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Workplace Ostracism: A Review and Directions for Future Research

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Abstract

Workplace ostracism was originally defined that individuals were excluded or ignored or disregard by other employees. Workplace ostracism is a kind of "cold violence", which has been paid attention widespread. The study reported here mainly summarized workplace ostracism and its effects from lots of domestic and foreign literatures. Firstly, we comb the conceptions and nature of workplace ostracism in different views. Secondly, we can mainly summarize its effects of workplace ostracism by means of studying plenty of empirical researches. Lastly, we point out the potential defects in previous studies and there are still some issues worthwhile exploring in the future.

1. Introduction

Workplace ostracism represents a pervasive workplace phenomenon. In recent 10 years, there have been a series of domestic researches on workplace ostracism among organization, and workplace ostracism has been regarded as an important research issue, causing widespread concern in academia and industry. As a new study field, workplace ostracism mainly rose in 2008, when Ferris *et al*. published a paper named "When Silence Is not Golden: Measuring Ostracism in the Workplace" in Journal of Applied Psychology, formally presenting the conception of "Workplace Ostracism", and developed a workplace ostracism scale, laying the foundation for future research on it. At the same time, Ferris pointed out that "the next phase of the study could focus on exploring mediation mechanism between workplace ostracism and its consequences among employees, and find out the deep relation between them" [1]. Based on a collection of relevant workplace ostracism literatures, we plan to identify the relationship among workplace ostracism, its effects and related mediating and moderating

variables and other aspects of the expansion comb. Another main purpose is that we hope to conclude the achievements scholars have already made and we believe that there is still much to be added to provide reference for future research.

2. Identification of Studies

We conducted this review of the literature by studying varieties of workplace ostracism research, including numbers of empirical studies and some related reviews. We are interested in learning different theories that have been used as the basis for workplace ostracism research. The articles included in this review were mainly published in academically refereed journals in organizational behavior, human resource management, applied psychology, and so on. We use the key words such as "workplace ostracism", "workplace exclusion" as search terms finding that there are about eighty qualitative studies that were published since 2008. The number of papers about workplace ostracism research shown in **Figure 1** from CNKI and **Figure 2** from Willy Science, EBSCO and Web of Science.

3. The Definitions of Workplace Ostracism

Researchers have not reached consensus on the distinctions definitions of workplace ostracism (WO). But all of them firmly believed that workplace ostracism is a kind of behavior that had a detrimental effect on organizations and their members. Ferris put forward the concept of workplace ostracism earliest and he thought that "people were suffering ostracism when employees in the workplace perceived exclusion, ignorance and disrespected treatment by others [2]." Workplace Ostracism, which concludes behaviors such as, rejecting or avoiding behavior or eye contact with the excluded. Compared to abusive supervision, uncivilized behavior, and bullying and so on, workplace ostracism is a passive-aggressive form existing in the organization and its employees [3], and it appears obscure, such as silence, ignorance, no response to a greeting. In addition, it varies from person to
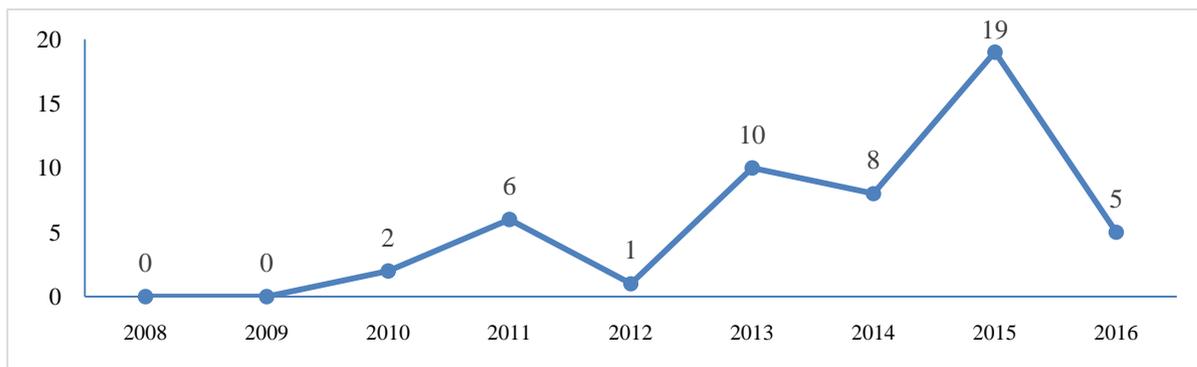

