IMPACT OF PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS ON WORKPLACE OSTRACISM. MEDIATING ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between perceived organizational politics, workplace ostracism, and interpersonal conflict in government-sector higher education institutions. Drawing on social exchange theory and existing research, it examines how interpersonal conflict mediates the connection between workplace ostracism and perceived organizational politics. A quantitative methodology was employed, with data collected from 230 employees in government-sector higher education institutions. The findings reveal that perceived organizational politics significantly contribute to workplace ostracism, exacerbating interpersonal conflict. These dynamics negatively impact organizational effectiveness and employee satisfaction. By highlighting these connections, the study provides actionable insights for mitigating corporate politics, reducing workplace ostracism, and fostering a collaborative work environment. The results contribute to theoretical advancements and offer practical recommendations for improving employee well-being in government-sector higher education institutions.

Keywords: Workplace Ostracism (WO), Perceived Organizational Politics (POP), Interpersonal Conflict (IC), Higher Educational Institution(HEIs)

Introduction

Workplace Ostracism (WO) is considered a pervasive workplace phenomenon, posing a serious and widespread concern for today's organizations (Hsieh & Karatepe, 2019; Liu et al., 2013). Ostracism negatively impacts the behaviors and feelings of employees, leading to self-defeating behaviors (Haldorai et al., 2020). WO refers to the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she is ignored or excluded by others (Ferris et al., 2008). Based on early studies surrounding social rejection, WO is also known as peer rejection, social exclusion, social isolation, abandonment, and being "out of the loop" (O'Reilly et al., 2015). A recent study revealed that 66% of employees experienced some sort of ostracism at their workplace (Parker, 2019). Another study discovered that over five years, 66% of respondents encountered WO in the forms of the silent treatment, whereas 28.7% reported that co-workers intentionally left the place upon their arrival (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). As a serious workplace stressor, WO brings a variety of negative effects on targets' psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes (O'Reilly et al., 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2016). WO causes job dissatisfaction reduced organizational commitment, poor job performance, greater counterproductive workplace behavior, and higher turnover intentions (Hsieh & Karatepe, 2019). Despite widespread research attention to the issue in recent years, scholars have paid very little attention to its antecedents (Liu et al., 2019). Consequently, it is essential to discover the factors that can shape WO and the mechanism by which these factors affect WO (Zhang & Dai, 2015).

Since experiencing WO generally depends on the behavior of others at the workplace (Chen & Li, 2019; Ferris et al., 2008; Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2019), interpersonal factors, particularly the negative ones, are likely to play a vital role in instilling employees' sense of WO. Thus, we suggest that perceived organizational

politics and interpersonal conflict can stimulate employees' WO, which is still unexplored in the existing literature. Organizational politics, in general, represents unofficial, self-serving, and sometimes behind-the-scenes behaviors to influence others, accumulate power, sell ideas, or attain predetermined objectives (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012). Therefore, employees usually perceive organizational politics as unethical, unfair, and unjust behavior (Başar et al., 2018; Bodla et al., 2014). The literature clearly indicates that perceived organizational politics (POP) is a genuine culprit of generating various negative employee outcomes (Baloch et al., 2017; Karatepe, 2013; Landells & Albrecht, 2019; Saleem, 2015). In particular, perceiving organizational politics at a greater degree promotes interpersonal conflict and distrust (Bai et al., 2016; Kumar & Ghadially, 1989; Ullah et al., 2019; Utami et al., 2014), as well as undermines interpersonal exchange relationships (Chinomona & Mofokeng, 2016; Scott et al., 2013), which can cause an individual to feel ostracized at the workplace (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2016; Zhang & Dai, 2015).

Despite a growing number of studies on WO in the context of business organizations, little empirical attention has been paid to the education sector (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2016; Fatima et al., 2017). Moreover, antecedents of WO in the context of HEIs are often overlooked by research, with a few exceptions (e.g., Bilal et al., 2020; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2016). Since a large number of faculty members working in public HEIs in the government sector actively engage in partisan and organizational politics (Shiddike & Rahman, 2019; Tithi, 2017), the current study draws on social exchange theory (SET), as well as proposes and aims to examine the direct effect of perceived organizational politics (POP) on WO and the mediating effect of interpersonal conflict towards the relationship between POP and WO in the context of public HEIs of the government sector. The present study contributes to the literature by identifying perceived organizational politics as a predictor of interpersonal conflict and workplace ostracism. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this study is the first of its kind to reveal the mediating role of interpersonal conflict in the relation between perceived organizational politics and workplace ostracism. Moreover, this study contributes to helping HEIs regarding how to reduce the phenomenon of workplace ostracism by showing that perceived organizational politics and interpersonal conflict can be important determining factors of workplace ostracism. Thus, HEIs should take initiatives to encourage fairness, equity, and non-politicized decision-making in relation to pay and promotion practices in order to promote a trustworthy working environment. According to the above discussion, this study aims to address the following question: Is there a relationship between perceived organizational politics and workplace ostracism by mediating effect of interpersonal conflicts in HEIs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace Ostracism

