INCIVILITY AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE:

AN INVESTIGATION OF MUNICIPAL LEADERS’ EXPERIENCE OF WORKPLACE INCIVILITY

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Abstract

This study investigated a group of local government leaders who reported experiencing workplace incivility, or incivility in the course of their average daily work. The aim of the research was to examine the effect of workplace incivility on the leaders’ motivation to work on behalf of the public using Public Service Motivation (PSM) as a theoretical framework. Qualitative semi-structured interviews elicited the participants’ thoughts and feelings about their experiences and their motivation to continue this line of work. The participants’ responses were analyzed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach. Findings suggested the leaders who most exhibited high levels of PSM were more likely to find ways to deal with the uncivil experiences. Implications for practice are offered as well as areas for future research.
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the listeners, the genuine ones who can see through the eyes of others and appreciate their experience. Those people who take a moment to make someone’s life a little better, the downtrodden’s landing a little softer. For the dedicated ones, who persistently return to fight for others with dignity and grace and whose hope for our future is unwavering. We need more of you. Keep doing what you do and pass it on.
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Workplace incivility is a significant problem in the United States and municipal governments are no exception. Workplace incivility is defined as “low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). Research and personal experience have demonstrated the costly effects of workplace incivility on targets resulting in higher stress levels (Bowling & Beehr, 2006), decreased organizational citizenship behaviors (Dalal, 2005), and increased turnover intentions (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Without more knowledge of how local government employees are affected by workplace incivility, the costs of these negative experiences will continue to rise.

Problem of Practice

Frequent turnover in local government leaders has occurred in several municipalities within one state in the Northeast. In speaking with local leaders leaving their positions, many have expressed frustration over the incivility they have experienced in their day-to-day work and how it wears on their motivation. If workplace incivility is allowed to continue specific to government service, the consequences can be grave for our communities. As Baby Boomers retire, their jobs could be difficult to fill. Further, a growing lack of professionalism and trust in government can lead to less collaboration and cooperation for the public good.

This dissertation gives voice to local leaders by asking how they experience incivility through their work and its impact on their motivation. The aim of the study is to provide further understanding of the complexities of incivility in public service work at the municipal level and the implications of incivility on the motivation of those who experience it. The research goal is
to investigate the issue more deeply within the context of one state to find potential avenues for change for the common good. As a professional development trainer for municipalities within the state being studied, further knowledge about workplace incivility in local government can be used to provide interventions and educational offerings. The time has come to stop talking about incivility and start doing something to stem the tide.

**Summary of Existing Literature**

A problem in the functioning of government in the United States is a growing lack of civility in public discourse and in the workplace. One need not look any further than television and the Internet to witness incivility (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014; Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014). TV and the Internet enable divisive rhetoric to be put forth without the filter that a face-to-face encounter may, though not always, provide having an effect on political trust (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). At the national level, we see a damaged democracy demonstrated by a polarized Congress unable to work together to pass major legislation on behalf of the American people. Those same members of Congress are seen on cable news often speaking with a general lack of civility toward their fellow colleagues. At the local level, leaders (municipal governing boards, city councils, legislatures) working on behalf of their communities also experience incivility and conflict contributing to ineffectiveness (Gabris & Nelson, 2013; Nelson, Gabris, & Davis, 2011) and turnover (Smothers & Lawton, 2017; McCabe, Feiock, Clingermeyer, & Stream, 2008; Bright, 2008; Renner & DeSantis, 1994).

Research has demonstrated that municipal leaders experience incivility through strained relations and toxic interactions between city councils, mayors, and/or city managers, as well as through interacting with citizens (League of Minnesota Cities and Minnesota City/County Management Association Joint Task Force Report on Civility, 2014; Vogelsang-Coombs, 2012).
Incivility can lead to employee turnover (DeHoog & Whitaker, 1990; Smothers & Lawton, 2017; McCabe et al., 2008; Bright, 2008; Renner & DeSantis, 1994), a lack of effectiveness in governance (Nelson et al., 2011), strained relations with citizens and erosions of public trust (Vogelsang-Coombs, 2012; Mutz & Reeves 2005), and potentially fewer young people interested in the public service career path (Smothers & Lawton, 2017). Although workplace incivility has been studied among many occupations from bank tellers (Sliter, Jex, Wolford, & McInnerney, 2010; Sliter, Sliter, & Jex, 2012b) to call center employees (Scott, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2013) to attorneys (Cortina & Magley, 2009), much remains to be learned about incivility and the work of local government leaders.

**Statement of Significance**

A study that investigates the experiences of incivility among municipal leaders has significance for researchers, practitioners, and the general public. Beginning in 1999 with Andersson and Pearson’s introduction of the term, *workplace incivility*, most researchers have empirically studied the topic using different methodologies, instruments, and sample populations. Very few studies used a qualitative methodology to examine the topic (Cortina, Magley, & Lim, 2002). Most of the research conducted on workplace incivility has focused on the private sector (Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016) and although some studied government employees (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2013; Cortina et al., 2002; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), none specifically studied municipal leaders (managers/mayors/administrators). This study will provide an unexplored perspective by examining workplace incivility within local government leaders.

This research adds to the growing literature on workplace incivility by focusing on a population, municipal leaders consisting of managers, administrators, council members or
mayors in cities or towns in one northeast state, which is a unique research approach relative to workplace incivility. It will also expand the number of studies employing qualitative methods to gain deep insight into the individual experience of workplace incivility. Further, it will link workplace incivility to public service motivation as a theoretical framework through which to examine the data.

Practitioners will find the investigation useful to broaden their knowledge on the subject matter and to identify and work to combat incivility in their own workplaces. Some studies regarding interventions for uncivil workplaces have been conducted (Cleven, Bush, & Saul, 2018; Seidle, Fernandez, & Perry, 2018; Hodgins, MacCurtain, & Mannix-McNamara, 2013; Kirk, Schutte, & Hine, 2011; Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011; Osatuke, Mohr, Ward, Moore, Dyrenforth, & Belton, 2009) but the spread of the issue has been far and wide. Many potential solutions are needed to address the issue in different types of employment sectors and job functions within organizations.

Finally, the general public gains from an interrogation of workplace incivility in local government because everyone is affected by the decisions of local government leaders in their communities. If workplace incivility is leading to high rates of turnover, motivation issues, or distraction among city managers, those communities are not fully benefiting from the expertise of their public servants.

Increasing the understanding of municipal leaders’ experience of incivility can serve to inform professional development training and other interventions by the state municipal league of cities and towns, one organization responsible for professional development training with local governments in the state. In a larger context, data from this work also informs understanding on the effects of incivility in the workplace at the individual level, specific to the
public administration context, and in the public leadership and leadership literature more broadly.

**Positionality Statement**

As this study investigates city and town leaders’ experiences of workplace incivility, it is important that I comprehend my own potential biases as a researcher. By interrogating my own attitudes, motivations, and sensitivities in relation to myself, my relationship to and interactions with others in my personal and work life, as well as the broader context of professional education, I can minimize any potential biases influencing the reliability or validity of the proposed study (Briscoe, 2005).

**Personal Background & Biases**

Throughout my life, I have always been fascinated by human interaction from both a psychological and sociological perspective. I am usually attuned to the energy of the social environment within which I find myself. I have also always been uncomfortable with the uncivil behavior that I have witnessed or experienced in daily life and have wondered why it occurs. In turn, I have found uncivil behavior to be the lowest of the potential paths one can take in their daily interactions. Through my education in psychology and sociology and eventually my training to be a counselor, I now view incivility as an indicator of some form of pain, be it individual, relational, or systemic.

Another topic of interest that I have developed is to understand how people come to pursue their career paths. From my perspective, our waking hours are best spent in careers that are enjoyed. Although my own career path has been a winding one, it has been consistent with what I value; serving others, learning, and the common good.
I have worked in some form of education since graduating from college in 1995. The path has been varied but has always been motivated by the common thread of helping other people. I have reached an understanding about my own privilege as a Caucasian woman living in the United States with access to education. Through education I emerged from a lower-middle class family from a small village in Western New York as a first-generation college student, eventually obtaining a master’s degree in counseling, and currently working toward a doctorate degree in education. Without my own access to education, and student loans, I would not have been able to improve my standard of living for myself and my children, or impact others in the ways and to the extent that I have. In conducting my research, I need to be aware of how my own education has helped me to see the world as a complex system of imperfect human beings acting in relation to one another toward individual or collective goals. I have learned to appreciate that values differ based on one’s individual experience and culture, and that what I may interpret as uncivil behavior may not impact others in the same manner.

Professionally, through a process of job changes that each brought their own path of self-discovery, my career has been spent assisting and teaching college students at the undergraduate and graduate level. After working as a career counselor in a top business school, I began to question my role as part of the chain of helping others toward careers in the private sector. This was during a time of widespread corporate scandal and the prevailing view of corporate culture grew more negative. I did not want to spend my own working hours to facilitate others toward that direction. I landed in a new role assisting graduate students in a public policy master’s program at an Ivy League institution. I viewed this work more in line with my values for the common good as I was assisting those who would go on to work in government or the nonprofit sector. As someone with a humble upbringing, I advocated for underrepresented students to gain
access to an Ivy League credential and helped others in finding jobs. Although that aspect of the work was incredibly meaningful to me, it became increasingly apparent how privilege played into the decision making of many leaders within the institution. I grew weary and knew a change was needed. Again, in conducting my own research I need to acknowledge and appreciate that my experience and perspective are not necessarily the same as others.

Currently, I find myself applying my values of contributing to the greater good through education. My role as a professional development trainer for a state municipal league allows me the platform to try to make a positive impact. I have anecdotally heard several stories of incivility that leaders of cities and towns in my state have experienced. Some leaders have even chosen to leave their positions or their professions altogether because of their experiences. To me, it is my professional duty as a scholar-practitioner to investigate this issue in order to understand the experiences of municipal leaders with relation to incivility and how their motivation to work in public service is impacted. In so doing, my goal is to eventually uncover information that will provide clues as to how to intervene as a trainer to assist leaders in promoting civility and respect in their cities and towns.

Relation to Others

I believe that more progress in local government can be made to assist all city and town residents regardless of their demographics if dialogue, public discourse, and interpersonal exchanges are conducted in a civil manner. To me, civility begins with the fundamental respect for the nature of humanity as complex and flawed beings who can overcome challenges through their own perseverance and the support of others.
The people in this study will be government leaders. Like me, their experiences, values, education, backgrounds and community cultures will influence their viewpoints on civility and public service. Some leaders will be more tolerant of incivility than others. Regardless of how closely my views on civility align with those of the participants, I must keep a professional distance to remain objective as I am gathering data through qualitative interviews.

I must also be aware of how participants view me as a trainer as well as a researcher. Because many of them serve on the executive board of the municipal league that employs me, they may have certain expectations of my role through which we are most familiar. They may be hesitant to be forthcoming with their views. This may be especially true if they perceive any difficulties they have experienced as a sign of weakness. I must work to gain their trust through establishing rapport, explaining my pledge of confidentiality, and behaving with the highest professional standards.

There are many potential influences and biases, both personally and professionally, that I must be vigilant to keep top of mind while conducting and analyzing my research in order to maintain validity of the results. The influences serve to motivate me to pursue change but also can impact the accuracy of my work if left unchecked. Reflecting on the potential biases is important in assembling a credible study on incivility and local governance.

The study I am proposing intentionally incorporates strategies to mitigate my biases (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). By looking at my positionality including race, gender, class, and other social identities (Briscoe, 2005; Carlton-Parsons, 2008) and my background involving my culture, knowledge, perceptions and demographic position, I have examined important factors related to a quality study. Further, in qualitative research, which is the method I will employ for this study, examining positionality is vital (Maxwell, Chesler, & Nagda, 2011).
In conclusion, I realize that my background is already formed and unchangeable but is also crucial to my research (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). By reflecting on my positionality, I see that my own perspectives have been informed by my unique experience but that there are also many similarities to those with whom I engage and intend to study. Professional values of effective use of resources to positively impact the community as well as respect for individuals and the common good tie me to my work and many of the professionals with whom I engage.

**Research Question**

Workplace incivility is a well-documented problem (Bunk & Magley, 2013; Adams & Webster, 2013; Porath & Pearson, 2012; Sliter et al., 2010; Lim & Lee, 2011; Cortina et al., 2001; Kern & Grandey, 2009; Cameron & Webster, 2011; Porath & Erez, 2007). Addressing the issue in relation to local government leaders’ experiences of incivility can serve to gain a deeper understanding of the context of the issue at the municipal level. By giving voice to their experience of workplace incivility, some increased understanding can be acquired as to its impact on the leaders’ motivation to do public service work. The knowledge gained through this study can also serve to inform potential interventions which, if successful, may benefit communities at large through the increased commitment and job satisfaction of municipal employees.

The primary research question this study will address is: **How do local government leaders describe their experiences of workplace incivility and its effect on their motivation?** Collecting data to explore the complexities of workplace incivility for local government leaders in one state is a goal of the study. Inspiring the investigation is Public Service Motivation theory (PSM) and examining how negative events of incivility may affect an individual’s drive to work in the public sector so that interventions can be developed.
The following questions based on the attraction-selection-retention (ASR) process involved in Public Service Motivation Theory, as outlined by Perry and Wise (1990), will provide a means by which to focus and frame the study:

- How did you (the local leader) develop your interest to work in public service? (Attraction)
- What factors about public service work contributed to your decision to pursue this leadership role? (Selection)
- Have you experienced workplace incivility? How has your experience affected your motivation to work in public service? (Retention)

**Theoretical Framework**

Public Service Motivation (PSM) Theory serves as the theoretical frame for this research study. When considering that the objective of this study is to understand more deeply the experience of incivility and its effects on municipal leaders, PSM Theory aligns with that goal as it seeks to explain the values and work motivations of those involved in the public sector work as well as the attraction, selection, and retention process.

**Foundations of PSM**

Calls for a recommitment to values consistent with government service arose after a steady decline in American public trust starting in the sixties. In particular, a public distrust in government followed that period. Perry and Wise (1990) set out to examine the public service ethic and its link to performance. Originally, the aim of their research was to “clarify the nature of public service motivation and to identify and evaluate research related to its effects on public employee behavior” (Perry & Wise, 1990, p. 368).
Described by the authors conceptually, public service motivation involves the predisposition of individuals to act on their needs and motives uniquely grounded in public institutions (Perry & Wise, 1990). Knoke and Wright-Isak (1982) found that behaviors are triggered by rational, normative, or affective motivations. Rational motives involve utility maximization. Normative motives are behaviors associated with a need to conform to social norms. Finally, affective motives involve an emotional response to certain social contexts. Following on this logic, these motivational triggers (rational, normative, and affective) would drive individual behaviors related to public service work.

Perry and Wise (1990) drew several potential behavioral implications from Public Service Motivation (PSM). First, they expected that individuals are more likely to pursue membership in a public organization, the higher their PSM (Attraction). Second, they proposed that PSM is positively associated with individual performance in public institutions (Selection). Third, they anticipated that public organizations drawing members with high PSM are more likely to manage individual performance issues adequately without use of utilitarian incentives (Retention).

By furthering his investigation into PSM, Perry (1996) developed an assessment to measure PSM. Instrument items were tested on six dimensions: attraction to public policymaking; commitment to public interest; civic duty; social justice; self-sacrifice; and compassion. Four of the dimensions, attraction to public policymaking; commitment to public interest; compassion; and self-sacrifice, were confirmed by factor analysis. Perry’s PSM scale showed face and construct validity and discriminant validity among the four dimensions to be good overall, as well as high reliability.
To examine the antecedents of PSM, Perry (1997) used his Public Service Motivation Scale to investigate relationship of PSM to five sets of correlates: parental socialization; religious socialization, professional identity, political ideology, and demographic characteristics of the individual. Although a comprehensive explanation was not reached, several factors were identified to affect variations in PSM significantly. Broadly the implications of the study involved the findings for the professional socialization, religious, and parental antecedents. Church involvement was found to be negatively associated with PSM, counter to Perry’s (1997) hypothesis. Together, this implies that familial, school, and professional experiences significantly affect an individual’s PSM.

Interestingly, Perry (1997) also found that income was significantly and negatively associated with in PSM. He suggests that, consistent with Lasch’s (1995) critique of American society as divided along class lines, elites may view themselves more as world citizens and less as Americans and as such, may have abandoned their historic commitment to the middle-class. Following this logic, elites would be less likely to pursue careers in public service.

