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'An outlet for your emotions': WKU professor examining aggressive commutes

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Katrina Bunch has a published paper looking into the connection between uncivil encounters in the workplace and aggressive driving on the way home.

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For many of us, a bad day at work leads to an angry drive home.

A Western Kentucky University professor is examining how workplace slights lead to aggressive commutes, and what employers can do to help.

Katrina Burch was recently published in the Journal of Business and Psychology for a paper looking into the connection between incivility encountered in the workplace and aggressive driving behaviors on the commute home.



“I have been interested in commuting for a long time, mostly because they say ‘all research is me-search,’ ” Burch said. “And I’ve commuted ungodly amounts of time ... I recognized that if I had a bad day at work, I would be more frustrated on my commute.”

The results of the paper, written by Burch, her mentor Janet Barnes-Farrell and current WKU grad student Melissa Sorensen, found that employees were more likely to engage in aggressive driving behavior on the work-to-home commute on days they experienced workplace incivility.

This behind-the-wheel aggression was found to be exacerbated by “psychological contract violations.”

“We all have this implied thing that ‘you’re not going to violate my space, I’m not going to violate your space’, this idea that we’re going to co-exist on the road together and we’re going to get to our destinations safely,” Burch said. “When somebody violates that, we might want to retaliate.”

These instances of incivility don’t have to be large offenses. Some are “subtle incivilities,” where a person doesn’t mean to offend but does so unintentionally.

“There is the workplace incivility that I study, which could be something potentially harmless as saying ‘hi’ to your colleague in the hallway and them not acknowledging you back,” she said.

The ambiguity of incivility can leave the target trying to make sense of an interaction, which can spill over into the commute.

Burch said the next step for her research is to dig into the motivations behind aggressive driving behaviors.

“If you had a bad day at work,” she said, “Are you getting behind the wheel of a car intended for this commute to be an outlet for your emotions? Or did you engage in risky or aggressive behaviors and didn’t realize you were doing it?”

She said there is a sense of anonymity afforded to drivers that may play into aggressive behaviors, with employees using the road as an outlet for their emotions.

“When you’re in a car there’s a level of anonymity,” Burch said. “In a work setting, that anonymity doesn’t exist. If somebody is rude to me and I’m rude back to them, it’s not anonymous.”

Burch argues that there is an organizational component to the findings, and that employers are responsible for providing an environment of civility in the first place.

“We can talk about the individual things people can do to potentially limit their aggressive behaviors on the commute, but there is a responsibility that organizations have to their employees to create cultures around civility,” she said.

She said that since most everyone works, there is an opportunity here for employers to lead a change in the public’s well being “through the policies they implement and the cultures they create.”