Ostracism is widely prevalent almost everywhere in society, including the workplace (Chen & Li, 2019; Yang & Treadway, 2018). WO represents a situation in which an individual feels that he or she is ignored, rejected, uninvited, or excluded by others in the workplace (Zhao & Xia, 2017). At work, an employee may feel ignored or excluded

by co-workers' behaviors, such as deliberate ignorance, denying eye contact, leaving the room when he/she comes in, ignoring him/her in the conversation, being unresponsive to his/her greetings, giving him/her the "cold shoulder" or withholding needed information (Chen & Li, 2019; Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2019; Yang & Treadway, 2018). These behaviors are a kind of interpersonal mistreatment that is painful and aversive to the ostracized employees (Chen & Li, 2019; Wan et al., 2018).

Compared with bullying, sexual harassment, and other forms of explicit mistreatments, WO is more ambiguous, subtle, and sometimes unintentional (Zimmerman et al., 2016). In certain instances, it may happen unintentionally when the source is too busy or not aware that his or her behavior socially ignores someone else (Al-Atwi, 2017; Chung & Kim, 2017). Whether it is intentional or unintentional, ostracized employees tend to feel humiliated, powerless, angry, stressed, dissatisfied, and revengeful, resulting in negative behavior (Fiset et al., 2017; Gkorezis et al., 2016; Liu & Xia, 2016; Riaz et al., 2019a, b). According to Gkorezis et al. (2016), WO is likely to undermine several fundamental human needs of the victims, particularly the need for belongingness, self-esteem, a meaningful existence, and control. It produces an unfavorable work environment which tends to bring numerous negative work outcomes, such as job stress (Mahfooz et al., 2017; Vui-Yee & Yen-Hwa, 2020), job tension (Hsieh & Karatepe, 2019), reduced job satisfaction (Chung & Kim, 2017; Fatima, 2016), reduced job embeddedness (Lyu & Zhu, 2019), higher turnover intention (Mahfooz et al., 2017; Vui-Yee & Yen-Hwa, 2020), reduced organizational commitment (Hitlan et al., 2006), emotional exhaustion (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2018), and higher deviant behaviors (Jahanzeb & Fatima, 2018; Peng & Zeng, 2017), Moreover, WO can have a negative effect on work engagement (Kaya et al., 2017), organizational citizenship behaviors (Wu et al., 2016), job performance (De Clercq et al., 2019; Jahanzeb et al., 2020).

In the context of HEIs, WO can lead to a number of undesired outcomes such as withdrawal behavior, deviant workplace behavior, resignation, and decreased job performance (Bilal et al., 2020; Fatima et al., 2019; Mirza et al., 2020).

Perceived Organizational Politics

Organizational politics is a common phenomenon in today's organizational life (Drory & Meisler, 2016). It refers to "intentional behaviors or actions that promote or protect one's self-interest at the expense of others or of organizational goals in the workplace" (Goo et al., 2019, p. 5). In a politically driven organization, employees are likely to perceive the work environment as unjust and unfair and thus, a threat to their interest and organizational well-being (Bodla et al., 2014; Cho & Yang, 2018). Thus, the way employees perceive organizational politics and the resulting implications have drawn the great attention of researchers (Meisler & Vigoda-Gadot, 2014).

Perceived organizational politics (POP) involves an individual's subjective evaluation in regards to the behaviors of others towards a self-serving purpose (Cho & Yang, 2018). POP refers to "the degree to which respondents view their work environment as political in nature, promoting the self-interests of others, and thereby unjust and unfair from the individual point of view" (Vigoda & Cohen, 2002, p. 311).