In 2010, Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise revisited the motivational bases of public service as originally outlined by Perry and Wise (1990) twenty years prior. Their synthesis suggested both convergence and divergence in the constructs related to PSM. The greatest area of convergence was found to be around ‘other’ orientation-- notions of prosocial, self-sacrifice, and altruism-- across definitions of motivation thereby matching up with the traditional concepts of a public service ethic. The authors point out that the ‘other’ orientation also dovetails with more recent research in social psychology and organizational behavior (Perry et al., 2010).

Divergence was found in the more particular nature of the objects of motivation in PSM than that of altruism and prosocial motivation (Perry et al., 2010). There were greater boundaries
drawn around PSM definitions (Perry & Wise, 1990; Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999; Brewer & Selden, 1998; Brewer, Selden, & Facer, 1999; and Vandenabeele, 2007) that included notions of the public and political entities (Perry et al., 2010). The authors suggest a specific type of altruism and behavior is brought forth through the values associated with public institutions, although not solely found in government organizations (Perry et al., 2010).

Perry et al. (2010) drew several conclusions from their review of the PSM research over a 20-year time span. The concept of PSM has drawn attention from a variety of disciplines ranging from public administration (PA) to organizational behavior to psychology. The core concept revolves around the notion that some people are drawn to work (the attraction element) that allows them to act in the public arena on behalf of the common good for society and others (Perry et al., 2010). The importance of this concept is that it acknowledges that some people are not simply acting for their own self-interest.

Examining their original proposition around the importance of PSM in the attraction--selection--retention process of individuals to public service work, Perry et al. (2010) found the proposition was empirically supported by others (Vandenabeele, 2008; Wright & Christensen, 2010), albeit as one of several motivational factors. The authors suggest future research expand to include situational factors affecting individual PSM which is the aim of the present study. In this case, how do local leaders experience workplace incivility and what is its effect on their PSM?

Public Service Motivation theory is an appropriate frame to guide the present study in that it seeks to explain individual factors related to those doing public service work. PSM postulates about the process of developing an attraction for public service, the selection for public service as a line of work, and the factors involved in the retention of public service
employees. PSM theory guides this study’s overarching research question as well as the semi-structured interview questions consistent with the methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Key Concepts & Terms

**Civility:** Civility is a term referring to the social norms for the basic standards of behavior connoting respect and regard that occur through interacting with others in everyday life. (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004).

**Workplace Incivility:** Originally defined by Andersson and Pearson (1999), workplace incivility has been defined as “low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (p. 457).

**Municipal Leader:** For purposes of this study, the term Municipal Leader will refer to any city or town manager, mayor, or council member. These leaders are the primary focus of the study and the groups that were solicited as participants in the research.

**Public Service Motivation:** Public Service Motivation (PSM) is a theory originally proposed by Perry and Wise (1990) to describe the predisposition of individuals to act on their needs and motives uniquely grounded in public institutions and public service.

**Common Good:** The term Common Good, according to Encyclopedia Britannica (Lee, n.d.) refers to the notion that there are certain general conditions in society from which everyone benefits. The concept traces back to the Ancient Greeks and has been prominent in Western political philosophy to the present time. It hinges on the idea that certain public goods such as justice and security “can only be achieved through citizenship, collective action, and participation in the public realm of politics and public service” (Lee, n.d., para.1).
**Pro-social behavior:** This concept can be defined as behavior or “actions intended to benefit others” (Brehm, Kassin & Fein, 2005, p. 353).

**Conclusion**

Bearing witness to municipal leaders’ experiences of workplace incivility is important for many reasons. First, by understanding more about the difficulties associated with workplace incivility in local government, we can give attention to an often overlooked and complex group of leaders. This greater understanding allows us as scholar-practitioners to generate policies and interventions to support local leaders, retain their knowledge sets, and stem attrition. Further, it allows us to more deeply understand a context in need of the next generation of leadership as Baby Boomers retire. Finally, an increased understanding of local leaders’ experiences of workplace incivility can further the knowledge around Public Service Motivation theory as well.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

A 2018 poll conducted by Shandwick and Tate, a telecom and marketing firm, in conjunction with research group KRC Research, found that a majority of Americans from both major political parties agree uncivil behavior in politics is having a significantly negative effect on our democracy. Whether we see uncivil behavior on the 24-hour news shows or straight out of the mouths of the highest officials in the United States, the experience is rattling to many everyday Americans. With the world looking to our country for moral guidance and leadership in matters ranging from humanitarian aid to peacekeeping and diplomacy, we need to understand the different ways incivility is playing out at this point in our history. The consequences of everyday uncivil behavior are vital to comprehend if we are to keep our society functioning in a strong and principled manner.

As a social norm and standard of behavior, civility is “based on widely shared beliefs [about] how individual group members ought to behave in a given situation” (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004, p. 185). In a similar fashion to other norms, civility specifies “of what people approve and disapprove within the culture and motivate[s] action by promising social sanctions for normative or counter-normative conduct” (Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993, p. 104).

This literature review will drill down into the existing literature on civility, the historical underpinnings of civility as a concept, and address some of its critics. The exploration will turn to recent national trends regarding incivility and then in particular to research on incivility in the workplace. Third, outcomes of workplace incivility for individuals and organizations are examined and a brief overview of the literature on antecedent factors is given. Finally, by considering workplace incivility for individuals in the government context and specifically at the
municipal level, we will be able to understand its backdrop and associated problems for the purposes of this study.

**Civility**

**Conceptual Evolution**

Civility has a long etymological history dating back over 2500 years to Ancient Rome. Its root word, *civitas*, refers to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Schaefer, 2015). Civility appears in classical literature as a foundational element of democracy regarding assembly. The rights of citizens (men only) meant that they assembled and voted on their leaders. By the Middle Ages, the feudal times, civility came to refer to proper conduct, a social and political way to show respect, and courtly behavior. Civility was “the proper conduct between lords and free men who served them -- deference, cooperation, service, reciprocal rights and duties, and proper speech and dress” (Schaefer, 2015, p. 104).

Civility again was conceptually changing, this time, into a depiction of community and the social celebration of human achievement during the Renaissance. Over the three hundred-year period that encompassed the Renaissance, the Age of Science, and the Enlightenment, civility took on a new and wiser flavor to reflect the humanistic sense of the times (Schaefer, 2015). Civilitas, the art and science of citizenship, was tied to the Latin phrase -- *mansio hominum* – meaning, “the culture of civility was the anchor of our humanity” (Schaefer, 2015, p. 105). Civility was the early version of humans being as their best selves.

During the late eighteenth century, the civility movement took hold and demanded respect and rights for everyone (everyone, as defined relative to the time). It sowed the seeds for citizens to rise up in the American Revolution and the French Revolution, and bore the fruit of

By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries slavery was abolished in America and eventually voting rights were won for women and blacks. The United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and civility seemed to have conceptually reached its greatest heights (Schaefer, 2015). Granted, all human interactions were not rosy and respectful, but a long journey toward the elevation of humanity was accomplished. However, civility is not without its critics and we examine those next.

Critiques

As with most human behavior, one can look at its function as well as its historical evolution to determine its social construction. As we see from the previous section, the concept of civility and behaving in a civil manner is rooted in Western European (mainly Caucasian) Christian society -- a position of majority and privilege. This is the same society that perpetuated issues of class and race to the point of enslaving others, took land from native peoples, and resorted to massacres and wars to spread their religion.

To address the issue of privilege, critics of civility argue that to behave in a civil manner the individual must first have acquired the knowledge and intricacies of social convention (Laverty, 2009). This knowledge is carried forward by the training of children on etiquette and proper manners concomitant with the elite. Mayo (2001) argues that civility represses the inherent hostilities stemming from social injustice and discrimination by covering them with a shiny veneer of politeness that thereby perpetuates the ‘less than’ status of the aggrieved. Mayo
(2001) believes the appropriate strategy for overcoming the inherent injustice is to promote incivility. She proposes that incivility brings the structural inequalities to light and facilitates knowledge and social reform. However, when presented with Mayo’s (2001) argument, Laverty (2009) draws on the power of civility to promote communication thereby building community. Laverty posits that “civility is an aesthetic-ethical good, irrespective of whether it secures ethical character or a just democracy” (2009, p. 229). Laverty goes on to explain, “…civility provides a hospitable context for individuals to navigate communicatively the complexity, ambiguity and significance” [of social hierarchy and identity politics] (2009, p. 229).

A further argument against critics of civility points to a perspective that proposes, rather than seeing civility as an absolute threat to freedom of speech, it should be conceived of as a condition for it (Spencer, Tyahur, & Jackson, 2016). The authors’ argument draws on Rood (2014) who contends that civility allows for emotive speech, dissent, and a multitude of voices as civility functions to “‘slow down and focus arguments, thereby creating time and space to explore differences and disagreements in ways that help all involved commit to understanding and being understood, respecting and being respected’” (Spencer et al., 2016, p. 53).

Incivility

National Trends

Unfortunately, many Americans now find themselves noting an erosion of respect and common decency among citizens and leaders alike, leaving many to question what is happening. The change in social norms that appear to have accompanied the Trump presidency has perhaps allowed some segments of the American population like the working class in former mining towns to feel less disenfranchised. However, what costs are being borne on our nation’s ability to
live in community with one another? According to Trending-Topics.co, a website that tracks which hashtags are trending on Twitter, at the time of this writing (June 2018), #civility was ranked number one (“#Civility”, 2018). It seems to be a time of constant political chaos and incivility in America.

Porath and Pearson (2013) report after 14 years of studying the topic and polling thousands of workers about treatment in the workplace, 98% report experiencing workplace incivility. In the previously referenced 2018 poll conducted by marketing firm Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate with KRC Research, 93% of Americans believe civility is a problem in our society and more than eight in ten Americans have personally experienced incivility in their daily lives, most averaging about ten experiences a week (“Civility in America”, 2018). There is a sense of agreement in the academic literature that the uncivil behaviors in American culture are more conspicuous and copious because of the inescapable presence of media (Herbst, 2010). Coe, Kenski, and Rains (2014) found over 20% of comments in online discussions from a newspaper website were uncivil, and 55% of article discussions held some form of incivility. It may be the 24-hour news cycle, instant access to information the internet provides, or the ability of the anonymous everyday person to become part of the discussion through online posting of comments that leads to this conclusion.

General agreement exists that uncivil discourse is emotionally arousing (Mutz, 2007). Being the target of insults and rude behavior in public can reduce effective cognitive processing, creativity, and productivity (Rafaeli, Erez, Ravid, Derfler-Rozin, Treister, & Scheyer, 2012; Porath & Eraz, 2007, 2009), as well as elicit reciprocal aggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Whether incivility boils over into the workplace, or arises therein, the costs can be high to the individual, the organization, as well as American society and prosperity.
Workplace Incivility

Given the complex nature of working on behalf of the public, one can envision that the workplace extends far beyond the boundaries of City Hall. Performing work at the local government level, municipal leaders (whether elected, such as a Mayor or council member, or an appointed professional such as a town manager) must interact with the public they serve. The daily interactions with community members, co-workers, and others can vary in nature from pleasant and professional to rude and uncivil. While the goal of this study is to more deeply understand the individual experiences of workplace incivility for local municipal leaders, we cannot put any information in context if we do not first examine what is known about workplace incivility broadly and within the public sector context specifically.

A History of Workplace Incivility Research

The study of workplace incivility grew out of organizational behavior research on workplace negativity and its effects over the last two decades. Numerous publications revealed the consequences of workplace bullying, abusive supervision, and aggression to be the experience of detrimental effects such as increased stress (Bowling & Beehr, 2006), less organizational citizenship behavior (Dalal, 2005), and greater turnover intentions (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008), all challenging the sustainability of the American workforce.

A lower gradation of negative workplace behavior, workplace incivility, was conceptually introduced in 1999 by Andersson and Pearson, who defined the concept as “low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” (p. 457). The authors also point out that uncivil behaviors in the workplace are “characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others”
Specific characteristics distinguish workplace incivility from other forms of workplace negativity. One element is the low intensity nature of the offense relative to the more severe forms of negativity like bullying and violence. Another element is the range of offenders that the uncivil acts can be perpetrated by including supervisors, co-workers, or even customers. Furthermore, another distinguishing factor of workplace incivility among other negative workplace behaviors includes the ambiguous nature of the intent to harm making it less overt and easy to diagnose (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Others include the ‘tit-for-tat’ nature of the escalation of incivility, that the uncivil behavior specifically occurs in dyads, the dysfunctional nature of workplace incivility, and the violation of ‘universal’ norms of respect assumed in the workplace (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

The workplace incivility research, however, is criticized for lacking a clear theoretical framework (Schilpzand et al., 2016; Miner, Diaz, Wooderson, McDonald, Smittick, & Lomeli, 2017). Schilpzand et al. (2016) suggest three theoretical perspectives to organize a unified theory of workplace incivility: experienced, witnessed, and instigated, by reconsidering the social interactionist perspective originally posited by Andersson and Pearson (1999) and replacing it by aligning it with trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000; Tett & Burnett, 2003). The authors believe that trait activation theory, which “proposes that interactions between personality traits and trait-relevant situational cues at the task level, interpersonal level, and team or organizational level could explain their reaction to events and subsequent behaviors” (Schilpzand et al., 2016, p. 81). By applying the theory to targets, witnesses, and instigators of workplace incivility, the theory of trait activation may be able to guide and interconnect the research (Schilpzand et al., 2016).
Some researchers have called for Andersson and Pearson (1999) to clarify the specific distinctions of the original definition of workplace incivility through additional research (Miner et al., 2017). Miner et al. (2017) point out the theoretical ‘speed-bumps’ that are perceived as slowing down the current research, limiting advancements in understanding the true nature of workplace incivility and how it functions. The authors’ goal is to accelerate a more nuanced understanding of incivility in the workplace from the perspective of how it occurs within an organizational system (Miner et al., 2017). Specifically, they identify five areas for clarification: Intent, Norms of Respect, Responses, Actors, and Valence. Miner et al. (2017) extend previous theorizing on workplace behavior and response trajectories. They posit that workplace incivility may also have clear intent to harm. It may be true to the norms of certain organizational environments to be uncivil. Workplace incivility may occur in networks (not just dyads), or may be viewed as functional. Further, workplace incivility may result in positive workplace outcomes, as well as show a variety of possible response outcomes. Even in light of the alternate routes laid out by Miner et al. (2017) and challenges to associated theoretical frameworks outlined by Schilpzand et al. (2016), workplace incivility research has chronicled a problematic phenomenon that needs to be addressed in research and in practice.

Negative interpersonal exchanges are rising (Duffy & Lee, 2012) and incivility has been found to be worsening (Cortina & Magley, 2009; Cortina et al., 2001; Sliter et al., 2010). Individuals in the United States spend a significant amount of time in the workplace. Numerous studies have been conducted to examine the potential causes of workplace incivility and the personal and organizational consequences. The individual and organizational outcomes of workplace incivility, in addition to their antecedents are discussed in the following section.
Outcomes of Workplace Incivility

The literature examines the outcomes of workplace incivility from a variety of levels. At the individual level, outcomes are investigated from an affective, behavioral, cognitive, and attitudinal perspective. At the organizational level, the literature looks at costs to the organization and potential antecedent factors of workplace incivility.

Individual Outcomes

Incidents of workplace incivility such as degradation, disrespect, and condescension have an impact on the individual. Several studies have documented the consequences of incivility in the workplace on the target experiencing the uncivil behavior (Bunk & Magley, 2013; Adams & Webster, 2013; Porath & Pearson, 2012; Sliter et al., 2010; Lim & Lee, 2011; Cortina et al., 2001; Kern & Grandey, 2009; Cameron & Webster, 2011; Porath & Erez, 2007). The experience of workplace incivility has been found to have affective, behavioral, cognitive, and attitudinal outcomes.

Affective Outcomes

Generally, individuals experiencing workplace incivility have been found to show affective outcomes including heightened signs of emotionality (Bunk & Magley, 2013), emotional exhaustion (Kern & Grandey, 2009; Sliter et al., 2010), depression (Miner-Rubino & Reed, 2010; Lim & Lee, 2011), lower affective trust (Cameron & Webster, 2011), negative emotions (Kim & Shapiro, 2008; Sakurai & Jex, 2012), negative affect and lower energy levels (Giumetti, Hatfield, Scisco, Schroeder, Muth, & Kowalski, 2013), and lower energy levels and increased stress levels (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Miner et al., 2010; Adams & Webster, 2013). Workplace incivility also has been shown to affect targets’ personal lives
outside work by linking the experience with decreased well-being levels (Cortina et al., 2001; Lim & Cortina, 2005; Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008) and lower levels of satisfaction with marriage (Ferguson, 2012) as well as increased levels of work-family conflict (Lim & Lee, 2011; Ferguson, 2012).

