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Ostracism in the workplace: 'Being voted off the island'

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"The loneliest people are the kindest. The saddest people smile the brightest. The most damaged people are the wisest. All because they do not wish to see anyone else suffer the way they do."—Anonymous

INTRODUCTION

As humans, we seem to be fascinated by ostracism. Ostracism has been popularized by the entertainment industry as we watch numerous reality shows where in each episode someone is "voted off the island" or "voted out of the house" by peers and strangers alike. People are generally "voted off" because: they are a weak link in team effectiveness, they are disliked because of the way they interact with others of how they engage with the game, they are a threat to win the game (and therefore cause me to not win), or they are not part of a powerful in-group and therefore are categorized as different from others in the collective group setting. The ostracized individual is subsequently deemed not worthy of being a member of a group and is frequently socially ignored by others in the group or organization. These dynamics of ostracism are virtually no different in the workplace.

We observe that the cause of ostracism behavior is generally not to hurt the ostracized person but to self-protect. With this in mind we argue that ostracism behavior can be deliberate and conscious, with a *potential* commitment to punish others. One way of describing ostracism is a single or repeated behavior that ignores or excludes others from social interactions that they would normally expect to take part in. This differentiates ostracism from bullying, a related construct but with a dimension of aggression and elevating

self by actively belittling others. It is worth nothing that ostracism also does not have to be punitive or deliberate, but can be enacted obliviously. Oblivious ostracism is generated for example when the waiter in a restaurant approaches a table and fills/refills glasses with water. There is a chance that no one at that table acknowledges the waiter's existence. This situation is not necessarily problematic for the waiter but as humans in the workplace we rely on our colleagues, superiors and subordinates to provide us with a sense of connection and acceptance. A lack of experiencing this connections makes it an uncomfortable working with or for people who do not value your presence. In that sense ostracism is the denial of a positive experience. Neuroscience research has shown that prolonged experiences of ostracism ergo the denial of a positive experience can inevitably influence the brain to believe it is experiencing physical pain.

As human beings, we will experience rejection by individuals and/or groups, it is an inevitable part of life; but, while we may expect this in our personal lives, when it happens in the workplace, it is confusing, and it may have an extremely negative impact on the person's physical and mental well-being and level of performance. Once again ostracism as such acknowledges a relationship between a physical and social pain reinforced by the individual's responses to being ostracized and which is modified according to a need an individual is trying to fortify (i.e. some response behavior in terms of approval and revenge).

Ostracism is reflexively painful, depletes fundamental needs, and is highly resistant to variations in situational context or individual differences. Most people in the workplace feel they have been ostracized. Results demonstrated that 66% of employees felt they had been given the silent

treatment in the past five years, 29% reported that others had left the room when they entered and 18% reported that they had been physically ostracized by being moved to an isolated location. Research on 2000 managers/employees in the United States revealed that 67% admitted deliberately not speaking to a person, while 75% indicated that they were at least once a target of this kind of behavior.

Humans have an evolved system for automatically detecting cues of ostracism and exclusion, however it appears that very often targets may also fail to immediately recognize that they are being victimized initially. Ostracism is not a “one off” event (e.g., not being allowed to participate in a meeting, not invited to lunch where they are normal participants, excluded from a firm function by error), but a continued exclusion from organizational formal and/or informal functions. Initially the individual may consider the first occurrence as unintentional, but as the ostracizer’s behavior continues, people quickly identify that they are being excluded and will feel the negative group pressure.

Regardless of the form ostracism behavior takes on, we observe that ostracism has ongoing impact for the ostracized individual, for instance the reoccurring memories of when ostracizing behavior took place triggered by a random event, a recollection of how it made them feel each time they see the ostracizer, or an empathetic reaction when they see observe others in a similar position. Ostracism in the workplace is has a pronounced impact on the ostracized, ostracizer and bystanders or witnesses to the ostracism. In most scenarios however, firms may or may not observe the act or series of acts. Despite suggestions that ostracism can be an effective means of controlling contra normative behaviors, punishing deviance and to increase group cohesion, any reoccurring or prolonged endurance or execution of ostracism has virtually no benefit to the individual, a team or the firm collectively.

Little research has articulated the issues concerning ostracism such as the different types of ostracism in the workplace, the impact on persons directly/indirectly involved in ostracism behavior, and the outcomes of ostracism in the workplace and its repercussions. From past research we have identified several fundamental gaps in the literature: **Why is ostracism of concern to organizations? How does it impact individuals and organizations alike? What can be done to prevent/change ostracism behaviors?**

With this in mind, the paper proceeds as follows: First, we will discuss the foundation of ostracism and its significance in the workplace as exemplified by real-world examples. Second, we will discuss the impact on the individual who is ostracized as well as possible responses to being ostracized. Third, we will discuss the impact of ostracism on those doing the ostracizing and on those who are witnesses or bystanders to the ostracism process. Finally, we offer an ostracism firm audit to identify possible ostracism cases across the firm and its stakeholders and suggest a plan for correction.

