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The Moderating Role of Communication Transparency in the Relationship Between Political Skill of Leaders and Workplace Ostracism

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ABSTRACT
Workplace ostracism is more damaging than bullying because when employees feel ignored, they will not only be damaged physically but also mentally. Although workplace ostracism has negative impacts on employee behavior, there has been limited study that focuses on variables that can decrease the level of workplace ostracism. The present study comprised 214 employees from any organizational domain and job level. This study used a Political Skill Inventory (PSI) to measure political skill, a communication openness scale to measure operationalized communication transparency, and the workplace ostracism scale (WOS) to examine workplace ostracism. Results showed that communication transparency moderated the inverse relationship between a leader's political skill and workplace ostracism. Political skill of leaders can significantly lower the level of workplace ostracism when communication transparency is low. This study may help organizations or communities to decrease the effect of workplace ostracism by increasing the leader's political skill and communication transparency at work.

Keywords: *Workplace Ostracism, Leader's Political Skill, Communication Transparency*.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a universal experience, people can feel ostracized by others or by themselves in the workplace (Ferris et al., 2008). Workplace ostracism is defined as individual perceptions regarding feelings of being ignored or excluded by others (K. D. Williams, 2001). According to Harvey et al. (2018), some behaviors can indicate workplace ostracism. Example scenarios are as follows: your coworkers are suddenly quiet when you enter the pantry room, whereas before they talked to each other; your coworkers do not invite you to a gathering that you must attend; you sit alone when you are in the cafeteria; people do not consider your presence as important; coworkers reject your advice at a meeting without a clear explanation; others exclude you from group discussions or arrangements; others avoid eye contact with you; others whisper to each other about you; and your boss coordinates with your subordinates directly without informing you beforehand.

Workplace ostracism can be divided into two categories based on organizational antecedents: purposeful and non-purposeful ostracism (Robinson et al., 2013). Purposeful ostracism is common in

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a company where the negative impact of workplace ostracism is relatively low, while non-purposeful ostracism is common in organizations that have a high-stress environment and are geographically dispersed (Robinson et al., 2013). Robinson et al. (2013) argue that one of the organizational factors that can decrease the impact of purposeful ostracism is engagement in workplace ostracism with other coworkers. This can lessen purposeful ostracism because they employees share behavior and support each other to rationalize excluding others (Robinson et al., 2013). Another factor that can decrease the effect of purposeful ostracism is organizational culture (Robinson et al., 2013). Some organizations have a culture of avoiding conflict, while others choose to solve the conflict. Organizational hierarchical structure also affects the level of purposeful ostracism. An organization with a steep hierarchical structure has stronger formal power to control its members' behavior than an organization with a flat hierarchical structure (Robinson et al., 2013). Organizational factors that can lead to non-purposeful ostracism include inadequate organizational culture, organizational diversity, and dissimilarity (Robinson et al., 2013). Robinson et al. (2013) argue that an organization with inadequate culture, high diversity, and dissimilarity leads to every member having a different understanding of the social normative. A lack of understanding of the social normative will lead members of the organization to non-purposeful ostracism (Robinson et al., 2013).

Most people believe that workplace ostracism is less damaging than workplace harassment (Riley, 2014). However, research by the University of British Columbia found that workplace ostracism is more dangerous than bullying because when employees feel ignored, they are damaged physically and mentally (Riley, 2014). This finding is relevant to the opinion of Sauder Professor Sandra Robinson, who states that workplace ostracism leads people to feel more helpless and not worthy of attention (Riley, 2014).

According to Hitlan et al. (2016), 13% of 5000 respondents felt excluded by their coworkers. A case of a white woman working in the Bristol City Council's housing department who was ostracized by her managers and senior managers and then faced disciplinary action was reported (Cork, 2019). In addition, a black woman working for Bristol City Council reported that she was ostracized by her colleagues and chose to sign-off work as a result of the stress created by the situation (Cork, 2019).

In Indonesia, there have been specific cases that demonstrate experiences of workplace ostracism. First, an employee working in a family company experienced workplace ostracism by the owner. The owner provided souvenirs and food to her coworkers, but not to the subject (Laili, 2019). Second, an employee from a private company was uncomfortable because his coworkers often whispered behind him (Huda, 2012). Third, a woman working as a cashier in a supermarket did not enjoy her work because her coworkers did not include her in groups (Purba, 2016). These behaviors make victims feel upset, unhappy, uncomfortable, and dejected (Huda, 2012; Laili, 2019; Purba, 2016).

