The identity impact of witnessing selective incivility: a study of minority ethnic professionals

Abstract

We examine how minority ethnic employees account for witnessing selective incivility to ethnically similar others. Our study is based on qualitative interviews with British Asian employees – the majority who witnessed incivility directed towards migrant Asian employees working for the same company. Our findings indicate that, for those whose minority ethnic identity was of central importance, witnessing selective incivility towards others from a similar ethnic background can be perceived as an identity threat. We provide insights into three identity work strategies undertaken by witnesses of selective incivility, while illuminating how minority ethnic identity shapes the way witnesses' respond to selective incivility in the workplace.

Key words: *incivility, identity work, ethnic identity, third party witnesses, diversity*

Introduction

Incivility, in terms of low-level non-physical negative behaviours which conflict with normative notions of mutual respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999: Yao et al. 2022) is a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary workplaces (Porath & Pearson, 2013). Experiencing incivility includes being ignored (Porath & Pearson, 2010), being excluded from camaraderie (Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2012) or being subjected to insensitive and condescending remarks (Yao et al. 2022). Incivility can be selective when an individual's membership of a particular demographic category is the trigger for their experience of incivility. For instance, research indicates that minority ethnic (Deitch et al., 2003; Smith et al, 2021; Sue et al., 2007; Van Laer & Janssens, 2011), women (Smith et al, 2021), and homosexual employees (Berdahl & Moore,

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2006; Cortina, 2008) are more likely to be subjected to incivility than other employees. Selective incivility not only has negative effects on targets, but it also negatively affects bystander witnesses (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004).

While the literature addresses the responses of third-party witnesses to selective incivility (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Herschcovis et al. 2017; Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019), in the majority of extant studies, witnesses' responses are explained in terms of the need to restore fairness and justice (Miner & Cortina, 2016). From this perspective, people hold morality-based assumptions about how human beings should be treated (Folger & Cropanzano, 2001). Therefore witnessing incivility can result in them experiencing a sense of moral violation (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019) and lead to morally-driven emotional responses such as anger or empathy (Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017), which can trigger the need for them to respond in ways that restore justice (Reich & Hershcovis, 2015). Justice may be restored through punishing the perpetrator (Folger, 2001) or engaging in victim-directed helping behaviour (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). While insightful, justice-based theorising tends to homogenise witnesses' experiences of incivility, implying that all incumbents have similar justice-based motives to act. Furthermore, it offers little explanation for the individual experience of witnessing incivility. Indeed, a strong critique of the growing literature on incivility is its weak theoretical development (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019; Schilpzand et al., 2016). In other words, there are fewer theoretical explanations provided for the 'why' question of witnessed incivility. Hence, there is a need to go beyond the justice perspective (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019) to explore alternative explanations for why and how witnesses respond to selective incivility in the workplace.

A person's sense of 'who they are' can shape the way they experience and respond to events in the workplace (Leigh & Melwani, 2019; Major et al., 2002). When people witness selective incivility directed to similar others, they may experience a sense of threat to their identity and that dynamic subjective interpretations of the self (Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018). Early scholarship has recognised that incivility can pose an identity threat to victims, making them feel less of a person (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). From a social identity theory perspective (Tajfel, 1978), individual identity is grounded in cognitive, moral, and emotional connections to broader communities (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Individuals often define themselves as part of collectives (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and therefore when they see that 'others like them' are being treated in a degrading manner, they may become aware of the gap between how they perceive the group they identity with and how others perceive it (Stryker, 1987; Burke 1991). This can lead to a sense of threat (Petriglieri, 2011) as individuals start to feel that the collectives to which they feel connected to are perceived negatively (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Holmes et al. 2016). Threats call for responsive adjustment to sense of self through identity work. Through identity work individuals can exercise agency to adapt, revise, and/or maintain self-conceptions (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) to better cope with threatening situations.

In this article, we examine 30 British Asian employees' accounts of selective incivility in the Finance and IT industry in Britain. As we asked these individuals about their experiences of selective incivility in the workplace (Cortina, 2008), 26 respondents explained how recent migrant workers from non-western nations who were perceived to lack required linguistic and cultural skills were often subjected to selective incivility. They reflected on how witnessing such selective incivility to especially South Asian migrants made them feel as British Asians. We focused on understanding how a minority ethnic identity characterised by dynamic and multiple affiliation (Hopkins and Blackwood, 2011) to British and Asian categories, influenced

incumbents' experience of and responses to the selective incivility that they witnessed in the workplace.

In what follows, we will first review relevant literatures focusing on the interaction between witnessing selective incivility, minority ethnic identity and identity work. We will then explain our research design and introduce our data. Based on our findings we make three theoretical contributions. Our first contribution involves conceptualising selective incivility as an identity threatening experience for minority ethnic witnesses, triggering considerations of the meaning of their ethnic identity, when that minority ethnic identity is important to their sense of self. Individuals from similar backgrounds differ in the extent to which they attach importance to any particular ethnic or national identity (Deaux, 2018). We argue that the identity threatening effects of witnessing selective incivility apply most strongly to those who have a meaningful connection to the targeted identity. Our second contribution provides insights into three identity work strategies undertaken by witnesses of selective incivility. Our third contribution involves showing how minority ethnic identity shapes the *way* witnesses' respond to selective incivility in the workplace. We conclude by elaborating the practical implications of our findings.

Witnessing selective incivility, minority ethnic identity and identity work

Incivility has been defined as "low intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target" (Andersson and Pearson, 1999:457; Yao et al. 2022). However, scholars have recognised that incivility can overlap with more explicit forms of gender and/or race based discrimination and harassment, encompassing "antisocial behaviours that are degrading, offending, or intimidating to targets and/or violating standards of interpersonal respect" (Cortina, 2008: 57). While incivility generally does not involve making explicit reference to demographic categories such as race, it can represent covert manifestations of racial bias in the

workplace (Cortina, 2008: 57). Selective incivility impacts on not only targets (Lim & Lee, 2011) but also third-party witnesses (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2006). A small but emerging literature provide insights into how witnesses experience negative affect (Totterdell, Hershcovis, Niven, Reich, & Stride, 2012), reduced well-being (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019), declining performance (Porath & Erez, 2009), reduced job satisfaction (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007) and decline in trust and sense of safety within the organisation (Miner & Cortina, 2016). Studies also distinguish between third party actors' intervention behaviours, highlighting behaviours aimed at changing the outcomes of incivility and its future occurrence (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Hershcovis et al., 2017; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015) and the more automatic and emotionally-driven interpersonal responses (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019) such as retributive actions against perpetrators (Reich & Hershcovis, 2015) or restorative actions aimed at compensating targets (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Herschovis & Batnagar 2017). In this literature, less is known about the 'identity effects' of witnessing incivility.

Witnessing selective incivility, directed at ethnically similar others, may be particularly threatening and disorientating for individuals whose identities meaningfully straddle the perpetrator and the target group. Studies have shown that British-born minority ethnic people have stronger British identities than their migrant counterparts (Nandi and Platt, 2015) yet can feel uncertain about the extent to which their claims to a British identity are generally accepted (Jaspal et al, 2021) and perceiving racial discrimination can intensify this insecurity. Ethnic identities frequently comprise (dynamic) multiple affiliations at different levels (Hopkins and Blackwood, 2011; Dovidio et al. 2016). Self-schemas are our cognitive understanding of who and what we are and "…*are often organised hierarchically such that the more specific elements are subsumed under more inclusive ones…*" (Amiot & Jaspal, 2014: 157). The significance an individual gives to his or her ethnic identity at a point in time may depend on how they

perceive it to be regarded by others (Kenny & Briner, 2013). Minority ethnic individuals can experience increased salience of their minority ethnicity when they feel they are being viewed through the lens of their minority ethnic group membership (Kenny & Briner, 2013). Hence certain situational factors (such as selective incivility) may increase the awareness of a particular dimension of an ethnic identity and activate short-term self-categorisation that focuses an individual on their affiliation with a specific group (Amiot & Raspal, 2014). From this perspective, witnessing selective incivility to ethnically-similar others may increase the salience of the Asian aspect of a British Asian identity, and lead to employees experiencing the Asian aspect of their identity as devaluing even though they normally see themselves as being 'British' and 'Asian'. Thus, witnesses may feel a lack of coherence between the various dimensions of their ethnic identity. A British Asian individual who witnesses selective incivility to an Asian employee, may wonder if being British and having family origins in the Asian sub-continent are somewhat incompatible. In other words, the experience of witnessing selective incivility in the work context may challenge the idea that superordinate and sub-group aspects of ethnic identity are compatible. Given that individuals have a strong drive to feel that the different aspects that make up their sense of identity cohere, any indication that aspects of self-identity are not compatible can leave the individual vulnerable to experiencing identity threat (Amiot & Jaspal, 2014) calling for identity work. We therefore argue that although witnessing incivility to an ethnically-similar other may be difficult for any minority ethnic employee, the identity work for those whose self-esteem relies on a sense of identification to the group of the victim and the group of the perpetrator has an added dimension. This added dimension will include reflection on the security of their claim to a British identity alongside their Asian one (Jaspal et al, 2021) and whether the 'racial boundary' (Jaspal et al, 2021 pg. 458) to being accepted as British can be traversed.