OSTRACISM, THE FOUNDATION OF THE CONCEPT

Examples of ostracism in the workplace are: when people fail to invite you to meetings of which you should attend; you go get a cup of coffee in the communal kitchen and people go

silent when you approach; you sit alone in the lunchroom; people appear to be giving you the silent treatment; people refuse to respond to salutations in the hallway; upon attendance in a meeting all names present are called but your own; you are left out of conversations or decisions of which your position should be involved; someone would leave every time when you would enter a room; any suggestions at a meeting you would make would be instantly dismissed without thought or just ignored; people’s eye contact with yourself was either to avoid contact or to glare; others would whisper and talk quietly amongst themselves without you included; your boss went to your subordinates regularly without getting you involved in the loop; general assistants would assist everyone, but were too busy to help you.

An excellent documented case illustrative of ostracism is a lawyer for a major law firm in New York who lost a huge expensive case that was embarrassing to the firm. The firm offered a promotion but asked the lawyer to relocate to another city to receive the promotion, which the lawyer unfortunately turned down. From there on out, the lawyer had a “feeling” that the social atmosphere towards him had changed. Henceforth, the lawyer was being excluded from meetings and decisions of which he should have had a say but were not directed towards him. Finally, the message was drilled home when the firm basketball team did not invite him to play against an opposing firm, when in the past he was always a starter for the team and was considered one of the best basketball players in the firm.

Ostracism is a form of social rejection that occurs when an individual is deliberately excluded from a social relationship or social interaction. Ostracism comes from the ancient Greek word *ostrakismos*. In ancient Greece, if someone offended you or behaved in a manner that was considered aggressive or offensive, you would put their name on a broken piece of pottery and place it in a large container in a public place. These pieces of pottery were known as *ostraca*. If a person’s name was written 6000 times, the entire community would give that person the silent treatment for ten years. Although the first references to ostracism seem to date back to 488–487 BC and the context of the son of Charmus of Collytus, Hipparchus, being “ostracized”, and later to Aristotle and his constitution of Athens, where he mentioned that ostracism was used by Cleisthenes when he reformed the constitution of Athens following the expulsion of Hippias.

Ostracism is one of the most widely used forms and socially-entrenched direct and oblivious exclusion, and some see it as more humane than corporal punishment, as when used in a time-out, but there is a deeper psychological impact that needs to be taken seriously. Ostracism is one of the most ubiquitous and powerful means of social control. This research suggests that ostracism can mean ignoring and excluding individuals and groups. The fundamental human needs that are threatened when someone is ostracized are: our sense of connection or belongingness, the control we desire between our actions and outcomes which may become uncoupled when we are ostracized, self-esteem that is shaken by feelings of shame, guilt, or inferiority, and the feeling that we have become a ‘ghost’, observing what life would be like if we did not exist. This research goes on to investigate how humans cope with belongingness needs as well as threats both in the short-term and the long-term. In general, after the initial pain and anger of being ostracized,

individuals seek to regain or reestablish the need that was threatened. For instance, if an individual's sense of belonging is threatened, they will attempt to repair the relationship with the person who has ostracized them, or they will seek others to create new relationships to restore their sense of belonging. In the long-term, if these needs cannot be restored, individuals eventually give way to feelings of alienation, helplessness, depression, and despair.

Ostracism can lower cognitive performance and lead individuals to engage in a variety of self-defeating behaviors. While it is easy to understand the negative impact of ostracism on individuals in the workplace, it can be more damaging to the organization as those negative outcomes work their way through the organization creating job tension, emotional exhaustion, and a depressed mood at work. For instance, when an individual feels ostracized or isolated, they spend valuable time talking to others about those feelings. This can lead to people "taking sides" and this leads to lower group cohesion. The morale of the ostracized employee(s) plummets and they begin to disengage from group processes. If the ostracism continues, then eventually a self-fulfilling prophecy may be created, in which the isolated individual becomes a low functioning, low valued employee, who may then legitimately be dismissed. Such a system may present a threat to the organization's long-term survival when employee productivity is not based on capability but rather, their willingness to use ostracism or bullying tactics on co-workers. Moreover, ostracism has been linked to aggression in the workplace and aggression is contrary to group cohesiveness. The evidence suggests that destiny beliefs may be related to destructive responses to ostracism.

When the need for a positive experience is threatened it can lead to lower psychological well-being and self-esteem, greater anxiety, symptoms of depression and negative emotions. It has a negative impact on employee productivity – employees are less likely to go above and beyond when they complete work tasks and are less likely to help colleagues. Also, because ostracism can hinder employees' psychological well-being, employees tend to get run-down and depleted and are at the risk of engaging in more counter-productive behaviors, like lashing out at their colleagues. Worst of all, employees may engage in what is called the spiral of silence. The spiral of silence is synonymous with the idea that speaking-up or speaking one's mind is unwise unless other organizational members share such perceptions of thoughts. Put differently, the silence can be taken literally in that employees begin to withhold opinions and concerns about organizational problem, thereby creating a culture where speaking-up is deemed unacceptable, even punishable by ostracism behavior. This is to suggest that if employees experiences ostracism, they may actively withhold concerns about this type of workplace problem. Such avoidance to speaking out privately or publically makes it difficult to manage ostracism in a workplace setting.