When employees are excluded from activities or conversations, they believe that they are excluded from the larger group (Ferris et al., 2008; Leung et al., 2011; Lyu & Zhu, 2017). Subsequently, they decrease their contribution to the organization, well-being, level of job embeddedness, and affective commitment (Ferris et al., 2008; Leung et al., 2011; Lyu & Zhu, 2017). In addition, workplace ostracism raises employees' aggression (Warburton et al., 2006), burnout (Qian et al., 2017), interpersonal deviance (Peng & Zeng, 2016), and intention to leave the job (Lyu & Zhu, 2017).

Previous studies have examined personality traits related to forms of workplace victimization (Amponsah-Tawiah & Annor, 2017; Bowling et al., 2010; Coyne, 2000; Linton & power, 2013). Furthermore, there is a limited study that examined an individual's skill as it relates to ostracism (Mao et al., 2017). Measurement of ability and skill are useful because they can be improved by training, learning, and practice (Van Wart, 2005).

According to Mao et al. (2017), an individual's skill that can be an antecedence of workplace ostracism is a political skill. Ahearn et al. (2004, p. 311) define political skill as "*The ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal or organizational objectives.*" Political skill itself consists of four dimensions: social astuteness, apparent sincerity, networking ability, and interpersonal influence (Ferris et al., 2007). Social astuteness helps people to interpret their own or others' behavior accurately and understand social interactions well. Networking ability allows individuals to develop strong relationships, productive alliances, and friendships. Interpersonal influence enables people to adjust their behavior in various situations. Apparent sincerity is essential to influencing others through perceived intentions.

The political skill itself is crucial to a leader's reputation (Blass & Ferris, 2007; Munyon et al., 2014). It provides a leader with behavioral flexibility, adaptability, and social astuteness, which are critical for addressing subordinate's needs and aspirations effectively (Ahearn et al., 2004). It also helps subordinates to perceive calm and self-confident characteristics of the leader while attracting others and providing comfort to them (Blass & Ferris, 2007). Leaders with superior political skill not only interpret different social situations accurately but also know how to act in every condition in a manner that does not convey self-serving motives and appears honest (Blass & Ferris, 2007). Ultimately, a leader's political skill will affect the social climate within work units and their subordinates' work reactions and behavior (Ahearn et al., 2004). Based on this explanation, we proposed our first hypothesis:

H1: A leader's political skill has a negative correlation to workplace ostracism.

To interpret different social situations and address their subordinates' needs effectively, a leader needs to identify the situation or problem. Communication transparency helps the leader to identify the problem and solve it before it worsens (Rogers, 1987). Communication transparency refers to employees' perception of how a leader listens, follows up, provides recommendations, and implements open communication patterns

(Vogelgesang et al., 2013). Rogers (1987) defines communication transparency as employee behavior in sending and receiving messages about personal tasks and innovative topics. When a leader exhibits transparent communication with their subordinates, outcomes for the organization will be improved (Kay & Christophel, 1995).

Communication transparency involves leaders and employees, information exchange between them, and the quality of their respective relationships (Norman et al., 2010). A leader who communicates transparently conveys their values, aspirations, and weaknesses of subordinates and encourages subordinates to employ similar transparent communication (Avolio et al., 2004). Communication transparency also helps subordinates to resolve their interpersonal conflicts with others (Kay & Christophel, 1995). When a leader can encourage subordinates to communicate transparently, they can increase their understanding of each other. Ultimately, communication transparency helps decrease the level of workplace ostracism (Robinson et al., 2013). Based on this explanation, we proposed our second and third hypotheses as follows:

H2: Communication transparency has a negative correlation to workplace ostracism.

H3: Communication transparency moderates the inverse relationship between a leader's political skill and workplace ostracism.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study Design

This study used a cross-sectional approach. Data was collected using a convenience sampling technique with an online survey method. The questionnaire in this research used two attention check questions described by Kung, Kwok, and Brown (2018). We only analyzed data from participants that correctly responded to all of the attention check questions. Data collection and processing started in the early of April and concluded at the end of May 2019. Informed consent was given for the questionnaire.

2.2. Participants

A total of 214 employees of different gender, education level, and socioeconomic status in various institutions, industries, and organizational fields were included in this study. The participants ranged from 18 to 56 years of age. We did not categorize participants by demographic factors because we did not find any evidence of correlation between demographic factors and workplace ostracism.