Identity work refers to agentic efforts to create, repair, maintain, strengthen and revise meanings of the self (Caza et al., 2018). Identity work can be done through talk, physical appearances and behaviours (Brown, 2015) to serve specific motives such as belongingness, self-enhancement and self-protection (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). We found no studies on identity work undertaken in response to witnessed incivility. However, the vast literature on identity work indicates that individuals who experience a sense of threat can engage in identity work to controvert their experience (Zapf & Gross, 2001) or rely on tactics such as humour and ambivalence to deflect the pain associated with the perceived threat (Ashforth & Kriener, 1999). For instance, in a study of 18 dirty work occupations, Ashforth, Kriener, Clarke & Fugate (2007) shows how managers engage in humor to diffuse the stress associated with problematic tasks. Individuals can also do identity work to separate perceptions of group-level treatment from personal treatment highlighting greater adversities against the group than against themselves personally (Foster & Matheson, 1999), or to position themselves as exceptions to negative connotations that cause group members to be treated unfavourably. For instance, Ezzel (2009) shows how women rugby players position themselves as exceptions to negative stereotypes that cast them as butch women, by casting themselves as "simultaneously tough, heterosexual, and conventionally attractive" (ibid: 124). Similarly, Jorgenson (2002) shows how women engineers contrast themselves with their fellow female counterparts to make the point that they do not embody stereotypically feminine traits such as sensitivity and nail painting. Individuals can also do identity work to adopt a more active stance to denigrate (see Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) perpetrators to draw self-enhancing inferences about their own self and/or their group. Alternatively, they can re-frame devaluing situations to make it less offensive and/or focus their attention to the positive outcomes of negative experiences (see Dutton, Roberts & Bednar, 2010; Maitlis, 2009). For instance, Slay and Smith (2011) provide insights into how Black journalists attempt to redefine the stigma attributed to them in positive

terms highlighting how their racial identity facilitates a distinctive perspective on civil rights, while Maitlis (2009) shows how injured musicians highlight how their injury paved the way for positive identity transformation and growth. Through identity work individuals can fulfill various important identity motives (Vignoles et al. 2006) such as the need for belongingness, self-coherence, self-continuity, meaningfulness, self-efficacy and control (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016) which enables them to cope with an identity threat.

The identity work that minority ethnic individuals undertake in response to an identity threat, may be influenced by their dynamic dual affiliations. Even in the face of an identity threat, it is possible for minority ethnic individuals to simultaneously identify with both superordinate and sub-group identities (Crisp, 2010). In other words, as individuals cogitate on how the witnessed slight is relevant to what it means to be Asian, they may still retain a sense of being British. Therefore, the identity work that they undertake in response to the threat may reflect this (dynamic) dual affiliation. However, we know little about how the complex multiple affiliations characterising ethnic identities shape witnesses' specific responses to selective incivility.

Previous studies have noted that sense of 'ethnic/racial similarity' can shape third party actors' intervention behaviour (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977; Gaertner, Dovidio, & Johnson, 1982). For instance, bystanders are seen as less likely to intervene or intervene more slowly in situations involving a victim of a different race, although in serious emergencies the race of the victim is not related to intervention (Brewster & Tucker, 2015). Scholars also suggest witnessing the suffering of a victim who shares a common identity with oneself is more likely to threaten an individual's sense of a just world than if this was not the case (Correia, Vala & Aguiar, 2001). The degree of centrality of this 'common identity' to the witnesses own sense of self is relevant.

Social identity theory suggests that whenidentification to a particular social identity is significant, individuals are more likely to interpret interactions with 'out-group' members on an inter-group rather than an inter-personal level (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

In this article, we examine how minority ethnic individuals identifying with British and Asian categories, experience and respond to selective incivility aimed at Asian migrants in the workplace. Drawing on 30 British Asian employees' accounts of witnessed incivility in the Accountancy and Finance and IT industry in Britain, we show how witnesses interpret acts of selective incivility as an identity threatening experience and explore the specific forms of identity work that they undertake in response to this threat.

Research design

Our study is based on a sample of ethnic minority employees of South Asian heritage from the Information Technology, Accountancy and Finance sectors in the UK. As individuals from South Asian backgrounds are relatively well represented in these sectors, making up 11% of IT specialists in 2020 (British Computer Society, 2021) and around 18.7% of the workforce in Finance and Banking (ONS, 2019) and over half of the tier 2 (skilled worker) visa applications made to the UK government were for these two sectors (Home Office, 2018) there is sufficient representation of South Asian employees to examine the 'identity effects' of witnessing selective incivility to 'ethnically similar' others.

The aim of our study was to understand British Asian employees' experiences of minority ethnicity in the workplace, and therefore perceptions of differential treatment were a central theme that we addressed. We employed one to one qualitative interviews (King, 2004) to gather data from our respondents. A pre-prepared topic guide guided the interview, covering ethnic

identity, ethnic stereotypes, perceptions of differential treatment towards self and similar others, how it makes individuals feel and how they cope and respond to this. In addition, we asked questions related to respondents' career aspirations, organizational cultures and guidelines on informal conduct. In response to our questions on differential treatment towards self and similar others, twenty six informants described low level negative behaviors directed towards migrants from non-western nations, implying that people were subjected to such incivility for a reason - because they were perceived to lack required linguistic, cultural and social skills[i]. Each of these 26 respondent shared at least one account of selective incivility that they witnessed in the workplace. Four of the 30 respondents said that they have not witnessed any selective incivility in their workplace.

The majority of respondents did not talk about experiencing selective incivility within their workplaces, although they acknowledged that they often felt ethnically assigned by others (Kenny and Briner, 2013). This may partially reflect their early career status and limited exposure within the world of work. The three female respondents from the IT sector were a notable exception where they acknowledged that they have experienced and witnessed gender-based selective incivility in their workplace. However, they said that they did not experience gender-based incivility as particularly devaluing and appeared to adopt a matter of fact stance towards it. Twenty six respondents however talked about how migrants from non-western nations who lack required linguistic and cultural skills were often ignored and overlooked by superiors (Porath & Pearson, 2010), excluded from day to day camaraderie in the workplace (Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2012) and at times subjected to demeaning remarks and other low-level insults (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). We asked these respondents to reflect how witnessing selective incivility to similar others made them feel, why and how they responded to it. We asked them to provide specific examples of selective incivility that they witnessed, and to

reflect on how they felt at the time, what they did and why. Respondents explained how the selective incivility they witnessed (to especially individuals from South Asia who were identified as the largest minority and migrant group in their organisation) reminded them about the stories of close family members who had experienced ethnicity-based selective incivility in the past. They highlighted that their status as 'ethnically marked' individuals came into fore, making them feel devalued, conflicted and triggering concerns about how they were perceived by others in the workplace. We probed them to reflect further on these experiences.

The study participants were well-qualified graduates. They were aged 21-26 years at the time of data collection and were born in the UK. Most respondents had parents who had migrated from Sri Lanka in the 1980s. They held an array of junior graduate level positions in their organizations such as management trainee, business analyst, programmer etc. (see table 1 for demographic details of respondents).

Insert table 1 about here

Our sample was a convenient sample in comprising British Sri Lankans. One of the authors, who was born and raised in Sri Lanka, used her personal contacts in the Sri Lankan diaspora to access British Sri Lankan professionals attached to companies in the IT, Accountancy Finance sectors - occupational sectors that position themselves as striving towards a diverse and inclusive workforce. Notably, they were not acquaintances of the first author but rather the contacts of 'other people' known to her. Nevertheless, she was recognised as an insider by respondents (Karra & Phillips, 2008). Her insider knowledge and status and the degree of access that she had to this ethnic community enabled her to develop trust and rapport and gather rich data on this potentially sensitive and intimate research topic. In-depth qualitative

interviews also facilitated the development of trust and rapport required to enable the researcher to gather intimate data on the experience of witnessing selective incivility that is revealing for both parties (Douglas, 1985). In this approach the researcher makes no claim to being objective but is reflexively aware of her own subjectivities. Indeed, questionnaire and survey-based inquiry, which dominate the workplace incivility literature (Cortina, 2008), are more limited in this regard.

