

WORKPLACE OSTRACISM THROUGH THE LENS OF RECIPROCITY THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Establishing a healthy co-worker relationship is the heart of developing a harmonious working environment. The area of organizational behaviour has paid less attention to workplace ostracism (WO) which can have a negative impact on the workplace environment. It is a prominent issue in the workplace that needs to be further investigated and studies on this issue are diverse and large. Thus, this paper comprehensively reviews the literature related to WO in two aspects. Firstly, it discusses counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) as an implication of ostracism from the perspective of reciprocity theory. Secondly, to investigate emotional intelligence (EI) potential to mitigate ostracized employees from acting defensively at work. This paper reveals that CWB emerged as a toxic behaviour due to WO. Meanwhile, positive EI can prevent employees from ostracizing others. Addressing this issue can reveal that CWB can potentially lead to ostracizing behaviour and EI as a reducing factor to the relationship.

Keywords: Workplace Ostracism, Counterproductive Work Behaviour, Reciprocity Theory, Emotional Intelligence

1.0 INTRODUCTION

One of the most crucial aspects of an individual's life is their job and a significant amount of time is spent at work. Therefore, developing strong and healthy relationships among employees has become essential in the organization. However, one of the most frequent issues that take place in the workplace environment is ostracism, which is seen as a widespread issue in organizations. Workplace ostracism (WO) refers to being excluded, ignored, or left out of social relationships in organizational settings (Howard, 2019) and it is sometimes known as "social death" that is common in organizations (Li et al., 2021). When ostracism occurs in the workplace, it can cause undesirable organizational outcomes. This is because ostracism behaviour can contribute to employees behaving counter to social norms, resulting in negative behaviours (Ong, 2022). Research has shown that those who are ostracised are more likely to act aggressively and engage in deviant behaviour (Qi et al., 2020). Thus, the primary concern of this paper is the consequences of WO in having a significant impact on the organization.

Apart from that, it is vital to explore the controlling factor from the perspective of individual traits in reducing negative behaviour caused by ostracism. Based on the previous study, employees may control their emotional states by using emotional intelligence (EI), which helps

them control the unpleasant feelings triggered by WO (Zhang & Shi, 2017). For example, employees with high EI will be able to handle being ostracized at work better than those with low EI. Thus, EI as a personal trait can be considered a controlling factor of ostracizing behaviour.

1.1 Problem Statement

Workplace ostracism was an ongoing problem in the organization, as most employees had encountered it. Based on the statistics from past research of approximately 1300 employees, 71% of employees identified themselves as victims of WO (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Similarly, in another research, 66% of employees reported receiving quiet treatment from coworkers at work (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). When employees feel they are being neglected, ostracised, or rejected by others at work, it becomes a major issue and has significant negative effects on the employee and organization. WO is an unpleasant experience that can have an impact on many kinds of behavioural reactions (Haldorai et al., 2022). It has been discovered that WO causes counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) and other deviant behaviours among employees. De Clercq et al. (2018) agreed that WO has negative effects on social interaction which leads to employees engaging in CWB which may disrupt organizational culture and cause the company to suffer significant financial losses. Furthermore, it also can affect job satisfaction (Chung & Kim, 2017) which can negatively influence employee performance (Setyawati et al., 2023).

From the perspective of the organization's impact of WO, several studies have shown that it triggers employees' actual turnover, which incurs organizational recruitment and training costs (Zhang et al., 2019). It can relate to the situation of a poor work environment might lead to increased turnover intentions (Hadi & Adriansyah, 2023). Other than that, ostracized employees were engaged in cyberloafing, which can waste organizational resources because it involves using online resources for activities unrelated to their jobs (Koay, 2018). In the long term, these negative workplace behaviours can create challenging issues for the organization's sustainability. As supported by Sharma and Dhar (2022), organizations with a history of ostracism are more likely to suffer. Despite the consequences of WO, what controls employees from ostracizing one another has been ignored (Chang et al., 2021). According to the literature, individual characteristics have a significant role in determining how to manage the harmful effects of ostracism (Wu et al., 2016). Thus, this paper will discuss how EI can influence an employee to practice ostracism in the workplace.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Workplace Ostracism

Ostracism can be defined as a type of exclusion, rejection, interpersonal abuse, and social death, including severe and painful psychological and physical experiences (Xu et al., 2020). Ostracism in the workplace presents itself as isolation, segregation, leaving the room upon the entry of another person, avoiding eye contact, neglecting to respond to a coworker's greetings, and relocating someone to a remote area (Robinson & Schabram, 2017). It often has two motives: purposeful or non-purposeful, and both forms of ostracism are likely to result in interpersonal deviance. Purposeful ostracism happens when the actor is aware of his or her unwillingness to socially engage another and acts intentionally while non-purposeful ostracism occurs when actors are unaware that their actions aim to socially exclude another (Robinson & Schabram, 2017). Also, ostracism, a kind of "cold violence," is characterized as employees believing they are being ignored or ostracised at work (Ferris et al., 2008).