In an important study by Lim et al. (2008), the authors developed and tested a holistic model to recognize negative effects of workplace incivility on individuals and workgroups. Focusing on mediating mechanisms in the process of workplace incivility and its subsequent effects, while controlling for work stress, the authors found uncivil work experiences have a direct negative impact on mental health, and that employees who had mental health problems were more likely to develop poor physical health.

**Behavioral Outcomes**

Counterproductive behavioral responses have been associated with the targets’ experience of uncivil behavior in the workplace. Targets of workplace incivility are known to reciprocate the behavior (Bunk & Magley, 2013) and retaliate against the perpetrators (Kim & Shapiro, 2008). Those targeted also show signs of withdrawal from work through decreased work engagement (Chen et al., 2013), increased absenteeism (Sliter et al., 2012), increased turnover intentions (Miner-Rubino & Reed, 2010; Wilson & Holmvall, 2013; Lim et al., 2008), and are more likely to exit the organization (Porath & Pearson, 2012). Specific performance-related areas are also associated with experienced workplace incivility such as decreases in creativity (Porath & Erez, 2007), lower levels of organizational citizenship behavior (Taylor et al., 2012; Porath & Erez, 2007), and decreases in task performance (Giumetti et al., 2013; Porath & Erez, 2007; Chen et al., 2013; Sliter et al., 2012b).
Cognitive Outcomes

Targets of incivility in the workplace have also experienced cognitive reactions such as task-related memory recall (Porath & Erez, 2007) in empirical studies. Cortina et al. (2001) found that uncivil encounters of employees in the previous five years were related to employees’ symptoms of psychological distress. Experiencing incivility is associated with burnout, anxiety and depression (Langlois et al., 2007) and general reduced well-being (Hershcovis, 2011).

Abusive behaviors at work have also been linked to cognitive distraction (Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 2001). Pearson and colleagues (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000; Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001) found that targets of incivility often experienced negative cognitive reactions at work (e.g., worrying about future interactions with the instigator).

Attitudinal Outcomes

Changes in employee attitudes, both at work and home, are also related to experienced workplace incivility. For instance, Lim & Teo (2009) investigated workplace incivility from a cyber perspective by examining email exchanges among employees. They found that cyber incivility in the workplace also leads to decreased organizational commitment.

Targets of workplace incivility are found to be less motivated (Sakurai & Jex, 2012), have less commitment to their organization, experience lower satisfaction with their co-workers and supervisors (Bunk & Magley, 2013), and have less life satisfaction (Miner et al., 2010; Lim & Cortina, 2005). Perceptions of organizational unfairness were found to increase in targets experiencing instances of workplace incivility as were signs of increases in depression and decreased satisfaction with co-workers (Lim & Lee, 2011).
Organizational Outcomes

Many detrimental factors exist in organizations where workplace incivility takes place. A 2005 study by Pearson and Porath indicated that most of the incivility incidents occur without organizational awareness or proper plans to address the issue. Estes and Wang (2008) found that the organizational environment is a key element in enabling or inhibiting uncivil behaviors. Management philosophy and organizational environment are two key aspects highlighted by the authors (Estes & Wang, 2008).

Myriad organizational costs are associated with workplace incivility, some of which include financial costs, losses in individual productivity and performance, decreases in work citizenship behaviors as well as employee turnover. Cascio (2006) estimates the costs of employee turnover to be 1.5 to 2.5 times the individual’s salary, adding up to significant monetary costs for organizations.

Organizational profit and performance can be adversely affected by workplace incivility through decreased employee effort, cooperation, withdrawal from voluntary labors such as task forces and committees, and less sharing of ideas (Pearson et al., 2000). Johnson and Indvik (2001) posit as much as 13 percent of an executive’s time may be spent documenting workplace incivility and resolving conflicts among co-workers. When workers call in sick or quit an organization altogether, replacement costs are high. Additionally, productivity as well as loss of institutional memory further damage the organization. If organizational consequences are so high, it begs the question about what factors are contributing to the incivility in the workplace. The possible antecedent factors of workplace incivility are discussed below.
Antecedent Factors

A variety of potential causes of workplace incivility have been suggested in the literature such as misplaced anger; stress; poor work organization; job insecurity; increased workload; organizational change; and lack of communication (Johnson & Indvik, 2001a; 2001b). Because of organizational changes toward ‘lean and mean,’ reductions in costs and efforts to increase efficiency and productivity have become continually more prevalent. Increases in incivility in the workplace may be facilitated by advancements in technology, outsourcing, and increased pressure to perform and adapt with less time to support and be supported by one’s colleagues (Vickers, 2006). A Swedish study of municipal school employees found a direct relationship between behaving uncivilly and low social support from co-workers, organizational change, job insecurity, and high job demands (Torkelson, Holm, Backstrom, & Schad, 2016). Torkelson et al. (2016) examined contributing factors to the perpetration of workplace incivility and found the greatest relationship between experienced incivility from a co-worker and instigated incivility. Pearson et al. (2005) suggest potential causes of workplace incivility lie within organizations including a changing workplace, resulting in an uncertain environment, questions of job security, and threats to livelihood. Increasing demands brought about constant innovation and technology change can also play a part. Aggression has previously been linked in the literature to workplace change (Baron & Neuman, 1996). Next the literature on workplace incivility in government settings is discussed including municipalities, the general population of the present study.

Workplace Incivility in Government Settings

The purpose of government organizations is to serve the population. Without adequate organizational environments, the work of and for the people cannot be done to satisfactory levels and in some cases, may have catastrophic effects on those it intends to support. Therein lies the
crux of my own rationale for studying workplace incivility in local government settings. If uncivil workplace experiences are rampant in America’s municipalities, the closest form of government to the people, as change agents and scholar-practitioners we need to address the issue in order to ultimately provide better services for all.

It stands to reason that those researchers examining workplace incivility in government settings would cross over into the field of Public Administration (PA). Vickers (2006), a PA scholar, writes critically about her field relating a story of workplace incivility she witnessed in a public hospital. The experience leads Vickers (2006) to question whether (PA) researchers are examining what should be written about and goes on to argue that much of what is studied in the field is not practically useful to public administrators and that PA “is not focused on the things that are happening in PA organizations that might be influencing the ability of PA organizations to serve and support our communities” (p. 71). Vickers (2006) charges that PA is ignoring crucial questions in favor of management rhetoric at the expense of the “stuff of organizational life that directly affects the working lives of those who work in PA, especially with regard to their ability to provide support to the people they serve” (p. 72).

Research involving the mistreatment of public sector employees is wide-ranging. Plimmer, Proctor-Thomson, Donnelly & Sim (2017) examined the nature of public service work and how the organizational management processes may allow or foster employee mistreatment in New Zealand. Their work revealed cumulative factors that radically alter the chances for mistreatment (bullying or discrimination) including a feeling of having little influence over their job, little support from management, and low access to flexible work.

Some research studies on workplace incivility have been conducted on government organizations. Cortina et al. (2001) studied 1180 public-sector employees to examine the targets,
instigators, and impact of workplace incivility. In the previous five years, 71% of the respondents reported experiencing some form of workplace incivility and roughly one third of the highest-level employees were the instigators of the acts. The experiences were found to be associated with greater psychological distress.

Zauderer (2002) conducted interviews of 20 public sector and non-profit employees who reported experiencing ‘everyday incivility’ at work. ‘Everyday incivility’ is defined differently from the specific definition of workplace incivility originally proposed by Andersson and Pearson (1999). ‘Everyday incivility’, as defined by Zauderer’s (2002) is “disrespectful behavior that undermines the dignity and self-esteem of employees and causes unnecessary suffering. In general, behaviors of incivility include a lack of concern for the well-being of others and are contrary to how individuals expect to be treated” (p. 38). Recommendations are offered to organizations around preventative measures including defining standards of civility including rights and responsibilities of the employees, conducting assessments of civility in the workplace, and the inclusion of civility in other agency trainings (Zauderer, 2002).

Drilling down to civility at the local government level, Vogelsang-Coombs (2012) looked at city councils’ challenges in relation to uncivil behavior and what leadership factors would lead toward a civil city council. She argues that five leadership skills are key elements to integrative governance which exhibits as a civil governing body at the local level: training and empowering citizens; balancing institutional autonomy and accountability; transforming dangerous political identities; using the public service ethos; and learning the lessons of history. The author concludes with a call for PA scholars to partner with cities and towns to address a municipal governance deficit. Nelson, Gabris, and Davis (2011) also studied municipal councils’
effectiveness and found that interpersonal relationships between council members as well as mayoral leadership were significant factors in the perception of having an effective council.

**Conclusion**

As evidenced by the literature in the area of workplace incivility, the problem is real and pervasive in many types of workplaces. The consequences for individuals who are targets of uncivil behavior are significant and disturbing. These experiences are cause for many different reactionary measures that may extend overtime spiraling out of control and spilling into the overall organizational climate. The costs associated with workplace incivility for organizations include lost time dealing with the incidents and decreased effort and motivation of employees. Even those who witness incivility can be affected.

Although some studies have been conducted of incidents of workplace incivility in government organizations, more research is needed. A dearth of research exists specific to workplace incivility in local government. The aim of this study is to attempt to contribute to the understanding of how local government leaders experience workplace incivility and its effect on their motivation for public service work.
Chapter Three: Research Design

This study investigated how local government leaders who experience workplace incivility make sense of these events and examined the ramifications on their motivation for public service work. The following chapter presents the research design for this study and outlines the rationale for the researcher’s methodological selections. The central research question is presented, as well as sub-questions to support the study and its link to the methodology. The approach to the research study is explained followed by a discussion on the details of the participants and procedure.

Research Question

The goal of this study is to gain insight into how individuals make sense of their experiences, therefore a qualitative design was chosen as the match to this research goal. The main driver of this study is the question: **How do local government leaders describe their experiences of workplace incivility and its effects on their motivation for public service work?** This question does not seek, nor likely is it possible, to quantify an answer to this question, so no hypothesis is offered. Additional goals of the study included collecting data that could work toward better understanding the challenges of local government leaders in the workplace. The investigation was motivated by Perry et al.’s (1990, 2000, 2010) evolving theory on what motivates people to do public service work and the dearth of research on workplace incivility in local government settings. Based on the research question under investigation, the methodological approach chosen is described next including the rationale for its selection.
Methodological Approach

A qualitative methodological approach was employed to investigate the research problem. Qualitative research is used to explore a problem (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) states that it is appropriate to use qualitative methods when researchers want to “empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants” (p. 48).

Because this study was intended to gain the perspectives of municipal leaders’ on their individual experiences of workplace incivility and motivation toward public service work, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was a fitting and appropriate method of investigation. Those researchers who use IPA as a research method seek to gain insight in how individuals make sense of their experiences by looking at how the participants talk about their experiences, not simply by providing predetermined categories and fitting phenomena into them (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA has been used broadly to examine individuals’ particular experiences with topics such as chronic pain (Osborn & Smith, 1998), personal and cultural identity (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000), and mental health, addiction, and eating disorders (Larkin & Griffiths, 2000). The IPA approach honors the humanity of the individual and the general human condition. Further information on the research paradigm and methodology are presented next.

Philosophical Assumptions

A constructivist-interpretivist paradigm guides the present research study. This viewpoint on reality, according to Ponterotto (2005), posits that reality is constructed in the mind of the
individual, instead of reality being external to the beholder. Constructivists believe that as many multiple valid realities can exist as there are individuals to hold them (Ponterotto, 2005). The aim of this study is to understand how individual municipal leaders construct and interpret their experiences related to workplace incivility. As such, participants will each have different stories to tell and experiences to share that shape their individually held realities. Their viewpoints on how their experiences have influenced their motivation to work in public service is also thought to be a function of their own constructed reality.

In the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the researcher is a co-creator, drawing out the participants through discussion, questions, and reflections. Constructivism values the interactive process between participant and researcher. My own background in career counseling, professional development, teaching, and administration is carried with me as I interpret the participants’ reflections on the unique experiences. Because I will be taking an active role in the exploration of each participant’s experience, I must “bracket” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131) my own perspective in order to be aware of how my own history may affect my interpretation of data. Bracketing, according to Tufford and Newman (2010), “is a method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process” (p. 80).

**Philosophical Roots of IPA**

As previously stated, this study will employ the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research method. IPA grew out of the field of psychology through the work of Jonathan Smith (1996) and is widely used in the documentation of experiences related to health and has spread into related social science fields.
Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005) describe key elements related to IPA. First, the participants in an IPA study are viewed as experts on their own experiences. By sharing and discussing their experiences, they provide insight for researchers into how they make sense of those experiences. Second, the data that are collected through IPA research are systematically and rigorously analyzed first by the participant and then by the researcher who interprets the experiences. Third, IPA is not meant to infer generalizations of groups of people, therefore it is idiographic in nature focusing on a small number of individuals which allows for in-depth examination of the experiences of the participants.

A successful study utilizing the IPA method involves two main processes. The researcher must balance the element of ‘giving voice’ to the participants’ experience and ‘sense-making’ through interpretation of the specific accounts and application of psychological concepts (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). IPA is a method characterized by its foundational grounding in the theories of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Each of these foundational theories are briefly considered below.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is the study of the phenomenon of consciousness and was introduced in 1900 through a publication by Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher and mathematician (Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017). To put the timing in context, one must remember that psychology was a completely new field introduced by Wilhelm Wundt in 1879 to study consciousness. Wundt pursued his study mainly through empirical (quantitative) research.
Husserl saw the need for a more comprehensive approach to the study of consciousness that makes room for elements that may not be proven through the five senses but still exist through experience (Giorgi et al., 2017). Husserl found it important to reflect on, examine, and identify the universal elements of a shared experience (a phenomenon) that would identify its true nature and rise above each individual’s assumptions about how the world operates. Husserl believed to best appreciate the phenomenon in question the researchers must set aside their own personal biases and notions about the phenomenon (called bracketing) to fully embrace the participant’s account (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Hence, Husserl is considered the founder of descriptive phenomenology.

As an approach to qualitative research, phenomenology allows a researcher to examine the essence of a particular experience (such as losing one’s job) through descriptions from individuals who have had that shared experience (Creswell, 2012). IPA is phenomenological because it involves examining a particular person’s own detailed account of an event or situation in his or her life.

A more existential and interpretative approach to phenomenology was offered by a student of Husserl’s, named Heidegger, who was interested in developing an understanding of ‘being in the world’ contextually, not merely as an individual’s descriptive experience in isolation (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger rejected his mentor’s epistemological position in favor of a more ontological one: the science of being (Reiners, 2012). This ‘being in the world’ concept, called inter-subjectivity (Giorgi et al., 2017), enhances understanding and meaning-making as it makes room for experience of phenomena in the context of the relational nature of how we engage with others and the environment.
Heidegger realized that the complexities of one’s relationship to the environment could never be truly known by another and would require interpretation by the researcher. The point of IPA research is to gain an insider’s perspective (Conrad, 1987) into the participants’ world or reality, although this cannot be done completely or directly. The researcher must interpret the participant’s account of the phenomena. Here we see the beginnings of interpretative phenomenology which seeks to gain insight in how individuals make sense of the world around them. Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, became the second foundational theory for IPA.

**Hermeneutics**

Interpretation is viewed as a critical element in understanding the lived experience. Heidegger believed that to be human was to interpret through one’s background or historicality (Laverty, 2009). Because, in Heidegger’s opinion (1927; 1962), all understanding is filtered through one’s given set of experiences, the researcher must be as aware as possible of his or her own historicality in order to separate it from the experience of the participant so that reliable interpretations are made.

In this sense IPA is also hermeneutic, meaning that it involves interpretation. Simply put, as the participants are trying to make sense of their own world, the researcher is aiming to make sense of the participants attempting to make sense of their world. Therefore, to gain access to the personal world of the participant, the researcher must do so through a two-stage process of interpretation, called a double hermeneutic. The researcher can take different stances on interpretation and IPA blends both empathic and questioning hermeneutics (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This combination of hermeneutical stances allows the researcher to seek to understand the world of the participant while also asking critical questions from a more removed observational
standpoint. In order to make an informed interpretation of the phenomena, IPA research also is idiographic in nature and will be discussed next.

**Idiography**

An idiographic approach to analysis employs a finely tuned focus on the specifics to develop a rich contextualized account of the particular (Shinebourne, 2011). With this idea in mind, the idiographic approach makes sense in the context of the goals of IPA research and can bring to light dimensions of a shared human experience.