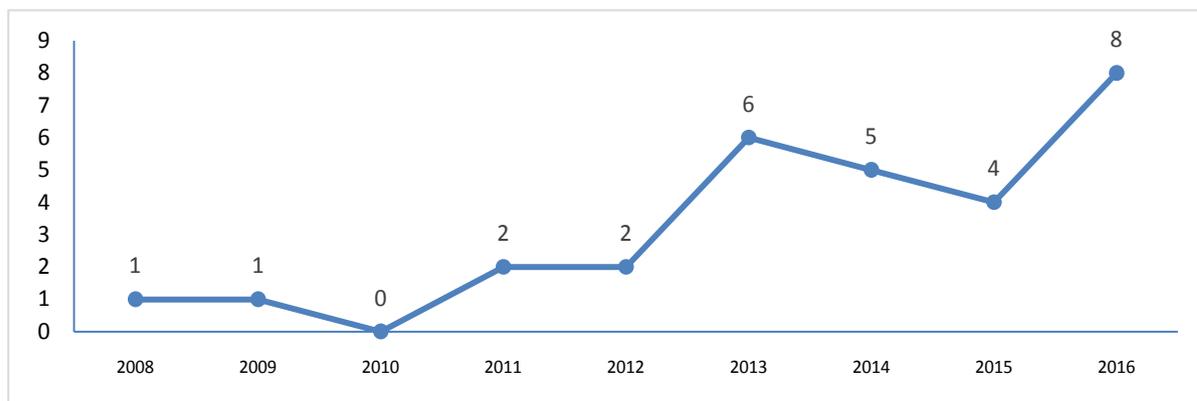**Figure 1.** The publishment number of WO papers in CNKI from 2008 to 2016.

Figure 2. The publishment number of WO papers in EBSCO, Web of Science and Willy Blackwell from 2008 to 2016.

person about workplace ostracism, because one kind of phenomenon might be exclusion for a person, but for someone else is not true. Chughtai believed that the ostracism as an inappropriate interpersonal interaction, would bring negative interpersonal experiences and tense interpersonal organization relationship, then people felt angry and humiliated, which led to negative behavior, thereby causing the excluded damaged their organizations and even lost the membership [4]. Jiaang Le *et al*. thought workplace ostracism was that members in the workplace suffered from interpersonal neglect within the organization, and others who abused their authority to set up obstacles when members fulfilled their job responsibilities or faced career development, thus being marginalized [5].

In one word, we can find workplace ostracism is a non-physical behavior, and whether it is an ostracism or not depends on people's subjective perception to some extent and workplace ostracism would bring unpleasant feelings and induce the excluded to take misconduct, such as retreat behavior, turnover intention, and decreased engagement.

4. Research on the Effects of Workplace Ostracism

Keep in mind scholars' findings from domestic and foreign, we can mainly summarized the impact of workplace ostracism from three aspects: 1) workplace ostracism could affect mental health of members in the organization [6], and reduce their satisfaction; 2) the ostracism would reduce workplace citizenship behavior and then lead to counter-productive behavior; 3) workplace ostracism is also an influential variable used to explain why employees made poor performance [7].

4.1. Workplace Ostracism and Employee Psychology

Numerous studies showed that employees who suffered ostracism at the workplace will generate a series of psychological aversion reaction, such as high tension in work, emotional exhaustion, mental depression, lower job satisfaction [2] [8]. This view was supported by many empirical studies. For example, Wu *et al*. confirmed that workplace ostracism was significantly positively related to employees' psychological pressure including work tense, emotional exhaustion, and depression [9], and these pressures could affect their work, family and health, such as job satisfaction and work conflict. Williams's model linked ostracism with demand finding that ostracism would consume the capacity that was used to maintain resources to meet their needs and achieve the desired, and thus cause pressure and anxiety on work, such as work requirements, expected performance [10]. On the other hand, another kind of resource losses was support from colleagues. When an employee faced workplace ostracism, emotions with others would break out. In order to increase emotional resources and maintain physical and mental health, people needed social contact to share their feelings or thoughts [6]. When the needs sharing emotion could not be satisfied, emotional resources were missing and led to emotional exhaustion [11]. In addition, studies also showed that exclusive environment would bring a painful and negative experience, resulting in depressed mood [2] [12].

