

Consequences of Workplace Ostracism: A Review

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Abstract

Ostracism is ubiquitous and inevitable part of personal and professional human lives. Workplace ostracism is a kind of cold violence which has received widespread attention of researchers in the recent past having negative consequences on a number of organizational outcomes. In tone with this, the current review of literature synthesizes consequences of workplace ostracism on employees' psychology, work attitudes and work behaviors as documented in the literature. In our discussion of the three aspects, relevant empirical findings and theoretical perspectives of each are mentioned. The managerial implications and future directions for research form the concluding part of the paper.

Keywords: Workplace Ostracism, Workplace Exclusion, Literature Review, Negative Consequences

Introduction

Workplace ostracism is pervasive phenomenon across organizations (Ferris, Berry, Brown & Lian, 2008) and is reflected in behaviors such as ignoring one's greetings, exclusion from invitations, conversations and the like. When individuals perceive ostracism, they experience stress which in extreme cases can contribute to cognitive and functional impairment (Williams & Sommer, 1997). Ostracism at work can adversely affect interpersonal behavior and harm job performance (Ferris, Brown, Berry & Lian, 2008;). Robinson et al. (2012) defined it as an individual or group neglecting to act in order to engage another organizational employee when it is appropriate to do so. In the last decade, workplace ostracism has been extensively studied in the organizational context. Workplace ostracism was explored by Ferris et al. (2008), who developed the workplace ostracism scale and described it as the extent to which individuals perceive that they are ignored or excluded by other employees in the workplace.

Ostracism need not be intentional or punitive. In many instances coworkers may ignore one another because they are engrossed in their own work (Williams, 2007). Indeed, one of the

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aversive aspects of ostracism is that it is often ambiguous whether one is actually being purposefully ostracized (Williams & Sommer, 1997). Regardless of the motives underlying ostracism, it is a painful and aversive experience. In studies with functional magnetic resonance imaging, the same brain structures activated after the individual experienced social rejection; the findings suggest that ostracism causes a sense of “social pain” (Eisenberger, Lieberman & Williams, 2003; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Alongside this, research reports that ostracism can attract severe consequences for employees and organizations. For example, experiencing ostracism at work thwarts employees’ self-esteem and worsens their health (Ferris et al., 2008; Scott, Tams, Schippers & Lee, 2014). Likewise, it instigates employee turnover (Renn, Allen & Huning, 2013), workplace deviance (Ferris et al., 2008), unethical behaviours (Kouchaki & Wareham, 2015), and sabotage behaviours (Sarwar, Abdullah, Hafeez & Chughtai, 2020) that are likely to attract high organizational costs.

A survey of 262 full time employees indicates that over a period of five years 66% of the participants received the silent treatment from their coworkers (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Similarly, in another study 71% of employees reported themselves as targets of workplace ostracism (O’Reilly, Robinson, Berdahl & Banki, 2015). Given the prevalence of ostracism at work, it can lead to social isolation and can threaten social support. Based on a collection of relevant workplace ostracism literature, the current review attempts to explore consequences of workplace ostracism.

The study begins by brief historical overview of workplace ostracism, followed by the search strategy used. Next, we identify and summarize articles to explore three research questions which are (a) What can be the impact of workplace ostracism on employee psychology? (b) What can be the impact of workplace ostracism on employee work attitudes? (c) What can be the impact of workplace ostracism on employees work behaviors? Managerial implications and future research directions are presented in the last section of the paper.

Historical Overview

Ostracism has been part of human life since the beginnings of recorded history when the ancient Greeks would vote to ostracize individuals from the communities as a form of punishment (Williams & Sommer, 1997). Exile and banishment represent extreme and complete forms of ostracism, but the phenomenon is also represented by less dramatic behaviors (e.g., using the silent treatment or avoiding eye contact); the more the individual perceives that he or she is being subjected to such behaviors, the more the individual feels that he or she is being ostracized. In the organizational sciences, behaviors that serve to socially exclude colleagues have traditionally been studied in conjunction with number of other

behaviors that capture negative workplace interactions (Rospenda & Richman, 2004). However, organizational scholars have recognized that ostracism is distinct from other forms of harmful social behaviors at work (Balliet & Ferris, 2013). Ferris et al. (2008) conceptually and empirically distinguished workplace ostracism from a wide range of other mistreatment constructs, echoing decades of psychological research that has established the importance of understanding ostracism as a unique form of social mistreatment (Williams, 2007).

