

Impact of workplace ostracism on unethical pro-organizational behaviors

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of workplace ostracism on unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB), by focusing on the moderating role of value alignment of WPS.

Design/methodology/approach – The theoretical model was tested using data collected from 434 employees in different companies from Shanxi provinces in China. Analysis of lagged data is used to empirically test the relationship between workplace ostracism and UPB.

Findings – The study found that ostracized individuals are more likely to engage in UPB when they embrace high value alignment with the organization.

Originality/value – This study examines the moderating effect of WPS, providing boundary condition for the relationship between workplace ostracism and UPB. So far, most of the empirical work has identified moderators that only buffer the relationship between ostracism and negative outcomes, and the result for moderators that actually determine pro-social responses has not yet to be discovered.

Keywords Workplace ostracism, Organizational identification, Unethical pro-organizational behaviour, Value alignment of WPS

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

You probably feel hurt and humiliated when others exclude you off their conversation or give you a cold shoulder when you try to talk to them at work. Such experiences are often labeled as “workplace ostracism,” a social phenomenon which individuals perceive as being ignored or excluded by other employees in a workplace (Ferris *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, workplace ostracism potentially influences employees’ mental and physical health (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008). Being excluded or ignored by other individuals or groups is a common phenomenon across all social contexts (Williams, 1997). In Chinese society, experiences of ostracism in a workplace context are not trivial. This is because Chinese tend to build various strong interpersonal ties with each other and hold a high level of collective value; thus, to Chinese, being able to establish and maintain close relationships with others at work is tantamount to build career success and to improve personal values (Liu *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, workplace ostracism will have a greater impact on employees from a more collective culture (Wilkins and Dyer, 1988). How does an ostracized individual response to his or her experience in a context of Chinese workplace? Robinson *et al.* (2013) indicated that ostracism can have paradoxical consequences, namely negative behavioral outcomes and positive behavioral outcomes. For the most part, ostracized employees will be prone toward engaging in negative behaviors such as reduced contributions (Hitlan *et al.*, 2006; O’Reilly and Robinson, 2009), unfavorable job attitudes (Ferris *et al.*, 2008; Smart Richman and Leary, 2009), decreased job performance contributions (Hitlan *et al.*, 2006; O’Reilly and Robinson, 2009), withdrawal (Ferris *et al.*, 2008) and deviance (Ferris *et al.*, 2008; Hitlan and Noel, 2009). Yet unique to ostracism is the fact that ostracism sometimes results in pro-social



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responses that are intended to benefit another individual, group or organization (Williams, 2007; Brief and Motowidlo, 1986; Ferris *et al.*, 2008). Given that those Chinese people who hold interdependent views of the self are more likely to experience negative emotions when workplace ostracism happens (Lee and Tiedens, 2001), a desire for more belonging and/or self-esteem may be the best fortified by behaving in ways that are more appealing to others, such as working hard on a collective task (Williams and Sommer, 1997), conforming to an incorrect but unanimous majority (Williams *et al.*, 2000) and engaging in various unethical behaviors to benefit their organization (Thau *et al.*, 2015). This study focuses on that committing to unethical pro-organizational behaviors (UPB) may be an appeasing response to ostracized employees.

Past research on workplace ostracism primarily investigated exclusion that motivates people to engage in antisocial behaviors, but a limited number of empirical studies have focused on a relationship between workplace ostracism and pro-social responses. Even though there are several studies that have tested workplace ostracism and pro-social behaviors such as helping behavior, voicing behavior and organizational citizenship behavior (e.g. Balliet and Ferris, 2013; Chung, 2017; Chung, 2018; Wu *et al.*, 2016), all of the studies found ostracized employees to be less likely to engage in these pro-social behaviors. What is more, these studies have produced fairly consistent results regarding the negative effects of ostracism, but the relation of ostracism to UPB is an exception (Thau *et al.*, 2015). This present responds to the call by answering the important question of why employees are likely to engage in pro-social behavioral responses (Robinson *et al.*, 2013).

