

Workplace Ostracism and Antagonistic Work Behaviors: Moderating Effects of Conscientiousness

Gurleen Kaur Rehal¹, Dr. Meenakshi Malhotra²

¹Research Scholar, University Business School, Panjab University.
gurleen.parmar@gmail.com,

²Professor, University Business School, Panjab University

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Abstract

Workplace Ostracism is a phenomenon of feeling ignored or excluded from social interactions of those around us at work. This seemingly harmless occurrence affects the employees' positive outcomes at work. Research on other negative behaviors such as bullying harassment etc. at workplace is extensive while the number of people affected by ostracism is far greater as compared to other similar behaviors. The past decade of research has uncovered many aspects including antecedents and consequences of workplace ostracism; however the field remains immensely under researched especially as far as the Indian perspective is considered. In this study, the relationship between Workplace Ostracism and Antagonistic Work Behaviors and how the relationship varies in the presence of Conscientiousness is studied. The analysis of the primary data collected from managerial employees of tractor manufacturing organizations in northern states of India revealed that Conscientiousness moderated the relationship between Workplace Ostracism and Antagonistic Work Behaviors.

Keywords: Ostracism, Workplace Ostracism, On-the-Job Behaviors, Antagonistic Workplace Behaviors, Conscientiousness.

1. Introduction

Ostracism is defined as “an extreme form of rejection in which one is excluded and ignored in the presence of others” (*Apa Dictionary of Psychology*). In the organizational standpoint, it falls in the umbrella term of negative workplace behaviors and is often talked about alongside other similar behaviors such as bullying, harassment, and counterproductive workplace behaviors. Ostracism is a universal phenomenon that exists in organizations across genders, demographics, and cultures and is said to affect far greater number of people in organizations as compared to other negative behaviors which are more visible and perceived as more serious than a mere absence of communication (Williams, 1997; Ferris et al, 2008; Faulkner et al, 1997; Fox & Stallworth, 2005). These obvious negative behaviors have received all the attention and research in the field and Ostracism has gone neglected for way too long despite having known effect on the people subjected to it. It has been proved that Ostracism has an impact on individuals needs to belong, control and of meaningful existence (Zadro et al., 2004). Recent research has formalised the concept and conversation has started around variables that are related to it in organizations and this study aims to contribute in this extremely underrepresented area of organizational behaviors at work.

Ostracism is an ages old tool that has been used in all parts of the world from time to time in social, political and now organizational setting and is known to affect the psychological well-being of those subjected to it (Williams, 2002). The most popular use of the tool has been generally attributed to Athenian democracy and the practice where anyone who was found to be a threat to stability of the democracy was voted against and banished from the society. This was done by votes that were cast on a selected day; the usage of pieces of pottery called the ‘ostrakon’ being an important visual part of the process became the reason behind the name of the now popular concept. Rigorously documented Greek history and several other related concepts throughout the existence of numerous civilizations and timeframes give insights into how this phenomenon has been pervasive over time and how it has affected the individuals being ostracised. Some of the known examples other than that of the Greeks, that can be found in history are those of ‘petalism’ in Sicily (Forsdyke, 2009), the Pakhtunwali (Pathan) tradition of ostracism (Mahdi, 1986), ‘ne zbore’ in the Montenegrin tribal system (Boehm, 1985), voodoo deaths in the Aborigines in Australia (Cannon, 1942), Amish practice of ‘meidung’ (Williams, 2002), use of silence in Western Apache Culture (Basso, 1970), the culture and the prevalent law of ‘tadipaar karna’/ externment in India (Virani, 2001) and the recent phenomenon of Cancel culture in the Social Medias; and they all point in a similar direction of how ostracism has been prevalent over time and more often than not was used as a tool of exerting power over individuals generally in group situations.

Ostracism at workplace got a little formalized and popular after Ferris et al. (2008) introduced the Workplace Ostracism Scale (WOS) and started the conversation around the various variables it had relationships with at the workplace. Studies over the past decade have spoken of the relationships it holds with reduced levels of job satisfaction and commitment; increased levels of deviant behaviors (Ferris et al., 2008); to painful experiences, psychological outcomes and behavioural outcomes (Mao et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2013); affects personality (Howard et al., 2020), job attitudes (Wu et al., 2012), well-being and engagement (Williams & Sommer, 1997; Bedi, 2019) and some surprising yet beneficial outcomes (Mao et al., 2018). This list of proven effects has become extensive but is still not exhaustive.