Since then, several other researchers have explored ostracism in work settings too (Jahanzeb, Fatima, & Malik, 2018; Choi, 2019; Wu, Yim, Kwan, & Zhang, 2011). Research suggest that ostracism is prevalent in organizations and can have a negative impact on employees (O'Reilly & Robinson, 2009; Wu, Wei & Hui, 2011). Although workplace ostracism is closely associated with other interpersonal psychological mistreatments (interpersonal deviance, abuse against others, and bullying), they are different forms of aggression (Leung, Wu, Chen & Young, 2011).

Methodology

We identified theoretical and empirical papers for our review through keyword searches in Google Scholar and Web of Science databases. The keywords used were “workplace ostracism’ and “workplace exclusion”. The articles included in this review were mainly published in academically refereed journals in organizational behavior, human resource management and applied psychology.

Research on Consequences of Workplace Ostracism

In this section we summarized the empirical research on consequences of workplace ostracism on the basis of its effect on employee psychology, employee work attitudes and employee work behaviors.

Workplace Ostracism and Employee Psychology

Almost all of the empirical evidences have shown ostracism to have adverse psychological effects. For example, workplace ostracism is found to instigate negative emotions such as psychological distress (Wu, Yim, Kwan & Zhang, 2011), anger (Bilal, Fatima, & Imran, 2020), anxiety (Ferris et al., 2008), emotional exhaustion (Jahanzeb, Fatima, & Malik, 2018; Choi, 2019), stress (Sarwar, Ibrahim Abdullah, Sarfraz & Kashif Imran, 2019), poor psychological health (Hitlan, Clifton, & DeSoto, 2006), sleep quality (Chen & Li, 2019), job tension, depressed mood at work (Choi, 2019), and burn-out among target employees (Qian, Yang, Wang, Huang, & Song, 2019). Moreover, Liu et al. (2013) found that employees who feel ostracized at work have negative consequences on their family life. Likewise, as ostracism hinders achievement of desired outcomes, pressure and anxiety at work

increases (Williams, 2007). When organizational member feel ostracized emotions with others would break out. As a kind of “social pain” (Eisenberger et al., 2003), studies’ have shown that workplace ostracism worsens target employees’ physical health (O’Reilly et al., 2014). For instance, Pereira, Meier, and Elfering (2013) showed that daily encounters with ostracism at work cause sleep fragmentation the following night. Likewise, workplace ostracism is also shown to impair targets’ sleep quality due to cognitive arousal (Waldeck, Banerjee, Jenks, & Tyndall, 2020).

Workplace Ostracism and Employee Work Attitudes

Several scholars have used the need threat theory and conservation of resources theory to explain the negative relationship between workplace ostracism and employee work-related attitudes (Wesselmann, Bagg, & Williams, 2009; Wu et al., 2012). These scholars suggest that humans are motivated by a variety of psychological needs and, therefore, they seek environments and situations that help satisfy these needs. Because humans are social animals, they fulfil most of their needs through interactions with other humans (Williams & Sommer, 1997). According to the need theory, individuals are motivated by four basic needs, namely, the need to belong, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. When people are ostracized, they are unable to establish positive interpersonal relationships at work. Such limited access to other individuals may result in feelings of frustration as the employee is unable to collaborate with others and achieve work goals (Zhu, Lyu, Deng & Ye, 2017). For example, Hartgerink et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of the effects of ostracism on players of a virtual ball tossing game and found that even a few minutes of ostracism resulted in negative feelings and decreased levels of self-esteem, belonging, and meaning. Similarly, conservation of resources theory proposes that exposure to workplace ostracism depletes the resources necessary to motivate individuals (Hobfoll, 1989). Victims of ostracism are likely to respond to such threat and preserve the remaining valued resources through reduced work engagement and commitment (Leung et al., 2011).

Positive workplace attitudes are thought to be critical for organisational effectiveness (Ostroff, 1992). However, studies have demonstrated that workplace ostracism damages employees' attitudes. Ostracized employees have been shown to have low job satisfaction, affective commitment, and overall organisational commitment (Ferris et al., 2008; O'Reilly et al., 2014), which is likely to reduce their contribution to their organisations. Employees' negative emotions are said to be exacerbated by workplace ostracism, leading to strong intents to disrupt organisations' services (Abubakar, Yazdian, & Behraves, 2018). It has also been observed to encourage employees' non-attendance by inducing job tension, which causes them

to arrive late or depart early (Hsieh & Karatepe, 2019). Moreover, employees' psychological disengagement and intentions to quit their jobs have also been linked to workplace ostracism (O'Reilly et al., 2014; Zheng, Yang, Ngo, Liu, & Jiao, 2016; Vui-Yee & Yen-Hwa, 2020).