Questions were typically open ended and were not asked in any particular order. Respondents often introduced their own topics but the interviewer ensured that all the topics on the interview guide were covered. In contrast to the neo-positivist conception of the interview, our aim was not to establish a context-free truth about reality (Silverman, 2000) by gathering stable responses from interviewees to unbiased questions asked in the same order. Rather our objective was to understand experiences from the perspective of the interviewee, and to understand how and why he or she comes to have this particular perspective (King, 1994). In other words, the respondent was seen as a "participant" in the research actively shaping the course of the interview rather than passively responding to pre-set questions in an orderly manner. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours. The objectives of the study were explained to participants and they were told about how their data would be anonymised, stored and used for research purposes. In line with standard practice, all participants signed a consent form and they were aware that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any point of time or withdraw their data from the study. The interviews commenced with demographic questions (which included basic questions about work and career) to encourage participants to warm up to the interview. Questions were open-ended to give respondents the opportunity to share their views in their own way and introduce their own topics (Oakley, 1981). While follow-up and probing questions were asked, we took care to ensure that participants wouldn't feel that they

were questioned in an intrusive or hostile way. Furthermore, we avoided phrasing questions in a leading way. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews and analysis took place iteratively.

Data analysis

We analysed our data using the narrative method. The narrative method is grounded in many disciplines, and it is used in various ways by scholars (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011; Riessman, 1993). It involves analysing data to identify meaningful storylines in the accounts of informants (Polkinghorne, 1988). A narrative approach suggests that people make sense of their experiences through narration (Czarniawska, 2004; Sims, 2003). By telling their stories, individuals interpret events and bestow them with meaning, coping with many challenges that they experience in the workplace.

We chose the narrative method because it suited our research question which aimed to understand how individuals of minority ethnic heritage experience witnessing selective incivility to ethnically similar others in the workplace. We saw the narrative method as useful to illuminate any "nuances of meaning" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11) attributed to the experience of witnessing selective incivility, and enabling us to gain a contextualized understanding of the 'why' and 'how' underpinning our respondents' accounts.

We read the transcripts in detail, focusing on the thoughts and actions related to differential treatment towards self and others. We wrote a short case summary for each transcript. This consisted a short synopsis of witnessed and/or experienced selective incivility as well as overt discrimination in the workplace, the ways in which the respondent made sense of and responded to such treatment and broader experiences that may have informed participants'

thinking where these were mentioned - for example, migrant parents' struggles in the 1980s as well as early experiences of discrimination. The synopsis also included details about how the respondent accounted for his/her minority ethnic identity. Four respondents insisted that they have never witnessed or experienced selective incivility in the workplace. We wrote case summaries of their transcripts as well, considering what may have influenced their position. We analyzed a total of 41 accounts.

We then worked to distinguish between identify recurrent themes. This led us to develop three distinctive narratives, which we labelled as 'excusing selective incivility', 'meliorating' and 'passive aggression' towards instigators of selective incivility.' All three narratives were characterized by a common pattern where participants described the act of incivility that they witnessed, explained how they experienced this act and then described their response to it. In the excusing narrative, individuals responded by explaining selective incivility in terms of unintentionality, inevitability and/or lack of time. In the 'meliorating' narrative, individuals talked about intervening to counteract the negative effects of selective incivility and in the passive aggression narrative, individuals talked about indirectly retaliating to perpetrators of selective incivility. We went through several refinements of the narratives presented here, constantly moving between the emerging narrative and data, to ensure that we were creating a credible narrative (see Sonenshein, 2010). Once we agreed on the narratives, we then used these as descriptions to code the transcripts (King, 2004).

Our analysis then moved on to a theoretical level. We attempted to understand the identity implications of each narrative. All narratives conveyed a common experience of an identity threat, however the responsive identity work differed by each narrative. We attempted to identify when each strategy was used and in what circumstances. Individuals reframed when

the selective incivility that they witnessed involved high-power individuals (with an established reputation for busyness and good character) 'speaking over' or 'disregarding' migrant employees. They positioned themselves as meliorators when selective incivility involved migrant employees being ignored or isolated in a social gathering. They demonstrated passive aggression when the act of selective incivility appeared to be repetitive and personalised (from a particular perpetrator to a particular victim).

We also noticed that people implicitly and/or explicitly referred to their British and Asian affiliations in their narratives. We thus attempted to understand how this dual affiliation influenced their responses to selective incivility. We coded the data to understand how individuals constructed and communicated their ethnic identity. We noticed that the 26 respondents who constructed and communicated an ethnic identity by drawing on British, Asian and Sri Lankan aspects talked about witnessing selective incivility in the workplace and responding to what they witnessed (rather discreetly) according to varying contextual circumstances. In contrast, the four respondents who constructed an ethnic identity by showing a very strong affiliation with the British category and distancing from the Asian category, or attempted to refrain from ethnic categorisation altogether said that they have never witnessed selective incivility in the workplace.

Our claim to trustworthiness is based on two grounds. First, we suggest that respondents' accounts should be trusted because the fieldworker was accepted as a peer, showed genuine interest in understanding the interviewees' views and experiences, and guaranteed confidentiality. Second, we focused on the plausibility rather than the accuracy of the respondents' accounts. We did not treat the respondents' accounts as 'true' versions of a fixed 'reality', but rather as shared constructions of the social world (Silverman, 2000). Viewed from

this perspective, contradictions, exaggerations, and extreme representations provide insights into the motives and meanings of respondents' behaviours. We were reflexive of the fieldworker's status as an ethnic minority migrant and attempted to mitigate its effects by assuming complementary roles in the data analysis process. One author had a first-hand picture of the empirical setting. Being detached from the field, the other author was in a position to more effectively challenge emerging interpretations and to provide alternative views of the phenomena under review. The two authors had repeated discussions on the nature and meaning of the data set and gradually constructed a joint interpretation of the empirical evidence.

Findings

We present our findings in two sections. In the first section we show the different ways in which our respondents constructed and communicated a minority ethnic identity. In the second section we introduce narratives of witnessing selective incivility in the workplace, highlighting three different types of identity work adopted by witnesses to deal with the devaluing experience, while also noting the accounts of a small minority who said that they have not observed selectively incivility in the workplace.

Constructing a British Asian ethnic identity

All of our respondents identified themselves as British Asian. Twenty six out of thirty respondents drew on British, Asian and Sri Lankan aspects to communicate a minority ethnic identity that highlighted commonalities with the British majority while also recognising Asian heritage and (often) Sri Lankan origin. Many of these respondents explained how their British superordinate identity enhances Asian aspects of their identity. For example, Rawin drew on Asian stereotypes of hard work (Woolf et al. 2008) and what he saw as the British tendency to prioritise quality of life to explain his minority ethnic identity:

I am very hardworking like most Asian people but I am not competitive like some people who grew up in Asia. I guess growing up in a context with limited resources makes people very competitive. Like most British people, life for me is not limited to material goals – quality of life matters. I like to travel, go on holidays. I will work hard more than many people – my family always instilled the importance of working hard but it wouldn't overtake my life… We always went to Sri Lanka for holidays. It is a major holiday destination and people from Sri Lanka go on many holidays

While Rarwin claimed Asian stereotypes of hard work, he also distinguished himself from Asian migrants, positioning them as competitive. He implies that his Asian identity is enhanced by his British identity and Sri Lankan origin – he is hardworking but he also knows how to appreciate life more broadly. Similarly, his British identity is enhanced by his Asian identity – while he appreciates good quality of life he also understands the importance of working hard. Thus, for Rarwin, both aspects of identity (Asian and British) are required to make sense of one another. Denying any one aspect will altogether breach his understanding of his ethnic identity.

Some of these respondents also highlighted commonalities between British and Asian cultures to make the point that it is difficult to draw distinctions between their superordinate and subordinate aspects of identifications. In Sarpreet's words:

Asian people are considered community oriented. I was taught since small days to place high importance on family and close relatives. Sri Lankan communities are particularly tightly knit – possibly because the country is very small. But really speaking, we cannot say that British people are not community oriented. I grew up in Britain and caring, family and the importance of friendship was a significant value I learned from school,

teachers and friends. I struggle to draw distinctions between what is Asian and what is

British because there are so many common traits shared by both cultures

Highlighting significant overlaps across British and Asian (and Sri Lankan) categories, Sarpreet makes the point that her ethnic identity cannot be compartmentalized (Hopkins and Blackwood, 2011).

