Understanding the influence of workplace ostracism on employee voice behaviour: The moderating role of psychological capital

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Abstract

Human evolution has led to detection of social exclusion cues and tendency to stay in the presence of other's company. This study explores the influence of workplace ostracism on employee voice behaviour, and the moderating role of psychological capital, in the Indian context. In existing literature, Workplace ostracism, the isolation that certain employees experience has been found to have significant negative effects on individual and organizational outcomes like promotive and prohibitive voice behaviour, with paucity of research in the Indian context. The sample consists of (n=144) Indian employees. Spearman's correlation between Workplace Ostracism and Employee Voice Behaviour was found to be "Very Low negative" correlation and statistically significant ($r = -.160$, *p < .05*). The findings aim to contribute in understanding potential impact of workplace ostracism and how training employees in factors of resilience, hope, self-efficacy, and optimism can help mitigate negative effects of ostracism. The insights can help organizations develop policies and interventions to address workplace ostracism and foster a more inclusive and empowered workforce.

Keywords: Workplace ostracism, employee voice behaviour, psychological capital, resilience, promotive, prohibitive, organisational psychology, Human resource management

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Introduction

Irrespective of how good one's job and pay are, from Maslow's work we know that satisfaction of social connections in the form of psychological needs is essential at the workplace (Parent & Lovelace, 2018). Workplace Ostracism, which is the isolation and neglecting treatment certain employees go through (Ferris et al., 2008), has been found to cause a lot of negative effects such as emotional exhaustion, depressed mood and higher stress levels (Li & Tian, 2016; L. Wu et al., 2012). Such major impacts of ostracism has brought attention on its research, especially in the last decade (Li & Tian, 2016). Compared to the direct mistreatments in the workplace like verbal abuse, ostracism is an indirect, covert and passive way of mistreatment (Abubakar et al., 2018).

The prevalence of ostracism and exclusion in the workplace is over 45 percent, as found by recent meta-analysis studies (Dhanani et al., 2021). A study revealed that over a period of five years, 66 percent of the sample population received "silent treatment" and 29 percent shared that people left the room when they were present (Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Zheng et al., 2016). Though it is an old study, it emphasizes on the high prevalence of ostracism and bullying at work. The range of negative effects caused by experiencing ostracism are shown in deviance, well-being, employee performance, job satisfaction and employee voice (Ayoko, 2022; Howard et al., 2019).

Multiple studies have been done to assess the impact of Ostracism on its various consequences. But the research done to understand the relationship between Workplace Ostracism and Employee Voice behaviour in specific, is very scarce (Li & Tian, 2016; W. Wu et al., 2018). Voice behaviour is when employees speak up and share constructive opinions about any work-related issues. A strong employee voice contributes in influencing outcomes at all levels of the company (Bashshur & Oc, 2015). Employees' contribution to the organisation, in the form of voice in this case, has shown to be negatively influenced by the presence of ostracism (L. Wu et al., 2012). As mentioned in Maynes and Podsakoff (2014), cited in study of Wu et al. (2018), "employees' voice behaviour is a multifaceted construct". The two 4 components of employee voice are promotive and prohibitive voice behaviour. Promotive voice focuses on inputs to improve the status quo of the company whereas prohibitive voice focuses on drawing attention to issues that need to be addressed (W. Wu et al., 2018).

One of the very few studies done between Workplace ostracism and employee voice behaviour focuses on the impact of supervisor and co-worker ostracism on employee voice behaviour. The results of this study found significant relationship only between supervisor ostracism and employee voice (Li & Tian, 2016).

A significant amount of research is done on understanding workplace ostracism and its outcomes at the individual and organisational level. An important point inferred is that all employees facing ostracism will not suffer at the same intensity or level (Zheng et al., 2016). Coping with the threats and effects of ostracism, largely depends on the employee's psychological factors like self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, which makes up their Psychological capital (Ashraf et al., 2020). A person's psychological capital consisting of 'self-efficacy' in taking action and putting the best efforts to accomplish challenging tasks, optimism in present and future success, perseverance and 'hope' in reaching the goals, and 'resilience' when dealing with problems and misery in order to bounce back and reach success (Prihatsanti & Handoyo, 2020). It is conceptualized that employees with higher Psychological capital, when faced with ostracism, are affected lesser by its consequences than employees with lower Psychological capital, who are more likely to be affected significantly (Zheng et al., 2016).