It is a complex phenomenon because it involves an individual's counter-normative acts with uncertain purpose and is difficult to distinguish from other interpersonal mistreatments such as bullying and aggressiveness (Naseer et al., 2018) and it is characterized as passive-

aggressive behaviours (Liu & Xia, 2016). A previous study has demonstrated that WO can have significant adverse effects like harassment and aggressiveness (Jahanzeb et al., 2020). Scholars have identified dispositional traits, ability and skill, behaviour features, and working context as factors in WO (Mao et al., 2018). Accordingly, people who are more emotionally stable, and have positive affectivity, self-esteem, extraversion, agreeableness, and proactive personalities are less likely to experience ostracism.

2.2 Reciprocity Theory

Reciprocity is defined as exchanges of approximately equivalent values in which each party's actions are dependent upon the previous behaviour of the others in such a way that good is returned for good and bad for bad (Keohane, 1986). The concept that people should repay those who have harmed them is rooted in the theory of reciprocity and is known as the negative reciprocity view. Based on the rules of reciprocity, individuals must treat others in the same way they would like to be treated. The negative reciprocity belief indicates a negative response to a negative treatment (Sun et al., 2022). It shows that the negative reciprocity belief is the suitable approach to respond to any unfair treatment. In contra to the positive reciprocity belief, people should not do anything negative to those who do them well.

The negative reciprocity theory can explain why people behave badly in working life such as workplace deviance. Interpersonal deviance might be seen as a kind of retaliation motivated by the negative reciprocity belief that can result from being ostracised at work (Hua et al., 2023). Previous studies found that employees who have been ostracised are more likely to engage in passive punishment by exercising the knowledge of hiding in response to unfair treatment (Sun et al., 2022).

In the aspect of negative reciprocity theory and WO, Hua et al. (2023) put forward the positive relationship between WO and interpersonal deviance. According to the norms of reciprocity, employees express negative feelings through reciprocity (Du Hengbo, 2020), leading to workplace ostracism when they disengage from work (Jahanzeb et al., 2020). Another view is the perception of WO is an unfavourable experience which may trigger negative reciprocity belief (Zhao et al., 2016). Employees who are ostracised will take revenge, either actively by acting detrimentally or passively, such as by withholding information (Greco et al., 2019). Employees may demonstrate aggressive conduct in response to workplace ostracism, including aggressiveness ideas, retaliation scripts, negative assessment, and attribution. In contrast, employees who have a negative belief in reciprocity often assume that revenge is an acceptable approach to avoid ostracism (Eisenberger et al., 2004).

A review of these studies reveals that WO specifically purposeful ostracism is an unfavourable treatment that causes a negative reciprocity belief. Overall, negative reciprocity belief may lead ostracized individuals to conclude that it is acceptable to take direct action against those who ostracize them, and this may engage them in a more interpersonal form of CWB. Therefore, from the standpoint of negative reciprocity theory, it can provide a better understanding of why employees engage in interpersonal deviance through WO.

2.3 Counterproductive Work Behaviour

According to Spector et al. (2006), CWB is defined as purposeful acts of aggression by employees that might be threatening the interests of an organization or its stakeholders. Employees' behaviour that is harmful to both the employees and the organization, such as activities that are counter to the organization's advantages and interests is referred to as unproductive work behaviour (Fatima, 2016; Khan et al., 2021). CWB refers to a variety of different terms that can be seen in Table 1. All these terms have a few similar characteristics: first, the behaviour goes against the organization's usual norms or principles; second, the

behaviour is harmful and poses a threat to employees and the organization; and third, the behaviour harms the organization and its stakeholders, including its employees (Ong, 2022).

Also, Spector et al. (2006) suggested that there are five aspects of CWB which are (1) abuse: which involves actions taken against coworkers with the intent of hurting them physically or mentally through threats, (2) production deviance: a failure to accomplish work and follow the path that is expected of them, (3) sabotage: it is taking property belonging to the company without consent, (4) theft: it involves behaviours such as arriving late to work, having a high absence rate, quitting work early, and taking extended breaks and (5) withdrawal: it is behaviour that limits the amount of time spent working to less than what the organization requires. Individual (Zhang et al., 2019) and environmental variables (Ma et al., 2019) also have an impact on CWB, which are a sort of aggressive behaviour (Li et al., 2020).