Workplace Ostracism clearly affects behaviors at work as discussed above but the need for research on specific relationships it holds with them and how these relationships may hold the key to understanding the underlying reasons behind these behaviors and thus improving them. We generally study behaviors in the black and white of desired behaviors and the negative or counterproductive behaviors at work. Antagonistic behaviors do not fall in either of these and in some sense falls in both of them. This may sound confusing but underlines the uniqueness of these behaviors. Antagonistic Workplace Behaviors is one of the four variables of the Lehman and Simpson (1992) scale of On-the-Job Behaviors which was further based on the EVLN (Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect) framework introduced by Hirschman (1970). Antagonistic behaviors were born out of the voice dimension of the framework and majorly represented the aspect of aggression with many items underlining feelings and behaviors of disobeying, arguing, reporting others. The nature of these behaviors is highly subjective and situational and a change of perspective may see them as positive or negative. For example reporting others to supervisors for a wrongdoing can be seen as loyalty to organization by some and someone creating conflict by others. Personality in general and the Big Five framework remain one of the most researched topics in psychology and organizational psychology. People high in conscientiousness are individuals who have high self-discipline and tend to work hard. They are usually efficient organized and consistent in their efforts which is not the case in people with low conscientiousness. Interplay of these traits can help understand Antagonistic Behaviors better in the face of adverse conditions such as Ostracism.

2. Rationale and Objectives

Organization/ Industrial psychology literature talks in depth about negative, deviant or counterproductive behaviors at workplace. These behaviors such as bullying, harassment, discrimination etc. are some of the most talked about topics in this area of research. Ostracism is very similar in nature but appears far less harsh, intense, intimidating and consequential than these other popular negative behaviors. On the contrary, Ostracism affects far more number of people than these well researched behaviors and acts as a silent killer killing its victims a silent social death (Williams, 2007b). It was reported that 75% respondents confirmed that a “loved one used the silent treatment on them” and 67 % admitted to “having used the silent treatments on loved ones” (Faulkner et al., 1997). Similar compelling results have been reported over time (Williams, 1997, 2001, 2007a; Fox & Stallworth, 2005) further emphasizing the need for research on the phenomenon. In one of the introductory texts it was reiterated that workplace ostracism is a universal phenomenon and most of the respondents confirm to having ostracised others or having been ostracised (Ferris et al., 2008). Transactional analysis also highlights how “negative strokes are better than no strokes at all” (Planning, 1977; Hay, 1999; Solomon, 2003) which further makes us believe that being ostracised and getting the silent treatment could be far worse than being subjected to seemingly harsher negative workplace behaviors (O'Reilly et al., 2015).

Research on the phenomenon picked up in context of organizations after the development of the Workplace Ostracism Scale (WOS) and studies have contributed adding many antecedents and consequences of the construct. However, there are huge gaps to be filled in terms of the nature of relationships the construct holds with other important organizational factors in order to generate results that allow applicability to organizations directly. The Indian context has almost a non-existence on the phenomenon let alone on specific relationships that it holds with other organizational variables. In order to explore these avenues we look at how conscientiousness affects the relationship between workplace ostracism and antagonistic behaviors at workplace. Antagonistic behaviors as already discussed, can be perceived differently by different people as being good or bad or justified and antagonism and ostracism both hold a complex relationship given it is seen as something that arises from or as a result of ostracism. Conscientiousness among the personality traits being related to antagonism and dissent (Packer, 2010), given its very nature, seems like an interesting addition to the relationship. The relationship we wish to explore in this study is that of moderation effect of conscientiousness on the two variables is proposed to exist in form of this conceptual model:

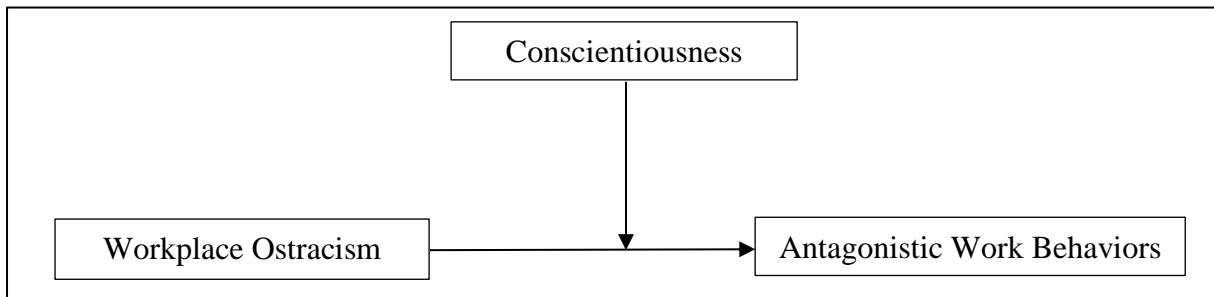


Figure 1: Conceptual model

Therefore with the objective to study the moderating effect of conscientiousness on the relationship between workplace ostracism and antagonistic work behaviors we propose the following hypothesis:

