

That's just rude

Psychologists are finding that boorish behavior
can have a lasting effect on well-being.

BY REBECCA A. CLAY

Having worked as a bank teller for three and a half years before graduating from college in 2007, Michael T. Sliter, PhD, made a startling discovery: He found it easier to deal with the rare aggressive customers — people who shouted and spat — than people guilty of more subtle rudeness, such as not saying “please” or “thank you,” questioning his competence or talking on a cellphone instead of focusing on the business at hand.

“With people who are overly aggressive — shouting, yelling, occasionally spitting on you — you can attribute that behavior to their personality,” says Sliter, now an assistant professor of psychology at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. “At the end of the day, the type of customer who bothered me the most was just rude.”

Sliter didn't let the experience get him down. Instead, he went on to become one of a growing number of psychologists conducting research on incivility. With polls suggesting most Americans feel civility is in decline, psychologists and other researchers are finding that rudeness does more than just make life unpleasant. It also has an impact on our ability to concentrate, our well-being and the bottom line.

Technology's role

A 2012 poll of 1,000 American adults by Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate in partnership with KRC Research found that about two-thirds of participants believed that incivility is a

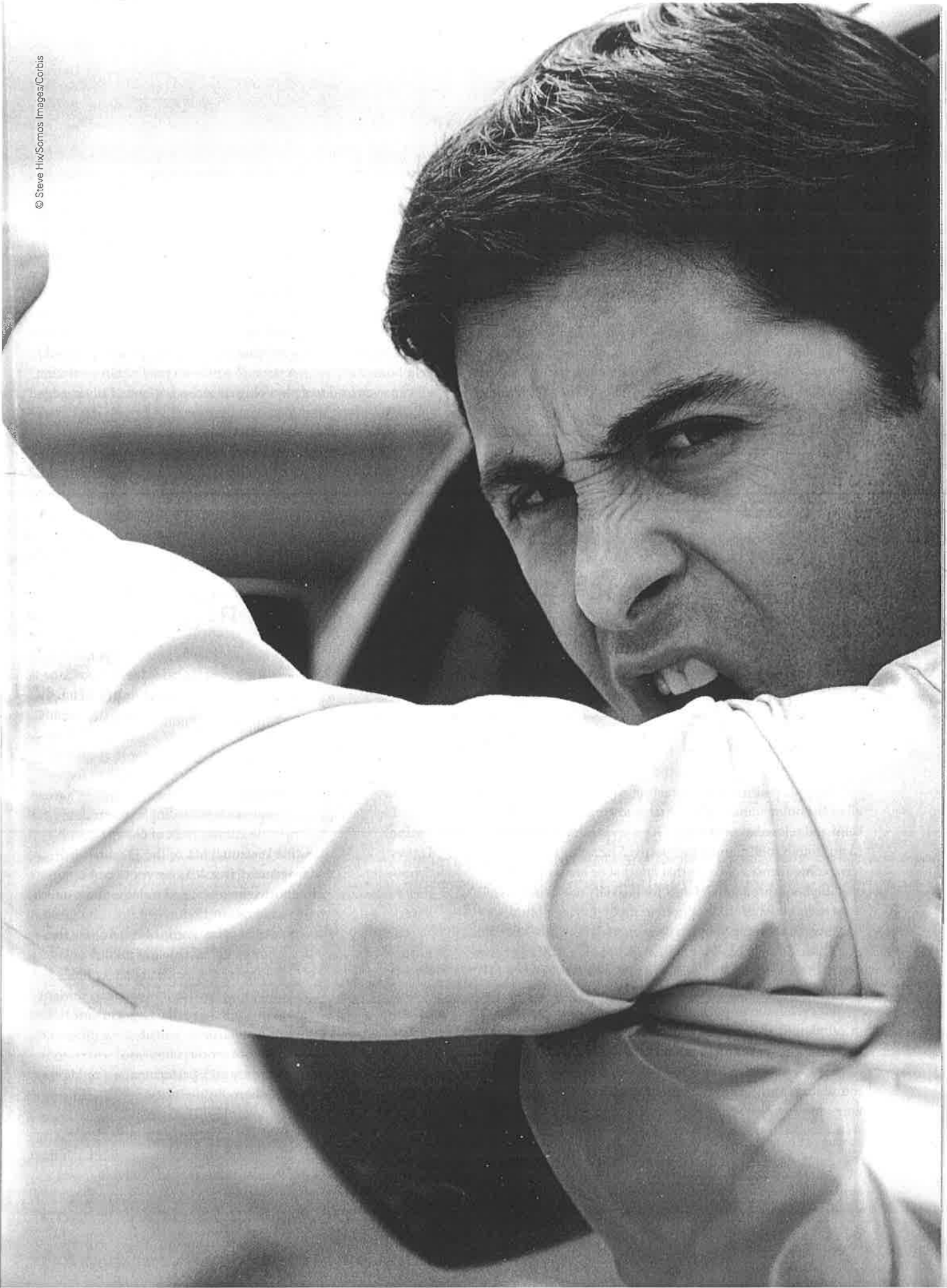
major problem. Almost three-quarters thought that civility has declined in recent years. While just 17 percent of participants reported being untouched by incivility, fewer reported personal experiences with incivility in certain contexts — on the road, while shopping, at work and in the neighborhood — than in last year's survey.

The poll did find a major increase in one area: online incivility and cyberbullying. Incidents doubled between 2011 and 2012, going from 9 percent of participants reporting that they had experienced such behavior to 18 percent.

Anonymity may be driving that phenomenon, says Ryan C. Martin, PhD, who chairs the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay psychology department. “When you're posting anonymously, you're more willing to say things you otherwise wouldn't say,” says Martin. Plus, he says, the fact that you can respond immediately reduces impulse control.