Table 1. Types of Negative Workplace Behaviours

Types	Definition	Other terms	Authors
Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Purposeful acts of aggression by employees that might be threatening the interests of an organization or its stakeholders.	Anti-citizenship behaviour, production deviance, property deviance, sabotage, theft	Spector et al. (2006)
Workplace ostracism	The degree to which an individual believes he or she is being ignored or excluded by the organizational phenomenon.	Exclusion, isolation	Ferris et al. (2008)
Workplace aggression	Individuals' attempts to harm people with whom they work or have previously worked, or the organizations in which they are currently or have previously worked.	Coworker abuse, relational aggression, interpersonal aggression	Neuman & Baron (1997)
Incivility	Low-intensity deviant behaviour with uncertain intent to damage the victim, in breach of workplace norms for mutual respect.	Gossiping, workplace hostility, personal mistreatment, interpersonal transgressions	Blau & Andersson (2005)
Interpersonal conflict	Interpersonal incompatibilities between group members, often involve tension, antagonism, and frustration among group members.	Relationship conflict	Jehn (1995)
Withdrawal	Dissatisfied persons engage in a set of behaviours aimed at preventing engagement in dissatisfying job settings.	Absenteeism, turnover, neglect	Hanisch & Hulin (1990)
Abusive supervision	The degree to which supervisors exhibit aggressive verbal and nonverbal behaviours consistently, avoiding Physical contact.	Negative/destructive supervisor behaviour, supervisor undermining	Tepper (2000)

2.4 Workplace Ostracism and Counterproductive Work Behaviour

The relationship between WO and CWB has been reported from previous perspectives. WO can cause poor self-worth and in turn, this can prevent employees from exercising self-control which might drive them to act aggressively toward others (Zhang et al., 2019). Other than that, ostracism affects people's self-regulation processes which can result in maladaptive

behaviours including self-defeating and aggressive behaviours (Yang & Treadway, 2018). Moreover, the employee is more likely to engage in CWB while experiencing negative emotions such as stressful situations due to ostracism (Chen et al., 2020). When someone is ostracised, they might attack a safer target such as an organization rather than superiors or friends (Gurlek, 2021). This is because they believe if they ostracize their superiors or friends, they may jeopardize the future of their jobs including their social status and promotion opportunities, and fear of reprisals.

Many prior studies revealed that ostracism correlated with CWB. For instance, Peng and Zeng (2017) consistently discovered that WO has a strong influence on employees to engage in undesirable behaviour, such as deviant behaviour. A recent study also found that WO has a positive impact on employees' tendency to engage in CWB (Zhu & Zhang, 2021). Similarly, Yang and Treadway (2018) discovered in their study that employee ostracism leads to CWB. Therefore, considering the existing studies, it can be concluded that CWB happens through employee-felt ostracism.

2.5 Emotional Intelligence

EI is defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as the capacity for the ability to perceive emotions, access and generate emotions to support thought, comprehend emotions and emotional knowledge, as well as reflect on and regulate emotions to support emotional and intellectual growth. Another definition by Goleman (1995) EI is the ability to recognize and understand one's own and others' emotional reactions, and to apply this knowledge to guide one's thinking and actions. It highlights the significance of employing emotional awareness to control behaviour and decision-making. It includes four components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management.

EI is a key personality trait that influences employees' behavioural patterns. It is the use of the mental ability to solve difficulties, deal with increasing demands, recognize self-development and the formation of relationships with others (George et al., 2022). An employee with a high EI would be able to interpret, perceive, and manage their emotions better in a way that might impact their effectiveness at work (Arshad et al., 2023). This is because an employee with strong EI often chooses good coping mechanisms over negative ones (Attallah & Afsar, 2021). When they are skilled at controlling their own emotions and those of others, they are more likely to behave appropriately and form meaningful relationships with their coworkers.

2.6 Counterproductive Work Behaviour and Emotional Intelligence

When employees believe they are unable to handle difficulties or manage themselves in stressful situations, they tend to engage in CWB (Ma & Liu, 2019). This is due to individuals with a higher level of EI who can interpret, control, and use emotional information better than those with lower levels (Chen & Li, 2019). Studies have indicated that EI is crucial for people managing stressful circumstances (Abdollahi et al., 2016). A study by Attallah and Afsar (2021) used EI to describe the underlying process of WO influencing engagement in CWB. Furthermore, Sharma et al. (2016) proposed that EI has a moderating effect on the relationship between workplace conflict, individual emotional and behavioural responses. Also, a positive correlation was found between interpersonal conflict and CWB, however, these relationships are reduced at higher levels of EI (Kundi & Badar, 2021). Other findings demonstrate the ability of EI to moderate the positive correlation between CWB and burnout (Ugwu et al., 2017). As a result, the previous studies suggest that EI may act as a moderator in the relationship between WO and CWB.