Theoretical Framework

According to the "need-threat theoretical framework" mentioned in Williams (2007) as cited in Wu et al. (2018), exposure to ostracism threatens four fundamental needs of individuals such as the need to belong, maintain self-esteem, need to perceive personal control and the need for a meaningful existence. Out of these, the need to belong is the most directly impacted by ostracism (W. Wu et al., 2018). Hence it can be inferred that when the employees' need to belong is threatened because of ostracism, it can negatively impact them in various factors, one of them being voice behaviour. This is further connected and explained by the "Belongingness theory" developed by Baumeister and Leary (1995), which explains that humans have an innate drive to form and maintain a lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). From this theory it is understood that workplace ostracism is detrimental to belongingness and threatens employees' innate needs to belong and need to be accepted by others (W. Wu et al., 2018).

"Social comparison theory" popularized by the renowned Leon Festinger, provides another perspective in understanding the impact of ostracism. As the name suggests, individuals tend to evaluate themselves

and their conditions by comparing with it other people (W. Wu et al., 2018). Hence employees who experience ostracism will create a social comparison about whether other group members experience what they go through. If there is a mismatch found post-comparison, the negative effects of ostracism on the employee would intensify.

The "Conservation of Resources" says that People strive to retain, protect, and build resources and are threatened by the potential or actual loss of these valued resources (Egozi Farkash et al., 2022). This theory helps conceptualize the moderating effect of Psychological Capital of the employee being ostracized. From the COR perspective, when employees face stress, they will act accordingly to preserve their resources and capacity for future use. Employees high in Psychological Capital are more optimistic and tend to preserve their personal resources, and focus on work aspects than interpersonal aspects. Therefore, they have enough resources to deal with difficulties like ostracism and are less affected on related outcomes (Zheng et al., 2016).

Problem Statement

To explore the influence of Workplace Ostracism on employees' perception of voice behaviour. Find out the role of psychological capital and how it influences the relationship between Workplace Ostracism and employee voice behaviour.

Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study is a quantitative, cross-sectional design. All data were Primary sources of data and were collected at a single point in time through using structured, validated scales to measure Workplace Ostracism, Employee Voice Behaviour, and Psychological Capital. A purposive sampling technique was utilized, targeting Indian employees aged 18 years and above with at least one year of work experience across various sectors. The raw data collected was cleaned by removing incomplete and invalid responses and addressing any missing data through strong matching or exclusion. All the data was stored in a password protected excel file. The outliers were removed to avoid any skew in results and ensure consistency. Statistical analyses included tests for normality, correlation, and moderation to examine relationships between variables and their moderating effects.

Sample size: 144 respondents

Inclusion criteria:

- Indian employees above 18 years of age, irrespective of any gender

- Employee respondents can be working in organisations from any sector

- Employees with over one year of work experience

Exclusion criteria

- Contractual employees and part-time workers of an organization are not included in the study

- Employees working purely in remote basis

- Employees who are unable to read and give appropriate responses use English as the language of communication

Tools used

Workplace Ostracism was assessed using a 10-item scale developed by Ferris et al. (2008). With a 7-point Likert scale, sample items included 'Others ignored me at work', 'Others left the area when I entered', and 'My greetings have gone unanswered at work'. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was 0.92. The psychometric properties of this scale was tested on Indian sample too (Kamboj & Garg, 2022).

Employee voice behaviour was measured with the scale developed by Liang et al. (2012) and consists of 5 promotive voice items and 5 prohibitive voice items. Sample items include "develop and make suggestions for issues that may influence the group" (promotive voice) and "voice out opinions on things that might affect the efficiency in the work unit, even if that would embarrass others" (prohibitive voice). Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.86.

Psychological capital Questionnaire (PCQ-24), measured the four dimensions of Psychological capital. With a total of 10 items, some sample items are "I feel confident helping to set targets/goals in my work area" (self-efficacy), "I always look on the bright side of thins regarding my job" (optimism). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for this scale is 0.86.

Ethical considerations

- Informed consent - Ensure participants are fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks if any, and their right to withdraw at any time.

- Confidentiality and anonymity – maintaining participant responses in password-protected files and changing their names into initials were the first steps in protecting confidentiality and anonymity.

- More accurate responses – informing participants before they attended the questionnaire to give honest and accurate responses, rather than hurried responses. Additionally, cleaning such data having incomplete, repetitive pattern responses made the data more reliable.

- Ethical data collection methods – 90 percent of the responses were collected offline by circulating questionnaires, and remaining online through Google forms. No one was encouraged to participate if they did not meet the participant criteria.