Researchers using IPA must pay attention to the particulars of phenomena acquired through detailed participant accounts in order to understand the richness of an individual’s contextual environment. For this reason, individual case accounts with significant detail, as well as a small group of cases analyzing the same phenomenon, are the units of analysis in IPA. The goal here is not generalizability but a vibrant characterization of perspective complete with all that can be portrayed and brought to light through the individual’s own historicality.

Procedurally, in an IPA study, the researcher will conduct extensive data gathering through individual interviews and sometimes involving other means such as journaling. The aim of the data collection is to capture the description of the individual experience in detail from the participant’s perspective. The data are then read and analyzed by the researcher who looks for emerging themes of how the individuals make sense of their experiences, which provides the second-layer of interpretation -- that of the researcher -- using a double-hermeneutic approach. The process involves deep analysis of detail and reflection on individual experiences and is idiographic in nature, not seeking to generalize any findings, therefore a relatively small number
of participants is employed. Because IPA is inductive, the research questions are purposefully broad to allow for unanticipated themes to bubble up (Bray et al., 2012). Questions are structured from an exploratory, not explanatory, stance. In IPA, research questions are intended to generate meaning rather than identify differences in variables (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

**Rationale for IPA**

Because the purpose of IPA was to employ close examination and interpretation of personal accounts of lived experience to explore how individuals make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009), I chose it as the methodological approach for this study. IPA’s focus on individual meaning-making in real-world contexts was a good fit with the research question and the goals of this study of personal experiences of workplace incivility among municipal leaders.

IPA research, according to Larkin and Thompson (2012), must evolve from a topic that is significant to the participants. In the case of this study, the experience of workplace incivility and its subsequent effects on the public service motivation of the participant was selected as the topic of focus. Given the prevalence of workplace incivility (Porath & Pearson, 2013, 2009), it was fairly likely to be experienced by the municipal leaders participating in this investigation. Participants had valuable impressions to share about their experiences regarding incivility and their motivation for public service work offering a healthy body of evidence to examine. IPA provided a means through which participants could tell their stories and share their perspective. This was vital to the researcher’s goals of gaining insight into the complexities of workplace incivility specific to local government leaders in one state, as well as also understanding of the effects of workplace incivility on the PSM of local leaders so that interventions can be developed.
Site and Participants

The site of this research study was one state within the Northeast region of the United States. This state, like most, has a municipal league that represents the interests of the cities and towns to the state government and serves as a convening body that identifies, discusses, and assists in solving problems facing local governments. By means of legislative advocacy and the provision of education and training, the league is a non-profit membership organization that seeks to enhance the efficacy of municipal governance in serving citizens’ interests and the common good. Each city and town within the state is a member of this municipal league. The league is the employer of this researcher where I hold the position of managing all professional education and membership services. I leveraged my position at the league to solicit participants to the study because the league’s status offers an element of legitimacy to the research based on its long history and solid reputation.

The participants in this study were municipal leaders within one state in the Northeast. The municipal leaders were drawn from a purposive sample for this study that included city or town mayors, managers/administrators, or council members. In order to develop a diverse sample, I targeted a variety of leaders in differing cities and towns, paying attention to demographics of the municipality and form of government (such as council-manager or elected mayor). I looked for a diversity of the participants in such areas as such as title, gender, age, education level and field of study. I used purposeful sampling to ensure the diversity of my sample. Purposeful sampling involves intentionally selecting “individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). The participants’ profiles are presented for a means of background and introduction.
Critics could argue a shortcoming of the sample is the omission of individuals who quit their jobs in public service because of uncivil experiences. Their inclusion could have offered an interesting dimension to the data and broadened the range of themes in the findings.

**Participant Profiles**

This study included several municipal leaders. Each participant is identified using a pseudonym to protect his or her confidentiality. Any specific identifying information such as the name of the city or town in which they serve has been omitted for the same purpose. A total of five municipal government leaders in one state in New England participated in this study. Four were considered managers or administrators in smaller towns while one was an elected council leader in a city. There were two women and three men who participated in the study. In total, the participants have over 175 years of public service experience, averaging 7 years in their current capacities.

**Sean**

Sean is 61 years old and has been in his current role as a town manager for about three years. The town in which he works has a population of about 16,000 people and an estimated 2016 median household income of $111,600 (www.city-data.com). Prior to Sean’s town manager position he had a long military career. He holds a bachelor’s degree and other graduate level degrees through the education he received as a military leader. Retiring but not ready to leave the workforce, he tried a few roles before deciding to pursue a position as town manager. He explained that his decision to pursue the town manager role came when he realized that running a town is similar to running a military base for which he had been responsible in the past. Sean appears to exhibit many facets of PSM.
Barbara

Barbara is 41 years old and has been working in local government for around twenty years. She holds a bachelor’s degree in political science and has been in her town manager position for about a year after working in a different capacity in the town for five years. She previously was trained as a town planner and held that role in the same town in which she currently works. The town she manages has a population of 10,500 and an estimated 2016 median household income of $61,700 (www.city-data.com). Barbara exhibits high levels of PSM.

Charlie

Charlie is in his fifties and holds a bachelor’s degree in political science. He trained to be a professional town manager by getting his master’s degree in public administration. He has worked in the field for 30 years and in his current role for 6 years. He has worked in that capacity in three different states in New England. The town he manages has a population of 7,500 with an estimated 2016 median household income of $75,400 (www.city-data.com). Charlie does not exhibit high levels of PSM.

Tom

Tom, also in his fifties, holds a bachelor’s degree, a master of business administration, and a law degree. He has worked in public service roles for about 30 years at three different towns in the same state. He has been in his current role as town administrator for about five years. He manages a small town of 5,400 that has an estimated 2016 median household income of $92,000 (www.city-data.com). Tom exhibits high levels of PSM.
Polly

Polly is the sole elected official among the participant group. She is in her sixties and has served several terms in elected government in the one city represented in the sample. In total, she has spent about 25 years as either a council member or mayor (who is selected by the council members). Prior to her elected experience she spent around 20 years volunteering in the community. The city Polly manages has a population of 24,500 and an estimated 2016 median household income of 61,000 (www.city-data.com). Polly exhibits high levels of PSM.

Recruitment and Access

To recruit participants, I sent email invitations (Appendix A) from my student email account to a set of municipal leaders (mayors, managers, and council members) within the state. As participants volunteered, I was able to reach an ideal number of 5 participants, as a small sample size is the norm for IPA research (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The ideal sample included both elected officials (mayors or council members) and hired or appointed employees (town managers/administrators) to gain a sense of the similarities and differences in their experiences. The sample also included participants from a city and several smaller towns.

Upon approval of the proposal by Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board, the recruitment of participants began. I sent an additional email (Appendix B) to the selected participants outlining the study’s purpose, potential benefits and risks, and reminded them that their role was completely voluntary and they could decide not to participate at any time throughout the process. I formalized participant consent through their signing of the informed consent forms prior to beginning any interviewing. Each interview took place at a time and place convenient to the participant such as their office, a restaurant, and other professional spaces.
Each interview was about an hour long with the shortest being 45 minutes and the longest being an hour and a half.

**Data Storage & Management**

Confidentiality was ensured through the assignment of a pseudonym to each participant. A key to the pseudonyms was stored separately from any transcripts of the interview data. All transcripts were labeled with the pseudonym and any markers that would potentially reveal the participant’s identity were removed.

After each interview was conducted, it was transcribed via mechanical application as a first pass and then perfected by me. All audio files were deleted permanently after they were used and analyzed for the study. Any physical artifacts such as transcribed interviews, written interview notes, and signed consent forms were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home. Any electronic files such as back-up files, coded transcripts, and emails were stored on my password-protected computer.

**Data Collection**

This IPA study sought to understand how municipal leaders experienced workplace incivility and its effects on their motivation to work in public service. An interview approach similar to the Participant Centered Approach (PCA) as outlined by McCrory and O’Donnell was utilized in that it is designed to “facilitate a focus on the participant’s frame of reference” (2016, p. 158). The gathering of rich data is only as helpful to the researcher as the extent to which one understands the meaning behind the words of the participant who is meaningfully reflecting on their experiences. The relationship between the researcher and the participant is one that must be
able to establish rapport and trust in order to enable disclosure, promote reflection, and be real. To this end, the researcher must be genuine, show empathy for the participant by checking that meanings are understood by reflecting back to the participant, as well as by showing acceptance through unconditional positive regard (McCrory & O’Donnell, 2016).

Questions and prompts that guided the interviews are outlined below in relationship with the attraction, selection, and retention scheme of PSM theory (Perry, 1990; 2010; Vandenabeele, 2008; Wright & Christensen, 2010) as well as workplace incivility.

- Please tell me about your background: (Attraction)
  - Possible prompts: your work, how long you’ve been doing it, your education, etc.
- Can you describe what influenced you to pursue your leadership role in municipal government? (Attraction/Selection)
  - Possible prompts: Any particular people, life experiences, values?
- What was it like for you when you were offered your first role in public service? (Selection)
  - Possible prompts: How did you feel? What did you think?
- What do you like about your current role? (Retention)
  - Possible prompt: What makes you want to want to go to work?
- What do you dislike? What makes you want to avoid it? (Retention)
- Tell me what incivility means to you. (Workplace Incivility)
- Can you describe any uncivil experiences you’ve had as part of your work? (Workplace Incivility/Retention)
  - Possible prompts: What was that experience like? What happened?
- Possible prompts: How did you feel about it? What did you do?
- Possible prompts: How did it make you think about your work? Did it change your attitude?

- What would be a positive change for you based on the uncivil experience? (Retention)
- How do you think your life would be different if you worked outside of public service? (Selection/Retention)
- What are your plans for the future? (Retention)
- Do you have anything you would like to add?

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was carried out following practical guidelines outlined by Larkin & Thompson (2012). IPA aims at “giving evidence of the participants’ making sense of phenomena under investigation and, at the same time, document the researcher’s sense making” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 10). The process is iterative and inductive (Larkin & Thompson, 2012) allowing for reflection of the researcher who is constantly interacting with the data.

The goal of interpreting the qualitative data is to “develop an organized, detailed, plausible, and transparent account of the meaning of the data” (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 105). The data in this study was interview transcripts. In an effort to refresh the researcher’s memory, the recording of the interview session was listened to fully to help the researcher to remember the interview atmosphere, setting, and fully immerse in the data. The researcher also read and re-read the transcript from the participant interview (Smith et al., 2009), paying closer attention to the details with each iteration in an attempt to enter the world of the participant and become reacquainted with the content (Smith et al., 2009).
The researcher used analytic memos before, during, and after the interviews to record any reflections on the coding process and choices, the process inquiry itself, as well as any emerging patterns or ideas to follow up on. Analytic memos are similar to a researcher journal entry where any and all thoughts about the process, participants, or phenomenon under investigation can be recorded (Saldaña, 2011). The memos were kept on the researcher’s personal computer and any handwritten notes in a coding notebook.

The analysis of the data from each interview was conducted in two cycles. Descriptive coding was used as the first cycle of coding because it allows for the development of a basic vocabulary of the data (Saldaña, 2011). In descriptive coding, the researcher is identifying the topics addressed within the data, not the content. Because this study answers questions related to the attraction to, selection of, and retention within public service work, those were some of the codes presented in the data. The second cycle of coding was conducted from an In Vivo perspective. In Vivo coding draws codes from the actual words of the participants (Saldaña, 2011), thereby allowing for a closer interpretation of their actual experiences and an honoring of the participants’ voice.

For each interview transcript, the two-cycle process of coding was conducted. A matrix of codes was created from the data in order to determine and illustrate emerging themes. Points of convergence (clusters) and divergence in the data and themes were identified.

The final matrix included superordinate themes and subthemes. Transcript extracts were included as examples in line with IPA methodology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A narrative account of the study was assembled discussing each theme and subthemes. Examples in the participants’ own words were used to support the thematic identifications. The themes were
discussed in narrative form and then in consideration of their relationship to Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory (Perry, 1990, 2010) and the literature on workplace incivility. The researcher’s commentary offered an analysis of the multiple levels of interpretation and how they fit with existing literature and theory.

**Trustworthiness**

In order to legitimize the rigor of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed criteria by which trustworthiness of qualitative data can be established through identifying credibility, transferability, and dependability. Within quantitative research, the criteria are similar, though not equivalent, to internal validity, reliability, and external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007).

Credibility is concerned with establishing that a study’s findings are truthful (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and there are multiple ways to do so. Within this study, participants had the opportunity to share their experiences through an in-person semi-structured interview, which produced a bulk of the data. Any follow-up was conducted through email. By having multiple opportunities to share information, and using different modes of communication, the researcher should be able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ perspectives (Creswell, 2012). Member checking, a means in which the participant is able to check the transcript for validity, was also used during the data collection phase and as another way to ensure trustworthiness of the data. Any feedback from the participants was incorporated back into the iterations in order to ensure the authenticity of the participant views. An external reviewer, enlisted by the researcher, looked for any anomalies in the data or ideas that needed further consideration. Transferability was informed through the provision of a detailed frame that
allowed the reader to trace the analysis from the initial commentary to the structuring of themes and subthemes (Smith et al., 2009). Significant details regarding participants and the setting were recorded and highlighted so that readers could draw their own informed impressions and conclusions.

**Potential Limitations and Threats to Validity**

Creswell (2012) describes the limitations of a study as those potential weaknesses or problems in the design that may affect the results. First, because the content being studied involved workplace incivility, participants may not have been completely comfortable sharing stories that involve their colleagues. This may have limited the information they were willing to share. Participants may also have been hesitant to disclose that any incidence of workplace incivility affected their motivation to do public service work as they may think it makes them appear weak. The researcher addressed potential limitations of the study by employing protocols to ensure participants’ confidentiality. Second, the study focused on municipal leaders in one Northeast state with unique laws and culture, therefore results may not be generalizable to other local government leaders in other states. Last, the participants for this study were targeted because they fit a set of criteria that aims to include elements of diversity of role type (elected and appointed) as well as community size (small town and larger city). The diversity of the leaders’ backgrounds and experiences may not be representative of all municipal leaders.

**Potential Risks & Benefits to Participants**

Within the study there were potential risks and benefits to participation. As introduced above, experiences of workplace incivility was the topic for discussion for the participants. Risks
of this line of questioning included the potential for bringing up distressing feelings or memories for the participant, the challenging of one’s work and life choices that may have arisen from self-reflection, and the sharing of stories that may have involved colleagues. Potential benefits to the participant included increased self-awareness and personal growth, a sense of pride and satisfaction of being involved in an academic pursuit that may help the greater good, and feelings of significance and catharsis that may have accompanied the telling of one’s story.

Protection of Human Subjects

In a research study, the use of human subjects offers many ethical considerations. This study, in accordance with *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978), adheres to three primary principles: the respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Every participant was reminded of the voluntary nature of the study and that they could choose to exit the study at any time. Further, participants were informed of the purpose of the study: to gain insight into municipal leaders who have had experiences with workplace incivility and its effect on their motivation to serve the public. The potential benefits of the study were also to be addressed with the participants which involved an increased level of understanding of the perspectives of local government leaders, a better work environment which may be facilitated by new interventions informed by the study, as well as an increased knowledge on theories to explain public service motivation. Any insights and benefits from this study will be shared with leaders statewide and others interested in the research topic.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this research study was to gain insight into how individual municipal leaders construct and interpret their experiences of incivility related to their work local leadership roles. A goal of this study is to better understand how municipal leaders were drawn to, or attracted to, their work in public service. Additionally, information was sought as to how the local government officials retain their positions and continue to stay motivated in the face of incivility.

The overarching research question guiding the study is: **How do local government leaders describe their experiences of workplace incivility and its effects on their motivation for public service work?** This question guides the report of the research findings. The following findings outline the four main themes and their sub-themes that emerged from the semi-structured interview data. Each theme and subtheme are outlined and followed by a summary incorporating the overall interpretation of the participants’ experiences.

A total of five municipal government leaders in one Northeast state participated in this study. Four were considered managers or administrators in smaller towns while one was an elected council leader in a city. The two women and three men who participated in the study had over 175 years of public service experience and averaged 7 years in their current capacities.

An analysis of the participant interviews yielded four superordinate themes with eight subordinate, or nested, themes. The themes identified were: Public Service Orientation (subthemes: Early experiences; Satisfaction and fit), Local Government Challenges (subthemes: Systemic challenges; Broader societal context), Presence and Prevalence of Incivility
(subthemes: Shared definitions; Varied forms), and Staying Motivated (subthemes: Self-awareness/perspective; Personal toolkit).