Some respondents explained how they merged Asian and British elements in their ethnic identity without giving dominance to any one category:

> *There are so many commonalities in the cultures. The British sense of appropriateness*
>
> *for instance is prevalent in South Asian societies. In me, I can't distinguish between*
>
> *British parts and Asian parts at times – both parts are important for me. But I also have*
>
> *the typical Asian determination I think – I don't know whether all British people are so*
>
> *doggedly determined. I am very tactful which is typically British (Charwin)*

In contrast to the twenty-six respondents noted above, three respondents aligned themselves to the British superordinate category over the Asian subordinate category in accounting for their minority ethnic identity. In Darpreet's words:

> *I see myself as more British than Asian. I can't see any Asian in me. I honestly can't.*
>
> *My siblings are different – they like Sri Lankan food, most of their friends are Indian.*
>
> *But since I was small, I was different. My mother used to cook me separate food –*
>
> *English food. I had white friends. So even children from the same family can be*
>
> *different. The others can understand Sinhalese (LANGUAGE) to some extent because*
>
> *our parents have always spoken to each other in it. But I cannot. Everyone finds this*
>
> *strange. My partner says this to me all the time (Darpreet)*

Darpreet uses her lack of affinity for the cuisine and language of her Asian background to denote her distance from her Asian ethnic identity. She contrasts herself to her siblings who have a stronger Asian ethnic identity and highlights how individuals can construct a minority ethnic identity in diverse ways.

One respondent discussed how he does not feel that he belongs to any particular ethnic category, insisting that he does not like to think of himself as similar to Asians, Sri Lankans or British:

> *I don't look at people in terms of where they come from or think of myself like that* (Akul)

However, Akul did acknowledge that when asked to classify himself for official purposes, he selected the British Asian category. Hence illustrating that for some minorities, there is a separation between the category they opt into for official purposes and their sense of ethnic identity.

In the next section we will examine how these respondents accounted for witnessing selective incivility towards others in their workplace.

Witnessing selective incivility

The twenty-six respondents who constructed and communicated a minority ethnic identity in terms of Asian, British and Sri Lankan aspects agreed that employees from non-western contexts were often ignored, excluded, overlooked and (at times) subjected to rudeness in their organisations. Informants implied that people were subjected to such incivility for a reason –

because they lacked desired linguistic and cultural skills. Our respondents provided insights into the identity threat that they experienced as witnesses of selective incivility in the workplace, highlighting three forms of identity work they adopted in response to the threat. These identity work strategies were not mutually exclusive, but were used dynamically by respondents under distinct situational circumstances. In the following sections, we will examine these identity work strategies, highlighting how they are shaped by a minority ethnic identity comprising Asian and British facets.

Excusing

Excusing involved explaining observed acts of incivility in terms of unintentionality, inevitability and/or lack of time, and making the incivility seem less offensive. Excusing was used when selective incivility in terms of 'speaking over others' and/or 'disregarding contributions' was perpetrated by high-power individuals with an established reputation for busyness. Excusing the acts they witnessed, arguably enables witnesses to reduce the sense of threat that they experienced. Darwin from Accounting reflects on her managing director's approach towards international colleagues:

> *When I see people disregard alternative perspectives because it is not presented in ideal English although it is perfectly understandable, I remember my doctor parents who have been in similar situations. I wonder if they (people in her organisation) think that I am not great either because there seems to be a sense of disregard towards a group of people who are very much like me .. I know that I speak very well – I grew up here but I can feel degraded - they look just like me …..He (Managing director) is generally a very nice guy - he talks over a couple of our international colleagues when they are out of point…It makes them feel bad because he is a very important person here and everybody would like to impress him. I can understand how they feel because I come*

from a minority ethnic background. I was always exposed to people who spoke in different languages so I am more able to communicate with anybody. But obviously everyone doesn't come from where I do and we can't expect everybody to think and act in the same way. …..I get bothered by it.. personally affected ...when it happens in the office… I always feel that it could be me ……if I was raised somewhere else… But then he is always strapped for time … You have to move fast in this organisation. It is all about performance. There is no time to think and relax, you have to get things done ….

(Darwin)

Darwin's excerpt highlights how witnessing incivility in terms of the contributions of ethnically-similar others being disregarded, brought back stories of the past ("*I remember my doctor parents who have been in similar situation*"). While the incivility that he witnessed was low level and implicit and was based on one's linguistic and sociocultural skills as opposed to colour of their skin, these experiences made him wonder if he too is perceived in similarly devalued manner. On one hand, Darwin felt threatened fearing that he too might be subjected to such treatment ('*I always feel that it could be me'*). Indeed, having migrant parents with similar linguistic skills appeared to enhance his sense of similarity to victims. On the other hand, he was able to draw on his British upbringing and linguistic skills to distinguish between his own self and victims. Nevertheless, he highlights that witnessing selective incivility to ethnically-similar others negatively impacted his self-worth. His response involves excusing the rude behaviour suggesting that the instigator may be strapped for time. Indeed, his interpretation attempts to pull the selectively rude behaviour into the realm of "general incivility". Furthermore, Darwin suggests that the instigator is known as a 'nice guy' by others in the workplace – in other words, it would be out of character for him to intentionally humiliate or hurt another person. Darwin is arguably able to feel a sense of security in the knowledge

that the senior people in his organisation are not exclusionary. Furthermore, his response facilitates him continuing to feel connected to and accepted by his colleagues (Vignoles et al. 2006) which is an important identity motive (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Striking in his account is how discourses of performance orientation, efficiency, and getting things done underpin efforts to excuse. Participants excused the selective incivility of senior managers by arguing that they lacked time and were very busy. Such participants saw this behaviour as justifiable in their high- performance oriented organisational cultures.

Maramjit who worked in the IT industry similarly tried to excuse her manager's slowness to acknowledge migrant workers and to talk over them:

> *He (MANAGER) talks over them – because they tend to take a lot of time to say things commensurate with the fact that English is not their first language as it is ours. But in theory it is not right – it can make people feel bad. I don't know if I am sensitive to these things because I am a person of colour and a second-generation migrant. When it comes to ethnicity you are aware of the power differentials, history – it can have a depreciating effect for even a moment, remind you of your roots. But this particular manager, he is a good person – that is if you put aside his insensitiveness when it comes to this. He is obviously very busy too and in this occupation, people have limited time to do anything – time becomes more limited as you get more senior…. The migrant guys are slow to be acknowledged in teams just because their social skills are different. Obviously, they are from India. I mean this kind of thing happens due to women as well –although they are not so different. But gender is not a sensitive issue as race is. When something happens to a racialised someone – it can make you think about your own self even if you don't usually think about these things and barely know the person ......*
> *(*Maramjit*)*

Maramjit highlights how witnessing incivility to a *racialized other* brought her minority ethnic identity to the fore (*remind you of your roots*). Maramjit responds by excusing the act of selective incivility as unintentional and highlighting the perpetrator's 'good character' outside 'speaking over' migrant employees and drawing on discourses related to lack of time and seniority. Through excusing, Maramjit is arguably able to avoid contemplating about external perceptions of her own self as an ethnically marked being, reducing subjective uncertainty and maintaining a more positive conception of self (Vignoles et al. 2006). While Maramjit associated herself with migrant workers on the grounds of her Asian heritage, she also highlighted British aspects of his identity in implying that she speaks English as a first language and thereby shut down the possibility that she can be treated like migrant employees. It is notable that Maramjit perceives ethnic identity as a more salient identity than gender identity. While gender-based incivility was seen as part and parcel of the male dominated IT industry she was situated within, incivility based on racial or ethnic fault lines triggered identity concerns that may not otherwise be consciously considered, leading to incumbents experiencing a sense of threat. Indeed other female respondents from the IT sector similarly noted that selective incivility on the basis of gender was also pervasive in their organisations. However, they argued that they did not experience gender-based incivility as identity threatening as incivility on the basis of race/ethnicity.