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between workplace ostracism and UPB by focusing on the moderating effects of workplace spirituality (WPS). This study proposes that ostracized employees are prone to engaging in UPB and makes several major contributions to the literature related to workplace ostracism, WPS and UPB.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1 Workplace ostracism and UPB

Workplace ostracism represents an employee's perception of exclusion and isolation from work colleagues (Ferris *et al.*, 2008; O'Reilly *et al.*, 2015). Workplace ostracism may undermine an employee's judgment of his or her self-esteem in the organization and lead to lower levels of belongingness (Wu *et al.*, 2016; Fuller *et al.*, 2006; Tyler and Blader, 2003). Because part of an individual's self-esteem stems from his or her membership in the organization, the individual should be motivated to act on behalf of the organization with which the individual identifies him or herself (Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000). Self-enhancement theory posits that individuals with either low or high self-esteem have basic needs to enhance the level of their self-esteem (Dipboye, 1977; Sedikides *et al.*, 2003). Thus, when a humiliating situation sets in, ostracized employee would rely on a variety of conscious or unconscious strategies in order to protect his or her self-esteem (Clark *et al.*, 1999; Meyer, 2003; Miller and Kaiser, 2001). In contrast with Western culture, people in China tend to endorse interdependent self-esteem. They value interdependence and are more likely to perceive themselves as a part of an organization. Therefore, in order to protect his or her self-esteem, an ostracized individual in a Chinese workplace would be more eager to strive to fit in and belong to the goals of his or her organization. In addition, workplace ostracism, as a harsh and unpleasant organizational experience, threatens an employee's sense of belonging (Ferris *et al.*, 2008; Williams, 2007). O'Reilly and Robinson (2009) also indicated that workplace ostracism is a very influential variable in explaining a thwarted sense of belonging. Nevertheless, belongingness is a fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Previous studies have suggested that if an individual's belongingness is threatened, he or she is likely to be triggered to demonstrate their value to the group and earn their belongingness back to the group (Jamieson *et al.*, 2010). In line with this point, Gardner *et al.* (2000) have shown that people with greater need to belong

are more likely to motivate themselves to gain social reconnections than those who are lower in need to belong. In a collective culture like China, employees strive for interconnectedness and belongingness with the organization. Additionally, Chinese employees are motivated to contribute to the organization's success. In this way, they tend to gain respect from others and increase their social status and success (Smith and Tyler, 1997). Given that Chinese people seek any opportunity to establish fulfilling and stable relationships with others, the perception of ostracism may connote a strong decrease of the sense of belongingness in their organization. Because engaging in antisocial behaviors such as workplace deviance, dysfunctional behavior and counterproductive work behavior may turn out to be very costly for ostracized employees in a Chinese organization, ostracized individuals would be more likely to fortify his or her self-esteem and needs of belongingness by all means available, including discarding individual and societal moral standards in favor of unethical acts such as UPB.

The discussions above for the effects of workplace ostracism are similar to the pro-social response of ostracism model developed by Williams (2007). According to Williams (2007), when fundamental needs (belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence) are threatened, individuals may be motivated to fortify these relational needs, which generally lead to pro-social thoughts and behaviors. Williams (2009) has further argued that pro-social behaviors reflect attempts to improve inclusionary status (need for belonging) and to regard one-self positively (need for self-esteem). In addition, Robinson *et al.* (2013) result showed that ostracism sometimes results in pro-social or conciliatory responses. There is also considerable experimental support for the notion that workplace ostracism can increase employees' pro-social behavior to benefit others and their work group for the sake of being accepted (Derfler-Rozin *et al.*, 2010; Williams and Sommer, 1997). The pro-social behaviors such as ingratiating themselves with others (Carter-Sowell *et al.*, 2008) and working harder for the group (Williams and Sommer, 1997) reflect efforts to restore belongingness by either reducing future ostracism, regaining acceptance from others, or seeking substitute belonging with others. Based on this logic, ostracized individuals may engage in UPB when doing so can earn them immediate acceptance.

UPB is a construct that captures and clarifies the core characteristic of the pro-social behavior of ostracism model developed by Williams (2007). On the one hand, UPB is pro-organizational behavior that is neither specified in formal job descriptions nor ordered by organization management. It is carried out to benefit or help an organization by taking action when necessary to protect it from unexpected danger and by speaking favorably about the organization to its outsiders (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). On the other hand, UPB involves morally questionable actions that are carried out with a goal to increase organizational success, but that harms the well-being of customers or other external stakeholders, or even society as a whole (Umphress *et al.*, 2010).