TYPES OF OSTRACISM FOUND IN THE WORKPLACE

Ostracism behavior tends to have many features discussed throughout this paper. We also note that ostracism behavior can influence multiple entities at once, the ostracized, the

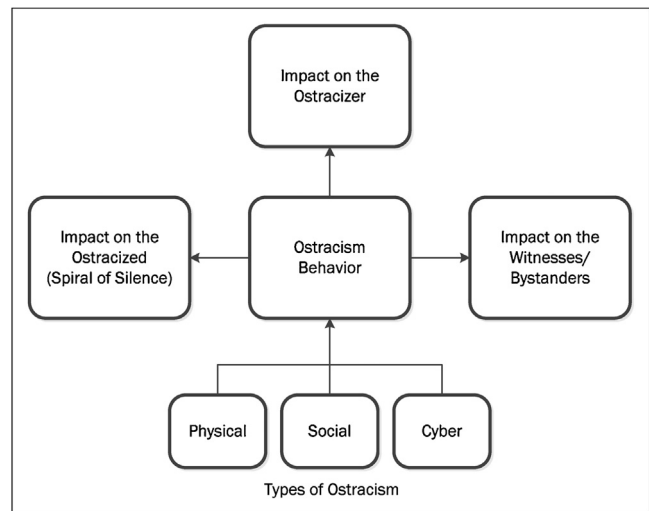


Fig. 1 Ostracism types and its influences on various constituents

ostracizer, and the (at times innocent) bystanders/witnesses. Each entity deserves attention since each is a piece of the puzzle of the ostracism process. Fig. 1 displays these types and individuals impacted by the ostracism process.

There are three main forms of ostracism based on how visible the ostracism is. These three types include: (1.) physical ostracism; (2.) social ostracism, and more recently, (3.) cyber-ostracism. Physical ostracism involves removing oneself or others from the social situation. Other forms of physical ostracism include expulsion, exile, solitary confinement, even the classic "time-out" sessions used by parents to discipline children (e.g., physical isolation/barriers to free interaction). The level of ostracism may range from separating oneself from others to merely reducing the amount of time spent with certain individuals. Social exclusion is a notion of being excluded, alone or isolated with or without explicit declarations of dislike, while rejection refers to a declaration by an individual or a group who does not want to interact with the individual. Social exclusion herein implies a broader term, as it incorporates a condition in which an individual is denied social contact. For example, China has a long history of ostracizing HIV/Aids patients, to the point where HIV-positive people have faced discrimination in the Chinese job market for years. Similarly, foreigners with this virus were banned from obtaining visas until 2010.

Social ostracism is more difficult to address because of the lack of knowledge that it is occurring. In addition, social ostracism is considered by many to be more painful than physical ostracism. Physical ostracism is direct while social ostracism is often confusing as in social ostracism one is continually reminded of the punishment. It is even worse than solitary confinement or even death, since the person is reminded continually of the active and total rejection that is taking place. Social ostracism involves an emotional withdrawal and may range from merely removing eye contact or not talking or listening to someone to applying the "silent treatment" or giving someone the "cold shoulder" or even "freezing someone out". In social ostracism, people are treated as if they were "invisible". Many co-workers practice this type of ostracism as a post-conflict behavior. The commonly used "time out" can be both physical ostracism

Table 1 Examples of ostracism in the workplace

Physical ostracism	Social ostracism	Cyber ostracism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silent treatment from a colleague. • Conversations end when you approach. • No one will go to lunch with you. • Your office is moved for no reason. • People leave the room when you enter. • People glare at you. • Your name is left off in an attendance call at meetings. • You are transferred to a lower paid job. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are not invited to lunch. • Meetings occur without your knowledge. • Key decisions are made without your input. • People whisper behind your back. • Assistants are too busy to help you. • Your boss bypasses you and goes directly to your employees. • Your ideas are dismissed immediately. • You get blamed by association for others' mistakes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your requests for social media connection is ignored. • People do not respond to your emails. • You receive 'dislikes' for your comments from your colleagues. • You are deleted from friends list. • You are not included in groups list. • Your passwords are regularly reset or deleted by administration. • You are not included in learning the new software implemented.

(dissociating oneself from working in the same committees) and social ostracism (reducing attention such as no longer part of the 'lunch bunch', not being invited with the team for drinks after work).

Both physical pain and social pain threaten basic human psychological needs, albeit differently. Researchers manipulated physical pain via a cold-presser task and social pain via an ostracism manipulation and found that both physical pain and social pain decreased participants' psychological need satisfaction, but social pain threatened it the most. In the virtual realm, a new form of ostracism has begun to occur, and that is cyber-ostracism. More than 5000 managers/employees participated in a study using a computer game to show how just two or three minutes of ostracism can produce lingering negative feelings. How can it be that such a brief experience, even when being ignored and excluded by strangers with whom the individual will never have any face-to-face interaction, can have such a powerful effect? Cyber-ostracism involves not including someone on e-mail lists, ignoring them in chat rooms and other forms of communication (i.e., posted letters, multiuser domains). Both in-person and online ostracism puts people at risk, as online experiences of ostracism may be as meaningful as those experienced in person. Table 1 offers a list of general social, physical and cyber ostracism examples. The list is not meant to be exhaustive but serves as an instrument to begin to identify these types of behaviors for the purpose of later on assessing the extent to which each of them occurs.

