

Workplace Ostracism, Employee Identity and Initiative Behavior – A Mediation Mechanism

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Abstract

Workplace ostracism has been one of the major issues of current world workplaces. It has been found to influence employees (its victims) negatively. Considering the value of ostracism, the current study aims to find its relationship with employee initiative taking behavior. It also covers the mediating role of employee identity. The study aims at achieving two objectives, where the first objective is to explore the level of prevalence of ostracism at workplace. Here the sample of the study comprised employees from public and private sector organizations and all in all 1429 responses were received. The findings revealed that the ostracism is present at both the workplace and employees face it on regular basis. The second objective was achieved by collecting data from 163 service sector employees. The statistical analysis revealed that the ostracism reduces employee initiative taking behavior and identity mediates the said relationship. Implications are provided on the basis of study results

Key words: Identity, Initiative taking, Ostracism, Pakistan.

Introduction

With the changing economic structure of business, the employees have been considered responsible for reading and understanding the environment and take initiatives in the wake of changes even beyond their formal roles (Cai et al., 2019). Employee initiative behavior is defined as the self-initiated behavior that aims to modify the external environment to challenge the status quo and putting active efforts towards that (Crant, 2000). The concept considers employees masters instead of the workers and values their role for organizational development (McCormick et al., 2019). While looking at the determinants of such a behavior, it has been identified that organizations have to provide good working environment if such a behavior is needed (Caniëls & Baaten, 2019; Chia & Sharon, 2013). Such environment fosters trust between organization and employees which makes employees' take initiative at work (Grant et al., 2009). Employee expects presence of resources provided by organization when such demands are to be met by them (Cheng & Ma, 2022). Past studies have largely focused on the positive aspects of working environment, but how negative working environment ensures the provision of resources at work is an area that has not gained researcher attention (Cai et al., 2019; Cheng & Ma, 2022). The negative environment makes employees vulnerable to negative happenings at work, which may be attributed to the organization and employees may tend to avoid initiative taking (Wu et al., 2018). Therefore, its investigation has been cherished and highlighted important for organizations (Cai et al., 2019).

One of the negative workplace environmental factor is ostracism at work (Williams, 2007), which is defined as feelings of being continuously ignored at work, facing cold shoulders and no value in group acts. Such workplace factors are severe and more damaging in the close culture where the socialization and connections are strong among members of the organizations (Chen et al., 2017), therefore its presence and effects seems more damaging in country like Pakistan. Countries with similar culture have reported high level of ostracism at workplace (e.g. China, Zhang & Kwan, 2015). Therefore, the it can be assumed that the effects of ostracism would be severe in the Pakistani context. Cheng & Ma (2022) also found that in Chinese context the ostracism is high and employees tend to avoid initiative taking at the workplace. Considering these questions in mind, the first objective of the study was to find out the level of ostracism prevalence at workplace by conducting an exploratory investigation.

While moving further and investigating the ostracism and its outcomes, its cognitive component has been ignored and given less value (Cheng & Ma, 2022), because individuals tend to think about such events when the culture is collectivist (Frese & Fay, 2001). According to Lazarus (1991) one's reactions towards external

environment are complicated processes and their reaction depends upon their perceptions about the events (Jones, 1990). Therefore, evaluating the cognitive and thoughtful processes as outcome of ostracism are important (Crant, 2000). Considering that this study entails investigation of identity as the cognitive mechanism between ostracism and initiative taking behavior. The same seems logical as the ostracism is a subjective experience where one may translate it differently, the outcomes are also evaluation based. One tends to cognitively evaluate it differently and translate its meanings and develop a self-identity with the social lens (cognitive appraisals) and tend to respond accordingly by indulging or refraining from initiative taking (second objective).