Engaging in UPB reflects the effort of ostracized individual to conserve their remaining resources, enhance their self-concept and restore their belongingness. The findings made by Thau *et al.* (2015) are consistent with this argument in that the evidence they presented suggests that ostracized individuals will be strongly motivated to improve their inclusionary status by engaging in UPB in order to demonstrate their value through increased contributions to the group. Collecting data from five enterprises located in China mainland, Zhang (2016) also indicated that employees may engage in UPB as an important rational choice to establish positive relationships when they encounter workplace ostracism.

Taken together, the present study proposes:

H1. Workplace ostracism is positively related to UPB.

2.2 The moderating role of value alignment of WPS

Prior research has called for a person-situation interaction approach to examine more complex factors that drive unethical behavior in organizations (see Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2010).

Similarly, some research indicated that there may be climate factors that foster UPB by providing cues that signal that such acts are accepted and rewarded (Miao *et al.*, 2013; Vidaver-Cohen, 1998). So far, the present study suggests that WPS may increase ostracized individuals' willingness to engage in UPB. Milliman *et al.* (2003) indicated that WPS is specified at three levels: individual level in terms of meaning in work, group level in terms of sense of community and organizational level in terms of alignment with organizational values. WPS, as defined for the present study, only uses the limited, organizational level concept which is defined as value alignment of WPS by Ashmos and Duchon (2000). Milliman *et al.* (2003) described value alignment of WPS as a strong feeling that is felt by an individual about how personal values line up with the mission and goals of the organization. In other words, individuals with high levels of value alignment would strongly identify with the organization and feel connected to organization's goal. According to Chung (2017), when individuals believe that their value is in accord with the value of their organizations, they are likely to engage in organizational behaviors that are beneficial to their organization. Meglino *et al.* (1989) also indicated that employees possessing similar values and beliefs with their organizations would have higher level of identification that would make them engage in more positive organizational behaviors. According to the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982), it is suggested that individuals' development of social identity is based on their organizational membership and internalization of their organization's successes and failures as their own (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Individuals with strongly perceived value alignment of WPS are more likely to take organizational values and work-related practices as more salient to them and enhance their identification with their organization (Dehler and Welsh, 1994). Umphress and Bingham (2011) noted that individuals who strongly identify with their organization are more likely to engage in UPB when they hold strong positive reciprocity beliefs. In terms of Chinese values, reciprocity is an important social rule that requires people to return the favor in a right time whenever they receive it. In the context of Chinese culture, Zhang (2018) found that high value alignment dimension of WPS motivates individuals to dispose UPB.

The present study proposes that ostracized individuals with high value alignment of WPS may increase their willingness to engage in UPB. On the one hand, individuals with high value alignment may experience a strong sense of identification with their organization (Milliman *et al.*, 2003). On the other hand, workplace ostracism is likely to lead to lower levels of organizational identification (Wu *et al.*, 2016; Fuller *et al.*, 2006; Tyler and Blader, 2003). At first sight, it seems that an ostracized employee should not be the same person with high value alignment of WPS. In fact, recent research has indicated that identification can be distinguished between the immediate work group and the organization as a whole (Christ *et al.*, 2003; Van Dick *et al.*, 2004; Van Knippenberg and Van Schie, 2000). Accordingly, this would seem plausible given that ostracized individuals who barely identify themselves with the immediate work group do not necessarily have a low level of identification with the organization as a whole. Thus, while ostracized individuals with high value alignment of WPS may have no sense of identification with the immediate work group to which they belong, they are more likely to strongly identify with their organization as a whole when they consider their organizations as having a stronger commitment to their workers, customers and society than other organizations do. Of course, ostracized employees are likely to expect a favorable treatment by their immediate work group first. Failure to do so will increase their likelihood of depending on the organization as a whole. Such ostracized employees will be much more motivated to seek re-inclusion and restore their sense of belonging by engaging in pro-social behaviors like UPB, especially in the situation where morally questionable behaviors can be considered as a necessary part of their job or "no wrong" in the pursuit of organizational goals. That is, if UPB is regarded as a mean of improving one's inclusionary status when one is at the risk of ostracism in their