Arguably, ostracism make itself visible through a number of features. It may be *active ostracism* as displayed in incidents of aggressive exclusion from group/organizational functions/activities or *passive ostracism* which is demonstrated by ignoring a person or giving a person the "silent treatment" or the "cold shoulder". Active ostracism therefore differs from passive ostracism in that the term active defines behaviors as (physically, socially, or in a cyber-context) barring an individual from social interactions (e.g., exclusions on email, moving their office to another building) while passive is defined as not reacting when they (i.e., ostracized individuals) attempt to interact (e.g., not responding to email, ignoring them when they come to a meeting). Both forms can take on reactive and proactive features, meaning ostracism can occur in retrospective of

event (as in reactive) or ostracism can preempt an event (as in proactive). Exhibit 1 offers a number of responses (termed 'posture') exhibited by the organization and employees alike relative to how they experience ostracism. The different responses are likely triggered by the form and extent of ostracism experienced.

Inextricably linked, the motives behind active and passive ostracisms types are multi-fold, these can be intentional (punitive), oblivious (non-punitive), defensive and prescribed. For example, ostracism may be *intentional* (e.g., to punish someone for violation of a social norm). The "scarlet letter" is an example of intentional ostracism. A woman who allegedly had an affair was forced to wear a red A as a punishment for what she had done. The purpose was to publicly shame the woman and discourage others from associating with her. In business an example would be having your office moved out of the department, a new title that is obviously a demotion, or being asked to move to a new location. Ostracism may be *defensive* when one ignores others in anticipation of being rejected such as not being invited to be part of the team to resolve an issue whereby you could/should be an integral contributor.

Another recent example is that of President of Russia, Mr. Putin, who has seen personal ostracism considering the Ukraine crisis. The Russian leader left early from a G20 meeting in Australia in November 2014, after facing stiff criticism from other world leaders of Moscow's role in the crisis. Finally, ostracism may be *prescribed* when one is not expected to acknowledge the presence of others (e.g., lack of eye contact, sharing a seat on a bus). For example, Judy Curry, a Georgia Tech atmospheric scientist, has experienced ostracism from the community around her. Because she repeatedly clashed with former colleagues after she publicly doubted the extent of global warming and criticized the way mainstream scientists operate, she is uncertain whether anyone in academia or elsewhere will ever want to employ her.

IMPACT OF THE OSTRACISM ON THE INDIVIDUAL

Ostracism is reflexively painful, depletes fundamental needs, and is highly resistant to variations in situational

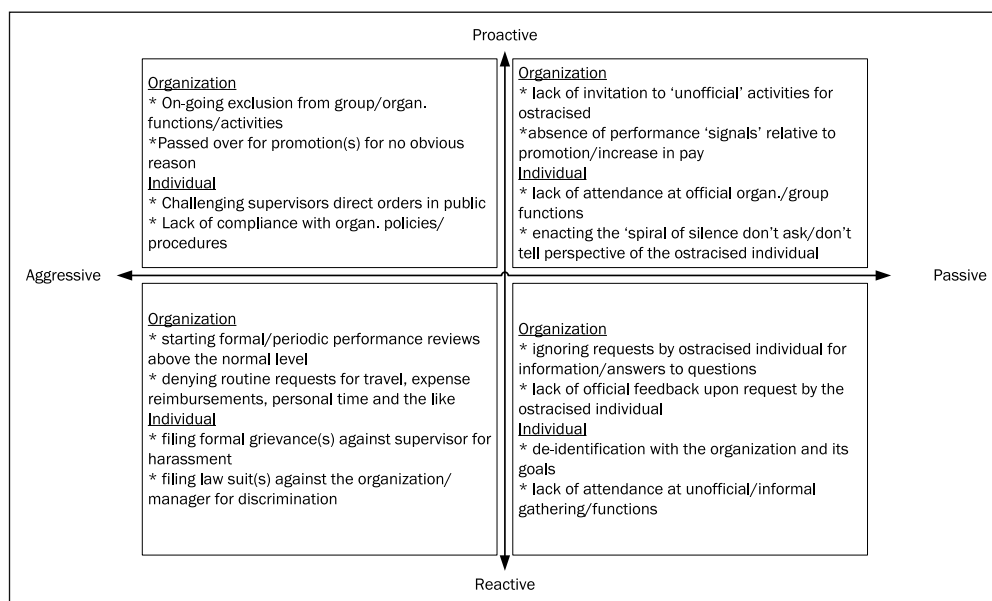


Exhibit 1 Posture of organization/individual relative to ostracism

context or individual differences. For an individual to remain part of the group, people will conform to the opinion of most of their peers. It can be argued from an evolutionary perspective that the detection of ostracism evolved through a signal, a feeling of pain. On the other hand, individuals react differently to ostracism depending on the varying levels of self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, narcissism, and attachment style. The victim of ostracism is cast into a *Catch-22* position, where legitimate complaints are viewed with a mixture of suspicion and derision. Individuals react to fight, tend-and-befriend, freeze and flight the ostracizing groups. Reactions are led by diverging motives such as a desire to be re-included, antisocial and aggressive behavior, or attempts to flee the situation.

