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Original Article

Organizational Ostracism: A Potential Framework in Order to Deal with It

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ABSTRACT

Background: Organizational ostracism is defined as a violation of norms that we are suggested to acknowledge at the workplace. It results in the exclusion of one person or multiple persons, and causes damage to our innate need to belong. This kind of behaviorism can be engaged through a hierarchical or nonhierarchical relationship. Three elements interact in the framework of organizational ostracism: the actor, the target, and the institution. Our aim was to describe the different factors interacting with every element in order to produce recommendations targeting to prevent the occurrence of such behaviorism in an institution and to help targets of such a violence in order to handle this situation and go forward. As psychological impact of ostracism has frequently been studied in the literature, we focused on its impact on professional tasks.

Methods: We performed a questionnaire-based study about organizational ostracism. This questionnaire was established through an online platform (<https://www.sondageonline.com>) and made available through the following link: <https://goo.gl/forms/KrkVXe3bMEc79cau2>. A keyword was sent to all participants. We created a 23-interrogation questionnaire with open and short questions. Nonwritten consent was obtained from all participants.

Results: The actor of ostracism engaged in ostracism, in most of the cases, with other persons without a real purpose. The actor of ostracism had an antecedent of problematic relationship at work in 82.9% of the cases. Of the participants, 58.5% were of the view that ostracism aimed to cause hurt and isolate them. Professional isolation was observed in 58.5% of the cases; 51.2% of the participants tried to improve their work potential and explained their reaction by an intrinsic motivation. The organization atmosphere was judged to be bad in most of the cases.

Conclusion: Our study showed that ostracism was mainly observed in public practice.

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1. Introduction

Ostracism has many definitions in the literature. Many words have been used in the literature to describe such behaviorism, such as isolation [1–4], social exclusion [5], rejection [6], abandonment [7], and being out of the loop [8]. Organizational ostracism is defined when an individual or a group omits to take actions that engage other organizational members when it is socially appropriate to do so [1]. As a target of ostracism, one may feel overlooked, excluded, or ignored by other individuals or groups [1,9]. We must distinguish ostracism from everyday routine behavior in which we ignore and are ignored by many others, such as when we share sidewalks, hallways, public transportation, or other communal

spaces with others. The experience of ostracism occurs when we violate norms that we are suggested to acknowledge [1]. It may or may not be practiced within a hierarchical relationship. This experience is harmful because it is in opposition to our innate need to belong, which is critical to our well-being [10]. This kind of behavior is not as well defined and studied as harassment or violence, and its impact on individual behavior has not been well studied. Some authors described the similarity between the impact of ostracism and physical pain [11]. We can ask ourselves if we faced such a situation, and we can wonder whether we are really being rejected or just imagining it. Few reports studied ostracism as a unique construct at workplace [12]. Ferris and coworkers [13] published an integrated model of workplace ostracism. Other

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authors focused on different aspects of ostracism, including the functionality of social exclusion [14], responses to threats to belonging [15], self-regulation to ostracism [16], impact of social exclusion [17], and mood consequences [18].

Our aim was to describe the framework of organizational ostracism and all the predisposing factors, in order to produce recommendations targeting the different elements interacting in this system, to prevent the occurrence of such behaviorism in an institution, and help targets of such a violence in order to handle this situation and go forward. We did not aim to assess the psychological impact of ostracism, which has been well studied in the literature.

2. Materials and methods

We performed a questionnaire-based study about organizational ostracism. This questionnaire was established through an online platform (<https://www.sondageonline.com>) and made available through the following link: <https://goo.gl/forms/krkVXe3bMEc79cau2>. A keyword was sent to all participants: OSTRACISM.

We created a 23-interrogation questionnaire with open and short questions. The results were instantly treated and sent to our e-mail address.

The questions were chosen in order to explore the different factors influencing the target's reactions and characteristics, actor's behavior, impact of ostracism, and influence of the organization's atmosphere.

All the participants gave their nonwritten consent.

The first page of the questionnaire was about the definition of ostracism in order to avoid confusion and explain the context to the participants.

3. Results

Forty-two participants were enrolled in our study, and they answered all the questions. Five persons were invited to complete the questionnaire, but they mentioned that they never faced or heard about such a situation. We tried to focus our results on the three elements of the framework—the actor, the target, and the organization. Besides, we presented the impact of ostracism without emphasizing on the psychological outcome.