immediate group, individuals who experience a strong sense of alignment between their personal values and their organization's mission and purpose should be more motivated to resort to UPB. In other words, when value alignment of WPS is high, the ostracized people's willingness to engage in UPB may be augmented. Conversely, ostracized individual with low level of value alignment may imply that he or she is experiencing a definitive exclusion, an absolute rejection from his or her organization (Robinson *et al.*, 2013; Derfler-Rozin *et al.*, 2010; Thau *et al.*, 2015). Definitive exclusion is likely to motivate employees to engage in antisocial behavior rather than pro-social behavior (Buckley *et al.*, 2004; Maner *et al.*, 2007; Twenge *et al.*, 2001; Twenge and Campbell, 2003). Thus, when value alignment of WPS is low, ostracized individuals' willingness to engage in UPB may be attenuated.

Taken together, this study proposes:

- H2.* Value alignment of WPS moderates the positive effect of workplace ostracism on UPB, such that the relation between workplace ostracism and increased UPB will be stronger for individuals with a higher value alignment of WPS.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and procedures

The data were collected from five manufacturing firms located in Shanxi province in China. The main reason for targeting five firms was that all of the human resource (HR) managers from these firms attended a government-sponsored training class to which I delivered a lecture on organizational behavior. A total of 10 attendees were invited to help collect survey data for this study, but only half of them agreed to assist me with collecting all the questionnaires. Data were collected based on the following procedures. Each of the five HR managers distributed questionnaires to employees from their own firms randomly. To strengthen the evidence supporting the proposed relationships between variables under investigation, a two-phase procedure was conducted in the survey. Prior to the survey, the English questionnaire was translated into a Chinese version and back-translated to check the accuracy of the translation. The back-translation corresponded well with the original version of the questionnaire. In the first stage (T1), 706 surveys were administered to employees from the five firms. Attached to the questionnaire was a cover letter explaining the purpose of the research and addressing the provision for confidentiality and voluntary participation. In this stage (T1), employees provided their demographic information and their perceptions of workplace ostracism and rated their value alignment of WPS and job satisfaction. In all, 610 questionnaires were returned with a response rate of 86.40 percent. Three months later, the second stage (T2) started with the same amount of questionnaires being sent to those who responded at T1. In all, 452 questionnaires were returned with a response rate of 74.09 percent. The participants were asked at T2 to assess the extent to which they engaged in UPB. After eliminating the invalid questionnaires (those that were incomplete in both stages), there were 434 completed surveys. Among all the respondents, 49.3 percent of them were female. The respondents' average age was 33.73 ($SD = 8.284$) with ages ranging from 21 to 55 and their average tenure in the current organization was 8.673 ($SD = 8.500$). Among the participants, 59.00 percent reported being married and all of them are working full-time. Of the sample, 40.7 percent had less than a bachelor's degree, 49.4 percent held a bachelor's degree and 9.9 percent had a master's degree.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Workplace ostracism. A ten-item scale was used to measure workplace ostracism; this scale was developed by Ferris *et al.* (2008). Responses were taken on five-point scale ranging from 1 for Never to 5 for Always. Examples of sample questions are "Others at work shut

you out of the conversation”; “Others left the area when I entered” and “Other ignored me at work.” α reliability for this scale was 0.890.

3.2.2 Unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). UPB was assessed based on the six-item scale developed by Umphress *et al.* (2010). A sample items included: “If it would help my organization, I would misrepresent the truth to make my organization look good” and “If needed, I would conceal information from the public that could be damaging to my organization.” The coefficient α for this scale was 0.888.

3.2.3 Workplace spirituality (WPS). The eight-item subscale of WPS (Milliman *et al.*, 2003) was used to measure value alignment. Samples included: “feels connected with the mission of the organization”; “Organization is concerned about health of employees.” The coefficient α was 0.926.

