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Counteracting workplace ostracism in hospitality with psychological empowerment

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1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is notorious for seasonal overwork, lack of recognition, and low decision latitude at the bottom of the hierarchical pyramid – conditions that habitually affect work climate and performance negatively (Zhao et al., 2013). Hospitality is also a high-stress sector, since it involves emotional labor: no matter what their feelings, staff must always try to display positive attitudes when serving customers (Chu et al., 2012; Lee and Ok, 2012). Unexpected contingencies also arise during service delivery, and the uniqueness of each situation due to people's diversity sometimes puts hotel employees under too much pressure. Such difficult situations when serving customers can cause dysfunctional or counterproductive work behaviors (Ferris et al., 2009).

For these reasons, maintaining positive interpersonal relationships among members of an organization is not always easy in a sector like hospitality, which also requires working at “anti-social times” and changing shifts (Tongchaiprasit and Ariyabuddhiphongs, 2016). Stressful work-related conditions in hotel settings can cause deterioration of interpersonal relations among the workforce, affecting the quality of work performed and leading potentially to internal conflicts. Some hospitality employees are likely to display negative conduct at work, especially towards co-workers, for example, by ostracizing them.

Ostracism is “a dark phenomenon within organizations” (Zhu et al., 2017: 63) that affects workplace behaviors. Workplace ostracism occurs when some coworkers exclude others from social interaction, sometimes leaving the room when they enter, avoiding eye contact or even to refusing to speak with them. Ostracized individuals are often ignored by their coworkers, who sometimes even refuse to greet them. Being the target of workplace ostracism diminishes the individual's self-esteem (Ferris et al., 2015; Williams, 2007).

Research has demonstrated that employees with low self-esteem are less likely to engage in prosocial or helpful behaviors (Ferris et al., 2008) and thus more likely to provide worse service to customers than co-workers with a better self-image (Akgunduz, 2015; Wu et al., 2011). Reduction in service quality can be especially harmful for service organizations such as hotels, where delivering outstanding customer

service sometimes implies employees *going the extra mile* through unsolicited service behaviors or attention that exceed customers' expectations (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997; Garg and Dhar, 2016). Low self-perception resulting from being ostracized may decrease these employees' motivation to excel when performing, making them less inclined to invest discretionary effort in their work—and thus to engage in *extra-role customer service*.

Despite the seriousness of these consequences, knowledge of the impact of workplace ostracism on the hospitality industry is still very limited (Zhao et al., 2013). Only a few studies have investigated the effects of workplace ostracism in hotels (e.g., Leung et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2017), and all investigations to date have been conducted in China. Given the cultural differences between Westerners' and Easterners' self-regard, and the contextual influences on behavior (Sedikides et al., 2003), this study responds to the call for further research on ostracism of hospitality employees in a dissimilar culture (Zhu et al., 2017). It adds knowledge to the nascent literature on workplace ostracism by examining the effects of ostracism on Spanish hotel workers. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first research conducted in Spain to measure workplace ostracism and extra-role customer service among hospitality workers.

To comprehend the repercussions of workplace ostracism in hospitality settings, this study aims at disentangling how certain work contexts affect customer-contact employees—self-perception and thus their performance—positively or negatively when serving customers. One of its main goals is to identify a boundary condition that would weaken the impact of workplace ostracism on self-esteem. The study thus explores the moderating role of psychological empowerment in this relationship. Psychological empowerment is a cognitive state that employees experience when they perceive that they can perform their tasks with autonomy and competence, and that their job is meaningful (Spreitzer, 1995). Psychological empowerment has been recognized by both researchers and practitioners as a powerful tool to motivate and engage employees, as it enhances their self-efficacy and self-concept. Empowerment has also been highlighted as a key driver of quality service in hospitality, where employee proactivity, resolution, and prompt action are often required (Namasivayam et al., 2014).

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The purpose of the present study is fourfold: 1) to contribute to the nascent literature on workplace ostracism by examining this type of social exclusion in hotel settings; 2) to explore whether empowering customer-contact employees can help to mitigate the detrimental effects of ostracism on their self-concept; 3) to uncover the linkages between workplace ostracism and performance, testing self-esteem as a possible mediator of that relationship; and 4) to help hospitality managers to minimize the occurrence and impact of workplace ostracism by providing a better understanding of the phenomenon and its effect on hotel workers' behavior.

In addition to empirically testing workplace ostracism in a Western-country context, this investigation makes several important theoretical contributions to the existing knowledge base in the following ways. First, the results not only show strong negative associations of workplace ostracism with self-esteem, confirming prior research findings (Ferris et al., 2015; Williams, 2007), but also provide evidence for the negative indirect impact of workplace ostracism on hospitality workers' performance. Since hotels' profitability depends on essential employee attitudes and behaviors, developing and empirically testing a model that attempts to explain what affects employees' self-esteem—and, in turn, influences their performance—can be interesting for both practitioners and researchers. Second, drawing on the ability of PLS software utilities to specify composite constructs, this study explores and conceptualizes psychological empowerment as a second-order construct, reflective at first-order level and composite at second-order level. The study thus develops this construct further, as Peterson (2014) recommends. Third, this study makes a unique contribution to the ostracism literature by identifying a boundary condition under which workplace ostracism is less detrimental to employees' self-esteem: when they feel empowered by their managers. This moderated mediation model then establishes a broad framework for future inquiry that could advance understanding of the mechanisms underlying the association between workplace ostracism and self-esteem. Finally, the results provide practical steps for managers interested in counteracting negative events in the workplace that can deteriorate service delivery.