The expectation of a future acceptance by an ostracizing group seems to be a key predictor of an ostracized individual coping with rejection. If an ostracized individual has positive expectations it tends to draw him/her closer to the ostracizing group of people. This behavior can be observed in individuals with high self-esteem. Conversely, people who tend to have a low self-esteem distance themselves from the ostracizing group. Low self-esteem individuals ostracize as a defense mechanism against criticism or rejection, while high self-esteem ones use it to terminate relationships.

People classify themselves based on their membership in certain social categories and define themselves based on membership in those groups. In the workplace, employees identify themselves as a part of the firm, but also to their work group, their department, their union, their lunch group, their age group, and so on. When membership in these groups is threatened by the process of ostracism and the possible loss of their shared identity with these groups, the impact on the individual can be devastating and difficult to reverse.

People's immediate reactions are quite similar across different forms of rejection in terms of negative affect and lowered self-esteem. Following these immediate responses, people's reactions are influenced by the type

and severity of the rejection experience. Three types of distinct motives were identified as being pro-social, anti-social, and socially avoidant behavioral responses. Behavioral responses to ostracism attempt to fortify relational needs (belonging, self-esteem, shared understanding, and trust) which lead to pro-social thoughts and behaviors. Ingratation is a psycho-social technique aimed at influencing to increase their attractiveness in the eyes of others, frequently accompanied by corporal signs seeking affection, empathy and approval. Another tactic is to fortify efficacy/existence needs of control and recognition that may be dealt with through antisocial thoughts and behaviors. These may be exemplified by complimenting and flattering the integrator. Chronic exposure to ostracism appears to deplete coping resources, resulting in depression and helplessness.

In-groups are viewed as social groups in which members engender feelings of loyalty and respect towards other group members, mostly based on membership in the group. Humans have evolved empathic systems to negotiate their environment successfully. Examples of in-groups include families, culture, religion, and so on. In the workplace membership of in-groups is based on work groups, trade unions etc. as discussed above. Members of in-groups extend benefits to other group members, often providing privileges that are denied to persons outside the group. Juxtaposed are out-groups, which are social groups towards which non-members hold strong negative feelings. Members of in-groups usually have a belongingness bias towards members of their group while actively disassociating themselves from members of out-groups.

It has been proposed that members of cohesive in-groups tend, through a desire to reduce conflict or avoid embarrassment, to make sub-optimal decisions, or group-think. Individual members of in-groups often set aside doubts in making hasty decisions that conform to the prevalent views of the group. The emphasis on high group cohesion as a necessary condition for groupthink has been challenged as it is proposed instead that the symptoms of groupthink often are

associated with social identification with an in-group whether the group is highly cohesive.

The tendency of members of in-groups to suppress dissent, at the expense of exercising judgments, occurs from an irrational desire to avoid isolation or alienation from the group (e.g., ostracism). Often, the fear of isolation from the group is greater than the fear that the decision may be irrational. When individuals agree with the strongly held view of the group this leads to feelings of self-confidence and reduced fears of isolation. Alternatively, when the views that one holds are in the minority, and the minority situation escalates, the individual becomes more uncertain and the tendency to suppress his or her point of view increases as a mechanism to avoid or reduce isolation.

RESPONSES TO OSTRACISM BY THE OSTRACIZED

In general, theoretical work indicates that the reaction to ostracism is temporal. The initial reaction to ostracism is pain and is a global response that occurs immediately after rejection. Following this experience of pain, being ostracized then leads to behaviors aimed at recovering thwarted needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. The ostracized individual often works in a positive, socially attentive, pro-social manner and attempts to strengthen bonds to others to gain acceptance. For instance, they may become more helpful and accommodating to fellow employees or they may work harder on team projects.

Alternatively, or if pro-social behaviors do not lead to positive self-affirmation, anti-social behaviors such as aggression may occur. Other individuals may choose to avoid the situation or the individual who is ostracizing them. Long-term ostracism may reach beyond purely psychological responses. Many targets state that they develop health problems such as migraine, heart palpitations, and increased asthma attacks. In interviews with people who had been ostracized, people who have suffered exclusion for long periods of time, individuals self-isolate, perhaps hoping to avoid further rejection. The study also reported depression, suicidal ideas, and suicide attempts. They eventually may feel little ability to change their situation and resign to feeling unworthy of attention at all. This may lead to a sense of helplessness. This emotional trauma, as opposed to physical trauma, is relived over and over by some individuals.