2.7 Emotional Intelligence and Workplace Ostracism

There are few scholars studying the relationship between EI and WO. The findings from the research show that people with high EI can handle ostracism at work better (Sahoo et al., 2022) and EI has a negative relationship with WO (Zaman et al., 2021). Highly EI employees can handle the feeling of being ostracized by others, thus they attempt to avoid organizational conflict. This is because the employees can assess if these feelings are appropriate for the situation and use emotional management skills to determine it is in their best interests to ignore their thoughts of WO (Zhang & Shi, 2017). In contrast, those with low EI are more negatively impacted by unfavourable and difficult workplaces since they are less likely to defend themselves from these ostracised situations (Srivastava et al., 2019). Overall, employees with EI will be able to cope with ostracizing behaviour than those with lower EI and this can be a key component in reducing WO.

2.8. Conceptual Framework

Based on the research objectives, Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework that shows the two relationships. The first direct relationship is between workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behaviour and the second is the moderating of emotional intelligence between workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behaviour.

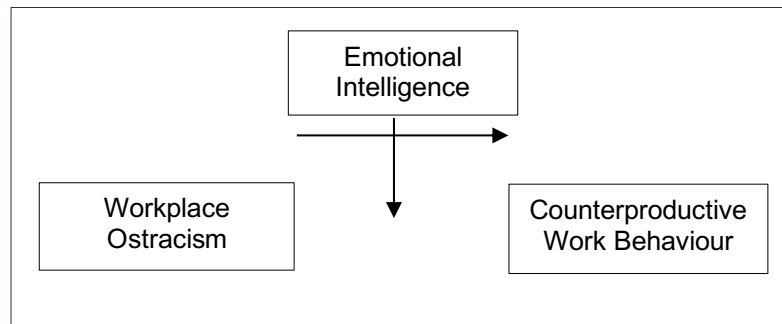


Fig 1. Conceptual Framework (source by author)

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Following the qualitative approach, this study is based on existing literature reviews, empirical evidence, and theories to identify concepts that are relevant to the contribution of the understanding of this research topic. Since this paper is based on a conceptual framework, data collection is not applicable. This involves primary sources of data from academic databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. This initial process involves an in-depth critical analysis of existing theoretical models and a recent literature review to identify the research gap and a comprehensive understanding of workplace ostracism in the context of reciprocity theory. Then, a conceptual framework was developed based on the findings that can guide the discussion and enable a comprehensive analysis of the topic. This framework serves as key concepts and relationships that are relevant to CWB due to WO and EI as moderating factors.

4.0 DISCUSSION

This paper explores that WO can lead to negative employee behaviour while highlighting EI as the controlling factor that can help employees handle ostracizing behaviour. From the perspective of reciprocity theory which suggests that individuals should treat others as they would like to be treated, leading to negative responses to unfair treatment. This theory can explain why ostracized employees may take direct action against those who ostracize them, leading to CWB. Furthermore, as supported by the previous studies, there is a strong

correlation between WO and CWB. For the coping mechanisms, research indicates that individuals with EI are better equipped to manage ostracism at work which can potentially reduce WO. This suggests that fostering EI skills among employees could be an effective strategy to combat this issue. Thus, EI plays a crucial role in managing WO as it can moderate the relationship between WO ostracism and CWB.

5.0 CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper discusses the issue of WO which has been proven to stimulate counterproductive and deviant behaviours as well as its impact on employees and organizations. Based on the previous findings, belief in reciprocity can influence the relationship between WO and fear of negative evaluation (Khair & Fatima, 2017). Also, the negative reciprocity theory strengthened the relationship between WO and defensive silence (Yao et al., 2022). In terms of the relationship between WO and CWB, WO is a major predictor of CWB (Shafique et al., 2021). The study of Gurlek (2021) provided support that WO had a positive relationship with CWB.

In response to this issue, employees can utilize EI to regulate their emotional states which helps them control negative sentiments caused by WO. This is because employees with high EI are better equipped to deal with WO than those with low EI. As a result, EI as an individual trait might be viewed as a mitigating factor for employees from practicing ostracism. By addressing this issue, it may become clear that CWB may result in ostracising behaviour and that EI is buffering the relationship. As this study is based on a conceptual paper review from the previous scholar, the framework has yet to be implemented. Thus, a future study is recommended to examine EI as a mitigating factor between CWB and ostracism.

CO-AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest in this paper. All authors made significant contributions to the research and preparation of this article.

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