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## Article

### Workplace ostracism and work engagement : the moderating role of neuroticism

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## **WORKPLACE OSTRACISM AND WORK ENGAGEMENT: THE MODERATING ROLE OF NEUROTICISM**

*CIGDEM KAYA, GOKSEL ATAMAN, BIRSEN YENER AYDIN*

### **Abstract:**

This study investigates the relationship between workplace ostracism and work engagement of the employees in the local governments and whether neuroticism, one of the personality traits, has a role on this relationship. Convenience sampling was used and data were obtained from a sample of 369 employees from various municipalities. The results show that there is a negative relationship between workplace ostracism and work engagement. Moreover, neuroticism moderates the negative relationship between workplace ostracism and work engagement. Overall, the results show that work engagement decreases as workplace ostracism increases, and highly neurotic employees are more negatively affected by workplace ostracism. Local governments may utilize the results in their efforts to create an environment fostering work engagement. Leaders may apply the study outcomes about the role of employee personality and workplace ostracism to improve their service performance.

### **Keywords:**

Workplace ostracism, Work engagement, Neuroticism, Local governments

**JEL Classification:** M10, M12, M19

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## 1. Introduction

In today's dynamic and complex marketplace, outstanding personnel can be an essential basis of sustainable competitive gains for firms (Zhang et al., 2015). Employees' engagement to work comprises a devotion and commitment in the direction of the doing in one's job and can provide organizations a competitive advantage (Bakker, 2009). In conservation of resources theory (COR), it is stated that numerous kinds of resources (e.g. organizational, job, and individual resources) are the motivational resources (Hobfoll, 1989), and thus increase engagement to work (Salanova, Agut, and Peiro, 2005; Hakanen, Schaufeli, and Ahola, 2008; Ferris et al., 2008). Workplace ostracism is one of the factors that may have an effect upon employees' engagement to work (Leung et al., 2011). Ostracism can be described as being unnoticed or isolated by other people in the place of work (Williams, 2001). Workplace ostracism is found to be adversely associated with various organizational and individual consequences such as well-being, job satisfaction, and affective commitment (Ferris et al., 2008; Balliet and Ferris, 2013). Individuals perceiving ostracism feel stress and this can lead to mental and physiological defect (Williams, 1997). One of the factors that constrain individual behavior is personality (Carver, 2005), and neurotic individuals can be more susceptible to workplace ostracism (Leung et al., 2011). Additionally, neuroticism has been discovered to decrease work engagement (Kim, Shin, and Swanger, 2009). Leung et al. (2011) have investigated the impact of workplace ostracism on service performance by examining moderating role of neuroticism and mediating role of work engagement. They found out neuroticism make stronger the direct negative effect of workplace ostracism on work engagement and the indirect negative effect of workplace ostracism on service performance. Neuroticism, therefore, is an important moderator variable while examining the association between workplace ostracism and work engagement.

Local governments are organizations led by elected people elected by the general public with the democratic right to participation. They are expected to respond to expectations with systematic and efficient management in order to provide the local services expected from the selecting ones. For this reason, the high performance of services in local governments is important in terms of completion of expectations and essential tasks. High performance requires employees to work in harmony. Having highly attached employees to the organization will bring sustainable service. In this research, therefore, we examine the liaison between of workplace ostracism and work engagement of the employees in the local governments, and whether neuroticism, one of the personality traits, has a role on this relationship.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Work Engagement

Engagement to work is described as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et. al., 2002a, p. 465). Vigor denotes to great levels of dynamism while working, psychological resilience, and

disposition to put effort into work. Dedication dimension means a sense of eagerness, challenge, honor, and inspiration. Lastly, absorption dimension talk about to a case that a person is highly motivated and favorably pays her complete attention to her work; when greatly engrossed, diverging from work becomes very difficult for her because time goes very swiftly for her (Schaufeli, et. al., 2002a; González-Roma et al., 2006).

Engagement to work has been widely investigated in the literature by examining its relationship with performance (Bakker, Demerouti, and Verbeke, 2004), leadership (Cenkci and Özçelik, 2015), job stress (Brit, Castro, and Adler, 2005), job resources and motivation (Salanova, Agut, and Peiro, 2005). Bakker, Demerouti, and Verbeke (2004) discovered that the liaison between engagement and performance is affirmative; highly engaged employees indicate higher performance. Brit, Castro, and Adler (2005) investigated army personnel by concluding that stress less affected soldiers engaged greatly. Cenkci and Özçelik (2015) examined the liaison between benevolent and authoritarian leadership styles and employees' engagement to work, and revealed that benevolent leadership style is positively connected with work engagement. They implicated that organization that desires to form an environment fostering work engagement necessitates having benevolent leadership style. Salanova, Agut, and Peiro (2005) revealed that ample job resources enhances motivation improving engagement to work and drives higher performance levels and higher customer loyalty. They acknowledged that their finding is consistent with Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory. Hobfoll (1989, p. 516) described resources as "... those objects, personal characteristics, conditions or energies that are values by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions or energies". Individuals, therefore, feel stressed if they lose resources, if they perceive there is a threat for losing resources, or if they are lack of resources that are gained subsequent resource investment (Hobfull, 1989, 1998). Individuals, thus, try to protect resources to be able to handle endangering conditions and avoid negative results such as emotional fatigue. Creating an environment that allows employees to protect resources is very important and has leveraging effect for their efforts to deal with work demands effectively. Otherwise, they will spend their energies to protect their resources and thus their engagement to work will decrease. One of the factors that are possible to affect employee's engagement to work is ostracism in the workplace (Leung et al., 2011).

