of family incivility emerged from research on workplace behavior, as psychologists and sociologists noted striking parallels between professional and domestic dynamics. Both environments involve power structures, role expectations, and interpersonal conflict—conditions that render them susceptible to incivility. Family incivility encompasses behaviors that, while not overtly aggressive, nonetheless breach expectations of mutual respect and exert harmful effects. Unlike explicit spousal conflict or parent-child disputes, family incivility often arises from insensitivity, habituation, or dysfunctional relational patterns rather than deliberate harm (De Clercq, Haq, Azeem, & Raja, 2018). Such behaviors—neglecting a family member's needs, disregarding their opinions, or issuing derogatory remarks—tend to be of lower intensity but accumulate over time to damage family dynamics (Bai et al., 2020; Bai, Lin, & Wang, 2016).

Research has documented that the micro-aggressions characteristic of family incivility are experienced across all family members. Persistent exposure strains familial relationships and contributes to emotional depletion (De Clercq et al., 2018). Drawing on Rosenberg's (1965) conceptualization of self-esteem, chronic incivility may render individuals susceptible to self-doubt and diminished self-worth, consistent with the chronic stress pathway to anxiety and depression articulated by Lim and Cortina (2005).

1.2. Family Incivility and Mental Health: A Review of Evidence

Recent empirical work has illuminated diverse pathways through which family incivility affects individual well-being. Kuriakose and Biswas (2024) demonstrated that family incivility reduces organizational citizenship behaviors by fueling negative rumination, though optimism and workplace friendships moderated these effects. Studies conducted with Indian healthcare professionals revealed that family incivility predicts burnout, which in turn reduces job satisfaction—with psychological capital serving as a protective factor (Bhattacharjee et al., 2022; Singh & Jha, 2021). Beyond occupational outcomes, evidence indicates that family incivility compromises psychological safety among university faculty, increasing vulnerability to workplace bullying (Gupta & Sharma, 2022).

Research conducted in family-owned banks found that witnessing incivility contributed to psychological distress through employee silence, particularly among individuals with lower self-esteem (Ahmed & Khan, 2023). Among adolescents, longitudinal data from China indicated that exposure to family incivility is significantly associated with higher levels of depression, with self-compassion moderating this relationship (Zhang et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

1.3. Research Gap and Objectives

Despite the growing body of evidence, most studies have concentrated on occupational outcomes or indirect pathways rather than assessing family incivility as a direct antecedent of psychological distress in adulthood. To the best of our knowledge, no study has examined this relationship directly in an Indian adult sample. The present study was therefore designed to: (a) explore the relationship between family incivility and psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress); and (b) determine the exact variance explained by family incivility in predicting psychological distress. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant positive correlation between family incivility and psychological distress.

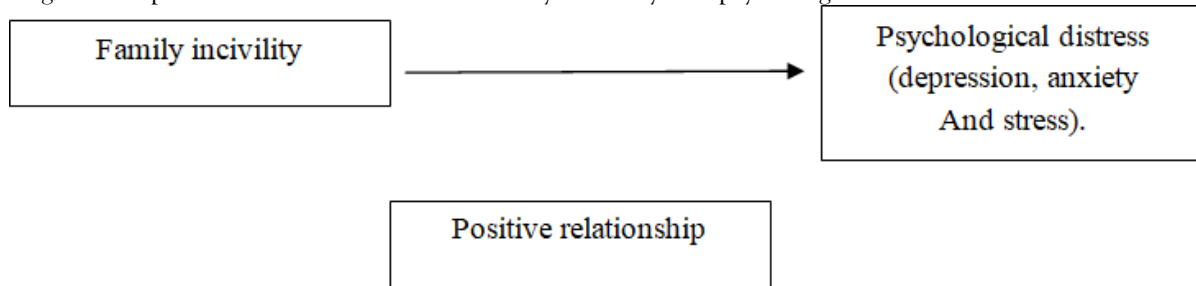


Figure 1. Conceptual model depicting the hypothesized positive relationship between family incivility and psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress).

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to examine the associations between family incivility and psychological distress. This design was selected for its suitability in establishing correlational relationships within a defined population at a single point in time.

2.2. Participants

The sample comprised 500 adults (250 males; 250 females) with an age range of 18–50 years ($M \pm SD = 2.31 \pm 0.94$) residing in Delhi NCR and Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling in accordance with the following criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

- Age range: 18–50 years
- Minimum educational qualification: Class XII
- Currently residing with family members (nuclear, joint, or reconstituted family)
- Both married and unmarried adults

Exclusion criteria:

- Insufficient English-language proficiency to complete self-report measures
- Clinically diagnosed psychiatric illness
- Individuals living alone

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Personal Data Sheet. A researcher-developed personal data sheet collected demographic information including age, gender, locality, family structure, and educational attainment.