The study contributes to the body of knowledge in many ways, where the foremost contribution is in form of investigating the prevalence of level of ostracism at work. This study also contributes to the literature by highlighting that the ostracism may lead to reduction in initiative behavior because individuals tend to make meanings of such social treatments and build an identity which helps them choose their actions in form of initiative taking. Thirdly, the study borrows from the lens of social cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Cohen, 1987), which proposes that information clues present at work help employee translate the incidents and assign meanings to them. Such clues further help employee translate these meanings and make choices of actions and reactions towards them. The following section covers the literature on the said problem which is further followed by the methodology used for investigation.

Literature review

Ostracism and initiative behavior

The level up to which employees consider themselves ignored or neglected at work is called ostracism (Ferris et al., 2018). It stands tall with the aspects like bullying, social undermining and incivility. All these aspects of work include notions like violence, aggression and rejections at work (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Robinson et al., 2013). Ostracism is regarded as one's subjective emotions which may be influenced by one's personal traits and sentiments (Williams & Sommer, 1997). It is a form of cold violence, where one avoids making physical contact and treats victim by giving silent treatment like avoiding dialogues and limiting the sharing (Zhou et al., 2018). Such form of passive aggression and violence may influence employee initiative behavior negatively, because initiative behavior is seeking chances, enhancing working flow and making more contribution to work (Grant, 2000). One's involvement requires positive psychological feelings about work and workplace, but ostracism influences one's psychological states and individuals tend to feel ignored and isolated due to that. As ostracism may create feelings of disregard and loss of respect it is expected that employees would try to avoid tasks at work. Furthermore, employees may attribute the

same to the organizational culture and environment, as the organization should provide an environment where employee do not have negative feelings about the workplace. The presence of ostracism at work creates negative perceptions about the working environment because of exclusion, suppression, passive aggression and rejection at workplace. All such factors reduce one's trust level in organization and they may avoid working for the sake of organization (Liu et al., 2015).

In wake of such a negative working environment employee may tend to create feelings of negative reciprocity and reduce their role in achievement of organizational goals (Wu et al., 2010). Individuals who are socially isolated, ignored by others, and have negative feelings about work tend to avoid doing something extra for their organization (Zhao & Sun, 2017). As ostracism is a state that may create same feelings, it is expected that it may reduce employee initiative behavior, which is hypothesized below:

H₁: Ostracism and employee initiative are negatively related

This study also proposes that employee identity mediates the relationship hypothesized above. This could be attributed to the fact that identity is one's belongingness to the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). It's a feeling where employee instead of considering herself an "I" translates it like "we" or "us" (Cheng & Ma, 2022). Such feelings are outcomes of environment where one is considered integral part of organization and feels that "they" consider him part of themselves. But as the ostracism is ignoring, isolating, passively showing aggression towards them it is expected that employees would not feel themselves part and parcel of the workplace (low identity). According to Yuan et al., (2014), identity is outcome of belongingness and self-esteem at work which is largely influenced by the working environment. Employees who are neglected at the workplace do not consider themselves valued and consider themselves less important and feel decline in identity (Wang et al., 2020). Such feelings finally reduce the level of bond and identity with the organization (Cheng & Ma, 2022). When there is loss of identity at the work the employees feel that they are not valued and they reciprocate it negatively by avoiding organizational tasks. Yu and Peng (2018) found that identity mediate the relationship of ostracism and extra role behaviors. Cheng & Ma (2022) also found that identity mediate between ostracism and initiative taking. This could be attributed to the social cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Cohen, 1987), which proposes that information clues present at work help employee translate the incidents and assign meanings to them. Such clues further help employee translate these meanings and make choices of actions and reactions towards them. Therefore, following assertion is being made:

H₂: Employee identity mediates the relationship of ostracism and initiative behavior

Research methodology

Considering the objectives of the study the data for the current study was collected in two phases, where the first phase covered data from various organizations including the public and private sector organizations. The second objective was achieved by collecting data from the service organizations only, where the tasks are challenging and employees have to meet customer requirements on regular basis. In first study, an online survey questionnaire was devised containing the questions on ostracism and it was floated to the students of MBA classes. These students were doing job in one or other organization related to the mentioned sectors. The link of google form was shared to those employees and they were desired to share the same link to their colleagues. All in all, 1429 useful responses were received for first study.