- (1) *Target*: Of the 42 participants 11 have been working in the private sector and 31 in the public sector. The experience was unexpected in 24 cases. The victim was alone to face ostracism in 11 cases. Ostracism was viewed as purposeful in 58.5% of the cases and aimed, according to the targets, to cause hurt. Five participants did not understand the reasons of ostracism. The reasons of ostracism consisted, according to the targets, in jealousy, power abuse, bad management, and a lack of communication and persuasive power. The targets described their character, before the experience of ostracism, as sensitive to others' reactions and behaviorism (17 cases), enjoyed (15 cases), and mistrustful (5 cases).
- (2) *Actor*: The actor was hierarchically superior in 30 cases (75%) and engaged in ostracism with other persons in 16 cases. The actor of ostracism had antecedents of relationship problems in 33 cases (82.9%).
- (3) *Organization*: The actor and the target worked in the same working place in 36/41 cases. The situation was temporary in 22 cases (46.5%). Concerning the institution's atmosphere, 33 participants estimated that the hierarchy was respected in the institution. They judged that the persons working together did not share either the same values (27 cases) or the same

objectives (27 cases). The institution atmosphere was viewed as bad in 20 cases.

- (4) *Outcome*: Of the patients, 57.5% presented anxiety. The anxiety induced by ostracism was judged as very intense in five cases, with a scale score of 5. Of the participants, 31.7% suffered from depression and 14.6% needed some rest to face the situation. The ostracism caused professional isolation of 58.5% of the participants. Among the participants, 39% became aggressive. This aggressiveness was due to irritability and induced by the view of the actor of ostracism and provocation of other persons. Of the participants, 51.2% increased their work performance. Many reasons were evoked to explain the increase of work performance and consisted in the intimate feeling of self-accomplishment, need of contraindicating the actor of ostracism, search for professional progression, and love of work.

4. Discussion

Our study showed that ostracism was mainly observed in public practice. The actor of ostracism engaged in ostracism, in most of the cases, with other persons without a real purpose. The actor of ostracism had an antecedent of problematic relationship at work in most of the cases. Many participants viewed that ostracism aimed to cause hurt and to isolate them. Professional isolation was observed in most of the cases. In opposition to the literature review, ostracism did not induce depression or aggressiveness in most of the cases. Besides, the majority of the participants tried to improve their work potential and attributed their reaction to an intrinsic motivation. The organization atmosphere was judged bad in most of the cases.

Our study focused on three elements forming the framework of ostracism: the target, the actor, and the organization's atmosphere. The actor of ostracism may be aware of his/her attitude defining purposeful ostracism or unaware of it defining unpurposeful ostracism [1,19]. Practicing ostracism can be emotionally painful for the actor, and sharing this behavior with other persons helps diffuse responsibility for its hurtful impact on the target [20]. This experience can induce the feelings of discomfort, guilt, and stress [21]. In our study, the engagement in ostracism was mainly collective. Unpurposeful ostracism may be practiced by overlooking colleagues or explained by interpersonal conflict [22]. Many authors reported that geographical dispersion seems to represent another organizational factor that may contribute to unpurposeful ostracism because it can increase the ease overlooking coworkers [22]. In opposition to these findings, our study showed that the actor and the target worked in the same workplace in most of the cases. For the target, the experience of ostracism is very harmful. The difference between ostracism and other negative workplace experiences, including bullying, harassment, interpersonal deviance, aggression, and social undermining, is that ostracism is not centered necessarily on the purpose of causing harm. Psychological consequences of ostracism are due to ambiguity about not only why it happened, but also whether it even happened at all [23]. Confrontation cannot be used because those who deliberately engage in ostracism, for whatever reason, can readily deny that it occurred [9]. Hence, coping with ostracism seems to be very challenging. Targets of full ostracism experience have more internal attributions about the cause of their exclusion (unpublished observation). In our study, five participants did not understand the reason of ostracism, and most of them justified it by personal conflict or jealousy. According to Robinson and coworkers [24], there are two primary organizational antecedents of purposeful ostracism: low costs associated with engaging in ostracism and limited alternative mechanisms that can serve the same function as ostracism. Organizational ostracism can be explained by different