2.3.2. Family Incivility Scale (FIS; Lim & Tai, 2014). Family incivility was assessed using the six-item Family Incivility Scale, adapted from the Workplace Incivility Scale (Cortina et al., 2001) by replacing references to supervisors and coworkers with family members. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (once or twice a year) to 5 (every day), with higher total scores (range: 6–30) indicating greater family incivility. For categorical classification, a mean item score exceeding 3 was considered indicative of high family incivility. The scale demonstrates excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

The six subscale items capture:

- Verbal aggression (being spoken to condescendingly)
- Lack of attentiveness (family members ignoring what one says)

- Demeaning comments (disrespectful remarks)
- Social exclusion (being ignored or excluded from family events)
- Judgment doubt (having one's decision-making ability questioned)
- Unwanted discussions (being drawn into uncomfortable topics)

Scoring interpretation: Low incivility (6–10) reflects minimal negative interactions and generally positive family dynamics (Karas et al., 2021; Heffernan & Dutton, 2013). High incivility (21–30) reflects frequent exposure to condescension, disrespect, and emotional neglect, commonly associated with psychological distress and relational dysfunction (Lim & Tai, 2014; Duncan & Feigelman, 2015).

2.3.3. Depression Anxiety Stress Scales–21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Psychological distress was measured using the DASS-21, the abbreviated form of the DASS-42. Participants rated 21 items over the preceding week using a four-point scale (0 = did not apply to me at all; 3 = applied to me very much, or most of the time). Subscale scores (depression, anxiety, and stress; seven items each) are summed and multiplied by two, yielding a range of 0–42 per subscale, with higher scores denoting greater severity. Combining all subscale scores provides an index of overall psychological distress (Henry & Crawford, 2005).

The DASS-21 Administration Scale:

0	1	2	3
Did not apply to me at all	Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time	Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of time	Applied to me very much, or most of the time

The Depression subscale measures dysphoria, hopelessness, devaluation of life, self-deprecation, lack of interest, anhedonia, and inertia. The Anxiety subscale assesses autonomic arousal, skeletal muscle effects, situational anxiety, and the subjective experience of anxious affect. The Stress subscale evaluates difficulty relaxing, nervous arousal, agitation, irritability, and impatience.

Severity cut-offs classify scores into five categories: normal, mild, moderate, severe, and extremely severe (Crawford & Henry, 2003). The instrument demonstrates strong psychometric properties, with Cronbach's α coefficients of .88 (depression), .82 (anxiety), .90 (stress), and .93 (total distress), as well as satisfactory discriminant and convergent validity relative to the Beck Depression Inventory, Beck Anxiety Inventory, and State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995; Shea, Tennant, & Pallant, 2009).

2.4. Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection. All participation was voluntary, with informed consent secured before administration. Participants were fully informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. No deception was employed. All data were collected anonymously, and no identifying information will be disclosed in publications. Records are maintained under strict confidentiality.

2.5. Statistical Analyses

Data were analyzed using the following procedures: (a) descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) to characterize the sample; (b) Pearson's product-moment correlation to examine the bivariate relationship between family incivility and psychological distress; (c) simple linear regression to test the predictive value of family incivility for psychological distress; (d) model summary statistics (R , R^2 , adjusted R^2 , and standard error of estimate) to quantify explained variance; (e) one-way ANOVA (F-test) to assess overall model significance; and (f) regression coefficient statistics (unstandardized B , standardized β , t -value, and p -value) to evaluate the direction, strength, and significance of the predictor.

3. RESULTS

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between family incivility and psychological distress in adults and to determine the variance explained by family incivility in predicting psychological distress. Pearson's correlation analyses revealed a significant, moderate-to-strong positive association between family incivility and overall psychological distress. Regression analyses further demonstrated that family incivility was a significant predictor of psychological distress, with an R^2 of .348, indicating that family incivility accounted for 34.8% of the variance in distress scores. This constitutes a meaningful effect size within the psychological literature. The ANOVA F-test confirmed the overall significance of the regression model ($p < .001$), and the unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients indicated a positive, statistically significant relationship ($p < .001$). Table 1 presents the model summary, Table 2 presents the ANOVA results, and Table 3 presents the regression coefficients.