Programmer Luwin attempted to reframe the selective incivility that a senior manager in his organisation bestowed towards fellow programmers from the Indian subcontinent:

> *Our logistics director is a very reasonable guy in most matters but I have noticed him overlooking the opinions of some of our IT people when they say that they have done things in India. He lets their comments pass, almost as if he is too polite to tell them that their work in India has no substance. When your boss overlooks your comments,*

you feel stupid, inadequate. You can see it in their faces. I feel bad whenever it happens. ..I feel bad as a person of Asian heritage. I sometimes get into wondering what they think of me - which I don't like to do because it is very taxing. So I just tell myself that this is just the way the world it. I volunteered at NAME OF WORKPLACE in Sri Lanka when I was young and they reiterated to me that 'western' ways don't work for Sri Lanka. So it is human nature I suppose and I am sure that our logistics director wouldn't purposefully disadvantage anyone (Luwin)

Luwin's minority ethnic identity was threatened as he witnesses selective incivility bestowed towards migrant employees and he started to fear if he might be next in line to receive such treatment. He responded by reframing the act of selective incivility as unintentional and highlighting the perpetrator's 'good character' outside 'speaking over' migrant employees. Through reframing, Luwin is arguably able to avoid contemplating about external perceptions of his own self as an ethnically marked being, reducing subjective uncertainty and maintaining a more positive conception of self (Vignoles et al. 2006). While Luwin associated himself with migrant workers on the grounds of his Asian heritage, he also highlighted British aspects of his identity explaining how he was side-lined in Sri Lanka as a westerner and thereby shut down the possibility that he can be treated like migrant employees.

Positioning self as a meliorator

Meliorating was a behavioural identity work strategy which involved positioning oneself as able to intervene to counteract the negative effects of selective incivility by virtue of a multicultural socialisation. This strategy was used when selective incivility manifested in terms of migrant employees being isolated or ignored in social gatherings in the workplace.

Respondents implied that witnessing others being isolated in a crowd called for them to meliorate by socialising with them. Farpreet who works in the IT industry explains:

> *When you see exclusion and ignoring due to language skills – but it happens to people who look like you, you can feel that you are looked down upon especially when you have migrant relatives and parents who don't have desirable linguistic skills and you are reminded of their stories. My mother has talked about similar experiences in the 1980s which is a long time ago but it still happens.. I grew up here so I have language skills but these people are not too different to my parents …….Women are ignored spoken over – there are so many big penises around here. It is just the way it is in this industry. Many women are able to handle themselves. But race is a totally different story. When the treatment appears to be based on race, you remember who you are, who your parents are and it affects you – you can start to think if you are seen as a lower calibre being ……..What do I do? I keep these people company. Not in an obvious way to present myself as holier than thou to all concerned, but just being polite and normal.... at drinks mainly. Its not such a big deal for me because I enjoy meeting people from different parts of the world and I have spent every holiday in south Asia so I can make good conversation with people from different parts of the world* (Farpreet)

Witnessing selective incivility to 'similar others' appeared to signal the devalued nature of Farpreet's ethnic heritage and led to her wondering if she too might be devalued due to visibly embodying this heritage (*you can feel that you are looked down*). While she was able to distinguish herself from victims on the basis of her linguistic skills, she felt close to them as she was reminded of her parents' experiences. As a female in the IT industry Farpreet acknowledges that gender based incivility is widespread. However she does not experience

gender-based incivility as identity threatening as incivility on the basis of race/ethnicity. In terms of a response, Farpreet made it a point to speak with people who were socially isolated, making up for what she saw as the damage they incurred. She suggests that she is able to improve the situation because she can converse with a wide array of people in contrast to many other colleagues and arguably enhances herself in the process of positioning herself as an appropriate meliorator. It is notable that Farpreet does not reveal her sentiments or her approach (*Not in an obvious way to present myself as holier than thou to all concerned*,). Indeed, her Asian ethnic heritage may imply that she is taking sides if she is seen as intervening.

Management Accountant Jaspreet similarly explained how he meliorates:

> *People just don't want to be bothered to talk to others who are not exactly like them. It is not nice to be ignored as an adult – it brings down your self-esteem. I guess I take it personally when I see it… I feel that I have to make amends by going and sitting and talking with these people. I don't make it obvious…. I am British and I would treat all citizens in the same way. But 9 out of 10 people will think that I am taking sides because I am brown...I just can easily talk to anyone and blend into any culture due to my background. I interacted closely with many relatives who didn't speak English as a first language. As a result, I am a person who can fit in anywhere – which is a great thing. But others are not in the same boat. ..We are not trained on cultural sensitivity and things like that although we prioritise diversity in our recruitment. People are expected to blend in* (Jaspreet)

By positioning herself as an appropriate meliorator, a person, who is able blend into *any* culture and make amends to others, Jaspreet enhanced herself with reference to the positive distinctiveness of her British Asian identity (Slay & Smith, 2011). Enhancement arguably

enabled Jaspreet to mitigate any sense of devaluation that she experienced due to witnessing selective incivility. It is noteworthy that Jaspreet is discreet in meliorating. She refrained from drawing attention to herself as an individual who 'takes sides' and selectively looks after the interests of minority workers. Indeed, such an image would be inconsistent for an individual like herself who constructed an ethnic identity with affiliation to both British and Asian groups. Jaspreet's excerpt thus illuminates how dual identification influences the distinct 'discreet' way minority ethnic individuals respond to witnessed selective incivility. It is significant that Jaspreet and many other respondents emphasised that employees in their organisations receive very little formal training on issues such as 'cultural differences'. Given the lack of training on cultural issues despite the diversity in recruitment, Jaspreet implies that people like herself are in a position of strength by virtue of their multicultural socialisation. They were not only able to fit in, but they were also able help out excluded others.

Rawin similarly positioned himself as the person who *fills the gaps* in his organisation by talking to people who are side-lined:

> *I am the person who fills the gaps – talking to people who are side-lined because I can understand how they feel – my parents have been in similar situations long time ago. I don't flaunt it because I don't want anyone to get the wrong impression and think that I take sides – but I do the needful. I feel fortunate to have a multicultural socialisation - some people just don't know how to make conversation from people who are not from this country and we have not been trained on it either. In my case I can interact with any group. It is a very important skill for people working in organisations with a highly diverse workforce* (Rawin)

Rawin followed Jaspreet to emphasise the strength of his multicultural socialisation and highlight its crucial importance for people management in highly diverse organisations. Contrasting himself to people who 'just don't know how to make conversation with others outside Britain' because they have not received training or guidance, Rawin constructed himself as an advantaged person who can negotiate belonging in any group and make things right for less fortunate others. Through such self-positioning, people like Rawin are arguably able to mitigate the devaluing effects associated with witnessing selective incivility to some extent. Rawin follows Jaspreet in his 'discreet' approach to meliorating. He makes the point that he is careful to avoid be seen as 'taking sides' in line with his ethnic identity which comprises affiliation to both Asian and British groups. Discreetness helped Rawin to refrain from drawing attention to himself as an individual who takes the side of minority workers – a particularly disadvantageous image for a person marked by a minority ethnic identity.

Passive aggression towards perpetrators of selective incivility

Passive aggression is a behavioural identity work strategy which involved positioning oneself as an individual who indirectly or subtly expresses their negative sentiments to perpetrators of selective incivility. This identity work strategy was used when the act of selective incivility appeared to be repetitive and personalised (from a particular perpetrator to a particular victim). Dakul explains:

> *On one occasion, I mimicked the sarcasm that one colleague repeatedly projected towards this guy. He was a low power individual there was no need to do this. It was repetitive so it bothered me – I gave him back exactly what he gave to others. I saw his face fall. I share something with this guy though our circumstances are totally different. Any differential treatment on the base of ethnicity is disturbing, it can affect you. You*

*need to do something even if its basic sarcasm but not too obviously of course because you don't want to give the wrong impression to people….. My parents migrated here in the 1980s and they have told me plenty of stories about how isolated they felt in the workplace. Whenever I see exclusion I remember them. I remember my heritage. I am not generally conscious of these things. But when you see a look alike being disregarded you start thinking about who you are and what others think about you. I am privileged to have been raised here (*Dakul*)*

By making the point that he gave the perpetrator back 'exactly what he repetitively gave to low power others', individuals like Dakul placed themselves at a position of strength and distanced themselves from the possibility of being victimised by selective incivility. While he identified himself as similar to targets, he also drew on his early socialisation in Britain to distinguish himself from them. Noteworthy in Dakul's account is how he positions his approach as 'discreet' so as to not give an impression of siding with any one ethnic group. He positioned himself as a person who is unafraid to stand up for disadvantaged others, but he was careful to refrain from being seen as siding with Asians which is inconsistent with his dual British Asian identity. In his excerpt, Dakul also highlights how witnessing selective incivility brought back stories of the past, especially the experiences of his migrant parents who struggled to cope with ethnicity-based exclusion in 1980s. He implies that his Asian heritage becomes salient upon witnessing selective incivility in the workplace, when he is otherwise not very conscious of identity considerations.

