

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Catching Rudeness is Like Catching a Cold: The Contagion Effects of Low-Intensity Negative Behaviors

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Key Words: Rudeness, contagion, incivility, dysfunctional work behaviors, cognition

Summary/Conclusions

It has been widely accepted that behaviors, much like a cold, are contagious and can be passed from one person to another. In three studies, researchers examined if rudeness could be "caught", how future interactions would be influenced by exposure, and if it could be passed to a third-party. The three studies discovered that rudeness is contagious and could be passed to a third-party. Rude events create accessibility for individuals to respond to rude words more quickly. Finally, since experiencing rudeness creates accessibility, it increases the likelihood that future behaviors are rude.

Limitations of Information

The study was conducted with a population that was predominantly in their early to mid-20's. It is not clear if an older population would respond similarly. The study didn't examine the effects of repeated events of rudeness. There is no known duration for contagion effects of rudeness. Rudeness was defined using interpersonal statements and rating scales. All of the studies had small sample sizes.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Implications for Cases of Rudeness

In three studies, researchers conducted social experiments on voluntary participants. In the first study, individuals were tasked with negotiating with either a rude or a neutral party. After a period of time ranging from the same day to 7 days later, participants were given surveys and were asked to negotiate with a third-party. The third-party and participants were surveyed about the interaction. This study found that when people negotiated with rude individuals in their first negotiation, their next negotiation was perceived to be more rude. This effect lasted up to 7 days after the initial exposure.

The second experiment had individuals witness a rude or neutral event. Participants were then tested on their word recognition. Individuals exposed to a rude event, were quicker to recognize and act when rude words appeared versus neutral or random characters. Results indicate that rudeness was more accessible in the brain after observing an outside rude event.

In the final experiment, participants were randomly assigned to 1 of 6 situations. They would play the role of an employee that was filling in for a supervisor. Participants responded to customer emails, then watched either a rude or neutral employee interaction video and finally responded to more email. The final emails were categorized as hostile, rude, or neutral. While the employee interactions had no bearing on the participants email response in either the

neutral or hostile conditions, with rudeness the participants paid it forward. It was the employees interactions that influenced the participants response in the final email.

Practical Applications

- ✓ Be mindful of your interactions. Rudeness is ambiguous. Ask how your interactions made others feel.
- ✓ Officers may need time to debrief or staff a case after meeting with particularly rude probationers. Try to avoid back to back appointments with difficult folks to allow time to decompress.
- ✓ Rudeness damages a relationship. Strive to achieve an authentic and genuine 4:1 ratio when dealing with someone who is disgruntled. Responding with a similarly negative tone will impede solving the issue.
- ✓ When addressing rude behavior, attempt to disconnect from emotional responses. Witnessing or experience a rude event may make it more likely that you will engage in rude behavior in the future.
- ✓ Supervisors should keep in mind that disengaged employees who are displaying negative behaviors in the work place can have a serious effect on team morale. Even low level behavior or undercurrents of toxicity are impactful.
- ✓ Supervisors should consider including questions about office morale and the health of the team as part of their regular individual meetings with staff.