Table 1 outlines the themes that emerged from the interview data of the municipal leader participants. The table presents the definitions of what is and is not included in each theme and sub-theme. The table also includes specific examples from the data.

Table 1

Themes and Examples of Leaders’ Incivility Experiences and Impact on Public Service Motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Non-Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Service Orientation</td>
<td>Early Experiences</td>
<td>Parents involved in public service work</td>
<td>No cited examples of early influences to public service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Satisfaction and Fit</td>
<td>Love making a difference</td>
<td>Could not condone the profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Government Challenges</td>
<td>Systemic Challenges</td>
<td>Politics built-in to the system</td>
<td>Elections may remove difficult people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broader Social Context</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sexism: Others think she is secretary, not manager</td>
<td>Social media &amp; other technological advances can reach more citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence &amp; Prevalence of Incivility</td>
<td>Shared Definitions</td>
<td>Inability to accept a different opinion as legitimate</td>
<td>Only one participant’s definition included expected level of decorum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Varied Forms</td>
<td>All participants report witnessing uncivil behavior</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Staying Motivated

Self-Awareness/Perspective

The near-retirees report freedom to behave according to their values One participant could not endorse public management as career path

Personal Toolkit

Several note patience and flexibility as important personal characteristics One participant noted he must be good at his job because he is employed

Theme I: Public Service Orientation

The first theme to emerge from the data analysis was the participants’ orientation toward public service work. The public service orientation theme is characterized by an attraction to serving others, a drive for doing good, and a significant level of personal satisfaction derived from contributing to making a difference in people’s lives. It also involves an individual’s interests, preferences, and skills aligning with the nature of public service work. The theme aligns with literature on PSM (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry et al., 2010).

Research on PSM has demonstrated a positive association for a segment of the population exhibiting higher levels of attraction to the work of serving others. This attraction was also highlighted in the findings of the present study. Furthermore, breaking down the theme of public service orientation into two parts (‘early experiences’ and ‘individual satisfaction and fit’), this study supports research on the ways in which the attraction to public service work is formed. First, by aligning with the attraction to public service through early experiences like parental socialization and second, through the selection and retention aspects of satisfaction in prosocial behavior, self-sacrifice, and altruism (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry et al., 2010).
Early experiences

Participants identified early experiences that set the stage for their careers in public service. Several told stories about early role models such as parents who worked in public service themselves. Others made contributions to bettering the lives of the community in other ways through volunteering. And one person spoke of falling into the career when his dreams of law school did not work out.

Polly spoke of growing up in a large Irish Catholic family in Washington, DC. Her father was ‘a union man’, a high-level leader of a workers’ union, who often met with politicians and other officials at the White House. She tells a story of her father talking about a senator from the opposite party and paying him a compliment calling him ‘a prince of a man’. When Polly questioned him about the man being from the opposite party affiliation her father told her, ‘[Polly], it’s not about the who, it’s about the what.’ She says she has carried that notion of having to work with everyone for the common good with her during her entire political career.

Both of Polly’s parents made an important impact on her early on. She tells this story:

It doesn’t matter if you like the guy in front of you or what, if what he says makes sense to you, he said, you need to ya know…embrace it. You need to ya know, form that relationship. He was all about ya know, working with others. And, um, the one thing I learned from my family and even my parents with nine kids, they were very active, they were CYO advisors, Catholic Youth Organization, they did our trips, ya know, our theatrics, and all that stuff, they were very involved as parents. And I was very dramatic in my teens, and any time ya know, I’d be feeling sorry for myself, or thinking they were so mean, my mother would say, ‘Get over yourself and do something for somebody else.'
Then you’ll know, then you’ll know, you’ve got it good’. They were tough, but they were right, they were right.

Barbara spoke of her father, retired now, who was the town solicitor for over thirty years nearby her current town in New England, and who represented school districts, and at one time chaired the conservation commission. She explains her history with her dad and the influence being exposed to that environment had on her.

So I grew up going to site walks, town meetings, and um, I really just liked the way that local government had an effect on people’s lives. Um, I felt like something you could, you could tangibly assess your impact, and hopefully that’s a positive impact, but I also liked the problem solving aspect of it, ya know, that you could be presented with a problem, and pull together a team, and find a solution and I found that to be very satisfying.

Sean also spoke of his father when asked about key influencers in his life:

I think there have been a lot of influencers in my life, the first being my dad. I was the oldest of eight children, and um, I watched my dad and how he dealt with a herd of children and still was active in our lives, and what he paid back to the community. It was interesting, after he passed away, I found from a number of different people I spoke to, of all the things he did that I didn’t realize. From simple things like, he’d go out on Sunday mornings and he’d buy fresh bread for our breakfast. That was kind of his thing, he’d make bacon and eggs for the whole family and friends and girlfriends, boyfriends, ya know, he’d serve 30-40 people some Sunday mornings for breakfast but he’d always go out and get fresh bread. So what I didn’t know until after he passed away, in the process
of doing that, there were four or five people he knew that were elderly or infirmed and he
would also pick up bread for them and the Sunday newspaper. And we thought he was
going to get bread for us and coming right home but what he would do is he’d get the
bread and drop it off to those people and he….he didn’t tell anyone about it. And that’s
just kinda what he did so I think, I think he was a main influencer in my life.

TJ discussed his own early community experiences setting the stage for his public service
career:

My only other involvement prior to working in municipal government years ago was
coaching high school, high school coach, high school football coach and a youth, youth
football coach and involved in community based activities, ya know, member of the
Lions Club and doing activities and things like that so I think that um, helped me start to
learn what public service was about and interaction with different groups in a community
and volunteering and doing certain things but I would have to say my perspective on it
has changed over time where I think, where now I, I fully, it, it, it takes, time, right?
Where, as you, as you mature, as you learn about priorities in life and I think as you get
older you start to much better understand today what public service is and the amount of
need that exists in certain areas of the community.

Although Charlie did not speak about influences from his childhood as being influential
in his public service career, he did discuss his college years where he majored in political science
and considered a law career that did not work out for him.

I took the LSATs, partied the night before, and didn’t really do that well. Ended up going
to graduate school and I ended up in public administration, and I used to work for UPS,
just kinda fell into it. I wasn’t a kid growing up who was like, yeah, I want to get into local government. But one thing I did do that was unusual was at the time, I did check the labor statistics as to what jobs were going to be opening in the next 10, 20 years and local government, which at that time, was ya know in the 80’s, was, was a growing sector.

Overall, most participants had early experiences or influences that set them on their path to a public service career. Some, like Sean, Polly, and Barbara spoke about parental influencers growing up that made major impressions on them of the importance of serving others. Tom’s own early volunteer experiences as a coach and Lions Club member exposed him to the community need. ‘I never realized the depth of need and poverty in the community I grew up in,’ he reported. And Charlie, although he did not set out to be a town manager, seemed to find his career as many people do, by maturing and facing the question of what’s next in life. His research through the labor statistics guided him into public service but it was clearly not his first choice. ‘I messed up my GREs and didn’t get into law school so I ended up with this. The job projections showed that town managers were a growing profession so here I am,’ Charlie stated.

**Individual Satisfaction and Fit**

Participants spoke of their personal attraction to the nature of public service work and how it fit with their preferences and values. Tom and Charlie discussed how they like the dynamic nature of public service work, though Charlie clearly had a less positive view of the work. When asked what made him want to go to work every day, he stated:

Mainly it is varied, and given what I do, I can have some level of control. Even if it’s crappy work, you don’t really want to do it, having that kind of control gives you a better feeling about it.
Tom, speaking along the same lines of personal fit of the work, put it a bit differently:

We have a number of things we need to accomplish. Right? So the nice thing about working in local government is, the seasons change and the years change and it’s never the same thing. Ya know, you’re not doing…people assume well, you’re doing the same thing, right? But no, you’re definitely not doing the same thing. And what makes me come to work every day is that there’s such…it’s all the departments, right, there’s such diversity in what we do that, um, it is continually challenging and continually changing.

Several participants spoke to the autonomy afforded by working in public service and the ability to see tangible results of their efforts. Charlie liked that he had some level of control over his schedule. Barbara noted her fit with the nature of the work in her preferences to work as a problem solver and to see the difference she makes in her community, citing recently remedying an emergency sewer main problem. Polly discussed how she finds personal satisfaction in seeing a project come to fruition and named a couple projects involving improved streetscapes and improved town-gown community relations with the local university.

Most of the participants reported that people are a driver of their satisfaction levels in doing municipal government work. Polly expressed a feeling of gratitude that she gets “to work with talented and helpful people” on the council and amongst the community. Regarding working with the employees of his town, Sean noted, “I have fun with them”. Barbara also saw people as a positive aspect of working in public service referring to the citizens of her town as respectful, thankful, and nice. Barbara added a story that surprised her and drove home how special she finds her community:
I think I work in a great town. I mean the people of the town are really fantastic. Even when they’re unhappy they are still for the vast majority of them are still respectful. They’re thankful when you help them. They have huge hearts. I mean, I see things every day that I’m like, I can’t believe people are that nice. And it’s really, it’s, it’s really nice. I mean, I think just for an example on Friday night we had a sewer line collapse on a street. It was a mess and it was a big problem. I was out on site you know, late into the night just because we had to find out what was causing this and this was all hands on deck. And we were on a residential street with lights set up, an excavator is digging up the road and I’m fully expecting that people are going to get hit and right in front of a dance studio where they’re having a dress rehearsal for a show on Sunday. Like, it was, it was, it could have been a really bad situation. And I saw a woman walking down the street with a little boy and he was probably about two years old, maybe three. And I’m like, oh boy, she’s going to be like, ‘my kid needs to go to sleep and you guys are here.’ And they had baked cookies for everybody there. I was still there, too. They brought a tin of cookies. They were still warm and said ‘Merry Christmas’ to everyone. Once they were on their way and I’m like, you know what? That, just that doesn’t happen everywhere. And I really think that I’m pretty lucky to work in the town that I work in.

Conclusions

Sean, Tom, Barbara, and Polly all appear to have higher levels of PSM (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry et al., 2010) based on their answers to the interview questions. Most of the participants expressed a genuine desire to work toward making a difference in people’s lives. It seems that having early role models who were involved in doing good in their communities either by public service work, volunteering, or another means of helping others, a condition of
the attraction element of PSM theorized by Perry and Wise (1990), made an impact on the participants’ desire to also contribute to the greater good in some capacity. Here, we are defining the greater good as the general community or group benefiting from the labor of those doing the public service work. Parents especially seemed to be highly impactful which, again, ties to Perry and Wise’s PSM theory (1990). The participants’ attraction to public service work is also derived from a fit between qualities inherent in the nature of the work such as the dynamic environment, opportunities for problem-solving, ability to see the difference you are making, and genuine satisfaction from working with, and for, the people.

Charlie’s answers suggest lower levels of PSM (Perry & Wise, 1990). He had nothing to say about being attracted to work in public service beyond the nature of the work being varied and him having some level of control over his schedule even if the work was ‘crappy’, in his terms. This seems to align with how he got into the field in general and that he ‘fell into it’. Notably, he was the only individual to not speak to an early influence toward public service such as a parental influence or personal experience. In fact, he seems to look at his work as his fallback option after not doing well on his law school entrance exams.

Presented above were some of the reasons that the participants were attracted to public service work as well as their views on how it offers them satisfaction to a greater or lesser extent. The next theme to be discussed involves the challenges associated with working in local government.

**Theme II: Local Government Challenges**

The second theme to emerge from the analysis of the data revolved around the challenges associated with working in local government. This theme supports the existing literature on
challenges experienced by local government leaders (Nalbandian, O’Neill, Wilkes, & Kaufman, 2013; Rosenau, 2003). Understanding the systems of government at the local level can be difficult in that government structures can take on many forms such as having an elected city or town council and an elected or appointed chief executive (mayor, town manager, town administrator). Any system that elects new members every few years has a turnover factor that may make long-term planning difficult (McCabe et al., 2008). ‘Turnover is a big deal when you’re looking at working for new bosses every election’, Charlie pointed out, ‘It’s hard to create a vision or a plan for more than a couple years’.

Further, local governments, complex on their own are also situated within a State and Federal government structure as well as a broader societal context that flows with issues and expectations of what is in the best interest of the people. One point that should be mentioned here is that the nature of the local government structures in the northeast is unique, and perhaps specifically unique within the one state that was studied. Culture also may play a role in the particular levels of PSM or civility based on the region.

Changes in cultural norms and advances in technology also play a role in shaping the complexity of the societal context (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, and Ladwig, 2014; Falco & Kleinhans, 2018). Tom pointed out, ‘Technology is a double-edged sword. It can help us move info faster but people can always take the messages in the wrong way or expect instant answers.’ The complexity of the societal context is illustrated in myriad ways like the perceived need for information on-demand. The broader societal context aligns with the reported challenges of city and county managers outlined by Rosenau (2003). Specifically, the modernization aspects of rapid communication, the organizational boundary overlap and the
expansion of identity politics (Rosenau, 2003) are supported by this study’s theme of local
government challenges.

**Systemic Challenges**

Change seems to be a constant in working in the local government environment. One
subtheme associated with the challenges of local government work coalesced around an inherent
lack of stability in the system based on the election cycle consistent with academic literature
(McCabe et al., 2008). The instability may take the form of job insecurity for the manager. One
participant, Charlie, a town manager who reports to an elected council, noted that town managers
often jump from town to town based on difficulties with council/manager relations. He illustrates
the point by saying, ‘It’s hard, really hard. I’ve seen people have five, six, seven jobs by the time
they’re 50.’ Sometimes an election will cause a turnover in ‘bosses’ who may or may not
approve of the job the manager is doing and they have the ability to dismiss that manager.

The system can be inefficient and can contribute to the ineffectiveness of government as
well. The built-in nature of politics into the system often emerges when managers have to walk a
fine line with being able to respond to council members’ expectations while having to push back
to keep the budget in line and present the unintended consequences to council members’ ideas.
Charlie told a story about a council member who approached him with a constituent complaint:

Some of my council are out there for election. So, for me, well, one of them came in and
they said, well, I’ve got a complaint and a suggestion that at the beachfront areas that
there are people there at night. And so, when the beach equipment comes to clean the
beach, ya know, they miss sections of beach because people are still out there. Could they
come in, in the morning? I said, well, what are you talking about? Well, if they started at
6 or 6:30 in the morning. And I said, well they could, but did you think of this? If we’re
going to have equipment out there at 6 or 6:30 in the morning in front of these beachfront houses making noise people are going to be pissed because it’s summertime and we’re disturbing them. And they say, I didn’t think of that. That’s the kind of things that they don’t think about...that I do.

Constituents also appear to contribute to the difficulties associated with the system of local government work. Sometimes, leaders’ interactions with constituents are perceived as contributing factors to systemic inefficiency. Often the inefficiency takes the form of, what several managers referred to as, ‘wasted’ time, or inefficiency, supporting the current literature (Van Wart, 2013; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Nelson & Svara, 2015; Lando, 2000). Polly, an elected official, noted the difficulty associated with working in the public eye and the presence of gadflies who have perennial complaints about the city but no willingness to bring solutions or compromise. She told a story of a married couple who would come to open meetings for city-wide strategic planning and expect to offer their comments when the period for public comment had passed months prior. When they were informed that the meeting did not include an option for them to speak, they would stand in the back of the room and make faces at the council members and jeer them. ‘They were infuriating gadflies. And to think they would take up everyone’s time to do this. What is wrong with them?’, Polly wondered.

‘Narrow and personal agendas’ was also a widely shared thread amongst the group and many discussed how these agendas contribute to wasted time. Tom, a town manager in a small community, spoke of the challenges presented by the constituents and council members who have their own personal agendas, ‘…the amount of time that we spend addressing a full minority position is excessive. It absolutely impacts your ability to get your work done.’ Charlie also reported that constituents often come to him and his council members seeking help with their
individual problems such as dead trees on their property or potholes in their driveways. They are looking for the leaders to solve their problems with public money and manpower. ‘So, you want me to lose my job so you can have a tree trimmed? I don’t think so’, he said.

**Broader Societal Context**

Further impacting the challenges of working in local government is the role of the broader societal context including changes in technology, sexism, and the evolution of the political climate. Communication is impacted by technology sometimes amplifying inefficiencies in municipalities (Anderson et al., 2014). The continuing social issue of gender equality challenges the female leaders’ work consistent with Cortina’s (2008) view of discrimination as a form of incivility. The political climate at all levels of government challenges municipal leaders as salaries and benefits are impacted by elected officials who do not want to raise taxes to keep up with rising costs as it may hurt their chances for reelection. Further, this shortsightedness can impact drawing of new talent to replace the aging workforce (Goodman, French, & Battaglio, Jr., 2013). ‘We are stuck in a hard spot. Who’s going to want a job like this when the benefits are eaten away?’, Charlie pondered.