## **2.2. Workplace Ostracism**

Ostracism has been used as a punishment form in the ancient Greeks by ostracizing individuals from their communities (Williams, 1997) and used in the literature in various meanings such as ignoring, deprivation, sending to exile (Williams, 2001). Sommer et al. (2001) defined ostracism as deliberate ignorance of the individual by others or others' deliberate distancing from the individual. Ostracism has detrimental effects on social and mental functions of the individuals and threatens the sense of belonging that is a fundamental need (Yang, 2012). Ostracism may cause long lasting and repeated intensive unhappiness and incompatible actions (Lustenberger and Jagacinski, 2010).

Ostracism is a widespread phenomenon and takes place across demographic diversities such as gender and age. It can also be observed among kids who disregard and segregate tormenters from their play groups; in other kinds of living beings such as lions and chimpanzees; among broadly varied cultural groups such as Afghan ethnic groups and the Amish (Williams, 1997).

Workplace is the most important social context on the forming of ostracism (Fox and Stallworth, 2005). Workplace ostracism is the personal perception of the individuals who are excluded and ignored by other in the workplace (Leung et al., 2011). Coworkers may not ask their colleague about going lunch together, they may ignore their colleague's recommendations at meetings, or they may fail to pay back in their own coin, for example, when their particular colleagues send greetings to them (Balliet and Ferris, 2013). Workplace ostracism is a very strong variable that prevents feelings of belonging and reduces the contribution made to the job (O'Reilly and Robinson, 2009). It is largely acknowledged that ostracism can harm physical and mental wellbeing, damage employees' job satisfaction and commitment to work, hinder organizational citizenship conducts, and diminish performance (Wu et al., 2012; Ferris et al., 2008).

There has been an inquiry investigating the relationship between engagement to work and workplace ostracism by Leung et al. (2011). They found that ostracism in the workplace is negatively associated with engagement to work because workplace ostracism diminishes target employees' resources, producing negative mental situations. Deficiency of sufficient resources to encounter work demands results in disengaging from work by influencing work outcomes. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H1:** There is a negative relationship between workplace ostracism and work engagement.

### **2.3. Neuroticism**

Five factor personality model of Goldberg (1990) is a well-known model of personality. Five factor personality dimensions are neuroticism, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion, Liao et al. (2013) stated that past inquiry has largely endorsed the relation of five personality traits or Big Five personality traits to motivation to work, including engagement to work. Kim, Shin, and Swanger (2009) revealed that neuroticism, of these dimensions, was the most associated dimension with work engagement by reducing engagement to work. It may be because highly neurotic individuals detect their work environment as more intimidating (Leung et al., 2011). Neuroticism is a personality factor that has the traits as being anxious, the fear of forsaken, and being introvert. Individuals lower in neuroticism have a tendency to be more calm, more stable in their moods, more socially adjusted to their environment, and have higher emotional stability. On the other hand, characteristics such as anxiety, pessimism, and sensitivity to undesirable impetuses describe highly neurotic individuals (Liao et. al., 2013). They have tendency to feel undesirable feelings such as anxiety and depression, and engage in interpersonal conflicts (Leung et al.,

2011). Leung et al. (2011) stated that the level of neuroticism of individuals that are highly neurotic increases when they engage in interpersonal conflict such as perceived ostracism and this leads them to feeling stress and engaging to work in low levels. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H2:** Neuroticism is a moderator on the negative relationship between workplace ostracism and work engagement.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Sample**

The sample of this study is composed of white-collar employees working in various local governments in Istanbul, Turkey. We used convenience sampling in this inquiry. We contacted with the employees of various municipalities in Istanbul through personal contacts. Management of municipalities approved such data collection, we, then, distributed the questionnaire was distributed whose. In total, 369 questionnaires were filled out by the participants. We included all of the questionnaires in the study. The sample, thus, comprised of 369 employees. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 60 years ( $M=1,4355$ ,  $SD=,62007$ ). 47,2% of the participants was female and 52,8% was male. The percentage of the participants with a university degree is 25,8%, with a postgraduate degree is 49,2% and with a high school degree is 25%. 74,6% of the participants has the job tenure with less than five years, whereas 25,4 of the participants has the job tenure with more than five years. It took four months to collect the data.