POP comprises three dimensions: i) 'General political behavior' (perceived self-serving behaviors of organizational members with the purpose of obtaining valued outcomes); ii) 'go along to go ahead' (perceived organizational members' behaviors of remaining supportively silent, passive, and inactive with the aim of achieving one's goals; and iii) 'pay and promotion' (perceived unfairness regarding pay and reward practices in the organization) (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991; Makhdoom et al., 2015). Since POP greatly affects an employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions, understanding its effects has both academic and practical significance (Crawford et al., 2019). Past research has shown that POP is negatively associated with desired employee outcomes, such as employee well-being (Ullah et al., 2019), meaningfulness of work (Landells & Albrecht, 2019), perceived organizational support (Bukhari & Kamal, 2017), moral efficacy (Khan et al., 2019), job satisfaction (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2019; Bukhari & Kamal, 2017), work engagement (Karatepe, 2013), organizational commitment (Bukhari & Kamal, 2017; Lau et al., 2017), employee creativity (Malik et al., 2019), extra-role performance (Karatepe, 2013), and job performance (Hasan et al., 2019). Moreover, POP was found to have a positive relationship with negative employee outcomes, in particular, stress (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2019; Bukhari & Kamal, 2017; Landells & Albrecht, 2019), task and relationship conflicts (Bai et al., 2016), employee silence (Sun & Xia, 2018), turnover intention (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2019; Bukhari & Kamal, 2017), knowledge hiding (Malik et al., 2019), and counterproductive work behaviors (Baloch et al., 2017).

Perceived Organizational Politics and Workplace Ostracism

In general, an increased perception of organizational politics can cause employees' feelings of unfairness, powerlessness, anxiety, increased awareness of self-protection, imbalanced interpersonal relationships, destruction of the exchange relationship between employees, triggering the sense of separation and crowding out by colleagues (Sun & Xia, 2018). Moreover, POP promotes conflict of interests, self-serving behaviors against each other, task and relationship conflicts, and interpersonal distrust (Bai et al., 2016; Ullah et al., 2019) and subsequently, yield employees' feeling of being ostracized by others (Mlika et al., 2017; Zhang & Dai, 2015).

In the context of social exchange theory, POP usually promotes a sense of unfairness and adversely affects employee outcomes, which is likely to weaken the exchange relationship (Chinomona & Mofokeng, 2016). In a poor social exchange relationship, employees are more likely to perceive themselves as weak or low-contributing social exchange partners and thus, feel excluded from each other (Scott et al., 2013). Moreover, considering the numerous negative employee outcomes of POP (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2019; Bukhari & Kamal, 2017; Labrague et al., 2017; Landells & Albrecht, 2017; Malik et al., 2019), it is assumed that POP can prompt another damaging employee outcome, i.e., WO. Thus, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. Perceived organizational politics has a significant positive relationship with workplace ostracism.

Perceived Organizational Politics, Interpersonal Conflict, and Workplace Ostracism

Social exchange theory reflects the idea that human beings are driven to reciprocate and engage in a social exchange relationship, in which successful exchange with others greatly depends on the actions and interpersonal trust developed with them (Wang et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2009). In a politicized organization, individuals engage in self-serving behaviors by ignoring the interests of others, which causes conflicts of interests and interpersonal conflict (Bai et al., 2016; Malik et al., 2019). The resulting conflict among employees in a work environment undermines social exchange relationships (Scott et al., 2013), wherein an employee becomes unwilling to interact and maintain relationships with those who are in conflict, resulting in negative interactions (i.e., workplace ostracism) (Zhang & Dai, 2015).

Ferris et al. (2008) argued that organizational politics can result in employees competing for scarce resources often with the loss of others, which is likely to eliminate trust among them. Generally, perceiving a high level of self-acting political activities increases the experience of unfairness, backstabbing, insecurity, conflicts and chaos, deteriorates interpersonal relationships, and thereby promotes interpersonal conflict at the workplace (Kulkarni, 2016; Ullah et al., 2019; Sun & Xia, 2018). On this basis, prior studies have found empirical evidence that employees' POP is positively associated with interpersonal conflict (Kumar & Ghadially, 1989; Ullah et al., 2019; Utami et al., 2014). Once interpersonal conflict becomes dominant in the workplace, individuals may feel hesitant to interact with those who are deemed distrustful and to maintain or restore relationships with them, turning the latter into low contributors in the exchange relationship and risking exposure of these individuals to ostracism (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2016; Scott et al., 2013). Accordingly, several studies found that interpersonal conflict results in WO (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2016; Scott et al., 2013; Zhang & Dai, 2015). Thus, we assume that interpersonal conflict can mediate the relationship between POP and WO.

H2. Perceived organizational politics has a significant positive relationship with interpersonal conflict.

H3. Interpersonal conflict has a significant positive impact on workplace ostracism.

H4. Interpersonal conflict mediates the positive relationship between perceived organizational politics and workplace ostracism.