The role of technology in the daily lives of local government officials was a point of contention. Several participants spoke of the fast and free flow of information through electronic communication and social media and the difficulties it brings setting up an expectation of instant gratification and incivility consistent with the literature (Oliveira & Welch, 2013; Anderson et al., 2014). Tom discussed technology as a double-edged sword allowing for quick and easy ways to deal with town problems but also as a mechanism for people to react uncivilly in the emotion of the moment without the facts or thinking through the impact of their words. He states:
But I think in terms of somebody in my role, my greatest challenge is controlling information and facts. Because today, and I think a key to all that is the way we communicate today. That’s it. Where years ago, it was very controlled, it was, I had to call you, I had to see you in person, I had to send you a correspondence. That’s about it. Where today, forget it. I mean, no holds barred, where I’m comfortable, I’m at home, I happen to see something on Facebook, or another form of social media or on TV and I, I have an opinion based on what I just heard and I am gonna just push that out. With no information, no basis, no background, no idea if it’s true or not true, but what I just heard, I’m gonna push it out, so that, that is probably the greatest challenge we have today is managing information.

Sean mentioned constituents behaving as ‘customer’ (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015) expecting instant answers to their requests as an example of challenges in working in local government he has experienced:

[There’s a] sense of entitlement that our customers, our citizens, have…and, and that they’re the minority, but the people who come in with requests or complaints that are, show absolutely no visibility, no clue about how the world operates. And, they’re, they’re in their own little bubble, and they don’t think about impacts on other people, and impacts that, they’re…just because they want something it doesn’t mean it needs to be the number one priority. There may be other people that have higher priority, ya know, for good reasons. So, it frustrates me when people come in, complaining about things that aren’t important or make a bigger deal about things than they should because ‘I’m a taxpayer’.

Both of the study’s female participants spoke about facing sexism in the public service workplace consistent with literature on incivility (Cortina, 2008) and gendered government work
Polly not only had been propositioned by one councilmember, but she had also been boxed out of being mayor early on because she was a woman. ‘Oh yeah, because I was a woman. They didn’t want me to have it...to be mayor.’, she said.

Polly explained the practice in her city is to allow the top vote-getter in the election to be the mayor but ultimately it is up to the council to make the final decision. For several terms, she was top vote getter but as the only female, her male counterparts did not either want her to be mayor or think a woman could handle the job.

She talks about the repercussions when the male councilmembers finally acquiesced and allowed her to be mayor:

They said, we’ll just let her in for two years, just let her be mayor, right? I’m telling you it was…[inaudible]. I was mayor, but the bottom line was they kinda decided as a pack, that they weren’t going to help me do anything. So every time there was some sort of event or something, and I would ask the others, would you like to attend or something, can you attend in my place, no. Boards and commissions were basically the same way. So, it was extremely difficult. I was everywhere. I was getting press like you wouldn’t believe. And they were jealous. I get it. I do get it. When I finally talked to one of the members, who became a very good friend of mine, Mr. X [name omitted] said Polly, you know you’re not going to get it. He said they’re going to take it away from you. And I said, Mr. X, I don’t get it. And he said, well, ya know you’re doing everything, you know, you’re getting the…and I said that’s because none of you would help me. I said I repeatedly…and said you know it…I’ve repeatedly asked you. And he said, yeah, well, we kinda had a thing. He told me they were like, let her fall on her face and I didn’t.
Barbara also faced experiences with sexism that although may have been less overt, still were experienced as unsettling and a sign there is still a long way to go toward gender equality. She gave an example of working in a traditionally male profession where when she would be in meetings and had not met the men in the room yet, they would assume she was the assistant and asked her to get them coffee. ‘Oh yeah, I got asked to get coffee a lot in meetings with outsiders when I first started. Then finally people started to get to know me’, Barbara explained, ‘Although, it still happens once in awhile. It’s frustrating.’

Charlie talked of the erosion of salary and benefits to those in city or town manager roles as town and city councils increasingly held tight to purse strings to get reelected, drawing attention to the idea that community members are suspicious of government employees (Pattakos, 2004). He states:

That’s the attitude. Everyone is viewed with suspicion. Ya know, you make…you don’t do any work and you get all this money and…and if you look at the salaries of municipal people they’re not that great. They’re, they’re, they seem good now, only because everyone else’s has fallen. Now other folks, they used to make far more money, and the benefits used to be better, municipality…municipal employees never made the money, they got the better benefits because politically, it was easier to give the benefits than it was the money. When things like healthcare and some of these other benefits began to rise in value, private people saw theirs getting cut while municipal people were keeping it, and five dollar co-pays, it drives people, it drives people coo-coo but the reason they had five dollar co-pays is because they weren’t making any money. And that’s probably the most disheartening thing.

Conclusions
The challenges associated with municipal government work reported by the participants are consistent with the literature. The issues ‘baked in’ to the system of government such as turnover (McCabe et al., 2008), inefficiency (Van Wart, 2013), and suspicion of government employees (Pattakos, 2004) are clear among the participants. Further, issues brought about by the broader societal context like sexism (Guy, 2017; Cortina 2008), an aging workforce (Goodman, et al., 2015), and technological challenges all are reported to bring a challenge to the work of the local leaders.

When taking the theme and subthemes into consideration, one can see the flawed nature of humanity at the heart of the issues about which the participants spoke. Whether by having unrealistic expectations, through behaving out of jealousy or by jumping to conclusions without factual information, a ‘gotcha’ nature of the human element is present. Conflict in some form appears and seems to drive the behavior. Conflict is healthy for democracy when used for civil discourse, but according to the participants this is often not the case.

Outlined above were the challenges associated with working in municipal government. Next, following along with the thread of conflict, the participants address their thoughts about incivility in local government.

**Theme III: Presence and Prevalence of Incivility**

The third theme to emerge from the data pertains to the presence and prevalence of incivility in local government. Participants were asked to define what incivility means to them in order to gain a sense of their impressions. Each of their definitions aligned with aspects of the existing literature on incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), including the opportunity to be heard, respected, and to have a healthy dialogue. Next, the participants were asked to report
about any experiences with incivility they have had or may have witnessed as members of local government. The data revealed that incivility is largely defined in similar ways by the municipal government leaders. Additionally, the participants agreed that incivility is present in their working lives either as personally experienced or witnessed. Ultimately, participant accounts of how incivility is experienced were shared. The stories reveal the various forms incivility takes in the municipal government sphere.

**Shared Definitions**

Participants’ definitions of incivility overlapped each other significantly in that they noted a behavior that displays general disrespect for the other person and an inability to compromise or to share ideas to meet a common goal. Intent to not work together appeared as a nuance of the definitions.

Polly defined incivility simply as ‘attacking the person and not the idea’.

Sean spoke of incivility in terms of causing a lack of progress:

I think disagreement and…and discussion moves us forward. I think incivility is the inability to accept a different opinion…and to not consider it. And in some cases, you know, to lash out and lash back and to me that does nothing. Moves nothing forward.

Our goal should be to move forward. And if you have one opinion and I have another opinion on the same issue, we need to listen to why we have those opinions. We’re both smart people, and we disagree, and we may in the end agree to disagree. But for me to, to not even consider your opinion or not to give it any value, and then to be uncivil with it, and to insult you or to question your intelligence or to do so many of those things that we see on television every day, doesn’t move the ball forward. It doesn’t move the ball
forward at all. All it does is it makes me feel empowered for a little bit, maybe because I’ve insulted you. And you know, I, I get to hear my backers clapping their hands because they’ve heard me insult you. But what the, what does it do for the good of the organization, whatever organization it is? It’s nothing.

Barbara defines incivility similarly paying specific attention to the listening aspect:

I think incivility is the inability to listen to the person that you may have a disagreement with. You know, I understand, you know, there’s often conflicts in local government and that’s totally normal and I think it’s healthy to have a certain level of friction on certain issues but if we disagreed all the time things wouldn’t work well. But I think it’s, just things become uncivil when people stop listening to each other and they’re just waiting for their turn to talk.

Charlie echoed the notion of the inability to listen to one another, ‘Incivility usually, usually means where people talking at each other and over each other and not listening to each other. It is where folks come to a meeting or take a position, and there’s no room for compromise.’

Tom spoke of a lack of adherence to norms of conduct and professionalism:

I think in government, in just a professional conduct in general there, there is a normal standard that I think used to be followed. In a lot of cases, it’s not about agreeing on an issue but there’s a way you can make your point, you can do it professionally and understand that this is business and it’s not personal.

A certain standard of decorum, respect for the other, and ability to conduct oneself in such a way that information is taken in and processed objectively with a goal of working toward
the common good appears to be the way in which the participants would like their work lives to be conducted. The intention of working together also seems to be a common thread implied among the definitions offered by the participants. Next the varied forms incivility may take are discussed to illustrate how municipal leaders experience or have witnessed the phenomenon of workplace incivility in local government.

**Varied Forms**

The analysis of the data shows that the participants’ experiences of incivility appear in many forms, all of which exhibit a lack of respect for others and a willingness to cross a line of decorum that many say has blurred or disappeared over time.

Tom discussed his experiences of incivility in terms of the volatility in the content and delivery of what people consider acceptable today:

Everything is fair game relative to personal attacks. It’s, it’s almost as if the, the means to achieve something, they’re no good. There is no guide. It’s just anything is good or you can you can utilize any means necessary to achieve an end and that means I’m going to attack you or your family or your job in…just with words. I mean, just talk and rhetoric, misinformation and volatility are going to do that, and that’s acceptable today…Where people are making comments publicly and a lot of times if you talk to them they’re depth of understanding of what they’re talking about is extraordinarily limited and it’s really indefensible.

Sean told a story of an uncivil experience that happened in his town that ended up in a grievance filed by the citizen to the human rights commission:
We had a gentleman come in a year ago, year and a half ago, asking for a marriage license for a civil union for him and his gay partner. And our town clerk pulled out, not clerk but one of the people in the clerk’s office pulled out the application from a stack of applications and handed it to him and it was an old application, a couple years old, and it didn’t list, it hadn’t been revised, it showed the bride, groom and didn’t show the other. He got very upset about it. And, the town clerk heard him getting upset and came out and said, I’m sorry, I apologize, but that’s the wrong form that must have been in the stack. I’m throwing it out but let me print you a new form and bring that to you which she did. He stopped listening. And so, it became all about him. And how he was aggrieved and how, ya know, it was insulting. And I often tell my children not to judge yesterday by today’s standards. That application was not intended to be insulting to him, the old application, it was the way things were then. And that was only three or four years ago, right? But that’s the way it was, then they changed the application. We had neglected to change it out and we apologized for that. But the fact that he, I mean, he, he, he used the N word and said we were treating him like one of those, screaming and yelling, and, and that kind of incivility, and you know, he stopped listening and when we stop listening is when we you know, things, the progress stops. If he had listened to them apologize, they would’ve explained that they were going to get rid of those old forms and make sure our website was updated with the new form and give him a copy of the new form and apologize and go on about your business, okay, thanks. And he could have looked at it like, oh, look, I corrected a problem. I found a problem and it was corrected thanks to me. Instead it became all about him, and how he was treated, mistreated by the fact that that form, and of course, the dialogue that happened between him and the others.
Sean went on to describe the grievance and resulting decision, “…but he took us to the human rights commission and um, the human rights commission which has tended to fall towards the aggrieved, um, dismissed the case out of hand.”

Charlie gave examples of incivility as a general lack of decorum which, in his view, are caused by lack of appropriate meeting management. “I’ve witnessed, a particular time, yelling, yelling all the time, and people talking over each other all the time. But, but many times, that comes down to the people in control of the meeting and they don’t know how to run a meeting.” Charlie addressed what he does proactively to combat the meeting mismanagement. He offers training for newly elected officials on parliamentary procedures, open meetings law, public records act to give them a baseline from which to operate.

Barbara discussed incivility at public meetings.

I have to say when I was interim [manager] and there were multiple occasions of incivility at public meetings where they were jeering from crowds and just wild assertions that you know, ‘oh you guys are all on the take’ and ‘this is fixed’ and I mean that kind of thing, not listening to the explanation of how processes go because you know especially with planning the interpreter and in particular there was one really large mixed use development that was proposed it was really on the scale of [omitted for confidentiality] mixed use development and there's a process that goes forward you know this we have to listen to the to the the applicant. We have to let them present their case.

We have to consider the evidence. We have to make findings. You know you can't…. But there were people who definitely felt strongly they said, ‘Why are you even listening to that? Just tell them to go away.’ and when the planning team refused they said ‘you know
we can't just tell them to go away we have to listen to them you know’. Jeering and catcalls and just, you know it…definitely…that was uncivil moment.

Another story of incivility in public meetings from Barbara entailed escalation to vandalism and her questioning the process.

I was at a public hearing where the town solicitor had made a ruling that we have to at least listen to them and that town solicitor had their tires slashed in the drive, in the parking lot. So, you know things I've seen things get ugly because really she's doing her job. You disagree with her. That's fine. You're going to go slash her tires in the parking lot, like that's all? There's really no need for that. It made me question the fact that sometimes, and I feel very strongly about this, that sometimes in local government when we listen to the loudest voices in the room and we get caught up in whoever is right in front of us making noise and sometimes I have to stop myself and say OK you know even if there's 500 people in this meeting which is a huge public meeting there might be 15000 people at home that have a different opinion and they just don't hear.

Barbara’s experiences of sexism were discussed as challenges she has faced in her work in the previous theme of Local Government Challenges. Those experiences can also be framed as incivility she has experienced in the form of discrimination, aligning with research on incivility as discrimination (Cortina, 2008). For example, Barbara discussed not being believed when she said she was town manager.

Last week I had a guy come in to complain… my office [has a sign] that says town manager on the door and he said ‘I want to talk to the town manager’ and I said ‘That's me’. And he said ‘No, I want to talk to the town manager’. And I said, ‘I am’. So, it's
like, you know, it's tough not to react to that. We had a conversation and I listened to him and you know, but I think, it's tough sometimes to, you know, not be prejudiced against what he's gonna say when he starts out.

Polly recounted her story of incivility and sexism that occurred when she was ‘allowed’ to become mayor by the male councilmembers.

So, I was mayor, but the bottom line is they kinda decided as a pack, that they weren’t going to help me do anything. There's a couple like that. So, every time there was some sort of the event or something and I, I was asking the others can…can you attend in my place, they wouldn’t. So, I say, ‘excuse me’? I didn’t understand. And I was getting press like you wouldn't believe and then finally…I get it. I did get it when I finally talked to one of the members. (We eventually became very good friends after.) And he said, ‘well, you know, you're doing everything you can’. I said, ‘that's because none of you would help me, Bill’. I said, ‘I repeatedly…and you know it, I've repeatedly asked. And he said, ‘well, we kind of had a thing’ he told me that, [their thinking was] ‘Let her fall on her face’. And when I didn't, they couldn’t believe it.

Conclusions

The participants’ accounts of incivility they have experienced or witnessed as municipal government leaders are varied but share common threads. One thread is a lack of intent on the part of an individual to work together toward a common goal (Rood, 2014; Stuckey & O’Rourke, 2014; Zauderer, 2002). Another thread of the experiences of incivility seems to simply be bad behavior (Levine, 2010). Stories from the interviews emerged of people behaving disrespectfully by yelling in public meetings, using inappropriate language with their supervisors, discriminating
against women, and following a line of conduct that is more like something from an overly-dramatic, scripted TV talk show like Jerry Springer than a group of people convening to participate in the workings of a community. It appears, in many cases, the perspectives of the people behaving uncivilly prioritize their own interests over those of the common good. This change of priority has spread like a virus in many communities and leaves many questioning why or how the municipal leaders stay in their jobs.

**Theme IV: Staying Motivated**

With all the experiences of incivility associated with local government work, this study looks to further understand how the municipal leaders continue on in their work. Two main sub-themes emerged from the data: Self-awareness and Perspective, as well as, having a Personal ‘Toolkit’ of qualities and methods from which the leaders draw during difficult times.

Participants were asked if any of their experiences made them question their work to elicit responses on how they sustain themselves professionally. Some also responded to a follow-up question about how they stay motivated to work in the public sector.

