

Fragile Heart: How Workplace Incivility Affects Volunteer Outcomes

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Abstract This study investigates the impact of workplace incivility on volunteer outcomes, a critical but long-overlooked issue in the nonprofit sector. Utilizing three-wave dyadic data from 2,320 volunteers and their managers in China, we examine the mediating role of psychological contract violation and the moderating role of just-world beliefs in this relationship. Our findings reveal that psychological contract violations play a crucial mediating role, linking workplace incivility to decreased volunteer performance and increased turnover intentions. In addition, volunteers' just-world beliefs positively moderate this relationship, such that the positive association between workplace incivility and psychological contract violation is stronger when volunteers have higher levels of just-world beliefs. This research extends the application of psychological contract theory to the volunteer sector and offers insights for nonprofit organizations to enhance their management practices and better support volunteers facing incivility.

Keywords Workplace incivility · Volunteer outcomes · Psychological contract violation · Just-world beliefs

Introduction

Building a good relationship between organizations and volunteers can enable volunteers to maintain their commitment to and engagement with the organization (Stukas et al., 2009). Factors such as organizational support (Alfes et al., 2016), collaborative team environment (Nencini et al., 2016), and transformational leadership (Dwyer et al., 2013) may strengthen this relationship and positively impact volunteer outcomes.

However, volunteers do not always receive proper management and treatment. For example, workplace incivility, defined as low-intensity deviant workplace behavior with an ambiguous intent to harm, is considered a typical negative factor in employee management (Taylor et al., 2012). Nevertheless, despite the possibility that incivility may be prevalent in volunteer organizations, its impact on volunteer management has not been evaluated. A study in the UK voluntary sector found that 15% of respondents experienced bullying in the past year, with the figure rising to 28% over the past five years, highlighting the presence of workplace incivilities among volunteers (Dawood, 2013). Moreover, compared to paid employees playing similar roles in the same organization, volunteers have a much higher rate of encountering workplace incivility (Trent & Allen, 2019). This phenomenon should raise concern within the academic community and prompt further investigation.

Psychological contract theory may provide a useful framework to analyze the impact of workplace incivility on volunteers. As Vantilborgh et al. (2011) explained,

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volunteers' psychological contract encompasses their expectations around respect, care, and safety. When volunteers encounter workplace incivility, they may feel their organization has breached this implicit contract and perceive betrayal and unfairness. This can undermine volunteers' willingness to contribute efforts and even prompt them to exit their positions (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2020). Additionally, an individual's value preferences may influence how psychological contract violations affect their behavior. For instance, volunteers with stronger just-world beliefs (JWB) (beliefs that we live in a just world where people deserve what they get and get what they deserve) may perceive more procedural injustice when encountering workplace incivilities (Guo et al., 2022). However, the role of psychological contracts and JWB between workplace incivility and volunteer outcomes remains unclear, warranting further empirical examination.

Therefore, to bridge the research gap, this study aimed to assess the potential impact of workplace incivilities on volunteer management. To this end, we collected three-wave longitudinal data from 2,320 volunteers and managers from China. We hypothesized that psychological contract violation will mediate the relationships between workplace incivility and volunteer outcomes (volunteer-rated turnover intention and manager-rated volunteer performance). Additionally, we examined volunteers' JWB as a potential moderating factor to test whether individual differences in fairness perception strengthen or weaken the impacts of workplace incivility on volunteer outcomes.

This study makes several contributions. First, it directs scholarly attention to the impact of negative workplace factors on volunteer outcomes, revealing volunteers' vulnerability when encountering workplace incivility. In doing so, it responds to the call from Phillips et al. (2019) for more research on workplace incivility in volunteer organizations. Second, this study innovates by utilizing psychological contract theory to deepen Trent's (2019) study about volunteer incivility and burnout, indicating that psychological contract violation mediates the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer outcomes. Third, it employs a multi-wave questionnaire design, effectively reducing common method bias (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Furthermore, we adopt a multi-source approach, gathering data on volunteers' turnover intentions and managers' ratings of volunteer performance, thereby providing more precise results compared to previous studies (Barraza, 2011). Fourth, this study uncovers how volunteers' pre-existing just-world beliefs strengthen the negative impacts of workplace incivility. This is distinct from the arguments that employees with stronger JWB rationalize workplace incivility and work harder to retain their jobs (Desrumaux et al., 2018). This finding suggests that ensuring volunteer commitment and engagement is not

always the same as employee management, especially when volunteers encounter negative behaviors in the workplace.