Review of Literature

Workplace Ostracism

Several studies highlight the negative impact of ostracism on employees and the organizational effectiveness. Brison and Caesens (2023) found that ostracism, particularly from supervisors or colleagues, leads to feelings of dehumanization. This, in turn, contributes to a decline in employee well-being (increased depression), job satisfaction, and loyalty, ultimately increasing turnover intentions (Brison & Caesens, 2023). Study done by Howard et al. (2019) emphasizes the antecedent effects by demonstrating that leadership characteristics, personality traits, and specific workplace contexts can contribute to ostracism. Their findings also showed negative impacts on employee performance, helpfulness towards colleagues, and willingness to voice opinions (Howard et al., 2019). Ostracism from both superiors and coworkers was found to affect employees' sense of self-efficacy and their ability to fulfill their social needs at work.

In understanding the perpetrators and victims of ostracism, study by Mlika et al. (2017) explored the reasons behind ostracized behaviour, finding that perpetrators often have a history of problematic workplace relationships themselves. This suggests that ostracism may stem from unresolved conflicts or a lack of interpersonal skills on the part of the perpetrator. Interestingly, this research also revealed that ostracized employees tend to internalize the blame, highlighting the psychological toll it takes on them (Mlika et al., 2017, p. 8).

Dash et al. (2023) explored the underlying reasons for ostracism through a qualitative perspective. Their findings categorized the causes into four main themes: perceived non-alignment with the organization's needs, emotional reactions of others, unconscious social processes, and structural or demographic differences between the victim and others. This framework provides valuable insights for supervisors and HR professionals. By identifying potential triggers, such as unclear

expectations or unconscious bias, organizations can develop preventative strategies to create a more inclusive work environment (Dash et al., 2023).

Important limitations called out from Wu et al. (2012) that are relevant are that, they realized and acknowledged that employees may utilize multiple coping strategies simultaneously and missing out on focusing about immediate consequences such as emotional reactions. Despite these, this study highlighted the need for organizations to foster a supportive work environment (L. Wu et al., 2012).

Employee Voice Behaviour

Wilkinson and Fay's (2011) study demonstrate the positive impact of voice on employee well-being and organizational performance. Employees who feel heard, experience greater job satisfaction, increased commitment, and potentially higher productivity and this is particularly true for newer employees (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011). Bashshur and Oc's (2015) review emphasizes on the multifaceted benefits of voice, and suggests that a culture of open communication can lead to improved employee perceptions of justice, job satisfaction, and even organizational citizenship behaviours. Further, voice was found to contribute to better decision-making, fostering innovation and ultimately leading to improved organizational performance (Bashshur & Oc, 2015).

McFadden and Crowley-Henry's (2017) study on LGBTQ+ employees, highlights their concern about potential mistreatment or being ostracized as troublemakers. LGBTQ+ employees may be hesitant to speak up, even within designated support groups. This study emphasizes the need for a safe space for employees to speak up about concerns without fear of consequences (McFadden & Crowley-Henry, 2018).

Workplace Ostracism and Employee Voice Behaviour

There are several research studies that help us understand how ostracism silences employees. Wu et al. (2018) found that both individual and group-level ostracism are detrimental to employees' willingness to voice both promotive and prohibitive feedback. This suggests that ostracism, even within a team, can cause such effect on employees' and their voice and communication (W. Wu et al., 2018). Deniz and Çimen (2022) reveal in their study, that ostracism fosters feelings of work alienation, a sense of disconnection from the organization and one's work. This in turn discourages employees from speaking up, fearing their voices will not be heard or valued (Deniz & Çimen, 2022). A study on the Indian teacher population revealed similar effects of Ostracism on their voice behaviour (Sivakumar & Arulkumar, 2022).

Considering motivation and self-esteem as perspectives, Jahanzeb and Newell (2020) propose that ostracism from co-workers threatens the employee's sense of self-worth within the company. Fearing being seen as inadequate, ostracized employees may hold back their ideas, even if they are constructive. This study focuses merely on co-worker ostracism, and not the impact of supervisor ostracism, which becomes a limitation in this study (Jahanzeb & Newell, 2022).

Study by Wu et al. (2019) focuses mainly on newcomers' ostracism and found that it reduces both their promotive and prohibitive voice behaviour. They attribute this to a diminished sense of having their psychological needs met at work. This study highlights the vulnerability of new employees who are still establishing themselves (W. Wu et al., 2019).