Understanding the degree to which workplace ostracism can subvert employees' self-esteem—and, in turn, affect the final service provided to customers—is crucial for hospitality managers and human resource staff so that they can take actions to prevent such negative repercussions. Practitioners may also find valuable the knowledge that hospitality employees with more autonomy and more authority on the job are less likely to be affected psychologically by social exclusion at work, as the present study demonstrates.

The following section presents an overview of the literature relevant to workplace ostracism, self-esteem, and extra-role customer service in service corporations. After the hypotheses are tested, the main results are discussed. The study concludes by highlighting its implications and limitations. Instructions on how to counteract ostracism in the workplace, as well as future research avenues, are also provided.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Workplace ostracism

Hospitality is a sector of intense and continuous interpersonal contact, where service displayed depends greatly upon the satisfactory interaction, communication, and team work of different members of the organization (involving concierges, receptionists, bellboys, chambermaids, waiters, etc.). Hotel workers frequently have to deal with mixed demands from customers and compeers. In this context, people's heterogeneity, various sociodemographic backgrounds, and unpredicted situations that arise during service delivery can create tense interpersonal relations among co-workers, especially in the face of difficulties—for example, when a front desk agent reprimands the chambermaid about the status of a bedroom after a long wait from the customer, or when a waiter delivers room service to the wrong

customer due to a misunderstanding by the person who took the order. Many such job stressors can cause workplace relations to deteriorate in hotel settings. Some individuals may respond by deliberately troubling interpersonal relationships with co-workers through actions such as avoiding contact with them at work or “repeatedly and intentionally not replying to someone who attempts to converse” (Blackhart et al., 2009: 270). As Chung and Yang (2017) emphasize, the workplace has now become a social context where ostracism occurs.

Ostracism is the extent to which a person perceives that he or she is being ignored, rejected, or excluded by others (Williams, 2007); workplace ostracism is a form of social exclusion at work. Examples of workplace ostracism behaviors include deliberately ignoring someone, withholding needed information, avoiding greeting someone, or giving someone the cold shoulder (Wu et al., 2011). Workplace ostracism has a negative impact on employees' subjective wellbeing, making them feel less worthy and even insecure about their abilities.

A person's sense of worth is highly conditioned by feeling important, beloved, respected, and appreciated by others. Korman (1970) affirms that self-esteem is a cognitive structure shaped by an individual's past history and some contemporary determinants, such as interpersonal evaluations; social influences affect self-concept. Employees' self-esteem can therefore be influenced by individuals with whom they have had contact in the past or currently have contact, from their workmates to other social group members. Work contexts and psychological experiences at work may then shape employees' concept of their worth (Korman, 1966). The ostracized employee may understand the isolating behaviors of co-workers as an exhibition of how others judge his or her competence. Targets' self-esteem can thus be profoundly affected by lack of attention and other isolating behaviors of coworkers towards them. Being ostracized at work can thus negatively affect the appraisal one makes of oneself, leading to loss of confidence, the perception that one *must have done something wrong*, and emotional disturbance (fear, guilt, hostility).

Ostracism has detrimental effects on people's perception of their worthiness and capabilities, undermining their self-esteem. Being *given the silent treatment* by others generates high emotional arousal, cognizing potential difficulties as bigger than they really are. Although self-esteem is a relatively stable trait, individuals can experience temporary fluctuations in response to recent events and outcomes, such as perceived social approval (Blackhart et al., 2009). For example, Leary et al. (1995) affirm that self-esteem is strongly affected by perceived inclusionary status (i.e., according to the *sociometer model*, self-esteem would be a measure of social acceptance). Williams (2007) theorizes that ostracism may reduce self-esteem more than other forms of social exclusion. Hence, workplace ostracism can make individuals feel insecure about their own capacities, even undermining the effective use of the skills they have, and consequently appraising themselves as weaker, ultimately diminishing their global self-esteem. The following hypothesis can thus be formulated:

Hypothesis 1. Workplace ostracism is negatively related to self-esteem level.

2.2. Psychological empowerment: a key psychological boundary

Korman (1970) delineates how organizations cultivate certain environments that affect employees' self-perceptions. While exerting a high degree of external control can be negative, increases in the decision-making responsibility over one's job can affect employees' self-esteem positively. Empowerment, for example, reinforces the worker's self-cognition as competent for the job; increases in goal-directed behavior can motivate employees' willingness to achieve congruence with their manager's expectations.

Self-enhancement is a universal motive (Sedikides et al., 2003). Empowering employees can therefore eliminate some work-related problems by enhancing workforce self-efficacy and increasing intrinsic

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