The remainder of this study is organized as follows: first, we review the literature related to our core variables and formulate our research hypotheses. Second, after describing the research methodology, we apply regression analysis to test our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss this study's theoretical and practical implications.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Workplace Incivility and Volunteers' Psychological Contract Violation

Workplace incivility refers to "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). These behaviors manifest in various forms, such as refusing to collaborate, damaging coworkers' reputations, temper tantrums, name-calling, condescending speech, and rudeness towards others (Vasconcelos, 2020). While most studies have focused on the effects of workplace incivility on employees with formal employment contracts (Estes & Wang, 2008; Reio & Sanders-Reio, 2011), few have explored the impact of workplace incivility on those with no formal organizational employment contracts, such as volunteers.

Volunteers may also experience uncivil treatment in the workplace. Studies have noted that many nonprofit organizations lack professional internal management to protect volunteers (Aranda et al., 2018). This leaves volunteers vulnerable to unequal treatment by managers and employees; subsequently, even those who perform well may become susceptible to unfair practices (Overgaard, 2019). For example, in Australia, volunteers are often treated as free laborers, assigned difficult or tedious work, and are vulnerable to work without water, food, or the appropriate tools (Paull & Omari, 2015). As Phillips et al. (2019) mentioned, despite the nuances in incivility patterns across global regions, its detrimental impacts on volunteers appear widespread.

Psychological contract theory provides a useful framework to analyze the impact of workplace incivility on volunteer outcomes. The theory was initially used to describe the implicit, unspoken agreements and expectations between an employer and an employee in the context of their working relationship (Robinson, 1996). The psychological contract refers to individuals' expectations about their work rewards, job treatment, work intensity, and job security (Cullinane & Dundon, 2006). Nowadays, the theory has been applied to analyze the relationship

between volunteers and their organizations. Specifically, Nicholas (2013) used psychological contract theory to suggest that volunteers view their work to find purpose and meaning, rather than being forced to work for money. Vantilborgh (2015) further proposed that psychological rewards from organizations are part of volunteers' psychological contracts, which can motivate them to work. However, a lack of respect for the volunteers could breach their psychological contract (Kappelides et al., 2019). In such cases, workplace incivility may violate the volunteer's psychological contract. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Workplace incivility is positively associated with volunteers' psychological contract violations; specifically, the more workplace incivility a volunteer encounters, the more the volunteer's psychological contract is violated.

The Mediating Role of the Psychological Contract Violation

Workplace incivility can have negative consequences if it leads to the violation of psychological contracts. According to psychological contract theory, an organization and its members generally build an exchange relationship based on a psychological contract, in that the organization should provide benefits and security to its members, and these members should reward the organization through their diligent work (Robinson, 1996). When employees experience workplace incivility, they perceive that their organization has failed to fulfill the promises in the psychological contract (Sayers et al., 2011). This perception can result in job dissatisfaction, a sense of undervaluation, a decrease in commitment, and even lead to turnover (Robinson & Wolfe Morrison, 2000).

When workplace incivility occurs in volunteer organizations, volunteers may be physically and mentally harmed, which is contrary to the original target of the volunteers' psychological contract of an organization caring for, respecting, and protecting its volunteers (Vantilborgh et al., 2011). Research has also shown that when volunteers experience a violation of their psychological contract, they are likely to feel dissatisfied, mistreated, and perceive unfairness (Griep et al., 2016; Vantilborgh et al., 2014). Studies focusing on workplace incivility among social workers have found that when their psychological contract is violated, they may no longer trust the organization and consider leaving (Barraza, 2011). As workplace incivility may lead to psychological contract violations, resulting in lower volunteer performance and higher volunteer turnover intention. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2a: Psychological contract violations mediate the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer turnover intentions (as self-reported by volunteers); specifically, the greater the workplace incivility, the more severe the volunteers' psychological contract violations, and subsequently, the greater the volunteers' turnover intentions.

H2b: Volunteers' psychological contract violations mediate the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer performance (as evaluated by managers); specifically, the greater the workplace incivility, the more severe the volunteers' psychological contract violations, and subsequently, the lesser the volunteers' performance.

Moderating Effect of Just-World Beliefs

Beliefs may influence volunteers' subjective feelings of workplace incivility and perceived psychological contract breach. They refer to an individual's subjective perceptions about right and wrong, and can significantly influence attitudes and behaviors (Albarracín & Wyer Jr., 2000). For volunteers in particular, their inner beliefs around fairness, justice, and altruism can motivate voluntary service and shape interpretations of organizational experiences (Nowakowska, 2023). Among all the beliefs, JWB are a major motivation for individuals to engage in prosocial activities. Those holding such beliefs posit that "bad" people should be punished and "good" people should be rewarded (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). When volunteers embracing these views of fairness encounter workplace incivility that violates such expectations, it may negatively impact their perceptions and emotional responses regarding organizational treatment (Desrumaux et al., 2018).

