



Ostracism in the Workplace: A Toxic Approach for Employee Mental Health

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Abstract

Workplace ostracism significantly affects employees' enthusiasm, humor, personalities, and other intellectual qualities— a topic that has been largely neglected in organizational psychology literature. This study examined the correlation between workplace ostracism and mental health outcomes. This study analyzed the impact of workplace ostracism on an employee's commitment to their organization. Health harm, along with its potential antecedents and consequences, also emphasizes the concealed and problematic aspects of victims. An in-depth analysis of the review indicated that personal constructs, individual differences, and cultural variations negatively and significantly affected employee well-being. Previous research identified females, individuals with disabilities, elderly persons, individuals with dark skin, members of the third gender, and other marginalized groups as primary victims. Due to the ambiguous nature of human behavior, many studies primarily concentrate on the contexts of employees or organizations. This includes counseling, intervention, prevention, and policy-making., rules, and laws require practical prescriptions based on prior research.

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INTRODUCTION

A ubiquitous phenomenon in the workplace is workplace ostracism. Over the past ten years, several domestic studies on workplace ostracism within organizations have been conducted. This has led to widespread concern in academia and business regarding workplace ostracism as a significant study topic. In 2008, workplace ostracism emerged as a new topic of study. "Workplace Ostracism" was first introduced when Ferris et al. published a study titled "When Silence Is Not Golden: Measuring Ostracism in the Workplace" in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. They also established a workplace ostracism scale, which laid the groundwork for further research on the topic. Ferris also noted that "the next phase of the study could focus on exploring moderation mechanisms between workplace ostracism and its consequences among employees and finding a deep relationship between them." Though workplace ostracism is relatively new, research has previously been done about social influence tactics, workplace bullying, and counterproductive behaviour. Workplace ostracism has

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been discussed in organizational literature since the 1970s, as Robinson and Schabram (2017) pointed out.

We did this review of the literature by looking at different types of workplace ostracism research that has to do with mental health, organizational commitment, and a growing number of empirical studies. We are eager to understand the various theories that underpin workplace ostracism research.

Method

Traditional methods were used to conduct our review, in which we initially performed a search for specific key words relevant to Ostracism in the workplace, conducted supplementary searches on specific themes that emerged in the literature, and then incorporated additional articles recommended by experts in the field of organizational psychology. Databases used to perform the initial searches were PubMed and Google Scholar, and the search terms were “Ostracism,” “Ostracism and Mental health,” “Ostracism and Organizational commitment. Articles written in languages other than English or published before 1986 and after March 2018 were excluded. Searches involving combinations of the above key words and related terms continued until the authors believed that saturation. At that stage, no other articles providing new information pertaining to Workplace Ostracism experiences were found. Articles were then coded based on their key findings and analyzed based on common themes that emerged during this process.

The Concept of Workplace Ostracism

The definitions of workplace ostracism have not been agreed upon by researchers. However, they all stood by their conviction that ostracism at work is a behaviour that negatively impacts both organisations and their members. The idea of workplace ostracism was first proposed by Ferris, who believed that “people were suffering ostracism when employees in the workplace perceived exclusion, ignorance, and disrespectful treatment by others.” (Ferris et al., 2008). Ostracism is a common occurrence that affects people of all ages and genders. Children eliminating particular people from their play groups or even amongst animals like chimps and lions are

examples of it in a variety of settings. The deliberate exclusion or ignoring of people by their coworkers in circumstances when inclusion is socially expected is known as workplace ostracism, a subtle but prevalent type of abuse. Researchers are paying close attention to this behaviour since it might be viewed as a type of “cold violence” in the workplace. (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2013).

On the other hand, ostracism has been considered a component of more general phenomena, such as workplace deviance. (Bennett & Robinson, 2000), aggression (Neuman & Baron, 1998), antisocial behaviour (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997), dysfunctional behaviour (Griffin et al., 1998), counterproductive work behaviour (Sackett & DeVore, 2001), social undermining (Duffy et al., 2002), organizational misbehaviour (Vardi & Weiner, 1996) or workplace bullying (Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Salin, 2001). However, mounting data suggests that ostracism at work is a separate phenomenon (Edwards, 2000). As will be discussed later, ostracism may exist alongside or be a component of other workplace deviance, such as aggression and bullying. However, some data suggest that it is theoretically and empirically a separate concept (Ferris et al., 2008). Workplace ostracism is perceived as distinct from other examples of workplace mistreatment in terms of conceptual and empirical differences (Ferris et al., 2008; Robinson & Schabram, 2017). Robinson and Schabram (2017) stressed that ostracism is much more ambiguous, unintentional, and may play a functional role. In a correlation study using questionnaires to measure various forms of workplace mistreatment, it was shown that workplace ostracism is different from other phenomena, such as workplace deviance, incivility, or bullying (Ferris et al., 2008)

