

Ashley Muddiman, “Public Servants’ Perceptions of Incivility”

People who work in the fields of government and public service have expressed concern about rising incivility and have reached out to organizations such as the KU Public Management Center for help managing the difficult conversations they need to hold in their communities. Given the different types of incivility and the factors that can affect how people perceive interactions, it is important to study how people who work in government and public service understand incivility. Recent work in political incivility, especially in the field of political communication, has theorized incivility as a set of norm violations that can vary from violations of interpersonal politeness norms to violations of democracy and deliberation norms. Studies have found that an individual’s perceptions of incivility depend on the personal traits of that individual and on the context of an interaction. Further, these perceptions of incivility can affect engagement with politics. Prior work has focused on how members of the public approach incivility. The current study contributes to this conversation by exploring how public servants understand incivility.

Government and public service offers a rich, complex context in which to study incivility. Government offices, for instance, are workplaces where community members and public servants interact. Community members may express disapproval and grievances in emotional ways, may disrupt public meetings when they feel their community needs are not being met, or may harass and threaten violence against people who work in public service, any of which may be interpreted as uncivil by someone working in these environments. Further, there are power dynamics to consider. On one hand, the First Amendment empowers members of the public because uncivil speech cannot always be restricted. On the other hand, elected officials, who have more governing power than community members speaking at a public meeting, may target community members with incivility. All of these, and other, considerations make studying public servants’ understanding of incivility an essential, and missing, part of the incivility literature.

Using a survey of people who work in government and public service settings, this paper will answer several questions: What types of messages and behaviors do public servants consider to be uncivil? How frequently have they experienced incivility? How frequently do they believe others have experienced incivility? And do their perceptions of incivility vary according to factors such as the issue (e.g., public housing, infrastructure), setting (e.g., public meeting, government office), and group-identity of the people engaging in a behavior (e.g., in-group or out-group partisan). Answering these questions will extend current theories to ensure they are adequate for understanding public servants’ approaches to incivility. Further, the study will begin a line of research investigating how public servants can help improve public conversations about challenging community issues.