The impact of JWB on work performance is mainly tested in employee management studies. JWB generally act as a buffer when employees confront with workplace incivility (Desrumaux et al., 2018). When employees with high JWB encounter workplace incivility, they may fear losing their jobs and prefer to make internal attributions, justifying that any workplace incivility occurred due to their own mistakes (Cortina, 2008). They tend to believe that they can obtain justice if they work harder in the future, so they tend to be more tolerant of current workplace incivility (Desrumaux et al., 2018). Consequently, employees with higher JWB are more inclined to exert effort to maintain their relationship with the organization when faced with workplace incivility.

However, unlike employees, volunteers' JWB may play a role in amplifying the negative effects of workplace incivility. First, unlike the employees who aim to get private interests, many volunteers aim to build a just world (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). If they are treated uncivilized in

the workplace, they may feel not being rewarded for their efforts. This unfair experience may cause volunteers with higher beliefs in a just world to feel more disappointed, and thus, more likely to believe that the volunteer organization has not fulfilled the promise of their psychological contract. Second, unlike the employees, volunteers do not have a formal work contract with the volunteer organization and can easily choose to turnover when encountering workplace incivility (Vantilborgh, 2015). Therefore, volunteers with higher JWB may feel more psychological contract violations and are more willing to reduce workplace outcomes when encountering workplace incivilities.

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Just-world beliefs moderate the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteers' psychological contract violations; specifically, the stronger the volunteers' just-world beliefs, the stronger the violation of their psychological contract due to workplace incivility.

We combined H2a, H2b, and H3 to propose a moderating mediating effect, in that JWB positively moderate the psychological contract violation's mediating effect. In particular, volunteers with higher JWB are more likely to perceive workplace incivility's violating effect on their psychological contract. Consequently, they are more inclined to reduce their performance or even leave their volunteer position.

H4a: Just-world beliefs moderate the indirect effect of workplace incivility on volunteer turnover intentions through psychological contract violations; the stronger the volunteers' just-world beliefs, the stronger the indirect effect.

H4b: Just-world beliefs moderate the indirect effect of workplace incivility on volunteer performance through psychological contract violations; the stronger the volunteers' just-world beliefs, the stronger the indirect effect.

In summary, Fig. 1 illustrates this study's hypothetical model.

Methods

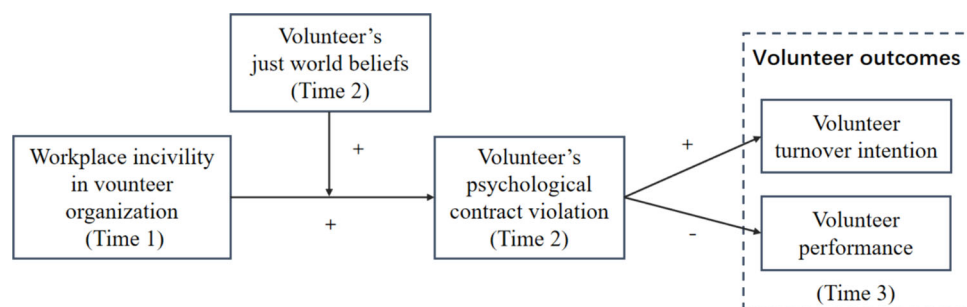
Sample and Procedures

China has a long tradition of voluntary service, and helping others has been a traditional virtue since ancient times (Hu, 2021). Zhejiang Province, located in the Yangtze River Delta region of China, has a very active atmosphere for volunteer service. According to 2022 statistics, Zhejiang Province has approximately 7 million volunteers, accounting for a quarter of its total population, and ranking first nationwide in volunteer service activity (Miao & Yu, 2023). Our sample of volunteers came from Zhiyuanhui, the largest volunteer service organization in Zhejiang Province. This organization has around 2 million registered volunteers, with 15,000 volunteers participating in 10,000 volunteer service projects daily, engaging in community services, waste sorting, traffic order maintenance and other initiatives.

Our research project was approved by the ethics review board of our institution (ZJUSPA202305001). From the roster of volunteers at Zhiyuanhui, the researchers used simple random sampling to select 3,000 volunteers. They were invited through cellphone messages to participate in an anonymous survey. Among the invited volunteers, 2,493 expressed their willingness to participate (acceptance rate = 83.1%). Subsequently, we invited their project managers (recovery rate = 97.4%), matched by the number of the selected volunteers, to evaluate their work performance. The project managers know the volunteers well and their evaluations are generally considered more accurate than volunteer self-assessments (Chenhall & Langfield-Smith, 2007). To encourage participation, each volunteer and project manager completing all questionnaires was given 10 Yuan as a reward. Their responses were anonymized before analysis, but IDs were retained for linking surveys across timepoints.