The type of response to ostracism may be linked to individual differences such as attachment style, need for belonging, or self-esteem, to name a few. In the aftermath of the ostracizing episode, people experience three, almost simultaneous motives: a heightened desire for social connections, angry, antisocial urges to defend oneself or to hurt the source of the rejection, and a motivation to avoid further rejection and its accompanying hurt. The choice of responses can be predicted by people's construal of the rejection incident. These constraints include fairness of the rejection, expectation of the relationship being repaired, pervasiveness or chronicity of the rejection, value of the damaged relationship, perceived costs of the rejection, and the possibility of relational alternatives. Pro-social responses will occur if the relationship is valuable and they think it can be repaired and if they perceive that there are

many costs associated with the loss of the relationship. Individuals will respond with antisocial behavior if they perceive the incident to be unfair, and they will withdraw or avoid if they have alternative relationships available or if the rejection or ostracizing has been going on for a long time.

People differ in the degree to which they react to negative interpersonal incidents based on their agreeableness and their self-esteem. Agreeable people and people with high self-esteem perceive less rejection and are less likely to respond in a negative or avoidant fashion. However, other research did not find widespread support for the idea that personality attributes are related to individual's reactions to ostracism.

IMPACT ON THE OSTRACIZER

Although there continues a burgeoning stream of research in regard to the ostracized, there is relatively little research in regard to: the one who is the ostracizer, for those that are witnesses to ostracism, or the unwilling participants in ostracism. As there are many reasons for ostracism, there will be just as many in regard to as to why the ostracizer is acting accordingly. One research stream supports a form of ostracism as top management is attempting to illustrate bad behavior of an employee and to motivate that employee to "come back into the fold" as they violated the norms of the group in some way. Even this type of ostracism suggests that the ostracizer will feel unpleasantness, self-degradation and fatigue. Other research suggested that ostracism was used as either a punishment or as a defense against criticism or rejection with the ostracizer feeling a disconnection towards the ostracized and a sense of controlling.

Research on the ostracizer is still in a nascent state and the results are not conclusive, and we currently can find none that directly is a study that occurs within the work environment. However, through non-work-related research, we could draw some tentative conclusions. If ostracizing a stranger, the ostracizer feels more control, high self-esteem and a greater meaningful existence, but no control feelings with close others. To summarize the little research in regard to the ostracizer, the results seem to be different but negative to the firm. The ostracizer will feel a decreased sense of belonging, increased anger, ego depletion, and a decreased need to make new social connections. In total, there seems to be a greater negative of psychological costs for the ostracizer with greater feelings of guilt, shame, distress and lower relatedness. Long term ostracism or severe ostracism results in consequences ranging from self-destructive behaviors (suicidal thoughts and attempts, alcoholism) to aversive effects of ostracism on their physical mental health or even much more worse by mass shooting. Hence, ostracism is a double-edge sword for the firm, both negative for those that are ostracized as well as for the ostracizer.

IMPACT ON THOSE WHO WITNESS/ BYSTANDERS TO THE OSTRACISM PROCESS

Not only is ostracism painful to the victim and the ostracizer, it may also cause negative affect to those who merely observe the process or act of ostracism. Witnesses feel the pain of others' ostracism as their own. Social learning

theory suggests that people learn by observation, visual images or through verbal codes. People can learn from good experience, bad experiences or from imitation. All of them occur very often by individuals engaged in behavior that they have previously witnessed others doing. Witnessing the actions of others, people that are close to us, can affect our participation in both compliant and uncommon behavior. Imitation has also been found to be more important in the initial acquisition and performance of novel actions than in its maintenance or termination of behavioral patterns once established.

PERFORMING AN OSTRACISM AUDIT

The prelude to any audit is the recognition of a need to audit. The premise of this audit concerns the need for proactive measures towards reducing and ultimately eliminating acts of ostracism in the workplace. While an audit is reactive in nature, it is the intent that the audit will bring forth proactive ideas and measures serving as a pulse-check for progress on detecting and eradicating forms of ostracism to protect firm future success potential. In the long-term, the audit offers an intermittent mechanism (at a rate deemed appropriate by the firm) to check whether proactive measures have been successfully addressed and to detect any lingering concerns. [Model 1](#) depicts a 6-step auditing process, each of which will we elaborate on next.

Step 1: Problem Recognition “Ostracism as a Problem”

Ostracism is a pervasive and serious workplace matter. We suggest that the frequency of ostracism has created a need to evaluate objectively the effectiveness of organizational culture (i.e. what is acceptable behavior and what is not) where organizational culture has been prone to dictate ostracism behavior and unwanted outcomes. An audit rela-

tive to ostracism behavior is in order whose outcomes can help prevent and/or resolve ostracism in the workplace. An audit is a planned and documented activity performed by a set of qualified personnel to determine by evaluation of objective evidence, the adequacy and compliance with established procedures, or applicable documents, and the effectiveness of implementation.

Yet, bringing attention to ostracism within the firm is problematic on its own, as it can be those who “raise the alarm” who become ostracized as a consequence (note our spiral of silence argument). At this stage, it is an internal process and frankly requires a champion to lead the way and to convince/enthuse others of the necessity of such an audit. The value proposition must be developed by those championing the process. If ostracism is a commonly perceived/identified issue among many employees, the firm may wish to agree that a set of principles to detect/classify and report ostracism behavior alongside an interest in the probable causes of ostracism behavior is what will assist greater workplace happiness and productivity.