Table 1. Regression Model Summary for Family Incivility Predicting Psychological Distress

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.590 ^a	.348	.346	.25333
a. Predictors: (Constant), Family Incivility Scale				

Table 2. ANOVA Summary for Regression Model

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	17.025	1	17.025	265.288	.000 ^b
	Residual	31.960	498	.064		
	Total	48.985	499			
a. Dependent Variable: Psychological distress (depression, anxiety and stress)						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Family Incivility Scale						

Table 3. Regression Coefficients for Family Incivility Predicting Psychological Distress

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.414	.076		18.632	.000
	Family Incivility Scale	.415	.025	.590	16.288	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Psychological distress (depression, anxiety and stress)						

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study support the hypothesis that family incivility is a significant and meaningful predictor of psychological distress in adults, accounting for approximately 35% of the variance in distress outcomes. These results extend the emerging literature on family incivility by establishing a direct predictive relationship—one that has not been directly examined in prior research. Family incivility has rarely been assessed in relation to psychological distress; most existing evidence has explored indirect pathways. For instance, Lim and Tai (2014) conceptualized family incivility as a subtle but chronic stressor that undermines personal resources and spills over into professional life. Subsequent research confirmed that home-based incivility reduces self-esteem and psychological capital, contributing to burnout and occupational dissatisfaction (Kong et al., 2021; Singh & Singh, 2022). Longitudinal evidence from adolescent populations in China demonstrated that family incivility predicted elevated depression, particularly through impairment of self-compassion and adaptive coping (Zhao et al., 2024).

The present findings extend this evidence base by demonstrating a direct association in an adult sample, suggesting that the impact of family incivility on emotional health does not operate exclusively through distal mediators.

4.1. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the understanding of psychological distress within the Indian cultural context, where family bonds are deeply embedded in social life and individual well-being is intricately linked to relational harmony. The majority of incivility research has been conducted in Western organizational settings; by focusing on the domestic domain in a collectivistic culture, the present work broadens the theoretical scope of incivility research.

The findings also invite critical reflection. Some prior studies suggest that the relationship between incivility and distress may be indirect or mediated by constructs such as silence, burnout, or rumination, rather than constituting a straightforward direct link. Others indicate that gender may not moderate this relationship significantly, or that effects may be better captured through general stress-exposure frameworks such as family stress models. These nuances indicate that family incivility does not operate linearly across all contexts; its impact may differ as a function of cultural, relational, and situational factors. Thus, the present study not only opens a new empirical direction but contributes a critical layer of analysis to ongoing debates by positioning family incivility as a distinct yet complex contributor to psychological distress.

4.2. Practical Implications

The findings carry important practical implications. For mental health practitioners, the results underscore the importance of assessing not only overt conflict but also low-intensity behaviors—dismissiveness, sarcasm, exclusion—that clients may encounter at home. Recognizing these patterns can support the development of more comprehensive intervention strategies that address covert stressors within family relationships.

The divergence in findings across studies further highlights the therapeutic value of attending to mediating factors such as self-esteem, optimism, and coping strategies. Strengthening these personal resources may buffer the negative effects of family incivility on mental health. Cultural sensitivity is also paramount: in collectivistic settings such as India, where family ties are deeply valued, even minor forms of incivility may carry a heavier emotional toll than in more individualistic cultural contexts. Practitioners are therefore encouraged to integrate family-based and individual-focused interventions aimed at promoting resilience and psychological well-being.

4.3. Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Several strengths of this study deserve acknowledgment. First, its novel focus on family incivility as a direct predictor of psychological distress in adults fills a critical gap in the literature. Second, its contextual relevance—conducted within the Indian sociocultural framework—enhances the applicability of findings to a population that is both sizeable and underrepresented in global psychological research. Third, the use of standardized, psychometrically validated instruments strengthens the rigor and validity of the results.

Certain limitations must, however, be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to better establish directionality of effects. Reliance on self-report data introduces susceptibility to social desirability and recall biases. The geographic concentration of the sample (Delhi NCR and Shimla) may limit generalizability to other cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Finally, the study examined family incivility as a unidimensional predictor without accounting for moderating or mediating variables such as family cohesion, communication styles, or parenting practices.

Future research should examine the longitudinal impact of family incivility on mental health outcomes to establish causal mechanisms. Comparative cross-cultural studies would clarify whether the observed associations are universal or culture-specific. Investigating protective factors—resilience, coping strategies, and social support—that buffer the adverse effects of family incivility represents another fruitful direction. Qualitative and mixed-method approaches could provide richer narratives of how individuals perceive, internalize, and navigate incivility within family life, thereby complementing the quantitative evidence base.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study represents a significant step in extending incivility research from organizational settings to the family domain. The findings demonstrate that family incivility is not a trivial interpersonal phenomenon—it constitutes a meaningful predictor of psychological distress in adults. While results must be interpreted with caution given the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report, they provide a valuable empirical foundation for both theory and clinical practice. For researchers, the study identifies a neglected but critical link in the mental health literature; for practitioners, it emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing subtle but harmful family interactions in counseling and psychotherapy. Ultimately, attending to family incivility is essential not only for reducing psychological distress but for fostering healthier, more supportive family relationships and promoting broader societal well-being.

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Data Availability: Data are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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