4.2. Workplace Ostracism and Work Performance

Some scholars did the research on discussing how workplace ostracism affected employees' job performance and found that workplace ostracism had a significant negative impact on job performance. Wu *et al*. [13] demonstrated that workplace ostracism had a negative effect on job performance, and verified self-esteem played a mediator role under the organizational context [9]. Hongdan Zhao *et al*. investigated the link between workplace ostracism and counter-productive behavior and the results showed a positive correlation [14]. In addition, Hong Kong scholar Alicia SM *et al*. set 19 Chinese hotel staff as samples, and drawn from empirical analysis that workplace ostracism had negatively correlated to service performance and it affected service performance by influencing the degree of participation in the work, and neurotic personality traits played a moderator in the relation between ostracism and work [13]. Mainland scholar Rui Li the conclusion that workplace ostracism had a significant negative impact on out-role performance, and organizational identification and job involvement had a mediating effect on them by investigating employees and their direct supervisor in the PRD organizations [15].

4.3. Workplace Ostracism and Employees Work Behaviors

Workplace ostracism made employees feel being marginalized, and did great harm to their psychology and even physiology, and ultimately affected employees' various behaviors in workplace [16]. Scholars did a series of re-

search about how workplace ostracism influence employee behavior (organizational citizenship behavior and counterproductive behavior).

Mixed results have been found in studies examining the relationship between workplace ostracism and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Wu *et al*. made an empirical study which tested workplace ostracism was negatively associated with OCB, and verified organization recognition played a moderating role and collective tendency played a mediating role [17]. O'Reilly *et al*. study also found workplace ostracism was negatively related to extra-role behavior and demonstrated sense of belonging played a partially mediating role [7]. Research indicated that workplace ostracism reduced their sense of belonging and thus hindered their willing to make contribution for organization. In addition, a study had shown that workplace ostracism would make the rejected produce pro-organizational behavior, but the study also pointed out that employees suffering workplace ostracism would produce pro-organizational behavior, essentially which is a mandatory organizational citizenship behavior, whose purpose is to reduce rejection from others [5].

A number of researches also studied the relationship between workplace ostracism and counter-productive work behavior (CWB). From the perspective of self-determination theory, a study found that workplace ostracism had significantly impact both on organizational CWB and interpersonal CWB and workplace ostracism of the excluded competent, independent and relations between the three basic psychological needs satisfied were significantly lower than those admitted [18]. O'Reilly Jane found workplace ostracism to be negatively related to in-role behavior in the workplace, however to be positively associated with withdrawal, and discussed the intermediary role of belonging in the above relationship [7]. Based on self-control resources perspectives, Yan Yanling *et al*. studied how workplace ostracism affected CWB under Chinese organizational context, and found that when faced with ostracism, individuals needed to consume mental recourse to suppress emotional responses, and there for CWB, main while the researcher found state-controlled regulation and psychological capital played a mediate and moderate effect respectively between WO and CWB [19], which was consistent with Hongdan Zhao *et al*. findings [14]. According to frustration-attack assumptions, any attack among individuals are derived from setbacks, and frustration will inevitably lead to attack, that is to say, when suffering setbacks such as workplace ostracism in an organization, the staffs will certainly take actions which might be harmful to organization (such as CWB) to "attack" the organization, whether this behavior is public or relatively hidden.

5. Emerging Issues and Future Research Directions

By studying and combing the literatures on workplace ostracism, we found scholars come to lots of valuable research findings in this field, but in terms of the published results on academic journals, the current research on workplace ostracism also was little, and there was still something to be expanded and innovated further whether from a theoretical perspective or specific research content.

Future research could focus on the following aspects: first, a range of theories had been used to make research on WO. At present, social exchange theory and social identity theory were the most popular theoretical perspectives used to current research to explain workplace ostracism and its effects, so in the future research, our theoretical perspective can be further extended such as resource conservation theory, social cognitive theory, social information processing theory and self-determination theory, thus enriching the theoretical interpretation between workplace ostracism and its dependent variables further and helping increase our understanding in diversity view.

Second, in future studies, we can further explore the mediating effect between the ostracism and employee workplace consequences, and explore the internal mechanism and try to open the black box among them. Thirdly, in future studies, we also can explore the effect in various situation or interaction term of boundary characteristic variables and study their corresponding behavior and attitudes.

6. Conclusion

This review provides a conclusion about workplace ostracism and its influence that not only discusses emerging issues but also points out future research needs and directions. Although there is a growing research on WO, papers published in journals at home and abroad are still not more and much remains to be studied.

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ments on the manuscript.

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