2.3. Reliability and Validity Tests

Reliability was estimated using alpha Cronbach. Reliability values above 0.70 were considered adequate; 0.80, very good; and 0.90, excellent (Kline, 2005). Validity was measured using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with Rstudio. CFI values greater than 0.90 and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) values of 0.08 or less indicated a reasonably good fit of the model (Hu & Bentler, 1999). As suggested by Kline (2005), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) values less than 0.05 indicated a close approximate fit model, values between 0.05 and 0.08 suggested reasonable error of approximation, and RMSEA values greater than 0.10 indicated a "poor fit" model. The moderation research

conceptual model used in this research was analyzed using PROCESS by Hayes (2018) model 1.

2.4. Measurements

2.4.1. Workplace Ostracism Scale (WOS)

Workplace ostracism was examined using the workplace ostracism scale (WOS) as described by Ferris et al. (2008), which consists of 10 items with a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). Items included "Others ignored you at work." and "Others avoided you at work." The workplace ostracism scale (WOS) used in this study was translated from the original language into Indonesian because this research was conducted in Indonesia. The translation process followed Sousa and Rojjanasrirat (2011). The scale met the criteria for fit indices. Reliability and validity values were as follows: CFI=0.917, RMSEA=0.063, and SRMR=0.056. The average α coefficient for the workplace ostracism scale was 0.931.

2.4.2. Communication Openness Scale (COS)

Communication transparency was operationalized using 9 items of the 13-item communication openness scale with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) as described by Rogers (1987). Four items measuring communication between peers were excluded: "People ask supervisors' opinions," "People ask coworkers for suggestions," "People listen to supervisors' suggestions," and "People listen to new ideas from coworkers." The use of the communication openness scale to measure communication transparency followed Vogelgesang et al. (2013). Sample items included "My leader acts on criticism" and "My leader follows up on people's opinions." The communication openness scale (COS) used in this study was translated from the original language into Indonesian because this research was conducted in Indonesia. The translation process followed Sousa and Rojjanasrirat (2011). Reliability and validity values were as follows: CFI=0.968, RMSEA=0.069, and SRMR=0.033. The average α coefficient for the workplace ostracism scale was 0.935.

2.4.3. Political Skill Inventory (PSI)

Subordinates' perception of their leaders' political skill was operationalized using the 18-item Political Skill Inventory described by Ferris et al. (2005) with a 7-point Likert-type scale. Items assessed leaders' perceived interpersonal influence based on Frieder and Basik (2016), e.g., "It is easy for him or her to develop good rapport with most people," and "He or she understands people very well." The Political Skill Inventory was used to measure leaders' political skill as described in Frieder and Basik (2016). The Political Skill Inventory (PSI) used in this study was translated from the original language into Indonesian because this research was conducted in Indonesia. The translation process followed Sousa and Rojjanasrirat (2011). Reliability and validity values were as follows: CFI=0.932, RMSEA=0.08, and SRMR=0.057. The average α coefficient for the workplace ostracism scale was 0.975.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Descriptive Statistics Analysis

Table I shows the mean, standard deviation, and inter-correlation between

variables. As can be seen in Table I, leaders' workplace ostracism had a significant inverse correlation with leaders' political skill, r = −0.174, p<0.01, and communication transparency, r=−0.219, p<0.01. We also found that leaders' political skill had a significant direct correlation with communication transparency, r=0.723, p<0.01.

Table I. Mean, standard deviation, and inter-correlation between variables

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	*1*	*2*	*3*
Workplace ostracism	1.9346	1.05893	-		
Leader's political skill	4.8803	1.42892	−0.174**	-	
Communication transparency	3.7586	0.88368	−0.219**	0.723**	-

[a.]**p<0.01

Table II. Multicollinearity test

Variable	*Eigenvalue*	*Condition index*	*Tolerance*	*VIF*
(Constant)	2.945	1.000		
Leader's political skill	0.041	8.472	0.421	2.373
Communication transparency	0.014	14.316	0.421	2.373

Table II shows that the data met the assumption of collinearity and that multicollinearity was not a concern (leader political skill, eigenvalue >0.01, condition index <30, tolerance >0.1, VIF <10; communication transparency, eigenvalue >0.01, condition index <30, tolerance >0.1, VIF <10).

3.2. Test Hypothesis

As can be seen in Table III, leaders' political skill had a significant inverse correlation with workplace ostracism (b=−0.6366, SE=0.2118, t=−3.0052, 95% confidence interval (CI) [−1.0543, −0.2190] p<0.01, H1 supported). Similar to leaders' political skill, communication transparency had a significant inverse correlation with workplace ostracism (b=−0.9299, SE=0.2538, t=−3.6637, 95% CI [−1.4302, −0.4295] p<0.01, H2 supported). There was a significant interaction between leaders' political skill and communication transparency (b=0.16579, SE=0.0540, t=3.0675, 95% CI [0.0592, 0.2722] p<0.01, H3 supported). These results indicate that communication transparency moderated the relationship between leaders' political skill and workplace ostracism. Leaders' political skill significantly lowered the level of workplace ostracism when communication transparency was low (b=−0.1763 SE=0.0864, t=−2.0416, 95% CI [−0.3466, −0.0061] p<0.05). However, leaders' political skill did not affect workplace ostracism when communication transparency was high (b=0.1551,

SE=0.0917, t=1.6916, 95% CI [−.0256, 0.3358] p>0.05). Therefore, H3 was supported.