understanding of socially appropriate behavior [25]. A weak organizational culture is defined when values, goals, and beliefs of an organization are not strongly shared and understood by all members [26]. These reasons were also observed in our study. Organizational diversity and dissimilarity can also lead to unpurposeful ostracism [27]. In our study, there was no organizational diversity, but gender diversity could explain such a behaviorism and we did not focus on that. The impact of ostracism seems to depend on its intensity and degree [28]. It is more intense when the experience is pervasive rather than partial and chronic rather than episodic [24]. The experience was episodic in most of the cases in our study. The major impact of ostracism is the decrease of behavioral contributions. Robinson and coworkers [24] divided the effects of ostracism into pragmatic and psychological effects. Pragmatic effects are task related. Targets sustain negative work-related outcomes when they feel excluded [29]. Besides, organizational ostracism can lead to a loss of resources and create a cascade of subsequent resource loss leading to the incapacity of getting one's job done [30]. Psychological effects of ostracism have mainly been studied in psychological studies [2] including sadness [31], generalized hurt feelings [32], anger [33], shame [33], and emotional numbness [34]. According to Robinson et al [24], the impact of ostracism could be moderated by acting on two major factors: the degree of awareness of being ostracized and the degree of threat posed by the perceived ostracism. One's awareness of being ostracized at work is likely to strengthen the psychological impact [35]. This kind of vigilance may be explained by a proper characteristic or the context of new employment [36]; a loss of power may lead to perceive ostracism by higher-ups [37]. By contrast, the degree of threat may be influenced by the social value of those doing the ostracism, whether it is unexpected and one's attributions for the ostracism. Persons who identify with their organization or workgroup, or rely on their job for a significant amount of self-worth may be affected more negatively [38]. When ostracism is unexpected, its impact is more intense [39]. A lack of social connections to other organizational members may lead to a negative behavioral outcome and decreased performances [40,41]. This impact is higher when task interdependence is high. This fact was not assessed in our study. Besides, ostracism may induce negative behavioral consequences with deviant and antisocial behavior [9]. Positive behavioral outcomes have rarely been reported, but according to some authors, it may be induced by particular moderators that are mainly represented by both strong motivation and efficacy about reinclusion [24]. High motivation plays a key role in the positive impact [42,43]. A positive outcome is also observed when the group was seen as important to one's identity [44] or when our belief is that these efforts will be effective [24]. In opposition to the literature review, in which negative impact and decreased professional performance have been reported, the majority of the participants in our study (51.2%) increased their work potential. This may be explained by the episodic nature of ostracism in most of the cases or the fact of being targeted with other persons. The latter situation could maintain the innate need to belong, even if it is to the rejected group, and reduce the impact of isolation. Besides, the majority of the participants described their intrinsic motivation at work. A limitation of our study is that we did not emphasize the way found by the majority of the participants to achieve this kind of motivation. Besides, our study contained a bias of selection because all the participants are still working, and we did not ask other persons who might stop working because of the psychological impact of ostracism. Motivation plays a key role in the framework of ostracism. Many theories are centered on the motivation process. Some theories focus on the needs of employees [44]. The second one focuses on the necessity to perceive a good response to be motivated [45], and on the cognitive and emotional need of employees [46]. The Achilles'

heel of these theories consists in the innate need to belong to a group, but ostracism is based on rejection and exclusion, which logically induces demotivation and negative behavior. The problematic is centered on the manner that we have to use in order to induce intrinsic motivation that is independent of the colleagues' or leaders' reactions or answers to our own work. This can be reached if the target is able to perceive the importance of self-accomplishment and determine personal objectives at work. According to our results and the literature review, we can act on the interactions of the three items in order to reduce organizational ostracism. In case of nonhierarchical ostracism, a good manner of leadership should be promoted in the institutions in order to limit everyone's tasks, promote equity, and motivate and empower the team. A manager's leadership style influences motivation, morale, and retention in staff. Common managerial styles are transformational, transactional, and *laissez-faire*. Leaders' style depends on their educational development and organizational culture. Thus, organizational culture seems to play a key role because of its impact on the manager's style and staff's motivation [47]. Victims of ostracism should focus on their extraprofessional network and avoid social isolation. They should avoid actors with antecedents of work conflicts and focus on their intrinsic satisfaction at work without expectation of a positive response. Cases of ostracism were reported, according to our study, mainly in public practice. This may be explained by the fact that private practice focuses on work skills. On the contrary, public practice is still polluted by personal and unpurposeful conflicts.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no financial interest.

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