Darwinder, an auditor in a leading Financial Services , similarly talked about how she passively demonstrated aggression towards a colleague who was selectively uncivil to a migrant employee:

You don't have to raise your eyebrows or roll your eyes at people who do things differently. This girl has been doing this repeatedly to this Hindu girl and one day she came in wearing a pin which says that she supports the LGBT movement. I rolled my eyes at her as she said it and she noticed it. I mean if she rolls her eyes at religious people, she should be able to handle it. I grew up here. I am not a person who will watch things happen silently. I am careful to not give people the impression that I am making a scene because I am brown. I am not doing that. I am just not afraid to stand up for what's wrong which is a fundamental British value.. People are not wrapped in cotton wool – we can say what we feel to our colleagues (Darwinder)

At the outset, Darwinder's account of witnessed incivility may be seen as overlapping with 'overt discrimination' (Cortina, 2008). However, Darwinder also mentioned in the course of the interview that she is not completely sure if the act she witnessed was aimed at undermining a visible cultural difference. What she knew with certainty was that this act was repeatedly geared at a minority ethnic migrant employee, and as such we have included this account as an act of incivility. By highlighting how she was selectively uncivil to the perpetrator, Darwinder highlights how witnesses may be motivated to instigate (passive) incivility to instigators in retaliation. Darwinder follows others to make the point that she is not a person who is afraid to act and she would not watch things happen silently, placing herself at a position of strength and distancing from victimisation. She contextualises her approach in her 'British identity' and follows others to highlight that she is careful to not position herself as siding with any one ethnic group.

Charwin explained how he indirectly spoke up for a colleague from India who was put down by another colleague at work:

He (a colleague from India) doesn't have the best social skills. He doesn't say things in a tactful way. And he is branded as rude and side-lined. Once she (a colleague) said to me 'Oh how did your review go, Amjit would have probably ripped you to shreds' and a senior VP who was also with us wanted to know who Amjit is. She explained that 'he is the rude guy'. She just dished him behind his back. This is not the first time she has done it. I immediately said the review was perfect – I have never had any problems with him. He made some excellent points – he is really kind and smart. I controlled my emotions. I didn't show anyone that I thought that she was saying something wrong. I just shared my opinion. She was a bit shocked and was like 'I am surprised'. As a person from an Asian heritage I just had to act for myself because this 'putting down' may happen to me too. I am a minority too. But it will be difficult in my case because I know the rules of the game here. I felt better in the knowledge that I acted, intervened and maybe hopefully made things right (Charwin)

Charwin's minority ethnic identity became salient as he witnessed selective incivility to a migrant colleague. He felt that the instigator's comment was inappropriate and disadvantageous to the target, and he wondered if he might be next in line to receive such treatment in line with his Asian heritage. However, he also distinguished himself from migrant workers, highlighting his superior British linguistic skills. Charwin's response was to indirectly speak on behalf of the target. He never indicated that the act was wrong. Rather he replied that he has had no issues with the target and repositioned the target as kind and smart, implicitly refuting the disadvantageous positioning of the perpetrator. Responding to the perpetrator (in an implicit manner) arguably enabled Charwin to position himself at a place of strength, arguably mitigating any sense of devaluation that he experienced as he witnessed selective

incivility. Responding implicitly also enables him to refrain from giving the impression that he is taking sides, positioning his approach in line with his British Asian dual identity.

Declaring that one has never witnessed selective incivility in the workplace

Four respondents declared that they have not witnessed obvious or subtle differential treatment to others on the basis of ethnic faultlines. These were respondents that prioritized identification with the British category over the Asian category in accounting for their British Asian identity or attempted to refrain from ethnic identification altogether. Darpreet explains:

> *I have not seen differential treatment to any ethnic minorities in this organization – intentional or unintentional. There are people who don't like each other. But this happens in any organisation. But even this is rarely problematic because we are expected to be nice and polite and we are polite and nice most of the time.. It is not professional otherwise. I think it is important to not look at everything from that angle. So is this happening because I am brown – is this happening because I don't know... I have friends who think like that and they don't help themselves. I mean if I don't like someone and I may avoid him, but it has nothing to do with his background. It is simply personal. In these kinds of organisations which are very diverse, people are very open minded and they try to be as accommodating as possible. Apart from the occasional assumption that someone might not drink due to their cultural background.. ..... I did an internship when I was in school, and I had problems with the Asian guys – they are the one's who were exercising their authority... The white guys were the ones who tried to include me..*

Darpreet who works for a prestigious audit firm draws on socio-categorial diversity in the organization as well as informal rules of conduct (*we are expected to be nice and polite*) to

argue that she has not witnessed selectively incivility in her work setting. Furthermore, she attempts to pull any form of incivility to the realm of general incivility in implying that it is motivated by personal dislike as opposed to sociocultural background. On one hand, Darpreet appears to be determined to not look at workplace relations through an ethnic lens in order to avoid getting herself stressed. On the other hand, it appears as if her early experiences of being dominated by Asian men influenced her tendency to distance herself from the Asian category and affiliate with the British as noted earlier.

Akul similarly talked about how he has never witnessed selective incivility in the workplace:

I suppose if you go looking for something you will inevitably see it. So perhaps I haven't noticed anything for that reason. What I say is about NAME OF ORGANISATION it is a welcoming place. There is equal opportunity for everyone. Everyone is treated respectfully. Things have changed over the past decades – things have changed drastically since I went to school. In professional circles in particular people don't care about where you come from. On the contrary, difference is celebrated I believe.

Akul portrays his organisation in the IT industry as meritocratic and inclusive, insisting that even well rehearsed gender-based incivility does not take place. He also suggests that selective incivility and overt discrimination are things of the past and they are entirely absent in contemporary professional settings. Akul's tendency to not notice selective incivility (based on ethnic faultlines) may be influenced by his profound determination to decategorize and construct contemporary professional organisations as ideal worlds.

See table 2 for more data excerpts.

Insert table 2 about here

Theoretical implications

We draw on our findings to make three contributions. First, we conceptualise selective incivility as an identity threatening experience for minority ethnic witnesses from similar ethnic backgrounds, when that minority ethnic identity is important to their sense of self. Our findings show how the Asian aspect of individuals' minority ethnic identity came to the fore (Kenny & Briner, 2013), as they witnessed selective incivility towards Asian migrant workers. Indeed, a number of interviewees declared that they did not ordinarily think about 'who they are' as minority ethnic beings in their jobs, but did so when they witnessed selective incivility in the workplace to Asian migrant workers. Furthermore, the selective incivility that they witnessed had the effect of reminding individuals 'of their migrant parents' stories from the past and thus illuminating the historically devalued status of their ethnic heritage. These findings reveal how witnessing selective incivility, can trigger in individuals, identity considerations that don't routinely occupy their thoughts. As awareness of the Asian aspect of their British Asian ethnic identity became momentarily salient (Amiot & Raspal, 2014; Kenny & Briner, 2013) and individuals wondered if they too are devalued by others in their British workplaces, appraising potential harm to their sense of self and experiencing an identity threat in process (Petriglieri, 2011). Our interviewees occupying relatively low power positions in their organisations as early careerists and possessing less stable occupational identities, may in part explain their tendency to readily appraise harm to themselves as they witnessed selective incivility to migrant workers (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019). By providing a snapshot of how a unique group of minority ethnic professionals account for their experience of witnessing selective incivility, our findings problematise existing homogenous understandings of witnessed incivility which is underpinned by mainly fairness and justice theorising (Herschovis & Batnagar 2017; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015).

While some studies recognise that racial or ethnic identity similarity can influence witnesses' propensity to respond (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977; Gaertner, Dovidio, & Johnson, 1982; Brewster and Tucker, 2015), individuals' responses are still explained in terms of their sense of a 'just world' being challenged by what they witness. We extend this conversation by introducing identity threat as a significant reason for minority ethnic witnesses to respond to selective incivility as well as more covert forms of discrimination (Cortina, 2008) bestowed towards ethnically similar others. While responding to witnessed selective incivility is not simply a matter or belonging to a majority or minority group, our findings indicate that witnessing selective incivility (related to ethnicity) can trigger dilemmas related to 'who I am' and 'how I am perceived by others' for minority ethnic individuals, which in turn calls for responses. These findings provide a less homogenised and more contextualised picture of witnessing incivility to extant understandings.