For second study, 250 questionnaires were distributed to service employees while only 163 useful responses were received backed.

Ostracism was inquired at both points of time and was operationalized using the 10 items scale of Ferris et al., (2008). This scale covered questions like “others avoid me at work”. Employee identity was measured by using the Mael and Ashforth (1992) six items scale which contained items like “My company success is my success”. The scale for employee initiative was adopted from the work of Zhang et al., (2014) containing four items like “I am a proactive problem solver”. All these measures were self-reported and measured at five points scale.

Data analysis and results

Results for the data analysis were carried out following the study objectives. The foremost of them was to assess the level of prevalence of ostracism at workplace, and it was observed that ostracism prevails at the workplace and 67% of the employees working in public sector face it in routine at workplace. On the other hand, 61% of the employees from private sector face ostracism in any form at the workplace. Here it is evident that the prevalence is high in public sector while the difference may not too high. The same has been evaluated using the t-test statistics and it was observed that the difference was not significant for both the groups ($t=2.887$, $p>.05$). therefore, it was to confer that the ostracism prevalence was common for both the groups. The data for objective two of the study was collected from service employees and evaluated using various tests the results of which are provided in the following sections.

Table 1

Prevalence of ostracism at workplace

Sector	Never	Often	Quite often	Almost everyday	Regularly	T	Sig.
Public (n=734)	13%	9%	12%	30%	37%	2.887	0.08
Private (n=695)	20%	10%	9%	29%	32%		

Table 2 to 4 highlight the results for objective two of the study. Table 2 reveals the descriptive statistics for the study. The mean scores are reported against five points scale and highlight the level of prevalence of each variable in the work setting. The reliability results are shown in table 3 where it is evident that all the measures were reliable for having value above the threshold. The correlation values also highlight that workplace ostracism is negatively related with both identity and initiative taking ($r = -0.40$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.32$, $p < .05$ respectively). On the other hand, employee identity is positively related with their initiative taking ($r = 0.25$, $p < .05$). these results reveal that the basic assumptions of relationships are met and therefore we may proceed with further analysis.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation
Workplace ostracism	4.01	0.453
Employee identity	3.69	0.783
Initiative taking	3.13	1.001

Table 3
Reliability and correlation analysis

	Reliability	WO	EI	IT
Workplace ostracism	0.83	--		
Employee identity	0.92	-0.40**	--	
Initiative taking	0.78	-0.32*	0.25*	--

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

The results for regression analysis are shown in table 4, where it is evident that workplace ostracism negatively influences employee initiative taking ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .001$) and employee identity ($r = -0.38$, $p < .001$). Employee identity, on the other hand, positively influences employee initiative taking ($r = 0.22$, $p < .05$). The mediation results also reveal that the indirect path is also significant ($\beta = .09$, $p < 0.05$), which shows the partial mediation relation exists. Based on these findings it is concluded that the partial mediation exists and H1 and H2 are supported.

Therefore, both H1 and H2 are supported. The mediation results highlight that the indirect effect of employee silence between despotic leadership and employee vigor

is significant ($\beta = .10$, $p < 0.05$). The table also reveals that the direct effect is also significant, therefore partial mediation is proved and H3 is supported.

Table 4

Hypotheses testing outcomes

Relationships	B	SE	t-value	Bootstraps @ 95%		P
				LLCI	ULCI	
WO → IT	-0.30	0.043	5.85	0.384	0.584	0.000
WO → EI	-0.38	0.074	5.20	0.407	0.608	0.005
EI → IT	0.22	0.053	4.75	0.409	0.501	0.027
Indirect effects						
WO → EI → IT	0.09	0.031	4.08	0.395	0.601	0.018

Discussion on findings

With the advent of change, the organizations are considering the value of employees as they take initiatives and have to go beyond their formal job roles (Cai et al., 2019). While looking at the determinants of such a behavior, the role of organization and its environment has been considered the most pivotal (Caniëls & Baaten, 2019; Chia & Sharon, 2013). The working environment depicts how employees are to be treated and what are believes about their work roles (Grant et al., 2009). The working environment is expected to be positive by the employees and they translate such an environment as a resource that enables them to meet workplace demands (Cheng & Ma, 2022). There is extant literature present on the positive working environment and how it influences the employees, but negative working environment has determinantal effects on employees and therefore should be considered (Cai et al., 2019; Cheng & Ma, 2022). The negative working environment is attributed as the negative organizational factor and employees tend to respond negatively to such environments (Wu et al., 2018), therefore valuing such environment has been cherished by past studies (Cai et al., 2019).