Data were collected at three different time points to reduce common bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), with a one-month interval between each point. At the first time point, information regarding volunteers' demographic variables, JWB, and workplace incivility was collected. Of the 2,493

Fig. 1 The research model



questionnaires that were distributed, 2,430 valid questionnaires were returned (recovery rate = 97%). At the second time point, 2,430 questionnaires were distributed to the volunteers who had effectively completed the first round of questionnaires. Information on the volunteers' psychological contract violations was gathered, and 2,382 questionnaires were collected (recovery rate = 98%). At the third time point, questionnaires were distributed to the volunteers who effectively filled out the prior questionnaires; information on the volunteers' turnover intentions was obtained. Simultaneously, 580 volunteer project managers rated the volunteers' work performance; 2,320 questionnaires from volunteers were recovered (recovery rate = 97.4%). The recovery rates at each stage were similar to those reported in the previous study (Trent & Allen, 2019).

The average age of the volunteers was 24.95 years old ($SD = 8.2$), with females accounting for 72.1% and males accounting for 27.8%, which is similar to the demographic profiles of volunteers in China (Liu & Zhang, 2021). In terms of education, 22.58% of the volunteers had a high school education or lower, 68.9% had a college or bachelor's degree, and 8.45% had a master's degree or higher. These sample characteristics are similar to those of surveys on Chinese volunteers (Yu et al., 2021), indicating the high representativeness of the sample within the Chinese volunteer population.

Measures

All the scales used in this study were derived and translated from well-established and widely used scales. Each item was scored on a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). We adopted back-translation procedures widely used in cross-cultural research to ensure equivalence between the original scales and the Chinese translation (Brislin, 1970). All scales demonstrated good reliability with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.8 (see Table 1).

Workplace incivility in volunteer organizations. This study measured workplace incivility in the volunteer organization based on Walker's (2014) scale, which includes four items, such as "I have been verbally abused in the volunteer workplace." Higher scores indicate higher workplace incivility (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). This scale has been used in research on volunteering (Trent & Allen, 2019).

Volunteers' just-world beliefs. The respondent volunteers' JWB were measured based on the scale developed by Cheng et al. (2022), which includes five items, such as "Heaven sees how people act, and good and evil will have their consequences." Higher scores indicate a higher belief in a just world (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$). This scale has

been used in prior literature to measure volunteers' JWB (Guo et al., 2022).

Volunteers' psychological contract violations. The violation of volunteers' psychological contracts was measured based on Robinson and Wolfe Morrison's (2000) scale, which includes four items, such as "I feel a great deal of anger toward my organization." Higher scores indicate a stronger violation of the volunteer's psychological contract (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). This scale has been widely used in prior literature on volunteering (Aranda et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2016).

Volunteer performance. Volunteer performance was measured based on Millette and Gagné's (2008) scale and included four items, such as "Fulfills responsibilities specified in the job description." The scale was completed by the volunteer organizations' managers. Higher scores indicated better volunteer performance (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$). This scale has been used in prior literature to measure organizational members' performance (Conduit et al., 2019).

Volunteers' turnover intentions. To measure turnover intentions, our study used the scale developed by Scott et al. (1999), which includes four items, such as "I would prefer another more ideal volunteering activity than the one I now participate in." Volunteers completed the scale, with higher scores indicating higher turnover intentions (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$). This scale has been used in prior literature to measure service workers' turnover intentions (Tokmak & Turgut, 2018).

Control variables. Existing studies have demonstrated that volunteers' gender (male = 1, female = 2), age, education (below high school = 1, high school = 2, college = 3, bachelor = 4, master = 5, and doctor = 6) which impact their turnover intentions and work performance (Schreiner et al., 2018). Therefore, we set these variables as control variables.

Method of Analysis

We used SPSS 26.0 software for the common method bias test, validation factor analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis, mediation effect and moderated effect test. Specifically, mediation hypotheses were tested by applying regression analysis along with bootstrap resampling methods to assess the significance of indirect effects.