Our second contribution involves introducing three identity work strategies (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003) adopted by minority ethnic witnesses of selective incivility – reframing, positioning self as a meliorator and passive aggression. Reframing (see Slay & Smith, 2011; Ashforth & Kriener, 1999) involved giving acts of selective incivility more innocuous interpretations, to mitigate or reduce the sense of identity threat experienced. Through reframing, minority ethnic individuals can excuse the selective incivility meted out to ethnically-similar others in the workplace and continue to feel a sense of belongingness – an important identity motive (Vignoles et al. 2006), in spite of what they witnessed in the workplace.

Positioning self as an appropriate meliorator involved identifying oneself as being at a unique place of strength in being able to counteract the negative effects of selective incivility by virtue

of a multicultural socialization. This strategy works as a form of identity work because witnesses of selective incivility are able to enhance themselves and feel a unique sense of capability and competence (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016) which arguably contributes towards mitigating the effects of any identity threat they experienced as they observed similar others demeaned within their workplace. Indeed, previous studies have shown that self-enhancement is an effective way of restoring one's self-worth to cope with devaluing circumstances (Slay & Smith, 2011). However further research is needed to expand on our understanding of this as witnessing incidents that one acknowledges to be selective incivility aimed at a group whose identity one shares can elicit negative emotions (Miner and Eischeid, 2012; Miner and Cortina, 2016) and this needs to be balanced against the self-enhancement and identity repair that comes from seeing oneself as a meliorator.

Passive aggression involved positioning oneself as an individual who indirectly or subtly expresses their negative sentiments to perpetrators of selective incivility. Passive aggression may enable witnesses of selective incivility to continue to feel some sense of control and arguably feeling less victimised by what they observed in the workplace. Previous research that has noted how explicit forms of denigration (Ashforth and Kriener, 1999) and othering (Ezzel, 2009) works as an effective form of identity work to enable individuals to deflect stigma attached to them. In line with previous research, we argue that more passive forms of aggression also enable individuals to lessen a sense of threat to their self. However by using this strategy, the witness does risk a more negative future relationship with the perpetrator.

These identity work strategies were not mutually exclusive, but were used dynamically by respondents under distinct situational circumstances. Reframing was used as a response to

selective incivility that involved 'speaking over others' and/or 'overlooking contributions' – often perpetrated by high-power individuals with an established reputation for being overloaded. Positioning the self as an appropriate meliorator was used as a response to selective incivility that manifested in terms of victims being isolated or ignored in social gatherings in the workplace. Passive aggression was used when the act of selective incivility was repetitive and personalised (from a particular perpetrator to a particular victim). In the extant literature on bystander responses, compensating victims (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Herschovis & Batnagar 2017) and confronting perpetrators (Folger, 2001; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015) are identified as automatic and morally-driven interpersonal responses (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019) underpinned by justice motives. We develop existing understandings by showing that confrontation can also happen in a passive manner. More importantly, we show that ameliorating and passive response can be underpinned by individualised identity motives – specifically, the desire of witnesses to reduce an identity threat by positioning the self in an enhanced and a less victimised ways.

While we do not refute fairness and justice explanations, we emphasise that it is important to extend the array of theoretical explanations for the why question of witnessed incivility which has been identified as a grey area that warrants further research (Schilpzand et al. 2016; Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019). Our findings also contribute to the literature on identity work (see Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Brown, 2015; Ashforth et al. 2007). Previous studies have talked about reframing (Slay & Smith, 2011) and responding to perpetrators through direct denigration (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) and othering (Ezzel, 2009). We extend these understandings by introducing passive response and meliorating as pertinent forms of behavioural identity work strategies that individuals can undertake in response to social identity related threats. Indeed, meliorating allows individuals to feel enhanced in the process of

focusing their attention on less fortunate others (Maitlis, 2009) while passive aggression allows individuals to feel less victimised in a discreet and less revealing manner than direct denigration and othering.

Our third contribution involves showing how, when important to the witness, minority ethnic identity shapes the way witnesses' respond to selective incivility. In line with their strong dual British Asian identification (Amiot & Jaspal, 2014) individuals were careful to be not make their sentiments explicit and are concerned to be not seen as 'taking sides' when they responded to selective incivility in the workplace. They meliorated discreetly and were purposefully indirect and subtle in their responses to perpetrators. We argue that this desire to respond discreetly is (at least in part) due to the incumbents' minority ethnic identity being comprised of two main ethnic identity categories (Dovidio et al. 2009). Most of our respondents strongly identified with both Asian and British categories asserting commonality with the majority group while also maintaining their subgroup's distinctiveness (Simon and Ruhs, 2008; Dovidio et al. 2016; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009; van Oudenhoven, Prins & Buunk, 1998). From this perspective, revealing that they are affected by the situations they witnessed, arguably detracts from their membership of the 'British' category. As selective incivility is extremely ambiguous (Reich and Hershcovis, 2015), frequently unnoticed and often perceived as unintentional, it is particularly problematic if individuals who are visibly identifiable as British Asian, are the only witnesses to notice that something is wrong and intervene to rectify the act. By doing this they inevitably risk signalling a bias towards the Asian category, and implying less loyalty towards the British category. Also, any loosening of membership of the British category is unsettling, because being British forms an integral part of the individuals' self-schema (Amiot & Jaspal, 2014). Furthermore, because there are negative connotations (e.g.

lack of social skills) associated with the migrant Asian employees, there are few advantages to reducing their association with their Britishness.

Extant understandings on bystander response suggests that witnesses may be more likely to respond to targets that they share a racial identity with – especially when the victim is not in immediate danger (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977; Gaertner, Dovidio, & Johnson, 1982; Brewster and Tucker, 2015). We extend existing understandings in this literature by providing a more nuanced picture of how minority ethnic identification that is based in importance to both national and ethnic categories (such as British Asian) can shape what witnesses feel able to do and not do, and their assessments of the perceived costs and benefits of intervention. While the subordinate (Asian) dimension of ethnic identity comes to the fore upon witnessing selective incivility and triggers the need to respond, the backgrounded superordinate (British) identity informs the overall nature of the response.

Practical Implications

Our findings indicate that low level selective incivility, on the basis of perceived deficits in linguistic and cultural skills, may be pervasive and is presented as almost a normalised and justifiable phenomenon in contemporary work settings which place profound emphasis on diversity and increasing the representation of minority groups. The treatment meted out to migrant employees resembles aversive racism, which although often subtle, has similarly pernicious effects to more overt forms of discrimination (Dovidio et al., 2010). Our findings indicate a strong need for managers and HR practitioners to remain vigilant about these forms of exclusion and emphasise a need for a zero-tolerance approach to workplace incivility (Pearson & Porath, 2005). There is an opportunity for HR practitioners to take direct action to raise awareness of what constitutes workplace incivility and its potentially damaging effects

on recipients. Second and relatedly organisational policy makers should ensure that all employees are able to feel a sense of 'belongingness in their uniqueness' (Shore et al., 2018) within the organisation, as opposed to facing poor treatment due to expressions of uniqueness. In other words, diversity should not be limited to policy where employees are expected to conform to organisational norms once recruited. Rather cultural diversity should be valued and respected within the organisation, providing space for activities that allow employees to learn more about each other. There should also be profound emphasis on facilitating inclusion (Shore et al., 2018). This can be done through training employees on inclusive behaviour, and providing guidelines for interactions within the workplace.

Third, our research usefully showcases the struggles that some British minority ethnic professionals undergo within these sectors to maintain their status as home-grown professional employees whilst processing the struggles of migrant workers who share an important aspect of their identity. A key practical implication of our findings is the need for witnesses to remain reflexive of the potential of their responses to maintain structures that disadvantage them. For instance, respondents who shut down selective incivility by reframing behaviour, facilitated the continuation of these forms of exclusion. The respondents who attempted to meliorate can enhance the effectiveness of their response by raising these issues with colleagues in HR and/or diversity and inclusion champions – using their cultural and linguistic capital and empathy for a wide range of groups to work with legitimate others to eradicate selective incivility in the workplace. A fourth implication is that our research reveals a potential additional benefit to having more individuals from historically marginalised groups in senior positions. Our findings revealed that the majority of these individuals are attuned to both spot incivility and feel a sense of personal responsibility to respond. Senior minority ethnic employees equipped with guidance on what constitutes useful intervention behaviour could support the organisation to

reduce such selective incivility and help ensure justice and fairness for all employees. However, this would have to be carefully managed as, although power is central to the decision to directly confront perpetrators (Herschcovis et al, 2017), visible minorities also face a potential 'favouritism threat' (Loyd & Amoroso, 2018) when they feel they are being seen to advocate for another colleague based on demographic similarity. Therefore, efforts to intervene on selective incivility may have to occur in conjunction with wider efforts to address uncivil workplace behaviours.