**Self-Awareness/Perspective**

The participants’ own self-awareness often serves as their motivator in difficult times because they know they can make a difference based on past accomplishments. They have a solid grasp on what they can and cannot control. Their self-awareness often is a factor that allows them to put the difficulties and incivilities they experience in perspective and to move on or continue to problem solve in the face of adversity.

Interestingly, both Sean and Polly are in their sixties and mentioned that the work they do is not because they ‘have to’ in order to financially sustain themselves. Their self-awareness of
this point in their lives also serves to sustain them in that they know they can walk away at any time and be ready for retirement without penalty. This position also allows them the freedom to behave according to their own values and ethics without concern for pleasing others, politics, or compromising their values to sustain their lifestyle.

Barbara’s perspective allowed her to look at the system itself and how its inclusivity may be improved for more voices to be heard:

So, I think that’s something. That there’s two sides to it, there’s trying to account for the people that aren’t at the meeting and also you know now that I’m a town manager trying to figure out how to incorporate more voices into the process so that you’re not just hearing from the loudest person. And I mean plenty of people feel like, you know, if someone doesn’t care to show up to the meeting then who cares what they think because they could have been here, too. But there’s my opinion that there’s a lot more to it than that.

Barbara goes on to address the complexities of the local government process and how some council members are swayed by the loudest person in the room:

So, I can imagine there’s some people that just stay home because they don’t want to be in the atmosphere, but they still feel they have feelings and opinions. They need a way to share. But you know, that’s the only thing. The only time I really down on the process is if and sometimes it’s two or three people in the audience they have a really strong opinion and you see the council who started with one well thought-out opinion start getting, start doubting themselves and it’s like, no…you were right in the first place, like, listen to
them. But just because they have a strong opinion and they’re in front of you doesn’t mean that they’re the public, you know, you know?

Finally, Barbara addresses how the incivility she experiences has not changed her attitude about her work but the way she does her work:

I mean, I think I try not to get too cynical, to say no to a lot of people, and in management positions people get very cynical. I still try to see the good in situations and the good in people. I don’t want to be the person who’s like, ‘I can’t wait to retire. I can’t wait to get out of here’. I mean I see that. I know I feel it. I think work life balance is a really important piece. I try to maintain that balance regardless. I am not, and I was very clear with the council when they hired me. I am not the person who is going to work seven days a week. You know, I’m not the person who’s going to miss all my kids’ concerts. That’s not, if that’s what you want, that’s not me because I won’t be a good manager if I’m burnt out. So, it’s hard, it’s really hard, but I try to stick with it.

Sean discussed his perspective of how life would be different if he did not work in public service:

I wouldn’t feel as fulfilled as I do. I might have a little more money in my bank account. I’d like to think that that would be the case, typically in, in a civil service, you know, you don’t make the same kind of money as your peers do in the corporate world, but I wouldn’t change it. Because like I said, I, I, it feels good. It felt good to get up and put on a uniform every day. It feels good to walk into this office every day and to know that I’m working for the common good of our community, not working to make a profit. My profit
is success in the community, not you know, how many dollars I can make by screwing someone or getting a better deal. So, I wouldn’t change it.

Similar to Sean, Tom also reported from his perspective how life would be different if he were not working in public service:

I don’t think I’d be as well rounded. Where I am today, so I’ve got lots, my hands are in lots of different things that affect everybody in the entire community. Um, and I think that’s something that I’ve always worked towards so I think it would be a much more narrow focus, not necessarily not as fulfilled but just different, I think. I’m kind of programmed now with what I do because I’ve been doing it for so long, um, but, uh, I think there needs to be more of a focus on public service because I think we all forget and uh, the world itself has a lot of challenges today not only in how we get along well but environmentally, and I think it’s going to take a real focus on public service and public well-being going forward, so I think I would miss it.

**Personal Toolkit**

Tom discusses how qualities of patience, knowing when to step away from a situation and to not react in the moment allows him to maintain himself as a professional during difficult times. He believes flexibility, being able to find common ground, being well versed on a topic and having familiarity with best practices allow him to deal with challenges. He also reported that it helps to be able to remember back to situations earlier in his career that did not go right and use those as lessons learned to make different decisions in the present.
Similar to Tom, Sean noted that patience, a reliance on the facts, utilizing best practices, and maintaining a sense of civil discourse allow him to keep motivated to do public service work. He also keeps his perspective through his devotion to serving others and bettering society.

Barbara noted that boxing helps her to keep perspective. “I box. Seriously, I take a class where I get to hit people. It helps tremendously.” She also discussed a method in her toolkit she uses to gain back control. Barbara told of how she proactively will pause a meeting or tense conversation if profanity is used because she believes it crosses the line of professionalism that is important to maintain.

Polly sustains her motivation with thoughts about what contributions she has made during her career as an elected official. She notes the various projects she can look around the community and see and that makes her feel proud. She also points to the talented and helpful people she has had the opportunity to work with and how those relationships outweigh the bad experiences she has had with the ‘gadflies’.

Conclusions

Participants were able to offer some clues into how they stay motivated to do the work of a municipal leader in the face of incivility or other difficulties they experience. Aligning with the literature, a general thread of agreement took the form of keeping a perspective on their work through self-awareness (Tummers & Knies, 2013; Fairholm & Gronau, 2015; Foldy, Goldman, & Ospina, 2008), as well as maintaining the ‘why’ or the meaning they derive from their work in municipal government (Fairholm & Gronau, 2015; Foldy, Goldman, & Ospina, 2008; Fairholm, 2004). Furthermore, participants appeared to draw from a ‘toolkit’ of personal qualities and methods that assist them in navigating difficult situations, also corresponding to literature on
leadership (Speers, 2016; Kramer & Crespy, 2011; Murphy, Rhodes, Meek, & Denyer, 2017).

Most participants were able to draw from their accomplishments, their goals, and their values to keep motivated. Interesting to note is that Charlie did not address the motivation question except that he must be good at his job because he has not been fired so he keeps doing it. He also said he could not endorse being a public manager as a career path. His reaction seems in line with what appears to be less of a motivation toward public service or having a lot of bad experiences that have worn him down over his lengthy career as a town manager.

**Conclusion**

The question this research study sought to investigate is: How do local government leaders describe their experiences of workplace incivility and its effect on their motivation? From the data, the findings include four superordinate themes with eight sub-themes. The themes identified were: Orientation toward public service (subthemes: Early experiences; Individual satisfaction and fit), Challenges of local government (subthemes: Systemic challenges; Broader societal context), Presence and prevalence of incivility (subthemes: Shared definitions of incivility; Varied forms of incivility), and Staying motivated (subthemes: Self-awareness and perspective; Toolkit of qualities and methods). The themes that emerged from the data supported many aspects of literature on PSM (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry et al., 2010; Wright & Pandey, 2008; Stritch & Christensen, 2014) and workplace incivility (Estes & Wang, 2008; Miner, Pesonen, Smittick, Seigel, & Clark, 2014; Andersson & Wegner, 2001; Porath & Pearson, 2012).

The findings were checked for validity with the participants to determine their accuracy, a method called member checking (Creswell, 2012). The data is trustworthy because it was collected directly from the participants via semi-structured interview with opportunities to clarify any questions of meaning during the interview and afterwards via email check-in.
The next chapter of this report addresses the findings in relationship with the theoretical framework of Public Service Motivation (PSM) used to structure the study. The framework of PSM will be used to situate the findings in relationship to the current literature. As appropriate, the findings that relate specifically to workplace incivility will be addressed in relation to that body of research.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to provide insight into the experience of local government leaders regarding incivility and its effect on their motivation to do public service work. The theoretical framework used to structure the study is Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry et al., 2010). Perry et al. (2010) proposed that PSM is one of several factors affecting an individual’s motivation (attraction, selection, retention) toward public service work. The PSM literature has suggested future research expand to include how situational factors affect individual PSM which is an aim of the present study (Wright & Christensen, 2010).

The qualitative method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996) was the means by which the collection and interrogation of the data occurred. The participants were five local government leaders who volunteered for semi-structured interviews. The participants were all asked a basic series of questions to address their motivation toward public service work and experiences of incivility in the work arena. In IPA research, the sample sizes are purposefully small in order to provide a deep reading of the data leading to the findings.

Four main themes and eight sub-themes were found: Public Service Orientation (sub-themes: Early experiences; Individual satisfaction and fit), Local Government Challenges (sub-themes: Systemic challenges; Broader societal context), Presence and prevalence of incivility (sub-themes: Shared definitions; Varied forms), and Staying motivated (sub-themes: Self-awareness/perspective; Personal toolkit).

This chapter reports each finding or theme as it relates to the PSM literature. The findings are also discussed, as appropriate, in relation to research on workplace incivility. The
implications of the findings are presented for the practice setting including examples of potential interventions. Finally, future areas of research will be offered as suggested by the study.

**Public Service Orientation**

The study’s first emerging theme involved the orientation toward public service of the participants. The theme is characterized by an attraction to serving others, a drive for contributing to the public good, and a level of personal satisfaction derived from making a difference in people’s lives. It also involves an individual’s interests, abilities, preferences, and skills being affiliated with the nature of public service work. This theme links to the attraction and selection aspects of PSM theory (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry et al., 2010; Christensen, Paarlberg, & Perry, 2017; Wright & Christensen, 2010).

The theme of Public Service Orientation supports the literature on PSM theory (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry et al., 2010, Christensen et al., 2017; Wright & Christensen, 2010). This theory postulates that some people are more attracted to the nature of public service work. The findings suggest most participants were clearly predisposed to act on their individual needs and motives uniquely grounded in public service. Several participants (Barbara, Sean, Polly) expressed that parental influences provided a backdrop of early experiences and exposure to the work of public or community service. This finding reinforces Perry’s (1996, 1997) studies examining parental socialization, self-sacrifice, and altruism as antecedents contributing to an individual’s attraction to public service work.

Additionally, the participants spoke of the ‘fit’ between their values of serving others, the associated costs, and their work. Interestingly, Bright (2008) found that PSM had no significant relationship to turnover intentions and job satisfaction when Person-Organization Fit was
considered. Person-Organization Fit is a concept from the organizational behavior field that highlights the congruence of individuals (values, skills, goals) with that of organizations (values, culture, resources, goals). The better the fit, the more likely the organization is to retain an employee (Westerman & Cyr, 2004; Wright & Pandey, 2008).

Several of the participants in this study reported pro-social motivations and were open to self-sacrifice which supports the PSM literature (Perry, 1997; Perry et al., 2010). Pro-social motivations were exhibited by the participants who discussed doing good on behalf of the community (Polly, Sean, Tom, Barbara), as well as enjoying working with people in their town (Barbara, Polly, Sean, Tom).

This study’s data also aligned with the self-sacrifice dimensions of PSM as confirmed through the factor analysis of Perry’s (1996) instrument to measure PSM. The self-sacrifice aspect may reveal itself in the form of lost income as they may have received greater pay in another line of work (Tom, Sean, Barbara). The sacrifice could also appear as the significant amounts of time they put into serving their communities as some council members only receive a small stipend (Polly).

Based on the alignment of the data with the literature on PSM theory, it appears that most participants, to greater or lesser degrees, exhibit substantial levels of Public Service Motivation. This data reinforces the literature on PSM theory by closely examining individuals’ currently in public service leadership roles and comparing their experiences with the theoretical framework (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry, 1996; Perry, 1997; Perry et al., 2010).

The first finding addressed the participants’ attraction to and selection of a public service career and supported the previous literature on the attraction and selection aspects of public
service motivation. Although the participants were oriented toward public service, they also were open about the inherent difficulties it possesses. The best way to examine and understand the data from this study is through the lens of PSM because not only is it well-studied (Pandey, Pandey, Breslin, & Broadus, 2017; Crewson, 1997; Perry & Hondeghem, 2008; Perry et al., 2010; Taylor, 2010), but it also has an obvious link to our goal of gaining insight into the lives of local leaders and their motivation to do the work of public service in the face of incivility. The next finding looks at the challenges associated with the field of municipal government.

**Local Government Challenges**

The second theme emerging from the data of this study showed that there are significant challenges involved with being a local government leader. This theme is characterized by the problems that are inherent in government systems and the municipality’s placement therein. The link of this theme to PSM theory falls under the retention aspects toward public service work. If a person is motivated toward public service work, how do they describe the associated challenges?

In order to identify city and town managers’ top leadership challenges, one set of researchers used interviews, focus groups, and clarifying emails to query leaders in local government (Nalbandian, O’Neill, Wilkes, & Kaufman, 2013). In addressing processual challenges, the authors noted the difficulties associated with engaging different stakeholders, multiple sources of information, and communication methods while merging those complexities with the changing process of government (Nalbandian et al., 2013). The challenges raised by the participants in the present study align with some of the issues reported by Nalbandian et al. (2013).
One such challenge for local leaders is managing the politics of issues and the varying values of advocates while engaging multiple stakeholders in order to be as inclusive as possible. Sometimes those advocates make their way onto the council and prefer to only deal with their pet topic as was reported in our data by Tom. Tom discussed the challenge of council members with narrow agendas who seemingly represented a small, issue-specific faction of the population. These members challenged the process of local government by working to represent some of the community, not to make decisions for the good of the entire community.

The agendas and intentions of stakeholders, some of which are ‘niche’ issues, also speak to the challenge reported by Barbara of trying to make sure as many voices as possible are heard. Along the lines of communication, Tom and Polly noted that methods like social media serve to complicate the inclusion of public decision-making because the modality is often used to put forth opinion with little fact to back up the assertions.

A struggle exists between maintaining local control and relying on state and federal government resources to meet the needs of the people. Turnover is one example of a major challenge unique to municipal leader’s work. Each election year, new ‘bosses’ may be added or removed from the council as was highlighted by all participants in this study. This turnover means that the leader may feel they are always working from a different playbook as each new council has different goals and plans. This turnover also can set up political conflict and impact the tenure of the manager. In a study of municipal manager turnover patterns, political conflict was found to be a significant reason for managers to leave their posts (McCabe et al., 2008).

The women participants in this study discussed the challenges they have faced due to sexism such as being denied the mayorship, being sexually harassed, and being ignored in a meeting when men made assumptions that the manager could not be a woman. The experience of
sexism in local government is supported by current research (Guy, 2017; Cortina, 2008). Although sexism is a well-documented problem, research on it among women in local government is sparse. A 2012-13 survey by the International City and County Managers Association Women Leading Government, (2014) found that 60% of women managers were the recipients of disrespectful or inappropriate comments from a council member or commissioner. The challenge of sexism goes beyond the definition of workplace incivility but by including it in this study we can incorporate its potential effects on the motivation to continue in public service roles for women leaders in municipal government.

As is illustrated above, the difficulties facing the participants in this study align with current research on the challenges municipal leaders contend with in day-to-day local government work. By viewing the challenges as baked-in to either the system of local government or to the broader complexities of contemporary society, the participants appear to ‘know what they signed up for’, so to speak. This kind of informed perspective may offer evidence that aligns with work on retention at the Federal level which finds that PSM is positively related to organizational commitment (Crewson, 1997; Naff & Crum, 1999). The next finding speaks to the presence and prevalence of incivility in local government.

**Presence and Prevalence of Incivility**

The third finding from this investigation involves the presence and prevalence of incivility in the working lives of the study’s participants. This study queried local government leaders about their experiences of incivility that arose under the umbrella of their public service role. An explanation of how their experiences align in relation to the existing literature on workplace incivility is presented.
All participants agreed incivility is a problem they experience frequently. As every municipal leader reported witnessing or being a recipient of uncivil behavior, incivility was found to be present within each participant’s work environment. This reporting is in line with recent research on incivility (Civility in America, 2018) though views on the workplace incivility vary. According to a 2018 survey, 93% of Americans perceive a severe deficit in civility, 69% view incivility as a major problem, and report experiencing incivility about 10 times per week (Civility in America, 2018), aligning with the views of the participants in the present study. In that same survey, when considering civility in the workplace, 92% of respondents categorize their own workplace as ‘somewhat civil’ or ‘very civil’ contrasting with reports from the municipal leaders. Other studies on workplace incivility concurred with the municipal leaders’ experiences estimating between 75 to 100% of workers experience incivility (Cortina et al., 2001; Cortina & Magley, 2009; Sliter et al., 2010).

The participants were first asked to offer their own definition of what incivility means to them. Their responses showed substantial overlap with one another’s definitions of incivility. All participants explained incivility in relation to a failure to communicate effectively. For example, several noted that incivility was an inability to listen, being unwilling to accept a differing opinion, and not working toward compromise. Additionally, some noted a lack of adherence to professional norms of conduct such as personal attacks or yelling and using vulgarity. Several participants noted that disagreement in the public sphere is part of our democracy but made the differentiation that there is a ‘give and take’ that goes along with that which is often missing in attempts at discourse.