Survey results support the notion that ostracism is a universal experience, with most individuals either having ostracized others or having been ostracized themselves. For example, one survey indicated that 67 percent of respondents in relationships had used the silent treatment on a loved one, whereas 75 percent admitted that a loved one had used the silent treatment on them (Faulkner et al., 1997). One survey of over 5,000 workers indicated that 13 percent of respondents had been excluded from work in the previous six months (Hitlan et al., 2006). Another survey revealed that, over five years,

66 percent of employees had been given the silent treatment; of those surveyed, 29 percent reported that others had left the room when they entered, and 18 percent reported having been moved to an isolated location (Fox & Stallworth, 2005).

A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the everyday stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to his or her community" is what the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines as mental health. Keyes distinguishes emotional, psychological, and social well-being as the three pillars of mental health. Happiness, interest in life, and contentment are examples of emotional well-being; liking most of one's personality, handling daily obligations successfully, forming positive relationships with others, and feeling content with one's life are examples of psychological well-being. Positive functioning is referred to as social well-being and includes feeling like a member of a community (social integration), a sense of belonging to a group (social integration), conviction that society is improving for everyone (social actualization), and comprehension of how society functions (social coherence).

This study also addresses the need for more research on workplace ostracism, as was suggested by Zhang (2016) and Jahanzeb et al. (2017) in order to pinpoint important elements influencing workers' behaviour at work. Another goal of this literature is to examine the effect of workplace ostracism on the relationship between organisational commitments. As, ostracized workers show a reduced organizational commitment, also directing towards a lower intensity of commitment at work (Leung et al., 2011). Therefore, ostracism must prove to be a concerning circumstance for the organization. According to the conservation resource (COR) theory, experiencing workplace ostracism depletes an employee's resources (both physical and emotional), which further affects work-related outcomes like performance and organizational commitment as well as social behaviours like OCB.

According to Caught and Shadur (2000), organizational commitment refers to the state in which employees are dedicated to accomplishing the organization's goals and encompasses their identification, involvement, and loyalty levels. People's

behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes can be used to measure this emotional response, which can range from extremely low to extremely high. Organizational commitment can be classified into three categories: affective, continuous, and normative, according to John Meyer and Nancy Allen (1997).

When people accept entirely the organization's objectives and core ideals, they demonstrate affective or moral commitment. People feel personally accountable for the organization's success and get emotionally invested in it. These people frequently exhibit excellent performance, positive work attitudes, and a willingness to stick at the company.

When people base their relationship with an organization on what they gain in exchange for their work and what they would lose if they were to leave (such as compensation, benefits, and affiliations), this is known as calculative commitment or continuity. Only when the rewards meet their expectations do these people give it their all.

Normative commitment occurs when individuals remain with an organization based on expected standards of behaviour or social norms. These individuals value obedience, cautiousness, and formality. Research suggests they tend to display the same attitudes and behaviours as those with affective commitment.

Workplace Ostracism and Mental Health

Researchers (Altun et al., 2020; Choi, 2019) show that workplace ostracism reduces the competency level of employee's performance and heightens their job stress, further influencing their turnover intentions. Thus, those employees who feel ostracized and excluded from the workplace deteriorate their physical and mental health. Furthermore, ostracism enhances the employee's distress, which produces undesirable job outcomes such as low job performance, high stress, and high turnover intentions (Leung et al., 2011). In particular, organizational research has revealed that workplace ostracism is related to higher levels of anxiety, depression, job search behaviour, and turnover intentions, as well as lower levels of satisfaction and psychological health (Ferris et al., 2008; Hitlan et al., 2006).

The long-term effect of persistent ostracism is resignation, whereby the individual has not been able to replenish or fortify their needs, and the result could be a wide array of issues such as depression, learned helplessness, reduced psychological resilience, unworthiness, and alienation (Williams, 2009). Organizational members who are ostracized might show a negative impact on physical health (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008) and weak psychological well-being (Wu et al., 2012).

Peng and Zeng (2016) have indicated that the feeling of ostracism brings much pain and hurt to an individual. Researchers also showed that denial of social engagement or interaction results in adverse psychological impacts rather than aggressive mistreatment (Peng & Zeng, 2016). Thus, workplace ostracism limits social contact and stops employees from participating in meaningful and long-term relationships inside the business (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2018). Workplace ostracism can affect employees' psychological and physical well-being (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008).

