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# Is Negative Attention Better Than No Attention? The Comparative Effects of Ostracism and Harassment at Work

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Ostracism has been recognized as conceptually and empirically distinct from harassment. Drawing from theory and research that suggests that employees have a strong need to belong in their organizations, we examine the comparative frequency and impact of ostracism and harassment in organizations across three field studies. Study 1 finds that a wide range of employees perceive ostracism, compared with harassment, to be more socially acceptable, less psychologically harmful, and less likely to be prohibited in their organization. Study 2 surveyed employees from a variety of organizations to test our theory that ostracism is actually a more harmful workplace experience than harassment. Supporting our predictions, compared with harassment, ostracism was more strongly and negatively related to a sense of belonging and to various measures of employee well-being and work-related attitudes. We also found that the effects of ostracism on well-being and work-related attitudes were at least partially mediated by a sense of belonging. Study 3 replicated the results of Study 2 with data collected from employees of a large organization and also investigated the comparative impact of ostracism and harassment on employee turnover. Ostracism, but not harassment, significantly predicted actual turnover three years after ostracism and harassment were assessed, and this was mediated by a sense of belonging (albeit at  $p < 0.10$ ). Implications for theory, research, and practice are discussed.

**Keywords:** ostracism; harassment; belongingness; well-being

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*If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met “cut us dead,” and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all.*

—William James (1890/2007, pp. 293–294)

## Introduction

Starting with early studies on social rejection (e.g., Jackson and Saltzstein 1958, Schachter 1951), the study of behaviors that isolate or disconnect others from social interaction has grown in recent decades. Ostracism (Williams 1997, 2007; Williams et al. 2000), also referred to as social exclusion (DeWall et al. 2009), social isolation (Rook 1984), peer rejection (Prinstein and Aikins 2004), abandonment (Baumeister et al. 1993), and being “out of the loop”

(Jones and Kelly 2010), is a common (Fox and Stallworth 2005, Hitlan et al. 2006b, Williams 1997) yet particularly painful experience (Eisenberger and Lieberman 2004) associated with a variety of detrimental physical, psychological, and work-related consequences (Ferris et al. 2008, Hitlan et al. 2006a, Mor Barak et al. 2001; see Williams 2007 for a review).

In the organizational sciences, behaviors that serve to socially exclude colleagues have traditionally been studied in conjunction with a number of other behaviors that capture negative workplace interactions (e.g., Duffy et al. 2002, Glomb 1998, Rospenda and Richman 2004). More recently, however, organizational scholars have recognized that ostracism is distinct from other forms of harmful social behaviors at work (Balliet and Ferris 2013, Ferris et al. 2008, Hitlan et al. 2006a). Ferris et al. (2008) conceptually and empirically distinguished workplace ostracism from a wide range of other mistreatment constructs, echoing decades of psychological research that has

established the importance of understanding ostracism as a unique form of social mistreatment (see Williams 2007 for a review). Although the distinct nature of workplace ostracism has been established, an important question that remains is whether understanding ostracism as a distinct workplace experience adds value beyond what we already know about workplace mistreatment in general. In other words, do workers view ostracism differently from other forms of mistreatment in the workplace, and, if so, how? More importantly, does the impact of ostracism differ from the impact of other forms of mistreatment?

In this research, we provide answers to these questions by comparing employees' perceptions of and reactions to workplace ostracism to their perceptions of and reactions to other forms of mistreatment. We collectively refer to these "other" forms of mistreatment as *harassment*. For the purposes of our research, we use the term "harassment" to capture a range of active verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are directed at a target and derogate or cause embarrassment to that target. Importantly, harassment, unlike ostracism, *engages* a target in a social dynamic with negative social attention and treatment, rather than *disengaging* a target with a lack of attention and treatment (Robinson et al. 2013).

We theorize that workplace ostracism is perceived by employees to be less psychologically harmful and more socially and organizationally acceptable than harassment but that the impact of ostracism runs directly counter to these common perceptions. Whereas scholars have established that ostracism is a painful experience, employees are likely to believe that it is relatively mundane and innocuous given its indirect nature, particularly compared with harassment. Drawing from theory and research on the fundamental human need to feel a sense of belonging with others (Baumeister and Leary 1995, Fiske 2004), we argue that ostracism has a more negative impact on employees' sense of belonging compared with harassment. Relatedly, we theorize that, on average, ostracism has an even more detrimental effect on employees' psychological and organizational well-being than the more direct and engaging forms of mistreatment captured by harassment.