3.2.4 Control variables. Therefore, this study controlled employee age (in years) and gender (0 = female, 1 = male; Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Umphress *et al.*, 2010; Thau *et al.*, 2015), job position (0 = non-management, 1 = management; Aquino *et al.*, 2001; Umphress *et al.*, 2010) and job satisfaction (Zhang, 2018) as one prior research suggests that these variables may affect employees’ willingness to engage in unethical behavior at work. The scale of job satisfaction was based on the satisfiers or motivators from the motivation hygiene theory (Herzberg *et al.*, 1959). This scale includes three items based on satisfaction with advancement and career opportunities and one item based on satisfaction with the nature of work from Nathan *et al.* (1991). Sample items included “Satisfied with career opportunities” and “Satisfied with nature of work.” The coefficient α for this scale was 0.784.

The variables including WPS, UPB and job satisfaction were all assessed using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

3.2.5 Analytic strategy. The data analysis was performed in three distinct stages. First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using Amos 22.0 to test convergent and discriminant validity among all variables. This study conducted a series of CFAs with maximum likelihood estimation and used the overall model’s χ^2 , root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), incremental fit index (IFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) to assess model fit. Second, this study arranged the survey data in a random order and then performed Harman’s one-factor test to avoid common method bias. Third, following Dawson (2014), this study conducted a four-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis to test our hypotheses. The control variables were first entered (employee gender, age, position and job satisfaction), followed by workplace ostracism in the second step. In the third step, value alignment of WPS was entered. The multiplicative interactive term between workplace ostracism and value alignment of WPS was added in the fourth step. More specifically, for the interaction effect, several statistical treatments were performed. This study first mean-centered the predictor (i.e. workplace ostracism) and the moderator (i.e. value alignment of WPS), respectively, and multiplied the two variables to produce an interaction term. By doing so, this study tried to remove the non-essential multicollinearity issue and improve the interpretational utility of the predictor variable’s first term in the analysis results. In addition to the way of testing the significance of moderation effect based on the above and below 1SD in the slope difference test, this study applied Aiken and West’s (1991) technique to more clearly estimate the region of significance of the moderating effect. The analyses were conducted using SPSS 21.0.

4. Results

Table I indicates the results of model comparison in CFA and Table II shows the means, standard deviations and correlations, while Table III reports the results of the hypothesis testing.

4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis

This study first examined a three-factor CFA model that included workplace ostracism, value alignment of WPS and UPB. The proposed three-factor model fitted the data well

($\chi^2(249) = 646.256$, $p < 0.001$; IFI = 0.938, TLI = 0.931, CFI = 0.938; RMSEA = 0.061). In addition, all factor loadings were significant, demonstrating convergent validity. The discriminant validity of the three proposed constructs was tested by contrasting the three-factor model against alternative models. This study compared the hypothesized three-factor model to three different models separately: a two-factor model where value alignment of WPS and UPB variables were combined (two-factor Model A), a two-factor model where workplace ostracism and UPB variables were combined (two-factor Model B), and a single latent factor model. Models were compared using the χ^2 difference test (Bentler and Bonett, 1980). Model comparison results (see Table I) revealed that the three-factor model fitted the data considerably better than any of the alternative models does. Thus, the

Table I.
Confirmatory
factor analysis and
model comparison

Model test	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Three -factor (hypothesized model)	646.256*	249	2.595	0.938	0.931	0.938	0.061
Two-factor B (UPB and workplace ostracism)	1,986.016*	251	7.912	0.730	0.702	0.729	0.126
Two-factor A (UPB and value alignment)	2,132.074*	251	8.494	0.707	0.676	0.706	0.132
One-factor (All combined model)	4,137.078*	252	16.560	0.389	0.328	0.387	0.190

Notes: $n = 434$. UPB, unethical pro-organizational behaviors. * $p < 0.001$

Table II.
Means, standard
deviations and
correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Workplace ostracism	1.945	0.678	—						
2. Value alignment	3.625	0.756	-0.157**	—					
3. UPB	2.535	0.875	0.268*	0.128**	—				
4. Job satisfaction	3.460	0.840	-0.070	0.752*	0.202*	—			
5. Gender	0.510	0.501	0.160**	0.051	217*	0.076	—		
6. Age	33.730	8.284	0.022	0.102***	-0.009	0.046	0.122***	—	
7. Position	0.459	0.499	-0.068	0.178*	0.076	0.164**	0.149**	0.199**	—

