



Workplace Ostracism as a Trigger for Counterproductive Behaviors: Examining the Mediating Role of Depressed Mood in Academic Institutions

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ABSTRACT

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This research aims to understand the linkage between workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behavior (CWB), with a special emphasis on the mediating role of depressed mood. The social isolation of employees leads to a high level of stress and anxiety and decreases employees' job satisfaction due to feelings of worthlessness. The study employs quantitative research techniques and focuses on managerial employees in two leading public universities in Punjab, Pakistan. Stratified random sampling was used to select a representative sample of the population. The results show that workplace ostracism has a positive correlation with CWB, indicating that employees who experience being ignored are more likely to exhibit negative behaviors. Furthermore, the study reveals that depressed mood partially mediates this relationship, implying that negative affectivity enhances the effects of ostracism on counterproductive work behaviors. These findings have implications for university management, suggesting that interventions to prevent workplace ostracism and promote positive mental health could lead to increased productivity. The novelty of the study lies in its exploration of the relationship between stress, self-esteem, and depressed mood as a mediating factor, which has not been fully explored in previous research.

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1.0 Introduction

Workplace ostracism which refers to the act of excluding or ignoring individuals at the workplace has recently become a topic of interest owing to the severe consequences it has on employees and the overall functioning of organizations (Asmita et al., 2024). The social isolation of employees leads to a high level of stress and anxiety and decreases employees' job satisfaction due to feelings of worthlessness. Concerning organizational behaviour, ostracism is particularly dangerous, as it may result in negative outcomes, including the decline in trust, decreased collaboration of teams, and CWB (Zappalà et al., 2022). Such behaviours that include lack of effort, absenteeism and even sabotage not only affect the organization negatively but also worsen the situation of the outcast. As the workplace relationships become more complicated and more competitive environment becomes more prevalent, it is imperative to understand the relations between workplace ostracism, employee mental health, and behavioral outcomes (Ayub et al., 2021).

In this study, WO is described as the level to which an individual feels neglected or marginalized by his or her colleagues in the workplace irrespective of whether the act was done deliberately or not. CWB can be defined as voluntary behaviours that are detrimental to an organization or the individuals within it, in the short or long term. On the other hand, Depressed Mood (DM) is a mood state which can be defined as the feeling of sadness, hopelessness, and lack of interest in activities which may be precipitated by events at work such as ostracism. WO and CWB have been related in previous research but the current study focuses on the psychological process, specifically DM that might explain the WO-CWB relationship. It is reasonable to assume that rejected employees because of feelings of rejection and isolation may become depressed and therefore act in a counterproductive manner at the workplace. Through this relationship, it will be easier for organizations to spot the source of behavior problems and work towards enhancing the working conditions.

The general research question of this study is the absence of understanding the mechanisms through which workplace ostracism causes counterproductive work behavior with regard to employee's emotional health. Although the detrimental consequences of ostracism have been acknowledged, many organizations do not understand how it affects the employees' psychological state and how this leads to adverse work behavior (Zhu & Zhang, 2021). This research therefore aims at filling this gap by assessing the moderating role of depressed mood in the relationship between workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behavior. Therefore, the research is focused on the employees of public universities which enable to pay attention to the specifics of the academic context in which the mechanisms of exclusion may be even less apparent (Sümer et al., 2020).

The importance of this study is based on the fact that the findings of the study could be useful for the leaders of organizations and personnel directors. Knowing the dynamics of workplace ostracism, emotions, and behaviors will enable organizations to develop prevention strategies that can support creation of healthy work environments, improve mental health, and minimize instances of counterproductive work behavior (Singh et al., 2024). This study is of great

interest especially in the academic institutions since interaction with others and group performance influence the performance of the individuals and the group as a whole. This can help policy makers to devise policies that can help in minimizing cases of ostracism and enhance working relationship (Bilal et al., 2021). The overall purpose of this study is to test the mediating role of depressed mood in the link between workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behaviours in employees of public universities (Ugwu et al., 2023). In this regard, the study aims at making a contribution to the existing literature on workplace relations and processes with a view of helping organisations to effectively manage social and emotional aspects of work (Lee, 2021). By doing so, it looks to develop healthier and more efficient workplaces for people to work in and make them feel appreciated and welcomed.

2.0 Literature Review

WO has recently captured the interest of OB scholars due to its detrimental effects on well-being and organisational performance. Ostracism which is the act of being ignored, excluded or isolated by others in the workplace can be seen as a form of nonverbal communication or social exclusion. A study done by Williams (2007) has shown that workplace ostracism is different from other other negative workplace behavior such as bullying or harassment as it is not as obvious as the other two. The ill effects of workplace ostracism have been highlighted and the research revealed that excluded employees experience emotional and psychological problems that hamper motivation, job satisfaction, and performance (Robinson et al., 2013).