#### **3.2. Measures**

Workplace ostracism was measured via Ferris et al.'s (2008) Workplace Ostracism Scale. Sample items from the instrument include "Others ignored you at work.", "You involuntarily sat alone in a crowded lunchroom at work.", "Others at work stopped talking to you." Scale reliability is .949. Leung et al. (2011) have indicated workplace ostracism has a unidimensional structure, therefore, we run factor analysis for the workplace ostracism scale by extracting a single factor from the scale.

Goldberg's (Goldberg, 1999; Goldberg et al., 2006) 10-item scale of neuroticism dimension of 50-item International Item Pool scale for measuring personality traits has been used to measure neuroticism. Examples of the items of the instrument comprise "often feel blue", "have frequent mood swings", "feel comfortable with myself". Scale reliability is .707. Leung et al. (2011) have indicated neuroticism has a unidimensional structure, as well, therefore, factor analysis was run for the neuroticism scale by extracting a single factor from the scale. Due to low factor loading, we left one item out of the analysis. The remaining nine items were forced to load on a single factor.

For the measurement of work engagement, we adopted the shortened form of the work engagement questionnaire developed by Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova's (2006). The original 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale of Schaufeli et. al., 2002b) was shortened to nine items by Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova's (2006). Instances of the

items of the instrument include “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”, “At my job, I feel strong and vigorous”, “I am proud of the work that I do”. Scale reliability is .961. Leung et al. (2011) have indicated work engagement has three-dimensional structure, termed as absorption, dedication, and vigor. Although the scale was found to have three dimensions for the current study, we handled it as it is unidimensional and calculated an overall mean for the work engagement by following Leung et al. (2011, p 839), as they aggregated the nine items to create “a single index of workplace engagement”.

The researchers translated workplace ostracism and neuroticism and scales from English, then back translated all of the items to be able to check if English and Turkish versions of the scales match. Two bilingual academicians examined the translation of the scales and then researchers did corrections based on their recommendations.

We used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “completely disagree = 1” to “completely agree = 7”.

Cronbach’s Alpha values of the scales and factor analysis results are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Cronbach’s Alpha values of the scales and factor analysis results**

Scales and Items	Cronbach Alpha	KMO	X <sup>2</sup>	P	Cumulative Variance (%)	Factor Loadings of the Items
<b>Workplace Ostracism</b> Others ignored you at work. Others left the area when you entered. Your greetings have gone unanswered at work. You involuntarily sat alone in a crowded lunchroom at work. Others avoided you at work. You noticed others would not look at you at work. Others at work shut you out of the conversation. Others refused to talk to you at work. Others at work treated you as if you weren’t there. Others at work did not invite you or ask you if you wanted anything when they went out for a coffee break.	.949	,919	3181,232	,000	65,961	,724 ,761 ,764 ,846 ,837 ,806 ,876 ,838 ,872 ,784
<b>Neuroticism</b> Often feel blue. Am often down in the dumps Dislike myself. Have frequent mood swings Panic easily. Seldom feel blue. Feel comfortable with myself.	.707	,767	1097,984	,000	50,526	,717 ,754 ,524 ,634 ,560 ,548 ,514

Am very pleased with myself.						,679
Rarely get irritated						,638
<b>Work Engagement</b>	.961.	,920	3668,198	,000	73,686	
At my work, I feel bursting with energy. (Vigor)						,877
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous. (Vigor)						,930
I am enthusiastic about my job. (Dedication)						,905
My job inspires me. (Dedication)						,836
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work. (Vigor)						,842
I feel happy when I am working intensely. (Absorption)						,862
I am proud of the work that I do. (Dedication)						,867
I am immersed in my work. (Absorption)						,818
I get carried away when I am working. (Absorption)						,778

#### 4. Analysis and Results

Table 2 depicts the correlation analysis results among work engagement, workplace ostracism, and neuroticism.

According to correlation analysis, there is a negative weak association between workplace ostracism and engagement to work. The association between workplace ostracism and neuroticism was found positive and weak. Lastly, there is a negative weak association between work engagement and neuroticism.

**Table 2. Result of Correlation Analysis**

	Workplace Ostracism	Work Engagement	Neuroticism
Workplace Ostracism	1	-,178**	,217*
Work Engagement	-,178**	1	-,289*
Neuroticism	,217*	-,289*	1

\*p<0.01

\*\* p<0.05

Hypothesis-1 was tested by means of regression analysis. Table 3 exhibits the result of regression analysis result. The outcomes suggest that workplace ostracism is negatively associated to work engagement, supporting the first research hypothesis.