So-called rant sites like www.justrage.com encourage such behavior. But sparring with strangers on these sites, the comments sections of mainstream news sites or even Facebook and Twitter isn't good for your mental health, Martin and colleagues found in research published this year in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*.

In one study, a survey revealed that people who frequent rant sites score higher on anger measures, express their anger more maladaptively and experience such negative consequences as verbal and physical fights more frequently than others. A second



study, with college students as subjects, found that reading and writing such tirades typically worsened their moods.

Although both studies were small, says Martin, the findings debunk the conventional wisdom that venting is good for you and affirm other, larger studies, such as a 2002 study in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* by psychologist Brad J. Bushman, PhD, of The Ohio State University, who found the same thing.

"I used to have a soccer coach who said, 'Practice makes permanent,'" he says. "That's what's happening here: If you get in the habit of venting anger in this way, it becomes your go-to mechanism for dealing with anger in all circumstances."

likely to remember the content of the conversation.

It's the missing half of the conversation that hijacks attention, says Galván. "In a cellphone conversation, part of the context is missing," she explains. "Every bit of information is a surprise since there's no context, and that seems to grab people's attention."

Other research, such as a 2010 study by Elizabeth L. Hay, PhD, and Manfred Diehl, PhD, of Colorado State University, in *Psychology and Aging*, has found that lack of perceived control over a stressor — such as being unable to escape an overheard cellphone conversation because you're on public transportation — can even lead to a physiological stress response, Galván adds.

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The cycle is also self-perpetuating, says Martin, adding that all of the online ranters in the first study reported that they felt calm and relaxed after ranting. "It's a rewarding experience for them from a conditioning perspective," he says. "But the long-term consequences of using that anger style are unhealthy."

Cellphones are another target for incivility researchers. While most users no longer feel the need to shout into their phones, they may be so wrapped up "in their own little bubbles" that they don't realize they're blocking a sidewalk or holding up a line, says psychologist Veronica V. Galván, PhD, an assistant professor of psychological sciences at the University of San Diego.

But even more important is the fact that the very nature of cellphones, which allow others to hear only one side of the conversation, makes them uniquely irritating, she says. In a 2013 study published in *PLOS ONE*, Galván and colleagues found that overhearing a cellphone conversation is much more annoying and distracting than hearing two people talking. In the study, the researchers asked college students to do a concentration exercise while a confederate talked on a cellphone or when two people held the same conversation nearby. The students forced to overhear the one-sided conversation found themselves more irritated and distracted and were much more

Incivility in the workplace

Incivility is also increasing at work, according to research by business professors Christine Porath, PhD, of Georgetown University, and Christine Pearson, PhD, of the Thunderbird School of Global Management. In a 2011 survey of workers, they found that half reported being treated rudely at least once a week — up from just a quarter in 1998.

All that rudeness comes at a price, warns Michael Sliter, the former bank teller. In a study of 120 bank tellers published last year in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Sliter and his co-authors found that incivility — defined as low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect — made a big difference. Incivility from customers and co-workers increased tellers' absenteeism. It also decreased their sales performance, a rating that reflects the average number of recommendations to customers to open new accounts, try online banking, schedule a meeting about a mortgage or similar referrals that customers pursue.

In an earlier study of call center employees, published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* in 2011, Sliter and colleagues found that both the source and the target of incivility make a difference in outcomes. Incivility from customers had a

bigger impact on well-being than that from fellow employees. And workers who are easy to anger seem to experience more negative effects from conflict with customers.

“Workplace incivility — people being rude or not refilling the coffee pot when it’s empty — may seem like a relatively minor thing,” says Sliter. “But the fact is that it’s incredibly frequent and can have huge negative impacts on individuals.”

Fortunately, as other research shows, it’s possible to reduce workplace rudeness. Take the work of Michael P. Leiter, PhD, a psychology professor at Acadia University in Nova Scotia. Leiter has used an intervention called Civility, Respect and Engagement in the Workplace (CREW) — developed by a Veterans Health Administration team including psychologists Sue Dyrenforth, PhD, and Katerine Osatuke, PhD — to improve both civility and functioning in Canadian hospitals. The six-month intervention consists of units identifying specific concerns in workplace relationships, developing plans of action and evaluating their effectiveness.

Hospitals are fast-paced, multidisciplinary environments that depend on the smooth exchange of information, says Leiter. “If you offer a suggestion to someone who’s then snarky at you, you’ll hesitate before offering a suggestion to that jerk again,” he says. “That interrupts the flow of information — and the stakes are high.”

In a study of nearly 2,000 health-care providers in Canada published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* last year, Leiter and his co-authors found that the CREW intervention led to improvements in civility, reductions in the amount of incivility people experienced from their supervisors and decreased distress, with improvements continuing even a year after the intervention ended. Attitudes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment also saw sustained gains, although they didn’t continue to improve afterward.

The changes hospital units made were easy, too. Emergency room staff, for example, agreed to tap a CREW pin on their lapels if they felt offended as a way of signaling that they needed to talk things out when they got a chance. Other units posted weather reports of the “emotional climate,” with rainy days signaling rude behavior and prompting conversation.

“A big part of the intervention is just to

get people to talk about their relationships rather than just getting ticked off with people and complaining to their friends,” says Leiter. “That’s part of your professional responsibility: to maintain good working relationships just like you maintain equipment and report breakdowns.”

Leiter and his colleagues are now working with other health-care organizations and government agencies to spread the technique.

“Incivility is a solvable problem, not something you have to put up with,” he says. “You don’t have to wait until people get cynical or quit in disgust; it’s something management can do something about.” ■

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