Thus, rejected workers may feel lonely on the workplace and demotivate as well as decrease productivity. Another critical concept in the study of workplace behavior is the Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB), which is the act of an employee intending to harm his or her organization or its people. CWBs can then be described as any negative behavior exhibited at the workplace and this may include theft, sabotage, truancy or deliberate organized workplace slowdowns according to Spector and (Fox et al., 2005).

Research has identified some antecedents of CWB including job dissatisfaction, perceived organizational injustice, and stress. Another research has pointed towards workplace ostracism as another possible antecedent of CWB since employees who are socially excluded may engage in CWB in the form of retaliation or defense (Ferris et al., 2008). Workers get preoccupied with discrimination at the workplace and may display behaviors that are detrimental to the organization and other employees as well as being indifferent to the organizational objectives. Additionally, employees who perceive their needs for attention and/or recognition as unmet may lack the requisite social and emotional capital to cope with stressors in the workplace and, therefore, are more likely to engage in CWBs (Matias, 2024).

The second way workplace ostracism may result in CWB is through the impact it has on the psychological states of the target employees such as putting the employee in a state of depressive mood. Depression is described as a state of low mood and the presence of affective, somatic, motivational, cognitive and physical symptoms that interfere with the ability to work and engage in other activities (Beck, 1970).

Numerous studies have confirmed the relationship between workplace stressors, such as

ostracism, and the onset of depressive symptoms (Zhao et al., 2020). Employees who are excluded from the communication processes at the workplace could develop negative feelings such as worthlessness, low self-esteem, hence developing a depression. This emotional state may, in turn, impact the staff's performance and decision-making at the workplace, which prompts them to engage in CWBs as a coping mechanism. Using the conservation of resources (COR) theory developed by Hobfoll (1989), people strive to guard their resources. Employees who are targeted for workplace ostracism feel that they are deprived of these valued resources, particularly social support and recognition that are crucial to their health. Due to this loss, the employees might engage in CWB as a way of protecting or reclaiming the resources.

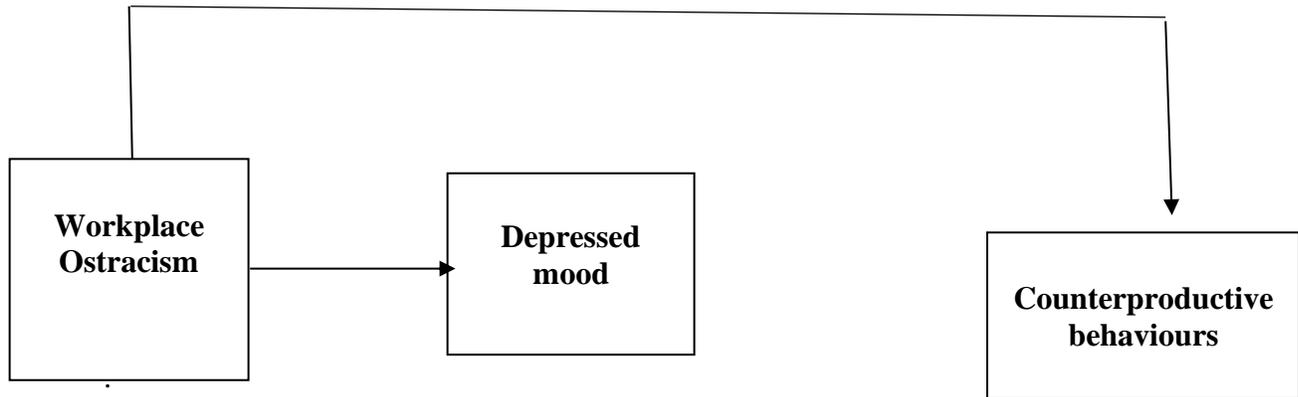
As per the theory, for those people who are in a negative mood and who think that they have lost many social resources, they will continue to act negatively in order not to lose more. Depressed mood is thus a key mediator in the process initiated by ostracism and resulting in various CWBs. Although previous studies have confirmed the relationship between workplace ostracism and CWBs, the moderating role of depressed mood has been understudied. According to Zhang and Liao (2015), the authors posited that the workers who experience workplace ostracism are more likely to complain of depressive symptoms that may account for the relationship between ostracism and work-related effects.