H₁ – There is a significant positive relationship between Workplace Ostracism and Antagonistic Work Behaviors.

H₂ - Conscientiousness will moderate the relationship between Workplace Ostracism and Antagonistic Work Behaviors.

3. Data Collection and Methodologies

3.1. Research Design

In order to get a thorough view of the phenomenon at hand it is imperative that a combination of several approaches that help understand the phenomenon from different points of view should be adopted (Denzin, 2007). This practice of triangulation was used and in order to achieve the objective, varied sources of data collected from respondents from different levels in the organization, accompanied by multiple approaches of data collection and analysis are looked into and used. Exploration under the qualitative aspect of the concepts under study in order to gain insights into the variables and the insights that existing researches provide formed the basis of the study; this inductive reasoning helped us develop the prospective relationships that may exist between these variables. This exploration led to the more structured and quantitative aspect of collecting the data and analyzing the interrelationships as a means of confirming the proposed relationships.

3.2. Sampling Design

Research in psychology is different in terms of the way research methods are employed when the objective is to get best possible results on the problem at hand. Hands down the pure probability based sampling techniques are considered the gold standard in scientific research, however in this field that does not account for being the most commonly used technique (Mertens, 2014). The key is to locate where the phenomenon occurs and thereby choosing the most suitable places and people and situations that can help uncovering the nuances of the phenomenon under study (Saunders et al., 2007). Multistage purposeful sampling was used, which is generally used when similar variables are studied (Collins et al., 2006), to collect the data. Tractor industry was chosen out of the core manufacturing organizations in order to remove industry specific noise in the data. The members companies of TMA (Tractor Manufacturers Association), an association of tractor manufacturers across the nation and a body recognized by the government of India was used as reference population. The sample was narrowed down to one geographical zone comprising of the states of Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh with a total of 1443 managerial level employees working at all the tractor manufacturing organizations in these states. A final useable sample of 488 employees was used for the analysis which was far greater than the minimum required 304 respondents (using Krejcie & Morgan (1970)'s technique) for the given number of employees.

3.3. Data collection and Instrument used

Primary data for the study was collected with the help of a cross sectional survey conducted in the chosen sample which is again one of the most widely used methods of data collection in Organizational Psychology. The only consideration when interpreting results should be to not infer conclusions or reach generalizations which are not appropriate to the methodology (Spector, 1994). The survey was administered using physical questionnaires with the scales of measurement for the variables. The Workplace Ostracism Scale (WOS) (Ferris et al., 2008) that collected data on seven point Likert scale where 1 stood for 'never' and 7 for 'always' was used. Sample statements were "How often do you feel, others ignored you at work?" and "How often do you

feel, others at work did not invite you when they went out for a coffee break?" It was a ten item scale and the scale came out to be fairly reliable at a Cronbach's α of .84 (Ursachi et al., 2015). Antagonistic Work Behaviors was collected using 5 item subscale of Antagonistic Behaviors by Lehman and Simpson (1992). Sample statements were "In the past 12 months how often have you spread rumors or gossip about co-workers" and "In the past 12 months how often have you reported others for breaking rules or policies". It was also collected on a seven point Likert scale where 1 stood for 'never' and 7 for 'very often'. For the study, it came in the acceptable range of Cronbach's α at .69 (Ursachi et al., 2015) was used. Conscientiousness was measured using the subscale from the BFI-10 scale (Rammstedt & John, 2007), and the reliability coefficient came at .65 which falls in the acceptable range (Ursachi et al., 2015). It uses a five point Likert scale where 1 stands for 'disagree strongly' and 7 for 'agree strongly'.