Table III. Workplace ostracism regression model

Variables	***b***	***SE***	***t***	***p***	***95%CI***	
					ULCI	***LLCI***
Leaders' political skill	−0.6366	0.2118	−3.0052	0.003	−1.0543	−0.2190
Communication transparency	−0.9299	0.2538	−3.6637	0.0003	−1.4302	−0.4295
Leaders' political skill * Communication transparency	0.1657	0.0540	3.0675	0.0024	0.0592	0.2722

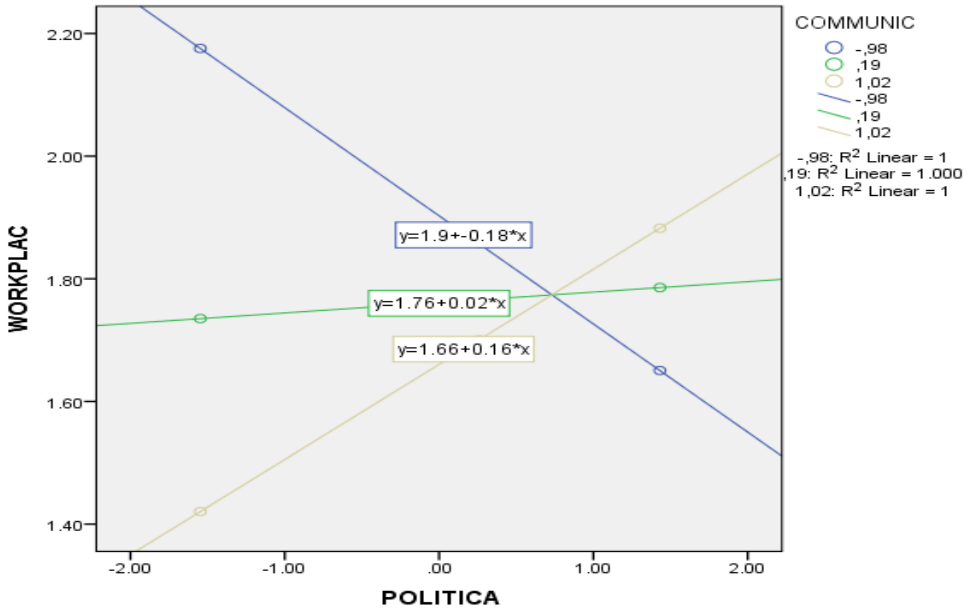

Fig. 1. The interaction between communication transparency and leaders' political skill in their effect on workplace ostracism

5. DISCUSSION

In this study, we aimed to identify the role of communication transparency in moderation of the relationship between the leaders' political skill and workplace ostracism. Each of our hypotheses was supported. First, the leaders' political skill had an inverse correlation to workplace ostracism. Second, communication transparency had an inverse correlation to workplace ostracism. Third, communication transparency moderated the relationship between a leader's political skill and workplace ostracism.

The first hypothesis was supported by previous research by Cullen (2014). They found that people with political skill had a lower chance of experiencing workplace ostracism from others because it enabled them to achieve popularity among peers.

This popularity encouraged them to have positive workplace outcomes, such as compensation from others or career achievement (Cullen, 2014). Political skill is crucial to a leader's personal reputation (Blass & Ferris, 2007; Munyon et al., 2014). A leader with greater political skill can understand social interactions well, develop strong relationships, develop profitable alliances and friendship, calibrate and modify responses to various conditions to induce responses in others, and influence others in terms of perceived intentions. Leaders with high political skill not only interpret dissimilar social situations accurately but also know how to act in every condition in a manner that does not convey self-serving motives and appears honest (Blass & Ferris, 2007).

Employees who perceived their leaders as having a high level of political skill believed that their leader was acting sincerely, authentically, with trustworthiness, and genuinely (Frieder & Basik, 2016). Their leaders presented their behavior in a consistent way, which included espousal of their values, awareness of themselves, understanding of others' perceptions of them, ability to identify complexity, and ability to identify the demands of a situation (Frieder & Basik, 2016). An effective leader has the skill to adapt their behavior to evoke response in others (Frieder & Basik, 2016). Political skill helps a leader to deliver subordinates' needs and aspirations efficiently, because it provides behavioral flexibility and social astuteness of the leader (Ahearn et al., 2004).