Similarly, Wu et al. (2013) discovered that employees with depressive symptoms due to ostracism are likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviour in order to express their grievances or as a way of dealing with pain. This implies that emotional health is an important aspect in understanding the behavioral consequences of workplace exclusion. In academic setting, workplace ostracism, depressed mood and counterproductive work behaviours are of particular significance (Ma et al., 2021). As with most other big organizations, public universities can offer environments in which teamwork and interpersonal relations are crucial for success. However, the competitive culture of the academic institutions may contribute to cases of ostracism especially to the faculty and staff who may be feeling left out in their respective departments (Litzellachner et al., 2024).

Research has shown that academic staff are equally exposed to the psychological effects of workplace stressors in the form of loneliness, burn out, and depression (González-Morales et al., 2012). Since the focus is made on teamwork, innovation, and open communication in academic settings, it is imperative to consider the impact of ostracism and encourage a more inclusive culture. Lastly, the literature review shows that there is a positive correlation between workplace ostracism and depressed mood, and between workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behaviours (Samma et al., 2020).

Ostracism takes its toll on the emotional and psychological capital of employees leading to depressive symptoms and the employees as a way of coping may indulge in CWBs. However, there is an increasing concern in the moderating effect of emotions on the relationship between ostracism and its effects in the public universities. This research seeks to address these gaps by examining the effects of workplace ostracism on emotions and behaviours of employees, and role of emotional health in organisations (Asmita et al., 2024).

Conceptual Framework



3.0 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research methodology with a cross-sectional design. This approach allowed for the simultaneous collection and analysis of data, facilitating the examination of relationships between variables at a single point in time. The research was conducted at two public sector universities in Pakistan: University of Sargodha Thal University Bhakkar. The target population included all employees at the two universities, totaling 1,333 individuals. Using the Yamane formula to estimate the sample size, the researchers calculated a sample size of 308 employees. However, to accommodate practical constraints, the sample size was adjusted to 300 employees. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representation across job descriptions, departments, and demographics, reducing bias and enhancing the validity of the study. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed to account for potential non-responses, with 300 completed and valid questionnaires forming the basis for the study.

Data collection was carried out using a structured and adapted questionnaire, designed to assess workplace ostracism, CWBs, and depressed mood. The questionnaire utilized reliable scales from prior studies: the Workplace Ostracism Scale for measuring workplace ostracism, the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist for CWBs, and a set of items reflecting respondents' current emotional status for assessing depressed mood. The questionnaires were administered to employees across various departments, ensuring anonymity in the responses.

Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 20. Correlation and regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between workplace ostracism, CWBs, and depressed mood. Mediation analysis, based on Baron and Kenny's (1986) testing procedure, was employed to explore the mediating effect of depressed mood in the relationship between workplace ostracism and CWBs. This statistical approach helped elucidate how workplace ostracism influences employees' emotions and behaviors.

4.0 Findings and Results

When it comes to internal consistency of the scales, the higher value of Cronbach's Alpha 0 is computed for Workplace Ostracism (WO), Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) and Depressed Mood (DM). Acid value is still acceptable here having a value of 902. The item-total correlations were also corrected with the range of 0. 698 to 0. 890, indicate that each item has strong relationship with the total scale. Excluding any of the three components does not bring

about a huge change in the reliability which means that all the three factors are very stable in the scale.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

	Cronbach's Alpha		N of Items
	0.902		3

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Item Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
WO	7.3819	1.687	.852	.829
CWB	7.4007	1.954	.701	.952
DM	7.3912	1.598	.891	.794

The KMO value of 0.682 indicates that the sample is moderately adequate for factor analysis. The significant result from Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Chi-Square = 725.23, $p < 0.001$) confirms that factor analysis is appropriate, as the correlation matrix significantly differs from the identity matrix. **Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.682
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	725.23
	df	3
	Sig.	.000

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

	WO	CWB	DM
WO	1	0.652**	0.905**
CWB	0.652**	1	0.702**
DM	0.905**	0.702**	1

The correlation matrix shows significant positive correlations between all variables. WO and CWB have a moderate correlation of 0.652, while WO and DM have a stronger correlation of 0.905. CWB and DM have a positive correlation of 0.702. All correlations are statistically significant at the 0.01 level, indicating strong relationships between the variables.

Table 4: Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.712	0.507	0.503	0.4761

The regression model, with R = 0.712, shows a strong positive relationship between the predictors (WO, DM) and the outcome variable. The R Square of 0.507 suggests that 50.7% of the variance in the outcome variable is explained by the model, and the adjusted R Square of 0.503 indicates good generalizability of the model. The standard error of 0.4761 reflects the average deviation of the actual values from the predicted values.