Workplace Ostracism and Employee Work Behaviors

The influence of workplace ostracism on employees' professional relationships has been studied extensively. Research has shown that if ostracism exists, relational damages are likely to occur. Indeed, previous research suggest, that workplace ostracism is a painful and unpleasant experience that can threaten the personal resources of its victims (O'Reilly & Robinson, 2009; Leung et al., 2011; Robinson et al., 2013). When ostracized individuals are ignored and excluded by others, they are unable to interact and build useful social connections. Ostracism thus, can impede an individual's ability to build relationships, support others, or engage in OCBs, and meet work performance expectations, since social ties are required to access information and resources at work. Workplace ostracism, for example, has been proven to inspire interpersonal counterproductive and deviant behavior toward others, such as being disrespectful to co-workers or making fun of them (Zhao, Peng, & Sheard, 2013; Peng & Zeng, 2017). It has also been found to lower targets' satisfaction with co-workers and supervisors (Hitlan, Clifton, & DeSoto, 2006), reduce their commitment to management, and spark malicious gossip about managers (Chang et al., 2019).

Although, the majority of evidence suggests that workplace ostracism affects employees' favorable interpersonal behaviours, however, few researchers have suggested that it has either no effect (Ferris et al., 2008) or a positive effect (under particular situations) on employees' interpersonal citizenship and helping behaviours (Scott et al., 2015; Xu, Huang, & Robinson, 2017; Bilal, Fatima, Imran & Iqbal, 2020). Mao et al. (2017) in their narrative review observed that workplace ostracism could have both a negative and positive impact on employee behaviors. According to the need-threat/need-fortification model, when individuals perceive a threat to their psychological needs, they engage in behaviors to preserve and fortify those needs. For instance, when individuals perceive a threat to their need for belongingness and self-esteem, they will engage in pro-social behaviors to win favors and gain inclusion into the group (Williams, 2009). Conversely, when individuals perceive a threat to their need for meaningful existence and control, they are more likely to engage in aggression and other counterproductive work behaviors to gain control over the situation (Williams, 2007, 2009).

Managerial Implications and Future Research Directions

Based on the review of literature following implications are provided to practitioners. As workplace ostracism is difficult to prevent, organizations may benefit by increasing managerial awareness of the issue and by offering timely support to its victims. Research established that workplace ostracism is harmful and is associated with a variety of negative consequences such as reduced psychological well-being and organizational citizenship behaviours besides increased deviant behaviors. As such, organizations can benefit by promoting an inclusive culture that discourages ostracism and encourages open and transparent communication. Personnel development workshops and training plans should be designed for employees, to help them handle and control stressful events. In addition, organizations can adopt a proactive approach to prevent ostracism. This may include offering conflict management skills training, communication enhancement workshops, and training managers and employees to recognize the warning signs of ostracism. In order to foster cooperation among employees, organizations should increase task complexity and interdependence. Apart from this, managers could develop team-oriented reward systems instead of single-oriented ones to signal the importance of cooperation and prevent ostracism at work. Importantly, managers should reinforce trust and transparency within the team, thereby, eliminating ostracism by creating practices encouraging trust and transparency and discouraging the use of ostracism as a punishment. It is important to be wary of forming biases against members within work teams, as the quality of the relationships between the manager and in-group and out-group members may cause feelings of exclusion and dissimilarity. Also, managers should exert effort to maximize the degree of self-determination and autonomy of employee's jobs.

The present review on workplace ostracism reveals that future research could focus on following aspects. First, majority of the early studies collected data using self-reports and non-experimental and/or cross-sectional research designs. Thus, it is difficult to draw any causal conclusion. Therefore, future studies should use other ratings (e.g., peers and subordinates) to measure ostracism and conduct longitudinal research to understand how ostracism unfolds over time. Second, all empirical studies included in this study measured ostracism from the perspective of the victim. Studies should investigate ostracism from the viewpoint of the perpetrator and bystanders to provide a more complete picture of ostracism. Moreover, very few scholars have investigated the personality characteristics of perpetrators and how they perceive and justify their ostracizing behaviors. More research in this area will provide a deeper insight into the detection and prevention of workplace ostracism.

Conclusion

This review summarized scholarly articles on the consequences of workplace ostracism on its vital aspects. The academic studies related to consequences of workplace ostracism have been examined as a basis for an overview of the current state of knowledge of this research domain. We discussed consequences of workplace ostracism on employee psychology, work-attitudes and work-behaviors. In addition to managerial implications, this paper also highlights some important research gaps in the workplace ostracism literature and provides new and promising directions for future research endeavours. The present review is expected to provide guidance for future research on workplace ostracism and promote meaningful conversation and examinations of this important workplace phenomenon.

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