Results

Measurement Model

As shown in Table 2, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the validity of the models including

Table 1 The constructs and measurement items

Construct	Measures	Cronbach's α
Workplace incivility in a volunteer organization	Someone in the organization spoke aggressively toward me Someone in the organization used a tone when speaking with me Someone in the organization asked aggressive questions to me Someone in the organization made curt statements toward me	0.89
Volunteer's just world beliefs	Heaven sees how people act, and good and evil will have their consequences What goes around comes around, and the world is fair The world is just, good men will always receive good judgment Justice has long arms: Evil men can never escape their punishment One's fortune or misfortunes are nothing but the results of one's previous behavior	0.88
Volunteer's psychological contract violation	I feel a great deal of anger toward my organization I feel betrayed by my organization I feel that my organization has violated the contract between us I feel extremely frustrated by how I have been treated by my organization	0.89
Volunteer performance	In his/her role as a volunteer, fulfills responsibilities specified in the job description In his/her role as a volunteer, positive aspects of the job he/she is obligated to perform In his/her role as a volunteer, performs tasks that are expected of him/her In his/her role as a volunteer, adequately completes assigned duties	0.91
Volunteer turnover intention	I would prefer another more ideal volunteering activity than the one I now join in I have thought seriously about changing organization since I began volunteering here I hope not to continue to work for this organization for a long time I seriously intend to look for another volunteer work within the next year	0.93

Table 2 Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Model (N = 2320)	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
Five factor: WI, PCV, JWB, VP, VTI	978.5	179	—	0.98	0.97	0.03	0.04
Four factor: WI, PCV, JWB, VP + VTI	3428.19	183	2449.69*** (4)	0.91	0.9	0.05	0.09
Three factor: WI, PCV, JWB + VP + VTI	9849.83	186	8871.33*** (7)	0.73	0.69	0.16	0.15
Two factors: WI, PCV + JWB + VP + VTI	10,583.13	188	9604.63*** (9)	0.71	0.68	0.16	0.15
Single factor: WI + PCV + JWB + VP + VTI	14,864.94	189	13,886.44*** (10)	0.59	0.54	0.17	0.18

WI workplace incivility, PCV psychological contract violation, JWB Just world beliefs, VP volunteer performance, VTI volunteer turnover intention, CFI Comparative fit index, TLI Tucker-Lewis index, SRMR Standardized root mean square residual, RMSEA Root mean square error of approximation. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

workplace incivility in volunteer organizations, volunteers' JWB, volunteers' psychological contract violations, volunteer performance, and volunteer turnover intentions. The results indicated that the measurement model fit the data well ($N = 2,320$, $\chi^2 = 978.5$, $df = 179$, $CFI = 0.98$, $TLI = 0.97$, $SRMR = 0.03$, and $RMSEA = 0.04$). Harman's single-factor test was used to evaluate the presence of

common method bias (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The maximum variance explained by a single factor was 14.38%, which was below the 40% threshold recommended by Aulakh and Gencturk (2000). In comparison to the competition model in Table 2, the results reveal that the five factors can be distinguished, and the model is a better fit for the data than any alternative model (MacCallum

et al., 1996). Thus, the constructs exhibit acceptable discriminant validity.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

The mean, standard deviation and correlation coefficients between the variables involved in this study are shown in Table 3. It can be found that there is a significant positive correlation between workplace incivility and psychological contract violation ($r = 0.375$, $p < 0.01$), and a significant positive correlation between workplace incivility and turnover intention ($r = 0.299$, $p < 0.01$). There is a significant negative correlation between workplace incivility and volunteer performance ($r = -0.339$, $p < 0.01$), a significant positive correlation between psychological contract violation and turnover intention ($r = 0.792$, $p < 0.01$), and a significant negative correlation between psychological contract violation and volunteer performance ($r = -0.670$, $p < 0.01$). The results of the correlation analysis provide a preliminary indication that the relationships of the key variables in this study are consistent with the hypotheses, which provides a basis for in-depth testing of the hypotheses.

Hypothesis Test

As shown in Table 4, Model 2, multiple linear regression analysis of the data reveals that, after considering the influence of the volunteers' gender, age, and educational level, a significant and positive correlation was observed between workplace incivility and psychological contract

violations ($B = 0.388$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, H1 is supported.

Stepwise regression was applied to test for mediating effects (H2a). As shown in Table 4, Model 4, after introducing psychological contract violations, a significant and positive correlation was observed between psychological contract violations and turnover intentions ($B = 0.882$, $SE = 0.015$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, the absolute coefficient value for workplace incivility and turnover intentions was 0.348 ($SE = 0.023$, $p < 0.01$) in Model 3, while it was 0.0061 ($SE = 0.016$, $p > 0.1$) in Model 4. This indicated that psychological contract violations mediated the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer turnover intentions. Furthermore, a bootstrap test by sampling 1,000 times revealed that psychological contract violations mediated the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer turnover intentions ($B = 0.882$, 95% CI = [0.298, 0.386]). Hence, H2a is supported.