Table 5: Direct Effect Regression Model

	Coeff	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.3050	0.1753	18.86	0.0000	2.9603	3.6497
WO	0.1752	0.0382	4.585	0.0000	0.1001	0.2503

The regression results indicate that workplace ostracism (WO) has a significant positive effect on Depressed Mood (DM), with a coefficient of 0.1752 ($p < 0.0001$). This means that for every unit increase in WO, DM increases by approximately 0.1752 units.

Table 6: Model Summary for Counterproductive Work Behavior

R	R-square	MSE	F	df1	df2	P
0.570	0.426	0.392	39.001	6	490	0.0000

Table 7: Direct Effect of WO and DM on CWB

	Coeff	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	1.4123	0.2240	6.3050	0.0000	0.9732	1.8514
WO	0.1360	0.0445	3.0592	0.0021	0.0490	0.2231
DM	0.3789	0.0371	10.212	0.0000	0.3043	0.4535

Table 8: Direct Effect of X on Y

	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
DM	0.3789	0.0371	10.212	0.0000	0.3043	0.4535

Table 9: Indirect Effect of X on Y

	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
DM	0.0238	0.0133	0.0040	0.0562

The indirect effect of Depressed Mood (DM) on the relationship between Workplace Ostracism (WO) and Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) is significant. The indirect effect (0.0238) lies within the 95% confidence interval (0.0040, 0.0562), supporting the mediation hypothesis.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the correlation between Workplace Ostracism (WO), Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB), and Depressed Mood (DM) while examining DM as a mediator between WO and CWB. The study established high reliability of the scales used in the study as shown by the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients which were greater than 0.5, thus supporting the validity of the constructs that were measured. The correlation analysis showed that there were positive significant relationships between WO, CWB, and DM, meaning that workplace ostracism leads to increase in counterproductive behavior and depression mood. The regression analysis also supported these relationships and showed that WO has a direct positive relationship with CWB and an indirect positive relationship with DM. This means that workplace ostracism not only affects the mood of the employees in a negative way but also makes the employees to exhibit counterproductive work behaviours, which underlines the need to address mental health issues at the workplace. The outcomes of this study are in consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the negative psychological and behavioural effects of ostracism in the workplace.

Besides, it was established that the data was appropriate for factor analysis through the KMO value and Bartlett’s test results. These findings further confirm the hypothesized model and extend the understanding of the role of depressed mood as an important mediator between workplace ostracism and CBs. The study findings provide further support to the social exclusion model, noting that psychological and behavioral factors are closely related at the workplace and that social exclusion increases the risk of mental health problems and negative work behaviors among employees. This study therefore contributes to the existing literature that explores the negative outcome of workplace ostracism and underlines the importance of prevention of such behaviour and promotion of mental health support.

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, the present research finds that workplace ostracism has negative effects on individual well-being and organizational performance. The findings of the study support the idea

that workplace ostracism leads to counterproductive work behaviors and does so through the mediating effect of depressed mood. When employees feel isolated or overlooked at the workplace, they tend to develop negative feelings that may result in counterproductive work behaviors. The findings of this study show that social exclusion and mental health are important factors that need to be considered in the workplace in order to prevent counterproductive work behavior and enhance workplace relations.

5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations can therefore be made from the findings of the study. First, organizations should ensure that they create an environment that discourages ostracism by encouraging the employees to engage in team-building activities and encourage communication to minimize the likelihood of ostracism. This can reduce the likelihood of social exclusion of the employees and therefore, make them feel valued in the organization. Second, the organization should have mental health programs, and this is the second reason as to why. These programs should include employee assistance programs, stress management and mental health promotion to assist employees when they are in a state of low mood. Third, leadership training and development programs are important as they help the managers and supervisors understand the symptoms of ostracism and how to respond to them. Leaders are also central in the development of the inclusive cultures and the conduct of employees depends on the actions of their leaders. Last but not the least, organizations should provide Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to help the employees dealing with mental health issues. EAPs can be very useful in helping employees to access the resources that they require to deal with stress and enhance their psychological state.

5.3 Implications

The findings of this study are important for organizational management, the management of human resources, and the corporate culture. Thus, recognizing the negative outcomes of ostracism and responding to its prevention, organizations can enhance the employees' health and minimize the occurrence of CWBs. The research also stresses the need to consider the mental health at work, because the companies that care about their employees' mental state are more likely to witness the increase in output and general well-being in the workplace. Furthermore, this work also has implications for the analysis of the relationships between workplace processes, psychological states, and behavior that may be useful for future research aimed at improving work-related health and effectiveness.

Muhammad Asif: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Ahsan Murtaza: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

Uzair Khan Jiskani: Methodology and Revision

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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