Notes: $n = 434$ (two-tailed). UPB, unethical pro-organizational behaviors. * $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.05$

Table III.
Hierarchical
regression results
for hypotheses

Variable	Step1	Step2	DV = UPB Step3	Step4
Gender	0.359*	0.279*	0.279**	0.273***
Age	-0.005	-0.006	-0.006	-0.006
Position	0.042	0.082	0.081	0.083
Job satisfaction	0.192*	0.211*	0.201**	0.201**
Independent variable Workplace ostracism		0.337*	0.339*	0.323*
Moderator Value alignment			0.014	0.006
Interaction Workplace ostracism \times value alignment				0.088***
R^2	0.084	0.150	0.150	0.162
ΔR^2	0.076	0.140	0.138	0.148
F	9.843*	15.065*	12.531*	11.752*

Notes: $n = 434$. DV, dependent variable; UPB, unethical pro-organizational behaviors. * $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.05$

distinctiveness of the three constructs in the study was supported. Given these results, all three constructs were applied in subsequent analyses.

4.2 Common method issues

As the data were collected from the same source, common method variance was a likely concern. The statistical remedy suggested by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) was used to minimize potential common source bias. According to Podsakoff and Organ (1986), this study arranged the survey data in random order and then performed Harman’s one-factor test to avoid common method bias. According to Podsakoff and Organ (1986), common method bias can occur when a single factor explains greater than 50 percent of the total variance. All the variables were tested using a principal component factor analysis. Based on the results, the first factor accounted for 27.62 percent of the total variability, out of three distinct factors. This implied that the same source bias of this study was not very serious.

4.3 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table II presents the means, standard deviations and zero-order Pearson correlations of all key variables. As indicated, workplace ostracism was found to be positively correlated with UPB ($r = 0.268, p < 0.001$). There was a moderate negative relationship between workplace ostracism and value alignment ($r = -0.157, p < 0.01$). No significant relationship was found between workplace ostracism and job satisfaction. Value alignment was found to be positively correlated to UPB ($r = 0.128, p < 0.01$), with the significant positive correlation shown for job satisfaction ($r = 0.752, p < 0.001$). And job satisfaction exhibited significant positive correlation with UPB ($r = 0.202, p < 0.001$).

4.4 Hypotheses test results

Table III presents the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis. *H1* predicted that the relationship between workplace ostracism and UPB was positive. The results demonstrated that workplace ostracism was positively related to UPB ($\beta = 0.337, p < 0.001$), supporting *H1*. *H2* proposed that value alignment of WPS will moderate the relationship between workplace ostracism and UPB. As shown in Table III, the interaction term proved to be significantly related to UPB ($\beta = 0.088, p < 0.05$), supporting *H2*. The nature of the significant interaction was examined by plotting values plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of value alignment. Figure 1 clearly illustrated the significant interaction and demonstrated the interactive effect of workplace ostracism and value alignment on UPB. When employees perceived high levels of value alignment, workplace

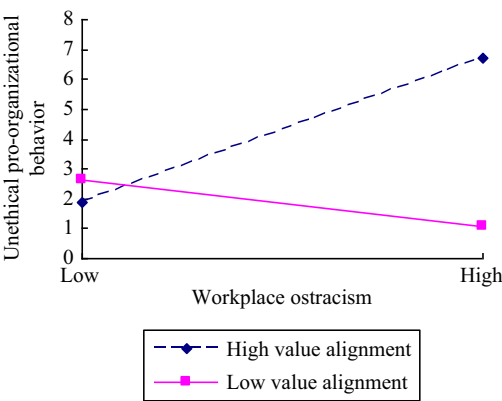


Figure 1.
Moderating effect of
value alignment on
the relationship
between workplace
ostracism and UPB

ostracism was positively related to UPB ($\beta = 0.416$, $t = 5.218$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, when employees perceived low levels of value alignment, workplace ostracism was unrelated to UPB ($\beta = -0.207$, $t = -1.395$, ns). Figure 1 provides additional support for *H2*. To determine if multicollinearity affected the findings, this study examined the variance inflation factor (VIF) values for the aforementioned model testing the interaction effect. The VIF values, ranged from 1.036 to 1.091, are much smaller than the conventional cutoff value of 10.0 as well as the more stringent criterion of 4.0 (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Leahy, 2000). The VIF values thus do not indicate a cause for concern that this study reported regression coefficients may be biased due to substantial linear interdependence among the predictors.