Stepwise regression was applied to test for mediating effects (H2b). In Table 4, Model 6, after introducing psychological contract violations, there is a significant negative correlation between the sense of psychological contract violations and volunteers' work performance ($B = -0.653$, $p < 0.01$) in Model 6. The absolute value of the correlation coefficient between workplace incivility and volunteer performance was 0.362 ($SE = 0.021$, $p < 0.01$) in Model 5, while it was 0.108 ($SE = 0.018$, $p < 0.01$) in Model 6, indicating that psychological contract violations had a partial mediating role. Further, a bootstrap test by sampling 1,000 times indicated that volunteers' psychological contract violations mediated the relationship

Table 3 Means, standard deviations, and correlations analysis of variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Gender	1.279	0.449	–							
Age	24.95	8.209	0.161***	–						
Education	3.771	0.842	– 0.034*	– 0.141***	–					
Volunteer turnover intention	3.345	1.101	– 0.079***	– 0.053**	0.098***	(0.925)				
Volunteer performance	2.484	1.022	0.073***	0.0170	– 0.107***	– 0.688***	(0.911)			
Psychological contract violation	3.475	0.981	– 0.059***	– 0.0260	0.095***	0.792***	– 0.670***	(0.891)		
Workplace incivility	3.745	0.956	0.0320	0.107***	0.128***	0.299***	– 0.339***	0.375***	(0.890)	
Just world beliefs	3.925	0.843	0.085***	0.139***	0.051**	0.163***	– 0.231***	0.259***	0.601***	(0.883)

$N = 2320$. Age was reported in years. Gender: male = 1 and female = 2. Education: below high school = 1, high school = 2, college = 3, bachelor = 4, master = 5, and doctor = 6. The numbers in parentheses are Cronbach's α . * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 4 Analysis of the mediating effect of psychological contract violation

	Psychological contract violation		Volunteer turnover intention		Volunteer performance	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Gender	− 0.121*** (0.046)	− 0.135*** (0.042)	− 0.188*** (0.049)	− 0.0684** (0.032)	0.175*** (0.045)	0.0867** (0.035)
Age	− 0.000522 (0.003)	− 0.00616*** (0.002)	− 0.00885*** (0.003)	− 0.00341* (0.002)	0.00411* (0.002)	0.0000869 (0.002)
Education	0.108*** (0.024)	0.0430* (0.023)	0.0614** (0.026)	0.0234 (0.017)	− 0.0679*** (0.024)	− 0.0398** (0.019)
Workplace incivility		0.388*** (0.020)	0.348*** (0.023)	0.00616 (0.016)	− 0.362*** (0.021)	− 0.108*** (0.018)
Psychological contract violation				0.882*** (0.015)		− 0.653*** (0.017)
_cons	3.238*** (0.129)	2.188*** (0.132)	2.271*** (0.152)	0.341*** (0.103)	3.767*** (0.139)	5.196*** (0.116)
N	2320	2320	2320	2320	2320	2320
R ²	0.012	0.150	0.104	0.629	0.127	0.461

Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

between workplace incivility and volunteer performance ($B = -0.653$, 95% CI = $[-0.289, -0.153]$). Hence, H2b is supported.

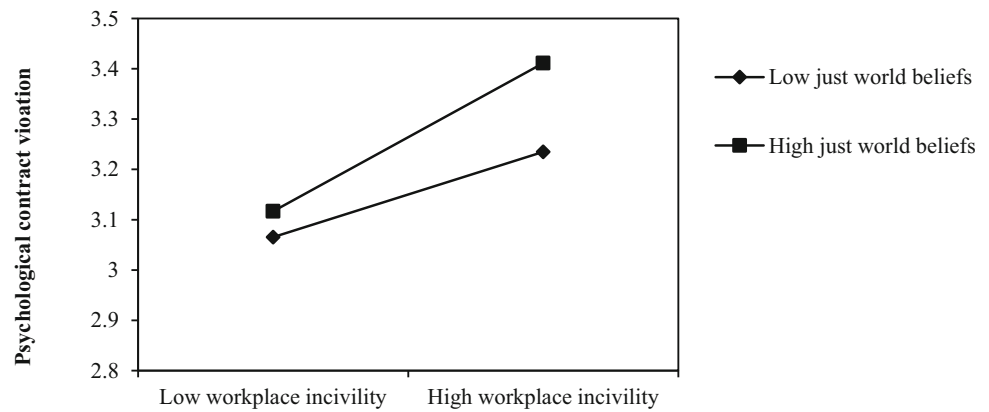
In Table 5, multiple linear regression analysis of the data reveals that the interaction between workplace incivility and volunteers' JWB significantly and positively affected volunteers' psychological contract violations ($B = 0.0654$, $SE = 0.017$, $p < 0.01$) in Model 3. To further

confirm the moderating effect and its direction, we followed the recommendation of Aiken et al. (1991) to plot the relationship between workplace incivility and psychological contract violations at one standard deviation below and above the mean of volunteers' JWB (Fig. 2). For volunteers with high JWB, the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer psychological contract violations was stronger ($B = 0.41$, 95% CI = $[0.29, 0.42]$).