Workplace Ostracism and Psychological Capital

Many studies demonstrate the negative consequences of workplace ostracism but highlight the effect of Psychological Capital on the consequences. Employees who experience ostracism report increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, and a greater likelihood of wanting to leave the organization (Chaman et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2016). Anjum et al. (2019) further highlighted that ostracism, when combined with other negative workplace behaviours like incivility, can lead to a significant decrease in employee work effort and contribution (Anjum et al., 2022). A major limitation emphasized was the inconsideration of how psychological capital might moderate the relationship found. This limitation is a gap covered in my current study.

A study by Firoz and Chaudhary (2021) also provides insight on how employees with higher psychological capital are better equipped to navigate the challenges of ostracism and that they may be more likely to maintain a positive attitude, experience a smaller decline in work effort, and even retain their voice despite feeling excluded (Firoz & Chaudhary, 2021).

Employee Voice Behaviour and Psychological Capital

Prihatsanti et al. (2020) highlighted the positive influence of Psychological Capital on employee voice behaviour. Based on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, they argue that employees with higher Psychological Capital perceive themselves as having more resources available and that these resources empower them to speak up. And when employees have low Psychological Capital, they may be reluctant to put the effort required to voice their opinions, fearing it will further deplete their limited resources (Prihatsanti & Handoyo, 2020).

Results of the study

	Age	Work experience (in years)
Mode	24.000	1.000
Median	34.000	8.000
Mean	34.042	10.413
Std. Deviation	9.310	8.822
Minimum	21.000	1.000
Maximum	57.000	35.000

Table I: Descriptive Statistics for Age and Work experience

Table I above shows that the sample (N=144) consists of participants in the average age of 34.04 years, with the minimum age being 21 years and maximum age 57 years. Similarly, it is seen that the average work experience among the population is 10.4 years, with minimum years being 1 year and maximum 35 years.

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	87	60.4
Female	57	39.6
Sector		
IT	33	23
Finance	29	20.1
Marine	35	24.3
Education	14	9.7
Healthcare	3	2
Legal	7	4.8
Others	23	15.9
State		
Karnataka	46	32
Tamil Nadu	93	64.6
Others	5	3.5

Table II: Demographic information of the sample

Table II above shows that the sample (N=144) consisted of 60.4 percent participants identifying as male (N=87) and 39.6 percent participants identifying as female (N=57). There are no respondents identifying as other genders. It shows that the sample consisted of 23 percent participants belonging to IT sector (N=33), 20.1 percent participants belong to Finance sector (N=29), 24.3 percent participants in Marine sector (N=35), 9.7 percent in Education sector (N=14), 2 percent participants in Healthcare (N=3), 4.8 percent participants in Legal sector (N=7), and 15.09 percent participants belong to few sectors such as, Public & Private sector, Marketing, HR, SMEs and Mental Health sector, all grouped as "others". And around 65 percent of the sample belong to Tamil Nadu (N=93), 32 percent from Karnataka (N=46), 5 participants belonging to different states.

	TotWO	TotEVB	TotPC
Mean	16.063	38.580	113.350
Std. Deviation	6.650	5.052	10.516
Shapiro-Wilk	0.834	0.984	0.985
P-value of Shapiro-Wilk	<0.001	0.086	0.129

Table III: Shapiro-Wilk test for normality

Table III above shows that the sample (N=144) shows a mean Workplace Ostracism score of 16.06 (SD=6.65), a mean Employee Voice Behaviour score of 38.58 (SD=5.05), and a mean Psychological Capital score of 113.35 (SD=10.51). The Shapiro-Wilk test for normality was run and showed that scores of Workplace Ostracism is not normally distributed ($p < .001$) and both Employee Voice Behaviour and Psychological Capital are normally distributed ($p > 0.05$).

Variable		TotWO
TotEVB	Spearman's rho	-0.160
	p-value	0.022*

Table IV: Spearman's Correlation between Workplace Ostracism and Employee Voice Behaviour

Note. * *p < .05,* for negative correlation

Table IV above shows that Spearman's correlation between Workplace Ostracism and Employee Voice Behaviour was found to be "Very Low negative" correlation and statistically significant (r = -.160, p < .05). This shows that as experience of Workplace Ostracism becomes higher, the employees' voice behaviour level decreases among the participants.