In terms of directions for future research, it would be instructive to see how other groups of minority ethnic employees, perhaps those whose parents did not have the same linguistic and cultural-based exclusion experiences, experience and respond to the treatment meted out to those migrant workers. Relatedly it would be useful to more explicitly consider intersectionality in minority ethnic witnesses' responses to selective incivility. Further study should also consider how differences in centrality of minority ethnic identity may play a role in the witnessing and response to selective incivility. Future comparative studies should also examine if majority group employees notice, interpret and respond to subtle acts of incivility in similar or very different ways. In addition, because witnessing incivility affects performance and citizenship behaviour (Porath & Erez, 2009) future studies should explore the extent to which social identities of the witness contribute to this effect. Finally, given that the three female respondents who witnessed selective gender-based incivility in our study did not experience an identity threat, although they were threatened by witnessing selective ethnicity-based incivility, it crucially important for future studies to examine how the experience of witnessing selective incivility plays out for other shared demographic characteristics beyond ethnicity.

A limitation of this study is that we took a 'snapshot' of the situation, focusing on employees' accounts of the incidences they witnessed, how they experienced these incidents and how they reacted to them. This gave us valuable insights into the identity dynamics involved in dealing with such incidents but future studies should be longitudinal in nature. Longitudinal studies would allow us to explore long term responses to witnessing incivility. A further limitation is the applicability of our findings to some other minority groups. We found that sharing a minority ethnic identity with the target of incivility can lead to specific types of identity work. This is because our participants identify with two ethnic groups and so a threat to the status of one of these key parts of their identity triggers important identity work. Further exploration is required to see how this could be applied to other minority groups. For example, identity work undertaken when witnessing incivility towards a fellow woman or gay employee might be quite different to that undertaken when witnessing that to someone from a similar ethnic group. Even with ethnicity, we would argue that identity work undertaken when witnessing incivility against someone of the same ethnicity and nationality may differ slightly to that undertaken by British minority ethnic employees witnessing slights to migrant employees from a similar ethnic background. We argue for the importance of recognising that these incidences trigger identity work but recognise that the specific identity work may be context dependent and argue for further research to explore this rich and important arena.

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Table 1: Details of respondents

RESPONDENT	AGE	INDUSTRY	SEX
R1 Rawin	25	IT	Male
R2 Sarwan	26	IT	Male
R3 Shawinder	25	Accounting/Finance	Female
R4 Sarpreet	23	IT	Female
R5 Marwin	26	IT	Male
R6 Jaspreet	21	Accounting/Finance	Female
R7 Charwin	24	IT	Male
R8 Sharkul	25	IT	Male
R Darwin	25	Accounting/Finance	Male
R10 Jakul	26	Accounting/Finance	Male
R11 Dakul	23	Accounting/Finance	Male
R12 Bakul	26	Accounting/Finance	Male
R13 Maramjit	22	IT	Female
R14 Dasan	24	Accounting/Finance	Male
R15 Darwinder	22	Accounting/Finance	Female
R16 Struth	24	Accounting/Finance	Female
R17 Cruth	26	Accounting/Finance	Male
R18 Narwin	24	Accounting/Finance	Male
R19 Suranjit	22	Accounting/Finance	Male

R20 Wakul	26	Accounting/Finance	Male
R21 Ampreet	24	Accounting/Finance	Female
R22 Lakul	23	IT	Male
R23 Pakul	26	IT	Male
R24 Luwin	25	IT	Male
R25 Farpreet	23	IT	Female
R26 Anwinder	23	Accounting/Finance	Female
R27 Marpreet	21	Accounting/Finance	Female
R28 Darpreet	21	Accounting/Finance	Female
R29 Jarpreet	21	Accounting/Finance	Female
R30 Akul	25	IT	Male

Table 2: Data excerpts related to identity work narratives

	Indicative quotes

Excusing	*I have noticed that some senior managers speak over foreign employees and that is not great it embarrasses them. But people are busy so if you can't say things quickly you are going to be spoken over. Senior people in this industry are eternally rushing. When you come from another country and speak English as a second language you are victim to this kind of thing. I feel bad because they look like me and my family but it is not intentional (Suranjit)*
	I have seen people disregarding perfectly logical arguments made by people who are not from this country just because they have already made up their mind that it doesn't make sense. A lot has to do with the way you speak but migrants are not that confident. Our line manager does this to the couple of people from various parts of the world…. Outside this, he is a nice guy… Most of them happen to be Asians given the migration patterns in this country. I feel like saying something. Something like 'this is not right, you are just assuming that he is incompetent because he can't articulate himself' but then it is not my place. It bothers me I apply it to myself. But maybe it is just my interpretation. It is probably not even meant to be offensive, and people do it when they are busy I guess. You have to have time to be tolerant - it is hard in a high performance culture like ours.. I feel very fortunate in my position being able to express myself very clearly and secure in the knowledge that I won't be subjected to this kind of treatment…. (Cruth)
	There are these two guys who work with us from Pakistan and I always sit next to them and speak to them throughout because nobody else does. It is a humiliating experience to be excluded and brushed aside. I am shocked when I see it happening – I find it hypocritical because we talk so much about diversity and inclusion within the organisation. I always remember my mother dreading office parties when she was young because she had nothing to say. She didn't feel able to contribute to the conversation, as an outsider from another culture, and no one helped her out. I remember this always and I am very sensitive to spot this when this happens. It is offensive to exclude and ignore people and it is totally unpleasant and repulsive to watch it happening. I see it happening I have to do something to fix things in my mind because I am a minority too although I have the gift of gab – thanks to my upbringing here. No one will ignore me – I guess they can't because I have very good conversation skills (Sarwan)

Passive aggression	*Janet (a colleague) mentioned in a big group meeting one day that Najda (a migrant colleague) struggles to communicate properly. And this is not the first time she has done it. I was thinking to myself that this is not true at all. I can understand Nadja – anybody can understand her if they want to. And it wasn't nice to say it in front of a big group. It is insulting. I was so angry because this shouldn't have been said in public and you should really devote more time to listen to people who do not speak in the same way that you do. It is about being culturally sensitive. I don't really know Nadja that well but I can surely understand her. She is not my friend or anything like that but I suppose something happened to me inside when I heard her being belittled in that manner. And I had to do something to stop. She is the person who looks most like me in the department and that is significant in some way or the other – it implies that it can happen to me too. Nobody would dare do that to me. I would give them a run for their money because my English is better than any of them. I grew up in Yorkshire. I was at a meeting with my boss and I told him that I struggle to understand Janet. She is not clear. I mean it is not really untrue because I really don't understand her comment about Nadja. So I don't understand her. If she can put down colleagues in public it is only fair that she receives a share of it (Anwinder)*
	I have been watching this person who almost always pretends to not hear what some of our IT people say – they are not from the UK and they have a very distinct way of speaking. She seems to find it very annoying and in most interactions she just ignores them or pretends to not hear when they are speaking with her. It is so subtle but she does it. Her actions bothered me so much.. One day we had to talk to each other and I pretended to not hear. She was getting very uncomfortable and quite agitated and I was thinking 'now you know what it feels like' No one can mess with me. I can stand up for myself and others. I have lived here all my life – so I am not afraid to speak. I do it tactfully though – I am not biased towards any side and don't want anyone to think that. There are no guidelines for informal interaction here. So I am not breaking any protocol..(Sarpeet)

Positioning self as a meliorater	*When our team goes out, this one guy from Kerala is outside the conversation after the first 15 minutes. People cannot be bothered to think about how others feel, they just carry on with the conversation without thinking about who is left out. I am the person who keeps on talking to this guy – because I feel bad for him, I know my parents were in his shoes a long time ago. I am in a different position but I am also in a position that I can understand how it feels and I have a need to make things right. I don't publicise it but I do it (Charwin)* *In informal social settings, foreigners are left out, nobody bothers to talk to them much because they are different. The great majority of foreigners in the ICT industry come from South Asia. I share an unspoken bond with the South Asian people obviously although I am different to them too… I can feel bad on their behalf especially when my parents have had similar experiences.. I make it a point to keep them company. I have common topics to chat with them or with anybody in contrast to many other people. Obviously I don't make this obvious which would be awkward for everyone concerned.. but I do this and I feel the need to do it (Pakul)*