Table 5 Analysis of the Moderating Effect of Just World Beliefs

	Psychological contract violation		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	− 0.121*** (0.046)	− 0.144*** (0.042)	− 0.140*** (0.042)
Age	− 0.000522 (0.003)	− 0.00668*** (0.002)	− 0.00648*** (0.002)
Education	0.108*** (0.024)	0.0442* (0.023)	0.0498** (0.023)
Workplace incivility		0.347*** (0.025)	0.0887 (0.071)
Just world beliefs		0.0782*** (0.028)	− 0.131** (0.061)
Workplace incivility × Just world beliefs			0.0654*** (0.017)
_cons	3.238*** (0.129)	2.053*** (0.140)	2.818*** (0.241)
N	2320	2320	2320
R ²	0.012	0.153	0.159

Standard errors in parentheses, * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Fig. 2 Moderating effect of just-world beliefs

In contrast, the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteers' psychological contract violations was weaker for volunteers with low JWB ($B = 0.30$, 95% CI = [0.23, 0.37]). These results support the notion that workplace incivility has a stronger positive effect on volunteers' psychological contract violations when they believe more in a just world. Therefore, H3 was verified.

In Table 6, the moderating effects test reveals that when volunteers' belief in a just world is high, psychological contract violations have a relatively strong indirect effect on the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteers' turnover intentions ($\beta = 0.36$, 95% CI = [0.31, 0.41], not including 0). Conversely, when the volunteers' belief in a just world is low, psychological contract violations have a relatively low, indirect effect on the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteers' turnover intentions ($\beta = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.32], not including 0). Therefore, the belief in a just world positively moderated psychological contract violations' mediating role in the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteers' turnover intentions. Hence, H4a was verified.

In Table 7, the moderating effects test illustrates that when the level of volunteer's belief in a just world is high, psychological contract violations have a relatively high indirect effect on the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer performance ($\beta = -0.27$, 95% CI = [-0.31, -0.23], not including 0). Conversely, when the volunteer's belief in a just world is low, psychological contract violations have a relatively low, indirect effect on the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer performance ($\beta = -0.20$, 95% CI = [-0.23, -0.16], not

including 0). Therefore, the belief in a just world positively moderated psychological contract violations' mediating role in the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer performance. Hence, H4b was verified.

Discussion and Conclusion

Conclusions and Theoretical Contributions

Based on the psychological contract theory, this study provides insights into the mechanism through which workplace incivility influences volunteer outcomes. The findings of this research are as follows: (1) workplace incivility has a detrimental effect on the psychological contract between volunteers and volunteer organizations; (2) volunteers' psychological contract violations caused by workplace incivility can further impact their volunteer outcomes, leading to a decrease in performance and an increase in turnover intentions; and (3) volunteers' JWB not only moderate the impact of workplace incivility on their psychological contract violations but also moderate the mediating effect of psychological contract violations on the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer outcomes.

This study makes several contributions. First, it addresses the issue of workplace incivility faced by volunteers, in response to the calls made by previous scholars for attention to workplace incivility in the nonprofit sector (Dawood, 2013; Phillips et al., 2019). Specifically, this study investigated volunteers' exposure to workplace

Table 6 Moderated mediation effect test (H4a)

Just world beliefs	Indirect effect (WI → PCV → VTI)	SE	95%CI
Low just world beliefs (− SD)	0.26	0.03	[0.21, 0.32]
Just world beliefs (Mean)	0.31	0.02	[0.27, 0.36]
High just world beliefs (+ SD)	0.36	0.03	[0.31, 0.41]

WI workplace incivility, PCV psychological contract violation, VTI volunteer turnover intention

Table 7 Moderated mediation effect test (H4b)

Just world beliefs	Indirect effect (WI → PCV → VP)	SE	95%CI
Low just world beliefs (− SD)	− 0.20	0.02	[− 0.23, − 0.16]
Just world beliefs (Mean)	− 0.23	0.02	[− 0.27, − 0.20]
High just world beliefs (+ SD)	− 0.27	0.02	[− 0.31, − 0.23]

WI workplace incivility, PCV psychological contract violation, VP volunteer performance

incivility, effectively supporting previous qualitative findings that highlight the existence of serious incivility in volunteer organizations (Paull & Omari, 2015). This study employed a questionnaire to examine the impact of workplace incivility on volunteer outcomes, thereby revealing the mechanisms by which workplace incivility affects volunteers' performance and turnover intentions.

