

FAQ's of bullying, harassment and incivility
MSU WorkLife Office 2020-02-26
B.Roberts, Ph.D.
Executive Director, WorkLife

People who step on others often have several perspectives that seem to be immutable justifications. Let's bust some myths about justifying disrespectful behavior.

First, is there a difference between bullying and incivility, or are they the same?

Bullying is behavior that has no legitimate purpose, is known or reasonably ought to be known to be unwelcome, and creates a hostile, intimidating, toxic or humiliating environment. (UNB, 2011) It is generally thought to be a pattern of persistent, repetitive behavior targeted at an individual or group of individuals. Most often, there is a power imbalance involved, which is exploited to the detriment of the targeted party. If it is based on a protected class, e.g. based on religion, race, nationality, gender, etc, it is discriminatory. If it is not based on a protected class, it is nonetheless unacceptable.

Incivility, by contrast, is conduct that is not typically persistent or targeted toward an individual or group, but may be frequent, generalized rude behavior exercised toward any/everyone, without any pattern. It does not typically convey a threat to the other party/parties present, but is generally outside the bounds of respectful, equitable, dignified communication. Examples would include but not be limited to vulgar, or hostile comments: profanity, rudeness, overt unfairness and unprofessional conduct.

“But I didn’t intend...”

Lack of intent does not mitigate the consequence of behavior. “I didn’t intend to kill someone when I got in the car” does not resurrect the victim. “I didn’t mean that comment in a racist way, I’m just saying...” does not erase the impact of the words. Spilled milk is still on the floor, and even mopping it up does not replace the lost milk - or the breach in relationship that is created when respect is dismissed in favor of intent. Knowing there was no intent to harm is the beginning of the conversation toward understanding; it is not an excuse or rationale.

“That’s just their perception...”

The target’s perception/experience of an event is as valid as the perpetrator’s intent or lack thereof. See above. Dismissing the reality of consequences is as disrespectful of others’ lived experience as the damaging action was in the first place. This supposed justification just adds salt to the wound. From another “perspective”, why does “stand your ground” legislation hinge on the perception of threat by the homeowner, not on the intent of the intruder (to seek help, ask directions, introduce themselves)? Clearly, perception counts when it supports the power imbalance; why not when it calls out power imbalance?

“I’m exercising my right to freedom of speech...”

We are not, in fact, free to say anything that comes into our heads to whomever we choose whenever we like. It is against the criminal code to yell "Fire!" in a crowded theater, because people will get hurt. It is a hate crime to say things that incite violence against others because of personal characteristics, because people will get hurt. We cannot by talk about confidential information because it is a breach of someone's privacy and people get hurt. Our freedoms of speech, religion, peaceable assembly and so on are freedoms only until other people get hurt. They are freedoms to hold differing beliefs, to practice different religious expressions, to gather with contrasting points of view - they are not freedoms to be unleashed on one another in hatred, violence or disrespect. They are not freedoms to force one another into submission, oppression or exclude participation.

"I am exercising my academic freedom..."

Academic freedom is not a license to mistreat others, to diminish or suppress ideas or participation, or to treat disrespectfully those with whom we may quite legitimately disagree. Academic freedom is a construct designed to protect the exploration and expression of thought, ideas and innovation that may go against the status quo or the institutional position, and must not be constrained by threats of job loss, curtailment of exploration or funding cuts. Academic freedom is not a freedom to be abusive of others. It must be exercised with wisdom, respect and responsibility, in recognition of the protection of creative, challenging ideas without censure or job loss. It is a misuse of academic freedom to justify abuse.

"That's just them... they don't mean anything by their [harsh tone or mean comments or disparaging remarks]. Don't take them so seriously"

Excusing abuse as a function of someone's personality is like saying we should tolerate being struck in the face because the person has poor aim. Or that it's OK for some people to be disrespectful because of their personality, but it's not OK for others. So, if I'm garrulous and jovial, I can say whatever I want and no one will complain - "that's just them", but if I am quiet and retiring my mean remarks are unacceptable? Who can and who cannot be abusive because it's "just them"? If I am unkind and disrespectful to everyone does that make it alright? (What kind of world would we have in that case?) No, it is not sufficient to excuse disrespectful behavior because it is a function of personality, style, or power.

"I was only joking!"

When someone is insulted, it is doubly hurtful to then minimize that experience by calling the event a joke. Not only was it experienced as hurtful, that hurt was then dismissed. More salt in the wound. Should we not respect the experience of another - whether we agree or understand it or not, it is theirs - and stop to learn about that? Falling back on an excuse of joking only makes the situation worse. Seek first to understand, not to dismiss, another's experience.