Ostracism is one of such factors (Williams, 2007), so the current study proposed and empirically investigated the impact of that on employee behaviors (initiative taking) via the mechanism of employee identity. The said relationship has been hypothesized using cognitive processes theory (Lazarus & Cohen, 1987), which proposes that humans make cognitive processes when they feel something favorable or unfavorable happening at work. As ostracism is a negative workplace happening it is expected to be influence employees negatively which was proposed and empirically tested. The findings proved that ostracism reduces employee initiative taking, which is supported by the past studies (Cheng & Ma, 2022). These findings are also consistent with the assertion that ostracism has more influence in collectivist cultures where there is strong bond prevails in societies. Therefore, it is expected that ostracism would have

more determinantal effects on employees over there (Chen et al., 2017; Zhang & Kwan, 2015), while the same has been proved by the current study.

The study also assumed the mediating role of employee identity i.e. one's cognitive component (Cheng & Ma, 2022). This role seems logical because in collectivist cultures employees tend to have more value for social relations and ostracism may undermine such feelings and employees may tend to lose identity with the organization and social settings (Frese & Fay, 2001). These results support the theoretical lens of Lazarus (1991), who propose that external environments influence the perceptions and reaction processes one considers suitable to that (Jones, 1990). Ostracism, being the negative workplace event, tends to influence the thoughts (cognition) which may lead to selection of negative workplace responses (Crant, 2000). Therefore, the results support the assertions and provides empirical evidence for the same.

Implications of the study

The study contributes to the literature and practice in many ways. From theoretical perspective, the study observed and empirically proved that ostracism negatively influences employee initiative behavior. When there is high level of ostracism employees tend to avoid initiative behavior. It also highlights that, in fact, when there is ostracism employees tend to feel loss of identity because of their cognitive processes. These results support the cognitive processes theory (Lazarus & Cohen, 1987), which proposes that information clues present at work help employee translate the incidents and assign meanings to them. Such clues further help employee translate these meanings and make choices of actions and reactions towards them. The study therefore provides an empirical evidence that support this theory and hypothesized relationships. The study also contributes by highlighting the level of prevalence of ostracism at Pakistani work settings. The data collected from 1429 employees working in public and private sector organizations it was observed that ostracism prevailed more at both forms of organizations (63% of the respondents feel it at regular basis). On the other hand, the employees working in public sector organizations feel it at higher level (67% of public sector employees reported so). These results are important for management of the selected firms as well, as the empirical results report that ostracism influences employees at cognitive level and they reduce their involvement at work. Therefore, the management should take actions where the employees may be not feeling ostracized. The management have to work on their environment and workplace culture to reduce such feelings.

Future directions

This study offers some novel insights but it is still prone to some limitations, the foremost of which is investigation of cross-sectional study only which may hamper the generalization findings. Though the first objective was achieved by conducting research on a large sample of more than three thousand employees but the second objective was achieved from a small sample. The future researchers may overcome this limitation by considering multiple sample, large sample size or diversified data from various sectors. Future studies should also cover some other aspects of researcher. For instance, the studies should include some boundary conditions e.g. positive leadership. Such leaderships can reduce the effects of ostracism at work. Similarly, the theoretical lens can be changed to have a better view about ostracism and its outcomes. For instance, conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) can be used to explain the same model. Future studies, should also add some other outcomes in the model e.g. megaphoning, scouting, psychological withdrawal and other outcomes that may be the result of ostracism.

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