5. Discussion

This study argued that workplace ostracism motivates employees to engage in unethical behaviors that have the potential to benefit their organization. This study found that employees who believed they were at risk of ostracized were more likely to engage in general acts of UPB, particularly when the employee had a high value alignment with his/her organization. This finding was consistent with some extant studies (Thau *et al.*, 2015; Zhang, 2016) which argued that workplace ostracism motivates employees to engage in unethical behaviors that have the potential to benefit their organization.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the literature in three ways.

First, this study has provided a new theoretical perspective to understand the antecedents of UPB. It is different from the previous studies focusing on some factors whose conception is rooted in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). According to social exchange theory, employees reciprocate positive exchange relationships with their employers by engaging in UPB (Umphress *et al.*, 2010). However, the framework of this study is rooted in the pro-social response of ostracism model developed by Williams (2007). According to Williams (2007), pro-social behaviors reflect attempts to improve inclusionary status. Ostracized individuals engage in UPB hoping that by doing so they will gain immediate acceptance. This result is consistent with the findings of Thau *et al.* (2015) which indicated that ostracized people are particularly motivated to make as large contributions through UPB to their organization as possible in an effort to improve their inclusionary status. It sheds new light on the importance of workplace ostracism as a predictor of UPB. Simply stated, this study found that individuals are more likely to engage in UPB if they have been highly perceived as ostracized from the organization in which they work. This finding suggests that individuals' perception of being ostracized from the organization in which they work plays an important role in explaining their work-related attitudes and behaviors.

Second, this current study has also contributed a new aspect on workplace ostracism to the literature. Previous studies on workplace ostracism usually focused on the argument that ostracized people might behave dishonestly to benefit themselves. Dishonesty involves discounting the harm that such behavior causes others and entails unfair treatment that benefits the selves over others (Graham *et al.*, 2011). For example, Poon *et al.* (2013) indicated that when compared to included participants, ostracized individuals showed higher levels of dishonest intentions and cheated more to take undeserved money in a behavioral task. However, by investigating the consequences of workplace ostracism, the model of the present research has introduced to the literature with one type of unethical behavior that is actually intended to benefit the organization or others. In contrast to previous studies on workplace ostracism which concluded that ostracism leads to undifferentiated antisocial responses (e.g. Buckley *et al.*, 2004; Maner *et al.*, 2007; Twenge *et al.*, 2001; Twenge and Campbell, 2003), this study has proved that ostracized employees are more likely to engage in UPB, which are carried out with a goal to increase organizational success, in order to seek

re-inclusion and restore their sense of belonging. Therefore, this study enriches the workplace ostracism literature by providing further empirical support for the effects of workplace ostracism on organizational behaviors.

Third, the finding on the moderating effect of value alignment also contributes to the literatures by establishing the relationship between workplace ostracism and UPB. Previous studies viewed value alignment of WPS as a positive factor to influence individual's ethical behaviors (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000; Kolodinsky *et al.*, 2008; Milliman *et al.*, 2003; Rego and Pina e Cunha, 2008; Duchon and Plowman, 2005). However, this study has showed that value alignment might mitigate the effect of workplace ostracism on UPB. This finding is important in that it provides the first insight into how value alignment, as a dimension of WPS, may make individuals more likely to engaging in UPB. This result answers the call to investigate potential negative aspects of WPS (Milliman *et al.*, 2003).