Table 5: Linear Regression for Moderation Analysis

	Unstandardised Coeffecients		Standardised Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)		.423		91.314	.000
TotWO	-.647	.554	-.852	-1.167	.245
TotWO*TotPC	.006	.005	.798	1.131	.260

Note. R^2=.347, F=4.928. p<.05*

From the above Table 5, we can see from the R square value that 34.7 percent of the variance in Workplace Ostracism has caused a change in Employee Voice Behaviour. From the above Table 8, we can see that the very low negative relationship between Workplace Ostracism and Employee Voice Behaviour is moderated by Psychological Capital (t =1.167, p < 0.05).

Discussion

Workplace ostracism is an extensive variable, but not that extensively studied in the Indian context. It is important to acknowledge and take action against such behaviours in the workplace, since research says that ostracism impacts not only the victim, but also the ostracizer and the bystanders in various ways (Harvey et al., 2019). Unlike the many research studies on Workplace ostracism and employee voice behaviour suggesting a strong relationship, this study gives a weak correlation between the two. There can be many factors influencing this result.

With India being a collectivistic society, workplaces would also exhibit the same behaviour. That is, even if ignorance/avoidance is observed in smallest forms, in daily work life it may not be possible to avoid team members from making interactions. Having these interactions make people pick up social cues to adapt and act accordingly. If low voice behaviour is observed, analysing the possible antecedents behind this behaviour is necessary. Studies mention that perception of ostracism distorts the amount

of control/regulation over one's own behaviour, but individual differences with respect to resource variables like Psychological capital exists that may alter or minimize the perception of workplace ostracism (Shahabuddin et al., 2022).

Highlighted in some studies, the individual coping mechanisms of employees may cause differences in impact of ostracism on voice behaviour (Ashraf et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2016). With the Indian population having an array of diversity, there is possibility for such differences in perception and coping with ostracism. And additional variables such as job satisfaction, organizational support, etc, can also influence the same (Deniz & Çimen, 2022).

Another important factor to consider is the shift in working sector context. Each industry may have its own norms and practices that will impact the voice behaviour. For example, in sectors like Legal, where voice behaviour may not create a lot of change with respect to the practices/rules followed, the overall behaviour for employees from this sector might be to exhibit low voice behaviour (Bashshur & Oc, 2015). Such differences are also influencing factors.

It can be observed that this study's results are not in line with previous literature on these variables. It is essential to analyse these differences. From the original paper published on developing the Workplace Ostracism scale, it is found that the methodology involved a deductive approach, implying that the items were drafted depending on existing literature and not considering employees' lived experiences through interviews/FGD's. Additionally, the scale having just 10 items and being self-reporting in nature, may sacrifice some nuanced aspects of ostracism. These factors, along with other cultural influences might have caused the discrepancy in results compared to other studies.

Research implications

Since the study explores the influence of workplace ostracism on organizational dynamic variables like employee voice behaviour at work, it can be a motivation for organizations to make stringent policies against ostracism, to prevent and condemn such practices.

Employee Voice Behaviour is an impactful variable to create change in the organization. The organization can promote and encourage its practice to foster innovation and open communication, by rewarding constructive voice behaviours.

With Psychological capital being a variable that equips employees to navigate challenges like Workplace ostracism and others, the

understanding from the study results will help create training programs to develop employees' psychological capital. Creation of mentoring programs for employees, will help them navigate and put efforts to improving their psychological capital.

Future research exploring these variables can take a longitudinal approach to understand the impact curve of a dynamic variable like ostracism. A mixed methods methodology would be more suitable for a deeper understanding of the relationship.

Limitations

With a target sample size of 200, getting only 144 responses makes the sample less-generalizable. And the responses being self-reported, may be altered and influenced by bias, especially with sensitive variables like ostracism. With extensive literature on the positive effects of psychological capital, it was researched on to explore its moderating effects. This may neglect the effects of other unmeasured variables that support coping with ostracism.

This study excluded the understanding of the variable relationship among contractual and part-time workers. Since they may have lesser work-experience than expected, it was avoided to prevent complexity. But the world reality in this age is the growing trend of gig-economy, consisting of interns, part-timers, and contract employees. It is important to understand their experiences too, not just because of their high numbers, but also given that they are typically younger and might be vulnerable to more negative impact.

Understanding dynamic and complex variables like workplace ostracism, voice behaviour and psychological capital, would require having interactions with employees about their personal experiences. It would not only provide more accurate responses, but also helps understand the demographic influence of their experiences, for example women in the workplace. But the ethical considerations would be an issue, since some people may not wish to share or may get triggered by talking about their sensitive past experiences.

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