The final 488 respondents whose responses were used for the analysis constituted of 90.8% (n = 443) male and 9.2% (n = 44) female employees. Age-wise, 46.9% (n = 229) respondents were aged between 21 and 30 years, 32.8% (n = 160) were between 31 and 40 years, 12.7% (n = 62) were aged between 41 and 50 years and 7.5% (n = 37) were more than 50 years. Data on the length of service in the present organizations indicated that 15.2% (n = 74) respondents were in the organization for more than 15 years, 11.1% (n = 54) respondents had a length of service from 11 to 15 years, 26% (n = 127) respondents had a length of service in the organization between 6 to 10 years and 47.7% (n = 233) respondents had a length of service of up to 5 years in the organization.

4. Analysis and Discussion

In order to study the relationship between Workplace Ostracism and Antagonistic Work Behaviors, the data was tested and it showed that a significant positive relationship existed between the two variables with a β coefficient of 0.39 and $F(1, 486) = 30.95, p < .001$ therefore H_1 stands validated. The relationship finds plenty support in literature when tested for similar behaviors at work which fall into the terminology of negative, deviant or counterproductive behaviors at work (Zhao et al., 2013; Yan et al., 2014; Liu & Xia, 2016; Yang & Treadway, 2018). Lehman and Simpson (1992) do emphasize that results on negative human behaviors can be seen as not being very strong but are consequential because negative behaviors are generally extremely underreported and the relationships are usually undermined which can be looked into by gaining deeper insights into the relationship. Ostracism itself is said to have contradictory responses in different individuals, both positive and negative (Wesselmann et al., 2015) and that also calls for deeper insights into the relations.

The analysis for checking the moderation relationship was done using Process macro version 4 using IBM SPSS 23. The variables were checked for the model for simple moderation. In order to conduct the analysis that if Conscientiousness (C) moderates the relationship between Workplace Ostracism (WO) and the Antagonistic Work Behaviors (AWB), use of the interaction variable and centring of variables was done. The results conveyed that the model was significant with $F(3, 484) = 14.86, p < .001$. For a unit increase in WO there was .45 times increase in AWB with $\beta = 0.45, t(484) = 5.80, p < .001$. However C and AWB did not have a significant relationship with $\beta = -.03, t(484) = -.80, p = .42$. The interaction term came out to be significant with $\beta = .24, t(484) = 3.45, p = .006$ and we infer that C moderates the relationship between AWB and WO and the proposed hypothesis H_2 stands validated (Hayes, 2018).

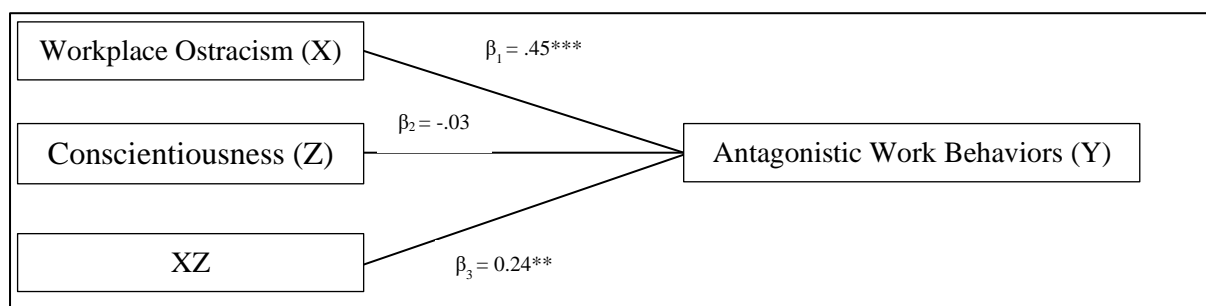


Figure 2: Path diagram for the moderating model. X = the independent variable, Y = the dependent variable, Z = the moderator variable, XZ = the interaction of the independent and moderator variables.

Slopes for the relationship between WO and AWB at the three levels of C revealed that it was significant when value of C was at mean ($\beta = 0.45, t(484) = 5.80, p < .001$) and at one standard deviation above the mean ($\beta = 0.73, t(484) = 5.63, p < .001$) and not at one standard deviation below mean ($\beta = 0.17, t(484) = 1.83, p = .07$). At mean and at one standard deviation above mean for every unit increase in WO, there was a 0.45 unit and 0.73 unit increases in AWB respectively.