Workplace ostracism reduces the chances of social belongingness among employees, which in turn affects their social needs (Wu et al., 2011). Thus, employees face vulnerability in fulfilling their social and psychological needs, which hampers their physical and mental conditions. Ostracism in the workplace reduces social interactions and, in turn, reduces employee contributions to the workplace (Robinson et al., 2013).

Research conducted on 262 employees indicated that 66 percent of respondents felt that co-workers ignored them, whereas 29 percent reported that other co-workers deliberately left the room when they entered (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Workplace ostracism decreases the opportunity for social interaction, which is crucial for humans to fulfil their psychological needs. Indeed, workplace ostracism potentially influences employees' mental and physical health (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). In particular, organizational research has revealed that workplace ostracism is related to higher levels of anxiety, depression, job search behaviour, and turnover intentions, as well as lower levels of satisfaction and psychological health (Ferris et al., 2008; Hitlan et al., 2006). Ostracism causes a painful and harmful experience (Gruter & Masters, 1986). Research has

revealed that negative experiences cause intense emotional reactions, including strain and distress (Taylor, 1991).

Workplace Ostracism and Organizational Commitment

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between workplace ostracism and organizational commitment, shedding light on the negative impacts of ostracism on employees' commitment to their organizations. For instance, a study by Ferris et al. (2008) explored the effects of workplace ostracism on organizational commitment in a sample of employees from various organizations. The findings revealed that workplace ostracism was significantly negatively correlated with all three dimensions of organizational commitment: affective, normative, and continuance commitment. Employees who experienced ostracism reported lower levels of emotional attachment, sense of obligation, and perceived costs associated with leaving the organization.

Ostracism at work is frequently carried out covertly and silently, which weakens the victim's sense of value as an employee and decreases their organizational identity (Ferris et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2016). Furthermore, because the victim's resources may be depleted by workplace ostracism, the victim may try to protect themselves by cutting back on their organizational engagement or quitting the organization (Zheng et al., 2016). However, research has shown that ostracism's prevalence poisons employees' workplace attitudes. Ostracized employees are shown to have low job satisfaction, affective commitment, and overall organizational commitment (Eickholt & Goodboy, 2017; Ferris et al., 2008; Hitlan, Kelly et al., 2006; Lyu & Zhu, 2019; O'Reilly et al., 2014), which is likely to reduce their contribution to the organizations they work for. Workplace ostracism is reported to flame up employees' negative emotions, resulting in high intentions to sabotage organizations' services (Abubakar et al., 2018).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

People need social interaction to share their feelings, enhance their emotional resources, and maintain

their psychological and physical health (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). When the need for emotional sharing cannot be fulfilled, emotional resources are lost, leading to emotional exhaustion. This suggests a noteworthy relationship between workplace ostracism and emotional exhaustion. Remarkably, little research has examined at the effects of workplace ostracism, despite its importance and prevalence (Ferris et al., 2008). Thus, it is crucial to understand the effect of being ostracized on mental health and organizational commitment.

Several studies have investigated the relationship between workplace ostracism and mental health, including research by Robinson et al. (2013), who found that ostracized employees experienced higher levels of psychological distress than non-ostracized employees. Ostracism at work is a widespread issue that many organizations face, and it can negatively impact employees' mental health. Understanding the impact of workplace ostracism on mental health might help organizations create measures to prevent or reduce its detrimental impacts. Workplace ostracism and mental health research might have practical ramifications for organizations. Organizations can establish measures to prevent or resolve workplace ostracism and create a more pleasant and supportive work environment for their employees by recognizing the elements that lead to workplace ostracism and its influence on employees' mental health.

A study by Ferris et al. (2008) found that perceived ostracism was negatively related to all three components of organizational commitment: affective commitment, normative commitment (commitment based on a sense of obligation), and continuance commitment (commitment based on the costs of leaving). There is a need for research on workplace ostracism and organizational commitment in specific industries, sectors, or cultural contexts. The effect of workplace ostracism on organizational commitment may differ depending on the business or cultural setting in which the research is conducted. As a result, conducting research in specific contexts can provide valuable insights into how contextual factors influence workplace ostracism and organizational commitment and can inform the development of context-specific interventions

and strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of ostracism and enhance organizational commitment.

Suggestions for future research

Various areas, including nursing, academics, and sports, need more research from the perspective of workplace ostracism. In India, the government has unsystematic rule, prevention, and intervention strategies how to resolve ostracism regarding issues. Research on mental illness has been conducted in greater quantity than that on the impact of ostracism in the workplace. Many conceptual frameworks for workplace ostracism have been proposed, but empirical evidence on its predictive power still need to be provided. Therefore, further research is required to test these frameworks and their role in resolving workplace ostracism, mental health, and well-being.

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