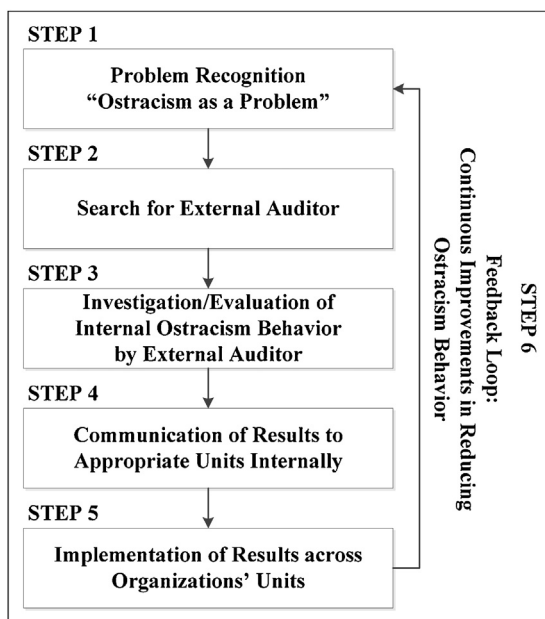
Step 2: Search for External Auditor

While internal to the firm a champion can raise awareness of the ostracism challenge, the likelihood than an internally-led process yields the desired results the context of such an emotionally entrenched topic is unlikely and can pose offence to the firm’s climate and culture. Peripheral assistance through the means of trusted external auditors would instead obtain the most objective and accurate picture of ostracism behaviors within the workplace. This would be particularly comforting to employees in cases of managerial abuses of ostracism. Unquestionably, external auditors ensure quality in the process and have a higher chance of eliminating biases. Doing so will assist to protect the workforce’s physical and mental health impacts.

An external person is of help only if they are sourced independently, and not by referral from a previous workplace colleague or existing colleagues. The auditor has to be trustworthy and competent in the area of ostracism. They must be competently working closely alongside internal champions but are able to separate and take charge of the sensitive task. Prior to the audit, the most influential and non-obstructive way internal champions can assist the external auditor with the tasks ahead is to endorse this audit, not only by addressing ‘what’ will occur, but ‘why’ this is a necessary step for the firm. This tactic holds especially true if ostracism reaches across a new territory for the firm.

Step 3: Investigation/Evaluation of Internal Ostracism Behavior by External Auditor

Objectivity is key to an investigation/evaluation of workplace ostracism behavior. The task at hand for the external auditor is to evaluate the adequacy and compliance to any existing procedures and likewise point to avenues for improvement in the process. Ultimately the auditor is expected to make recommendations about why ostracism exists, the extent to which it has become visible in the firm, how to approach the alleviation of ostracism and to offer measures which can guarantee the effectiveness of the proposed implementation.



Model 1 Ostracism auditing process

For these recommendations to have meaning it is equally important to understand those processes of ostracism which are deliberate and conscious acts, in addition to those which are oblivious acts of ostracism, i.e., those that the ostracizer may not be aware of themselves.

The tools used by an auditor should examine the overall firm's 'state of health', attitudes of managerial staff towards ostracism, employees' experiences with and perception of ostracism-related behavior, among other elements that relate to assessing ostracism and the causes and impact thereof. Linked to Step 2, the idea is that cooperation of internal employees will occur only if the auditor has substantial buy-in from employees. We are all vulnerable to the process, some perhaps more than others. Bystanders. Ostracizer. Ostracized. The firm most of all.

Because the cause of ostracism is generally not to hurt the ostracized person but to self-protect, we do not advocate any recommendations for punishment by exiting ostracizers from the firm (unless it is voluntary) as this can have more harmful effects than not addressing the issues at all. We advocate that any tool used or recommendation made ought to support for the people who are the culprits or those who have experienced or are witness to ostracism. The idea is to evaluate whether and to what extent the ostracizer needs help perhaps in fighting their battle. Mental health perhaps. Likewise, the idea is likewise to address the concerns of the ostracized individuals. The ostracized individual is likely not at fault, however the ostracized individual may not know/believe this to be true. The audit serves the purpose to not only detect, but to address the ostracism phenomenon in the light of its different stakeholders and the features and motives and other nuances it presents itself with. Not to be forgotten are the people who may have held on ostracism experience for a number of years. How can barriers be broken down? It is an uncomfortable experience to speak about. Varied experiences must be detected, and perhaps some of the audience have still not clued in that there is ostracism at play or that they may be engaging in ostracism behavior – it is after a deliberate or oblivious act. Focus group may be of assistance here.