According to Andersson and Pearson (1999), incivility involves “acting rudely or discourteously, without regard for others, in violation of norms for respect in social
organizations” (p. 455). Respectively, the researchers offer that workplace incivility can be concisely thought of as “behavior that disrupts mutual respect in the workplace” though their full definition of workplace incivility is “low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of mutual norms of respect” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 455).

As can be seen from the participants’ definitions, they generally align with the definitions found in the literature in that they highlight rude behavior that violates social norms.

The participants gave several examples from their own experiences, amplifying the many forms that workplace incivility can take. The examples given by the participants supported the definitions from the literature in that they showed rude behavior such as yelling or name calling, behaviors that violated social norms like talking over one another, interrupting, and profanity, as well as were considered low-intensity in that the behaviors were not physical aggression and had an ambiguous intent to harm the other. When asked about intent to harm, none of the leaders believed that most perpetrators of incivility outright wanted to inflict harm on the direct recipient of the uncivil behavior, thereby supporting the notion of ambiguous intent highlighted in the Andersson & Pearson (1999) definition.

The third finding discussed the presence and prevalence of incivility in the work environment of the participants. The local leaders reported their own overlapping definitions of incivility linked to the definitions from the literature (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Taylor, Bedian, Cole, & Zhang, 2014). The participants also shared examples of incivility they have witnessed or experienced from their work in local government. Workplace incivility is often a difficult issue to deal with on its own, but perhaps even more so in the public eye of local governing entities (Speers, 2016). Next, reports on how the participants deal with the challenges and incivility are presented in relationship to the literature on PSM.
Staying Motivated

The last finding to emerge from the research study on incivility and the experience of local government leaders is ‘Staying Motivated’. This theme speaks directly to how the participants sustain their motivation to do public service work. This finding is presented in relationship to the psychological literature and the theoretical frame of this study, Public Service Motivation (PSM) theory. In particular, the theme aligns with the retention aspect of the Attraction-Selection-Retention scheme from PSM which postulates that those persons with higher levels of PSM will have lower turnover intentions (Perry & Wise, 1990).

This finding is made up of several overlapping ideas. Self-awareness and perspective work together to allow the participant to mitigate incivilities and other challenges by looking inward (Svara, 2006; Foldy et al., 2008; Fairholm, 2004; Fairholm & Gronau, 2015). Self-awareness is, as it sounds, having an accurate sense of one’s needs and how one tends to experience interactions and relationships (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). Perspective involves the ability to step back and look at the self in relation to a greater whole in order to assess one’s place therein. The other aspect of the theme of Staying Motivated is that the participants use what resources they have in the face of incivilities or other challenges. They have their own ‘personal toolkit’ of qualities and methods, a facilitative style, consistent with the literature (Ford & Green, 2012; Murphy et al., 2017).

Participants were asked if their experiences with incivility they have faced in their public service work make them question what they do. This question was asked to draw out why they keep at the work and how they stay motivated. Their answers illustrated a window into the participants’ processes for maintaining motivation.
Some leaders sustain motivation by leveraging their self-awareness and knowing what ‘works for them’. For example, Barbara combats her stress by boxing which allows her to come back to work refreshed and gives her time to gather perspective on issues. Barbara’s particular way of maintaining motivation is by managing stress with physical activity. This supports the literature on the effects of self-awareness. Acceptance and mindfulness are positive aspects that allow the individual to identify the internal state and manage it positively (Sutton, 2016).

When faced with incivility, several of the leaders think about the benefits of their work such as work-life balance. Thinking about the positive aspects of their work maintains their motivation because they perceive work-life balance is harder to find in the private sector. The management literature on work-life balance and motivation in public service supports this notion. Buelens & Van den Broeck (2007) found a significant positive relationship exists between work motivation and work-life balance for public sector employees compared to those in the private sector.

For one participant, this ‘toolkit’ of personal qualities and methods includes patience, restraint, and the 24-hour rule in communicating. In order to calmly remain professional in the face of incivility, writing an email but not sending it for a day is a cathartic exercise. For another leader, the method of ‘hearing the other person out’ allows for a conflict to be de-escalated. Interestingly, these, and other methods used by the participants are addressed in a 2016 article in the Harvard Business Review by workplace incivility researcher, Christine Porath. Within her piece, she discusses how exercise, journaling, taking on a hobby, and mentoring are all potential ways to shift from ruminating about an uncivil experience at work to finding ways to thrive both cognitively and affectively.
By leveraging their self-awareness and putting things in perspective, the leader experiencing difficulty is able to regain some control of their situation (Johnson & Johnson, 2000). By further utilizing their personal toolkit of methods, they can positively affect their experience by finding a lesson or other positive aspect to be grateful about therein. In turn, they sustain motivation to keep doing public sector work and as Porath (2016) reports, are able to thrive in the face of incivility.

The fourth finding discussed the specific ways in which municipal leaders maintain their motivation for public sector work when they have experienced incivility or other difficulties associated with the job. Through using their self-awareness and perspective, the participants reported developing their own ‘toolkit’ of methods to sustain motivation that they draw from during trying times. The leaders’ toolkits include their own personal qualities such as patience, flexibility, being well informed, or being a problem-solver. They have awareness over how they have leveraged these qualities with success in the past. Each leader’s personal toolkit facilitates success during experiences of incivility (Porath, 2016).

Summary

In summary, the findings of the study overlaid onto the Attraction-Selection-Retention framework supported the literature on Public Service Motivation theory (Perry & Wise, 1990; Christensen, 2017). Four participants (Sean, Polly, Tom, & Barbara) appeared to have high levels of PSM while one (Charlie) did not. The high PSM participants each developed their interest in public service work (Attraction) at an early age either through parental socialization or other experiences. The nature of the work and each high PSM individual’s fit with it allowed them to choose this career path and be successful (Selection). The high PSM participants all
experienced incivility as part of their jobs as public servants but they seem to take the issues in stride and are able to manage them thereby continuing on in their respective roles (Retention).

Conclusion

This study set out to query the following research question: How do local government leaders describe their experiences of workplace incivility and its effect on their motivation? Using IPA as the methodology of inquiry, a small sample of municipal leaders was interviewed. The data collected from the semi-structured interviews was analyzed and yielded four main findings. The findings were presented in relation to the theoretical framework for the study, PSM, as well as the literature on workplace incivility.

Overall, the findings align with the literature on public service motivation theory (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry, 2000, Perry et al., 2010) and the attraction-selection-retention scheme (Christensen, 2017) to explain individuals with high levels of PSM. The findings reinforce the literature on PSM related to the early experiences of the participants (Perry & Wise, 1990). Most of the leaders’ experiences supported Perry’s notion that parents, and other role models, influence the attraction to public service work (Perry, 1996; 1997). The fit of the participants to the nature of public service work via their tendencies toward pro-social patterns of behavior as well as self-sacrifice and altruism also support Perry’s (1996, 1997) elements of motivation toward public service work. The challenges participants experience in local government work are clear and suggest the leaders know what they have signed up for, so to speak. Public service motivation has been found to be positively associated with organizational commitment and retention at the Federal level (Crewson, 1997; Naff & Crum, 1999) and the participants showed a clear sense of commitment. This study shows that municipal leaders are motivated to do the
work of public service. They also each have ways in which they maintain their motivation by leveraging their personal qualities and toolkit of methods in the face of incivility.

Regarding the experiences of the participants, the findings of this study support the literature on workplace incivility. Each participant reported having experienced or witnessed incivility in the role of municipal leader. This reinforces recent surveys of Americans who report a deficit in civility (Civility in America, 2018). The definitions of incivility given by the participants align with the seminal definition of workplace incivility found in the literature (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Specific examples offered by the leaders reinforced many of the nuances in the definition from Andersson and Pearson (1999) such as ambiguous intent to harm, the violation of social norms, and the low-intensity nature of the violations in comparison to physical violence or workplace bullying and abuse.

Workplace incivility in local government is a significant challenge facing all stakeholders from manager and mayors to clerks and community. As many of the Baby Boom generation retire, younger workers will be needed to take up their roles in a field that is projected to grow (Goodman et al., 2013; Zauderer, 2002). It is imperative that work be done to make the job of the local leaders more attractive by bringing attention to incivility as a problem that does not simply impact the individual but the society at large. This study has reinforced the need for such an undertaking. Recommendations for practice will be presented next.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Several implications for the practice setting can be drawn from the findings of this research study. The first implication is simply that workplace incivility in the municipal government setting must be recognized as a legitimate issue. This recommendation is supported
by literature on workplace incivility broadly and within government settings. Zauderer (2002) called for a need for government organizations to recognize incivility in the public sector in order to build community and improve culture as well as draw the best and brightest to public service. According to an extensive literature review by Estes & Wang (2008), workplace incivility occurs frequently but is often not recognized as an issue as it is not well understood. In a survey on council member effectiveness, researchers found that interpersonal relationships and mayoral leadership were believed to be the most important aspects of an effective council implying that setting a norm for civility is important (Nelson, Gabris, & Davis, 2011).

The second implication for practice is to spread awareness of the issue of workplace incivility among those who can recognize it and do something about it such as managers and Human Resources professionals. This recommendation is supported by research from the field of human resource development. By informing those serving in leadership roles as well as human resource managers on the costs, causes, and impacts of allowing workplace incivility to occur, those officials can take action to create better work environments for their employees (Estes & Wang, 2008). The researchers also recommend leadership establish a zero-tolerance policy on workplace incivility and work to nip incivility in the bud (Estes & Wang, 2008). As Cortina (2008) points out, “Leaders set the tone for the entire organization, and employees look to them for cues about what constitutes acceptable conduct” (p.62).

The third implication of the study is raising the issue at high and prestigious levels. An important piece of building awareness can be setting certain issues as a priority for convening groups in order to create change (Scott, 2008). According to a study from the Academy of Management Journal, professional associations play a lead role in “theorizing change, endorsing local innovations, and shaping their diffusion” (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002).
Professional associations of local government leaders such as the International City and County Managers Association (ICMA) and the National League of Cities (NLC) should take on the topic of incivility to help elevate the issue if positive change is to occur.

A fourth recommendation or implication of this study is to broadly educate on civility. One example from the literature cleverly promoted civility through a group of college students in partnership with college administration, faculty, and local government called Project Civility (Spencer et al., 2016). Originally the project promoted civility as a form of politeness by recognizing acts of civility in the community, but the students’ understanding of civility broadened to include political friendship and democratic participation. Using similar tactics, communities could raise awareness and promote civility among their populations.

A similar suggestion calls for transformative dialogue techniques to be used in communities in conflict (Cleven et al., 2018). Leveraging a perspective that allows people to gain voices and choose identities, transformative dialogue is offered up by the authors as a means by which to combat political polarization by merely seeking common ground and changing interaction from destructive to constructive.

A final recommendation, specific to my own work role as a professional development and training manager for municipal employees, is to organize educational sessions on workplace incivility for members of our state’s league of cities and towns. Experiential workshops that practice de-escalation techniques and offer the wisdom of leveraging self-awareness, perspective, and one’s own ‘toolkit’ would not only benefit the employees but also their co-workers and the public they serve (Leiter, Day, & Oore, 2011). Additionally, I can assist specific communities to recognize incivility in their own environments using proven survey tools like the Civility Norms Questionnaire (Walsh, Magley, Reeves, Davies-Schrils, Marmet, & Gallis, 2018).
Areas for Future Research

This study suggests several areas for future research. One such area is the individual experience of workplace incivility with different populations such as women leaders or elected officials. As was illustrated from this study, incivility as a form of discrimination via overt or covert sexism occurs. Studying the issue more specifically could serve to inform how to draw more women into local government work. Another helpful line of research would be an investigation of incivility experiences for lower-level municipal employees who do not have the level of control and autonomy a leader does. Further, another line of research would be to examine the experiences of those who have left their public service careers because of uncivil experiences. Again, such investigations could inform conditions for a better work environment and draw new interest to the field of local government service helping to combat the wave of retirements from the Baby Boom generation. Finally, I would like to see research conducted on the experience of average Americans with respect to the incivilities perpetrated by our highest levels of government. Although the experience of incivility may not be direct, I suspect it is still significant for many.

The topic of civility is of vital importance in contemporary American life. When asked at the end of the 1787 Constitutional Convention whether we have a Republic or a Monarchy, Benjamin Franklin famously answered, “A Republic... if you can keep it.” (Linde, 1989). As educators, it is imperative that we fight for civics education in schools and beyond, model and foster civility, and facilitate values of respect for all if we are to keep the precious gift of our own unique form of government crafted and handed down by our founders. The beauty of American society is in its diversity of perspectives and the freedom to be uniquely stronger and better together. Civility has allowed us to keep our Republic for over 230 years. We all must do our
part to promote civility if we are to protect our individual freedoms and way of life, continue on as a beacon of freedom to the world, and keep our Republic strong.
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Appendix A: Email to participants

Date

Dear Municipal Leader [NAME]:

I am a student in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University located in Boston, Massachusetts. I am writing to ask for your help in my current research.

I am currently working on my dissertation in organizational leadership focusing on civility and culture in local government. I have a strong research interest in understanding more about workplace incivility and its effect on individual motivation to do public service work. I am especially looking to interview municipal mayors, managers, and council members about their experiences.

If you are willing to contribute to this research by participating in this study, please contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or via email at slatteryj@XXX.edu. I will send you a consent form and provide further details.

If you choose to participate, we will meet for approximately one hour to talk about your experiences as a municipal leader. The interview will be audio-recorded and will take place in the early fall at a time and place most convenient to you. Your confidentiality will be maintained at all times; I will assign each participant a pseudonym and all interviews and documents will be referenced using only this pseudonym. Any interviews I conduct will be under stringent university protocol, which gives the interviewee the right to withdraw at any time. Participation is entirely voluntary. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Slattery, Ed.D. Candidate
Northeastern University
Appendix B: Consent Form

Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Education Department

Name of Investigator(s): [Patricia Mason, Ph.D., Jennifer Slattery]

Title of Project: An Investigation of Municipal Leaders’ Experience of Workplace Incivility

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are in a leadership role in municipal government.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to understand your experiences and to develop potential training and interventions for municipal workplaces.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to meet with an interviewer to discuss your experiences in municipal government.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed at a place convenient for you. The interview will take approximately one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

Risks to participation are minimal. Potential risks associated with the discussion of your experiences as a municipal leader could include distressing feelings or memories. Should any distress occur the interview can be stopped by you at any time. The researcher will also be responsible for stopping the interview should you exhibit signs of distress and refer you to emergency care or call 911. Any possible loss of confidentiality could result in minor
psychological discomfort to the participant regarding their municipal leadership situation. The likelihood of a loss of confidentiality is extremely low given the safeguards in place including pseudonyms for participant and location.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There is no direct benefit to participating in this study. However increased self-awareness and personal growth and/or feelings of significance and catharsis may accompany the telling of one’s story as well as the opportunity to contribute to potential training interventions.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

Anonymity will be maintained via pseudonym. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym. Your location (city or town) will also be assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. The data will only be accessed by the researchers and an outside professional transcriber from another state outside the region of study.

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. The audio recordings will be deleted after being transcribed. Transcripts will be held in a password protected laptop by the researchers and any paper copies will be filed in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home. Pseudonym information will be held separately from any transcripts both electronically and on paper, both protected by password and locked filing system respectively.

Describe the procedures you will use to protect personal information. If codes are used, describe coding procedures. Explain how data will be maintained, and when/if data will be destroyed. Audiotapes and videotapes are considered identifiable information, even if no names are included.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review to see this information.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

N/A

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.
Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Jennifer Slattery at XXX-XXX-XXXX the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Patricia Mason, Ph.D., the Principal Investigator at XXX-XXX-XXXX

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

No.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

No cost to you will be incurred.

Is there anything else I need to know?

No.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part  Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent  Date
Depending upon the nature of your research, you may also be required to provide information about one or more of the following if it is applicable:

1. A statement that the particular treatment or procedure may involve risks to the subject (or to the embryo or fetus, if the subject is or may become pregnant) which are currently unforeseeable.

2. Anticipated circumstances under which the subject’s participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject’s consent.

3. Any additional costs to the subject that may result from participation in the research.

4. The consequences of a subject's decision to withdraw from the research and procedures for orderly termination of participation by the subject.

5. A statement that significant new finding(s) developed during the course of the research which may be related to the subject’s willingness to continue participation will be provided to the subject.

6. The approximate number of subjects involved in the study.