**Table 3. Regression Analysis Results between Workplace Ostracism and Work Engagement**



<b>Dependent Variable: Work Engagement</b>			
<b>Independent Variable</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>p value</b>
Work Ostracism	-,178	-2,114	,035**
<b>R= .122; R<sup>2</sup> = .015; F value=12.765; p value= .000</b>			
**p< .05			

To be able to test the second hypothesis, we performed hierarchical regression analysis. For diminishing the frequency of multicollinearity, we centered the independent variables as recommended by Aiken and West (1991). Table 4 presents the results of the analysis by pointing out that neuroticism has the moderator effect and therefore Hypothesis-2 is supported.

**Table 4: Results of the Hierarchical Regression Analyses**

<b>Dependent Variable: Work Engagement</b>			
<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
Workplace Ostracism	-,178**	-,051**	-,050**
Neuroticism		-,439**	-,429**
Workplace Ostracism x Neuroticism			-,072**
R	,122	,291	,296
R <sup>2</sup>	,015	,085	,087
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	,010	,080	,080
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	,009	,076	,003
F	3,260**	16,913**	11,650**
**p< .05			

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the association between workplace ostracism and work engagement of the employees in the local governments and whether neuroticism, one of the personality traits, has a role on this relationship. Our results demonstrated that there is an association between workplace ostracism and work engagement. This finding is coherent with the evidences of Leung et al. (2011). Moreover, we found out

neuroticism has a moderator effect on the negative association between workplace ostracism and work engagement. This means that “highly neurotic employees are more negatively affected by workplace ostracism” as indicated by Leung, et al. (2011, p.841). Pocnet et al. (2015) also found out negative association between work engagement and neuroticism. In their study on 572 Dutch employees, Langelaan et al. (2006) found out work engagement is featured by low neuroticism. Since neurotic employees perceive their work setting as more intimidating, their negative reactions increase when they experience ostracism, and this lowers their work engagement.

In this research, we contributed to the literature by explaining the results of workplace ostracism in Turkish context. We examined local governments by drawing from COR theory predicting that workplace ostracism weakens individual's resources and reduces motivation. And secondly, the study contributes to understanding of the moderator impact of neuroticism on the association between workplace ostracism and work engagement. Employees' emotional imbalance that is one of the personality characteristics contributed to the negative connection between these two concepts. As stated earlier, local governments are establishments managed by elected people elected by the general public, therefore, the general public's expectations from the local governments are based on getting local services by means of systematic and efficient management. For this reason, creating an environment for the employees to be able to show high performance in local governments becomes necessary to serve to the public by completing of expectations and essential tasks.

While our study aids to the literature, it has limits. First, we collected and tested data only from different municipalities in Istanbul. Collecting data from all over Turkey will be beneficial to be able to generalize the findings. The second limitation is that we used cross-sectional strategy by collecting data via questionnaire. Using longitudinal research strategy and qualitative research methods such as interviewing with the employees and conducting case studies can be very useful to be able to comprehend this relationship by adding additional related variables such as employee performance and other personality dimensions. In later studies, the factors affecting employee outcomes can be expanded by using scales such as motivation, job satisfaction, organizational loyalty, and the research sample can be expanded in order to reach the results that can be interpreted in a wider field. Additionally, workplace ostracism is not only has effects on organizational outcomes, it also has effects on the life quality of a person. For example, Yaşbay, Debirbağ, and Bilginoğlu (2014) have investigated the impact of workplace ostracism on family satisfaction. They also examined if work-family conflict has a mediating role and the preferences on work-home segmentation has a moderating role on this relationship. They found out workplace ostracism has a negative and significant effect on family satisfaction. Additionally, workplace ostracism increases work-family conflict and work-family conflict decreases family satisfaction by mediating partially the association between ostracism and family satisfaction. On the other hand, work-home segmentation moderated the relationship. Therefore, next studies may also spend efforts to find out its effects on the different fields that can be important for a person's life.

Overall, the results show that work engagement decreases as workplace ostracism increases, and employees who are highly neurotic are more negatively impacted by ostracism in the workplace. The attitudes and performances of employees who try to reach the targets set by organization to succeed organizational vision are very important. In this regard, it is important to manage human resources, to keep motivation high, to create a branded institutional culture, to train management, to make fair arrangements in personal rights, to make employees feel valuable, to organize team works and to strengthen their competence. Local governments may have benefit from this research by using the outcomes in their struggles to form an atmosphere encouraging work engagement. Managers in local governments may apply the results of this research about the employee personality's role and workplace ostracism to improve their subordinates' engagement to work, thus, leading to improvements in their performance while serving their public. Working in harmony is necessary for high performance. In order to success sustainable service, local governments should have highly attached employees by preventing ostracism in the workplace.

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