External auditor may invite affected and non-affected individuals to focus group/s discussions, offer ways to provide anonymous feedback under the premise that any data collected will be used to inform the development of the firm's action plan. This can be followed by a firm-wide invitation for anonymous survey responses to the ostracisms behavior identified. For the process to work, consultation with a representative sample of the firm is a must. The process must give those who have felt ostracized and bystanders of these events a safe avenue to speak out on what they have witnessed, while protecting their identities. If this is something the firm cares about, the evaluation should include a rigorous self-assessment measure for all units, this will (still anonymously) highlight whether and the extent to which ostracism protrudes throughout the entire firm or a few specific units. A set of recommendation results from this process.

Step 4: Communication of Results to Appropriate Units Internally

So, what are the mechanisms through which the recommendations can be communicated through? The slogan "we come

in peace" comes to mind. Whichever method of information dissemination is selected to be most purposeful by the firm, the lead executive would hear about it first. Generally speaking, the process should alleviate pain, anxiety and uncertainty, with the intent of making it a more pleasant environment for all. Addressing the 'why' of the audit (see Step 2), becomes important here once more. The last thing an audit should do it to frighten or make employees and managers nervous, especially is they present part of the problem.

What are the mechanisms by which this is best communicated to the ostracized person and the ostracizer? Disseminating data to units will go to the leaders of the units who will then disseminate the information within their units. Training will be offered to the leaders of each unit to ensure a unified approach is taken to addressing ostracism concerns, whereby the approach or extent to which recommendations are observed will influence the extent to which recommendations are implemented. In cases where the leader of any unit is responsible for a culture of ostracism, the lead executive ought to be advised by the auditor of the circumstances.

Communicating the results/recommendations, the auditor is responsible for: highlighting strategies relative to what a leader of unit or a manager might do to recognize ostracism in his/her own behavior; offering ways the manager may deal with individuals who report ostracizing behavior versus those who report to have observed ostracizing behavior; how to address the concerns of those who do not speak up about ostracism among others; and how to assist those already ostracized individuals to become re-engaged. This is about creating an environment where every single employee can have a voice and be respected for having a voice, even for those who feel like they do not have a voice.

Communicating the results/recommendations throughout hierarchies will take finesse, as some will already believe themselves to be culprits while others may fear further ostracism due to the fact that they have cooperated in this matter. What is important to remember is that every member of the firm is part of the system in which we operate. No one is immune to ostracism, and relapses will occur to those most prone to use ostracizing behaviors. Checking pulse on the challenges frequently is important to ensure progress towards goals is made.

Step 5: Implementation of Results across Organizations' Units

Empowering employees to understand themselves and what ostracism means to them ought to be at the core of the implementation. We do not advocate for another online training tool. The approach must be more unique than that. In fact, we advocate for leaders to set the tone by enacting appropriate behavior, based on the recommendations made. When leaders enact appropriate behavior, employees will follow. Alongside leaders setting the tone, implementation ought to include a creation of communication channels whereby employers can increase employee's interaction and to have proper channels for reporting insults, threats or abuses, these include: healthy communication and conflict resolution, surveys pertaining to social inappropriateness

from time to time. There is a philosophy underpinning a firm and therefore its culture. Understanding how to address ostracism in the workplace cultural context is important.

Step 6: Feedback Loops — Continuous Improvements in Reducing Ostracism Behavior

A natural reflection on this process would warrant a feedback loop whereby participants within the process have a non-threatening opportunity/ability to offer constructive feedback to the process detecting an eradicating ostracism behavior. Finally, audits ought to be performed regularly (or at the will of the firm) to uphold the standards of the firm and to ensure that any changes to implementation are held consistent throughout time. It is ultimately dependent upon the extent to which ostracism permeates through the firm, hence we cannot propose a one-size-fits all approach.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Ostracism generally refers to the process of rejection or exclusion of an individual by another individual or group. Ostracism behavior is problematic for a myriad of reasons and more importantly can potentially impact more than just the ostracized person. The ostracizer and witnesses are just as involved, directly and indirectly, in the ostracism process. The negative outcomes of ostracism are such that the firm is deleteriously affected. In this paper, we examined the

significance of ostracism in the workplace, its constituents and outcomes of actions of these constituents. With the premise of ostracism behavior as an undesirable element in firms, we proposed a firm audit of ostracism to identify possible ostracism cases across the firm and its stakeholders and suggest a plan for correction.

The cyber form of ostracism has recently come to the forefront due to firms having more telework employees and the use of e-tools such as email and e-groups. People are now integrated with an e-format at the office and can be ostracized through this new format. As all firms are affected by global business, antecedents and consequences of ostracism vary across different countries and cultures, and possibilities exist that one culture (in-group) may ostracize other cultures.

Convinced of the harmful impact on a number of stakeholders and most of all the likely long-lasting impact on the performance of the firm (if unattended), we strongly recommend an audit for ostracism in the workplace with implementation procedures for corrective actions. This phase of correcting ostracism is expected to be the most lucrative to the firm if done correctly, since it potentially ceases ostracism activities. Managing ostracism in the workplace ought to receive major attention due its importance. This will take a champion. The process would appear to be a delicate one due to the changes required in attitudes as well as processes whereby attitudes are usually the tougher elements to change. Managerial interventions and techniques must be discussed, and action plans implemented and sustained.



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