Theoretical Framework

The researchers indicated that social exchange theory is based on the principle of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Cook et al., 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Salleh et al., 2020). The principle of reciprocity refers to the equal exchange of either positive or negative commitments between the parties involved (Aburumman et al., 2020). It appears that HEIs can promote fairness and justice through establishing a non-politicized work environment, in which academics will experience trustworthy relationships among them and hence feel less ostracized at the workplace. Therefore, social exchange theory supports these relationships. Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research methodology to investigate the relationships between perceived organizational politics (POP), workplace ostracism (WO), and interpersonal conflict (IC) in government sector higher education institutions. The research is based on the principles of social exchange theory and aims to provide insights that can inform interventions to reduce workplace ostracism and improve organizational effectiveness and employee satisfaction.

Population and Sample

The population for this study consists of employees from various government sector higher education institutions. A sample size of 230 employees was selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure representation across different departments and job roles. The sample demographics are detailed in Table 1, including age, gender, qualification, designation, and experience.

Table 1: Demographic Analysis

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age 18-25	96	25.3%
Age 26-35	93	24.5%
Age 36-45	112	29.5%
Age 46 and above	78	20.6%
Male	192	50.7%
Female	187	49.4%
Diploma or less	113	29.8%
Bachelor	159	42.0%
Master	88	23.2%
PhD	19	5.0%
Entry level	88	23.2%
Middle level	214	56.5%
Top level	77	20.3%
Experience 1-2 years	86	22.7%
Experience 2-3 years	28	7.4%
Experience 3-4 years	58	15.3%
Experience 4+ years	207	54.6%

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that included validated scales for measuring perceived organizational politics, workplace ostracism, and interpersonal conflict. The questionnaire was distributed electronically to the selected employees, and responses were collected over a period of three months.

Statistical Techniques Used

Various statistical techniques were employed to analyze the data. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using Partial Least Squares (PLS) were utilized to test the hypothesized relationships. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and reliability tests were also conducted to ensure the robustness of the data.

Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of the constructs were assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. The results indicated high reliability for all constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values as follows:

- Interpersonal Conflict: 0.860
- Perceived Organizational Politics: 0.914
- Workplace Ostracism: 0.959.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of the respondents. The analysis included measures of central tendency and dispersion to understand the demographic distribution and other relevant attributes of the sample population.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

SEM was employed to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. This method allows for the analysis of complex relationships between multiple variables simultaneously. SEM was chosen for its ability to handle multiple regression equations and its robustness in dealing with multi-collinearity among independent variables.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

CFA was conducted to validate the measurement model and ensure that the constructs measured what they were intended to measure. The goodness-of-fit indices indicated an acceptable fit for the measurement model, confirming the validity of the constructs.

EVALUATION OF HYPOTHESIZED MODEL

The hypothesized model was evaluated using various fit indices, including the chi-square statistic, comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The results showed that the model had a good fit to the data, with all fit indices meeting the recommended thresholds.

Hypotheses Testing

The results of the hypotheses testing are summarized in Table 2. All hypothesized relationships were supported, indicating that perceived organizational politics significantly influences workplace ostracism, with interpersonal conflict acting as a mediator.

Table 2:

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	T Value	Decision
H1:	POP → WO	0.592	0.067	8.824	Supported
H2:	POP → IC	0.508	0.060	8.511	Supported
H3:	IC → WO	0.167	0.064	2.609	Supported
H4:	POP → IC → WO (mediation)	0.085	0.036	2.368	Supported

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the dynamics of perceived organizational politics, workplace ostracism, and interpersonal conflict within government sector higher education institutions. The results suggest that high levels of perceived organizational politics lead to increased workplace ostracism, primarily through the mediation of interpersonal conflicts. These findings are consistent with social exchange theory, which posits that negative organizational environments foster interpersonal distrust and conflict, leading to social exclusion and ostracism among employees. The study highlights the importance of addressing organizational politics and interpersonal conflicts to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study offers several practical implications for managers and policymakers in higher education institutions. By understanding the impact of organizational politics on workplace ostracism and interpersonal conflict, institutions can develop targeted interventions to reduce political behavior and promote a positive organizational culture. This can lead to improved employee satisfaction, increased productivity, and enhanced organizational effectiveness.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations, including its cross-sectional design and the focus on government sector higher education institutions. Future research could explore these relationships in different organizational contexts and employ longitudinal designs to capture changes over time. Additionally, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying these relationships.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of the impact of perceived organizational politics on workplace ostracism and the mediating role of interpersonal conflicts. The findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to address organizational politics and interpersonal conflicts to foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment. The study provides a series of suggestions for further

research and practical measures to alleviate the harmful consequences of organizational politics and interpersonal conflicts. The purpose of these proposals is to improve the overall academic and administrative environment in higher education institutions, fostering a more inclusive and supportive workplace for all faculty members.

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