Second, this study applied psychological contract theory to the field of volunteer management and analyzed workplace incivility's negative impact on volunteers. While one study found that workplace incivility led to volunteer burnout (Trent & Allen, 2019), it did not delve into the underlying mechanism. Our work demonstrated that psychological contract violations are an important mediator of workplace incivility that affects volunteer outcomes. Moreover, another prior study suggested that workplace incivility can reduce volunteers' work performance by reducing psychological capital (Roberts et al., 2011). However, this study contended that volunteers' psychological contract violations play a crucial mediating role in the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteer outcomes, which provided another explanatory mechanism.

Third, this study examined the moderating role of JWB in the relationship between workplace incivility and volunteers' psychological contract violations. It has suggested that employees' JWB will prompt them to rationalize workplace incivility as their fault and choose to work harder to maintain their contractual relationship with the organization (Öcel, 2012). However, unlike employees bound by formal contracts, volunteers have no formal contractual obligations with their organizations. The volunteers holding strong JWB that expect higher fair treatment, can perceive more psychological contract violations and are more inclined to exit their roles when confronting workplace incivility, rather than being more loyal as employees. This finding highlights the differences between volunteers and employees (Overgaard, 2019), revealing that volunteers with high JWB are more vulnerable and more likely to leave their jobs when confronted with workplace incivility, thus demonstrating the specificity of volunteer-related human resource management.

Fourth, this study employed a multi-wave survey and gathered data from multiple sources, enhancing its reliability and validity (Chenhall & Langfield-Smith, 2007). Specifically, we adopted a three-wave tracking

questionnaire and effectively reduced the problem of the common method bias. Additionally, we measured volunteer outcomes using volunteers-reported turnover intentions and managers-rated volunteer's performance. Compared to previous studies that only used subjective variables to measure voluntary outcomes (Barraza, 2011), our multi-source measurements lend robust evidence for the research findings.

Practical Significance

First, volunteer organizations should take action to reduce the issue of incivility. This study reveals the seriousness of workplace incivility in volunteer organizations by highlighting its negatively impacts on volunteer outcomes. To address this issue, volunteer organizations should establish clear reporting procedures and policies, similar to those afforded to employees, ensuring that volunteers receive comparable protections against sexual harassment, bullying, and other forms of incivility (Beaton et al., 2022). Second, volunteer organizations should refrain from treating volunteers as mere free labor, and should instead care for, respect, and support them to maintain their psychological contract through more training and psychological counseling (A. Walker et al., 2016). Third, more attention should be paid to volunteers who have high expectations of justice. While believing in a just world may motivate volunteering participation (Jiranek et al., 2013), volunteers with these ideals are also more susceptible to psychological contract violations when encountering workplace incivility. Therefore, volunteer organizations should offer training and counseling to help volunteers adjust their justice expectations and reflect on their experiences. According to Einolf (2018), reflection practices involve activities that encourage critical thinking about volunteers' experiences and alignment with their personal values and the organization's mission. This approach can help volunteers to deeply process and integrate their experiences, which may develop stronger psychological resilience and reduce the negative impact of workplace incivilities.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although this study contributes to the theory and practice of preventing volunteers' workplace incivility, it also has

several limitations. First, workplace incivility can be divided into leadership, colleague, and service recipient incivility; therefore, incivility from different sources may have varying impacts on volunteers (Trent & Allen, 2019). Future research should explore the effects of different types of incivility on volunteers' psychological contracts. Second, our investigation aligns with previous studies on volunteers in China, showing that they are predominantly young and female (Liu & Zhang, 2021). However, considering that young females may be more vulnerable to workplace incivility due to power imbalances (Gabriel et al., 2018), the demographic characteristic of our samples may limit the generalizability of our findings. Although our analysis controlled for gender and age, future research should further explore how workplace incivility affects volunteers differently by these demographic factors. Third, although this study adopted a multi-source approach to collect manager-rated volunteer performance and volunteer-reported turnover intention (Knapp et al., 2017), it is difficult to avoid that a few managers, who could be the perpetrators of incivility, also evaluate volunteer performance. The assessment of volunteer performance could be more precise if variables such as volunteering time and frequency were used to reduce bias. Fourth, although this study reveals that volunteers are vulnerable to the harm of workplace incivility, and perhaps research on this topic is just beginning. We argue that this kind of harm can originate from external sources or be influenced by individual factors, such as volunteers' moral identity (Zhao et al., 2022). Therefore, future research should further explore volunteers' psychological vulnerabilities to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of workplace incivility on volunteer outcomes.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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