5.2 Practical implications

The theoretical model in this study and empirical findings may also provide some practical implications for organizations. First, this study indicated that workplace ostracism increases employees' engaging in UPB. Thus, managers should try to decrease the negative impacts of workplace ostracism. One measure that managers can take is to create a proactive response system for detecting ostracism. This system can reduce the likelihood and continuation of workplace ostracism or quickly end it when it first emerges. When workplace ostracism is observed, managers can determine who suffers from ostracism and why. Then managers should focus on maintaining favorable interpersonal relationships through increasing cohesiveness, trust and communication because ostracized employees require more interdependence and interaction. Additionally, managers should actively implement an employee assistance plan that enhances their emotional management training and counseling in order to help the ostracized employees better to cope with the destructive situations. For organization practitioners, it is important to be wary of forming biases against members within work teams, as the quality of the relationships between the manager and in-group and out-group members may cause feelings of exclusion and dissimilarity (e.g. Bauer and Green, 1996), which will further increase ostracism. Moreover, managers can foster a strong culture of trust and promote interpersonal interaction by holding gatherings such as team-building activities and social skill training programs to help mitigate the potentially negative impact of workplace ostracism (Lam and Lau, 2008).

Furthermore, managers should consider the impacts of value alignment on UPB as suggested by the moderating effects that this study identified. Specifically, the empirical finding of this study shows that ostracized employees who embrace high value alignment of WPS are most likely to be motivated to engage in UPB. On the one hand, employees at risk of ostracism might be particularly motivated to make as many contributions to their group as possible in an effort to improve their inclusionary status. When given opportunities to increase their organization contributions through UPB, ostracized individual might be more likely to use those opportunities. On the other hand, individuals with high value alignment might pursue organizational goals and maximize the benefits for their organization at the expense of ethical standards and external stakeholders' interests through engaging in UPB. Even though value alignment with organization can produce numerous positive organizational behaviors, managers should increase awareness of the dark side of it. When the negative effects of value alignment are weakened, the negative influence of workplace ostracism on UPB will be lessened or mitigated. Thus, manager simply cannot build up employees' perceptions of value alignment with organization and expect employees to only engage in positive organizational behaviors. Organizations need to be cautious about emphasizing value alignment perceptions and about providing organizational support because under certain workplace conditions this may lead to unethical behaviors. Additionally, managers need to establish clear standards to

evaluate and punish unethical behaviors even if they are conducted in favor of the organization. Nevertheless, managers should also be aware of the potential challenges of determining the appropriate level of punishment, because harsh punishment may hurt the feelings of ostracized employees. To some extent, trainings on ethics might increase ostracized employees' awareness of issues of UPB in business. After all, realizing that unethical behaviors can exist in organizations is a necessary first step to take before trying to minimize them. Finally, organization practitioners should establish protective mechanisms to encourage ostracized employees to do what is right without being afraid of reprimand when they face ethical dilemmas. For instance, organization might designate ethical counselors to help ostracized employees not to engage in UPB.

5.3 Limitation and future research directions

While the study made the above outlined contributions to the existing literature, it also has some limits. First, a potential limit in this study is from common method bias, which was presented as an inflated correlation between two variables due to the fact that they were measured using the same method (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). To lessen the likelihood that common method bias exaggerated the associations observed among the variables in this study, two waves of data were collected and two validity tests were conducted before verifying the hypotheses. However, it could not avoid or lessen the problem of common method bias thoroughly. Future research should still be conducted with cautions.

Second, in this study, all of the data were collected from the company in northern China. Hence, the degree to which the results can be generalized to other cultural contexts may be limited. The findings should be validated through further research in multiple cultures that differ in cultural values that are likely to influence the variables in this study.

Third, in addition to the main and moderating effects of workplace ostracism on UPB, this study also expects that future research should employ some potential mediators (e.g. commitment, belongingness, organization identification and self-esteem) to explore the mechanisms underlying the relationship.

6. Conclusion

This research proposed that workplace ostracism motivates individuals to engage in pro-group unethical behavior as a mean of improving their inclusionary status. Using experimental study, this research found converging support for this theory: workplace ostracism motivates people to engage in UPB, and this effect was stronger when value alignment of WPS is higher. The findings of this study extend the understanding of UPB and open up new avenues of research by demonstrating the dimensions of WPS as climate factors that foster UPB by providing cues that signal such acts are accepted and rewarded.

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