Johnson Neyman method revealed that 82.79% of the observed data lies in the zones of significance and two separate regions can be seen at the ends of the scale (Figure 1). At a C score of 4.29 the relationship is significant ($\beta = 0.18$, $t(484) = 1.96$, $p = 0.05$) and as the C score rises the relationship between WO and AWB starts becoming more positive till C score reaches the end of the scale at C score of 7 ($\beta = 0.82$, $t(484) = 5.40$, $p < .001$). WO and AWB are also significant related at C score of 1.3 ($\beta = -0.53$, $t(484) = -1.96$, $p = 0.05$) and although not a lot of observed data lies beyond this point it does become more negative till C score of 1 ($\beta = -0.60$, $t(484) = -2.08$, $p = 0.038$).

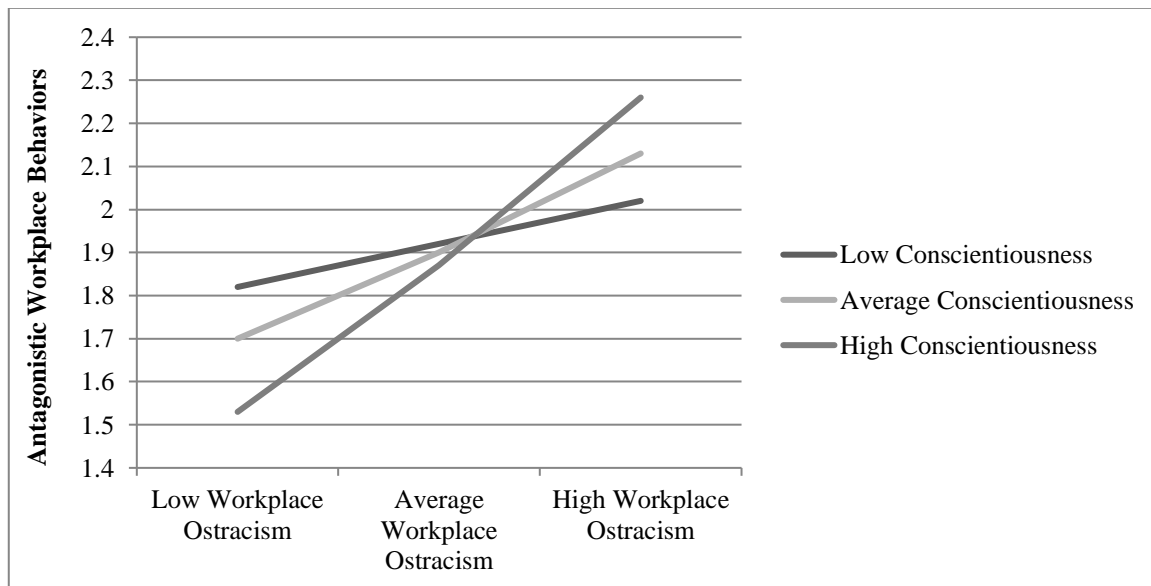


Figure 3: Variations in Antagonistic Work Behaviors with changes in Workplace Ostracism at different levels of Conscientiousness.

It can be clearly seen that respondents showing high C scores show a far more volatile relationship between WO and AWB as compared to those with low C scores. Respondents with low C Scores tend to portray AWB in a very small range falling around average AWB scores; the big difference shows up in respondents with high C scores with extremely low AWB scores at low ostracism and extremely high AWB scores at high ostracism felt by the respondents. This clearly shows that employees with high conscientiousness would act more antagonistically than others in case they face ostracism. If they don't face ostracism the levels of antagonism displayed would decrease drastically. Irrespective of the level of ostracism faced in the organization, employees with low conscientiousness will keep exhibiting average levels of antagonism.

Conscientiousness is known to be related to impulse control, antisocial behavior (Miller et al., 2008); "expressed greater willingness to dissent" (Packer, 2010). Conscientiousness as a trait has been seen to affect relationships of variables especially where a negative behavior or aspect of psychology has been involved. Tepper et al (2001) found that it moderated the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate's resistance; the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinate problem drinking weakened in presence of high conscientiousness (Bamberger & Bacharach, 2006). Also in case of politics and organization citizenship behavior (Chang et al., 2012); and counterproductive work behavior and workplace mistreatment (Kim et al., 2015), conscientiousness played the part.