Communication transparency has an inverse correlation to workplace ostracism, because it enables the employee to be respective and responsive to information (Roger, 1987). When employees engage in transparent communication, they can identify problems earlier and solve them before they worsen (Roger, 1987). Communication transparency is also important for leaders because it helps to communicate values, aspirations, and weaknesses of employees and encourages them to implement similar transparent communication (Avolio et al., 2004). It also helps leaders and employees to understand each other and decrease misunderstanding, which leads to workplace ostracism (Robinson et al., 2013). Communication transparency also increases employee motivation to deal with personal conflict with other subordinates (Kay & Christophel, 1995). When employees deal positively with personal conflict, they can reduce the level of workplace ostracism. Transparent communication by leaders also affects subordinates' trust in them (Whitener, et al., 1998). Employee trust allows them to work cooperatively and believe that their interests will not be harmed by others' uncooperative behavior (Cremer, Snyder, & Dewitte, 2001).

Political skill requires the ability to understand, read, and control social situations in discreet and unobtrusive ways (Ahearn et al., 2004). It is easier to understand and control social situations when communication is transparent. Communication transparency involves leaders and employees, information exchange between them, and the quality of their respective relationships (Norman et al., 2010). Leaders who are transparent in communication convey their values, aspirations, and weaknesses of subordinates and encourage subordinates to employ similar transparent

communication (Avolio et al., 2004). It also helps leaders and employees to have an understanding of each other and to decrease misunderstanding (Robinson et al., 2013). However, decreased communication transparency can affect the relationship between a leader's political skill and workplace ostracism. Lars (2002) views transparency as a social phenomenon formed from the actor's expectations and strategies. Based on that, organizations need to know the information that they want to provide in a form that is relevant to the strategic goal. It helps the organization to be more externally accessible and to promote transparency by selecting, clarifying, and summarizing data. Organizations also need to determine how transparency is promoted. Transparent communication can be promoted by establishing an organization's standard for transparency. This helps the organization to deliver transparency as an environmental condition and simultaneously creates understanding.

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the data collected in this study was not stratified by demography, such as age, type of organization, or employee's position in an organization. Future research should be considered to examine workplace ostracism based on demography. Second, this study only examined the effect of one moderating variable on the relationship between leaders' political skill and workplace ostracism. Further research should explore other variables that can moderate the effect of a leader's political skill on workplace ostracism. It is important for organizations to know which information can be provided and which form is most effective for a strategic goal. Third, this study was unable to determine causality. Future experimental research is expected to analyze causal factors that affect the relationship between leaders' political skill and workplace ostracism.

This study may help organizations or communities to decrease the effect of workplace ostracism by increasing leaders' political skill. Organizations can also lower the level of workplace ostracism by increasing communication transparency. However, organizations should first determine standards of transparency. Organizations or communities can provide training for increased political skill in their leaders and implement policy that supports communication transparency at work.

6. CONCLUSION

This study found that political skill in leaders was inversely correlated with workplace ostracism and that communication transparency moderated the effect of leaders' political skill on workplace ostracism. People with political skill may have a lower risk of experiencing workplace ostracism, because it allows them to gain popularity among peers. Leaders with higher levels of political skill can decrease workplace ostracism because they can provide comfort to others. Political skill also helps people in an organization to understand each other and decreases misunderstanding, which leads to workplace ostracism. When everyone in an organization has a similar understanding of each other, it can decrease misunderstanding that can increase workplace ostracism. Communication transparency decreases this misunderstanding and requires

information exchange and corresponding relationships between leaders and employees. Transparent communication by a leader can affect a subordinate's trust in them. Subordinates who trust their leader will work cooperatively and believe that their interests will not be harmed by others uncooperative behavior.

Although communication transparency has several benefits, communication transparency can affect the relationship between a leader's political skill and workplace ostracism. The effect of a leader's political skill is higher with lower levels of communication transparency. As a social phenomenon, transparency is created by the actor's expectations and strategies. Based on that, organizations need to know which information and the form that best suited to the strategic goal. This may help organizations to be more externally accessible and to promote transparency by selecting, clarifying, and summarizing data. Organizations also need to determine how transparency is offered. They can start by defining and complying with a standard for openness within the organization. This may help the organization to provide transparency as an environmental condition and create an understanding of transparency.

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