Lehman and Simpson (1992) in their introductory text explain how the nature of Antagonistic behaviors falls in the shades of grey and cannot be directly categorised as positive and negative in nature. These actions categorised as antagonistic can be subject to perception of the employees. Actions that may be perceived as being good employees by helping find and report organizational inefficiencies and correcting organizations processes can be seen as actions of an employee finding faults in others or creating conflict in interpersonal relationships. This perspective of these antagonistic behaviors may help us make sense of the change in behaviors reported by the employees given changes in the environment. An employee high in conscientiousness, who are generally believed to be self-disciplined, hard workers, meticulous, consistent etc.; may perceive these behaviors being justified when performed in an environment of ostracism. They may also tend to perform these actions as an act of resentment given they are aware of these personal traits and how they perform their work and despite that being subjected to an environment of ostracism.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Workplace Ostracism shows its presence in responses of the employees and what emerges from its interaction with Conscientiousness in the respondents and the Antagonistic Behaviors performed by them is as expected, yet interesting. Conscientiousness does moderate the relationship between Workplace Ostracism and Antagonistic Work Behaviors. Significant changes in the relationship can be seen at different levels of Conscientiousness reported by the employees. At low conscientiousness, the relationship between the two variables is such that not a lot of variation can be seen in the antagonistic behaviors exhibited with changes in ostracism felt by the employees. This gradually changes with the change in conscientiousness and at high levels of conscientiousness, the relationship is increasingly positive; i.e. with increase in ostracism felt by the employees there is a steep rise in the antagonistic behaviors of the employees. The results are seemingly more significant at the two ends of the conscientiousness scale; more so at the mean and higher of the conscientiousness score.

This brings us to the inference that in order to bring down antagonism in organizations, we must have to manage both these variables i.e. increase conscientious people in our organization which can be controlled via the hiring processes and also keep the ostracism to the minimum in our organizational environment. What must be kept in mind is that if we do hire people with high conscientiousness or already have such employees in our organizations, we must be aware that we have to keep ostracism down otherwise in presence of high ostracism, these employees will exhibit antagonism higher than an average employee. If for some reasons we are unable to control ostracism levels in the organization, it would be better to avoid employees with high conscientiousness if we wish to reduce antagonism at all costs because others may tend to be relatively stable in terms of antagonism displayed irrespective of the ostracism levels in the organization.

Theoretically the study adds to the limited literature on Ostracism and Workplace Ostracism adding a required Indian context to the knowledge of the phenomenon. It also brings out new insights on the relationships it holds with both Antagonistic Behaviors and Conscientiousness trait of personality and how Conscientious affects its relationship with Antagonistic Behaviors. From the standpoint of managerial implications of the results they can guide the people in positions of the industry and similar organizations to help understand the everyday actions of their employees better. Actions can be related to the underlying psychology, here the ostracism or conscientiousness levels, which can be used as tools to understand and avoid or deal with these behaviors better. As discussed above, the levels of conscientiousness in people, the ostracism environment in the organization can be used as tools to manoeuvre antagonistic behaviors given the situational factors in which they are being applied.

6. Limitations and the way forward

Limitations help understand the boundaries of the results discussed and how they can be applied to wider variety of situations and where they cannot; also giving us a insights into areas of future research which can help widen the scope of the results found in this study and the scope of the phenomenon understudy and what related factors can be of consideration in the future.

Generalization of the results is the first limitation; as discussed in the methodology adopted for the study, it has been made clear that the data collected is from a specific set of employees from organizations in a specific industry. This should always be considered when using these results in situations different than those they were tested for. The applicability of these results should be considered before using them for application or further research studies. This brings us to the fact that for future researches the relationship can be tested in various industries and varied level of employees in different regions of the nation and the world in order to prove and increase the generalizability of the relationship.

The data collection was done using a cross sectional study which has a limitation of providing a degree of detail to the results. If we wish to explore the temporal aspect of the phenomenon it cannot be done using these results which can be brought out by other data collection and research methods which factor in time aspect of data. This bring us to the next area for future research wherein different data collection and research methods such as experimental or longitudinal studies can be applied to these variables in order to find out how they respond to time aspect changes.

The data collection was done on self-report scales and also shortened version of a popular scale was also used for a variable. These scales have held against the test of times and are widely used scales but some biases may exist which should always be considered when analysing and applying the results they generate. Lehman and Simpson (1992) emphasized how people generally responded to positive behaviors in way they would have been closer to reality as compared to other behaviors which resulted in underreporting in other behaviors, in this case Antagonistic Behaviors. To get over this limitation researchers can choose instruments or even methods of

collection that can overcome the problem. What can be done is collection from multiple data points which can give a more comprehensive view of the problem at hand.

Furthermore theoretically there is immense scope of future research, with ostracism being an exceptionally under researched topic; interrelations with other factor at workplace can be theorised and worked on.

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