Answering the proposed research questions is important because, as a field, we need to show not only that ostracism and harassment are distinct constructs from one another but also that they have distinct effects. Although researchers acknowledge that both workplace ostracism and harassment are negative experiences, we currently know very little about whether, and how, the effects of these experiences differ. Our research extends the work of Ferris et al. (2008) to further explore the distinctiveness of ostracism from other negative workplace interactions and, in doing so, makes several contributions to the literature. First, we highlight how a threatened sense of belonging is relevant to an understanding of the disparate effects of workplace ostracism on employees. Our work indicates that ostracism is a stronger threat to one's

sense of belonging than harassment, and a threatened sense of belonging is an important mediating variable between ostracism and an employee's well-being and work-related attitudes. These results establish a psychological rationale for why ostracism is a detrimental experience in organizations. Second, our work shows that, directly counter to lay perspectives of ostracism and harassment, ostracism has a stronger and more negative relationship than harassment with employee well-being outcomes and work-related attitudes. Our work supports theory that suggests that ostracism is a uniquely detrimental experience (Spoor and Williams 2007). Finally, as we will discuss further, our work joins the broader discussion in the literature on understanding the uniqueness and relative impact of related but distinct constructs (e.g., Hershcovis 2011, Tepper and Henle 2011).

We test our hypotheses across three field studies. In the first study, we examine whether employees perceive ostracism, compared with harassment, to be less harmful and more acceptable in their workplaces. In the next two studies, following methodological guidelines for comparative tests (Cooper and Richardson 1986), we examine our predictions that ostracism is more common and more harmful than harassment, and we test the role of a threatened sense of belonging. Study 2 involves a diverse sample of employees across many organizations, whereas Study 3 seeks to replicate and extend our findings with longitudinal data from one large organization. We begin by briefly explaining the nature of ostracism in organizations and how it is distinct from more overt and direct forms of mistreatment.

## Ostracism in Organizations

Ostracism occurs across many social contexts, including the workplace (Ferris et al. 2008, Hitlan et al. 2006a). Workplace ostracism can include having one's greetings go ignored, being excluded from invitations, noticing others go silent when one seeks to join the conversation, and the like. We define ostracism as an individual or a group neglecting to take actions that engage another organizational member when it would be customary or appropriate to do so (Robinson et al. 2013).

The unique nature of ostracism is captured by two distinguishing features. First, ostracism involves the omission of behavior, or directing no behavior toward the target, in contrast to harassment, which involves acts of commission, or directing hurtful behavior toward the target. As Ferris et al. (2008) pointed out, forms of mistreatment that engage the target in a social interaction is antithetical to the very nature of ostracism: ostracism involves the *absence* of a *wanted* behavior, whereas harassment involves the *presence* of an *unwanted* behavior. Second, whereas harassment may involve a wide range of verbal and nonverbal behaviors intended to harm, demean, belittle, or cause personal humiliation or embarrassment

to a target, ostracism's underlying motives can be many, such as obliviousness or oversight on the part of the actor (Ferris et al. 2008, Williams and Sommer 1997), and are not necessarily intended to cause harm (Williams 2001, 2007).

These unique features combine to disengage the target of ostracism from social interaction and to inhibit the target from responding to this form of mistreatment. Harassment, on the other hand, engages the target in a social dynamic, albeit a negative one, and thus is likely to fuel further social interaction. Ostracism's primary impact is to disconnect and to isolate, not to involve. As we will articulate throughout this paper, it is this core feature of ostracism that, on the one hand, increases the social acceptability and prevalence of ostracism relative to harassment, but, on the other hand, is likely to contribute to its stronger and more negative impact.

### Perceptions of Ostracism and Harassment at Work

Before considering the actual differences in the effects of ostracism and harassment, let us first consider how those differences are socially perceived. The prototypical view of mistreatment in organizations is that of *petty tyranny*, characterized by overt behaviors that convey hostility, antagonism, and opposition (Ashforth 1994). Anti-bullying laws and organizational policies often focus on eliminating these more overt antisocial behaviors rather than the more subtle and invisible ones of ostracism. Sexual harassment policies, anti-bullying legislation, and other formal rules and organizational guidelines explicitly address and prohibit verbal and physical behaviors that actively demean or threaten another employee. It is comparatively rare to find, however, personnel rules and guidelines that address the issue of socially excluding an employee from formal or informal interaction, or ignoring or not responding to an employee's greetings and attempts to interact. As an example, a nationwide campaign in the United States, the "Healthy Workplace Campaign," encourages states to adopt anti-workplace bullying legislation that targets the elimination of prototypical harassment behaviors such as verbal abuse, threats, humiliation, intimidation, work interference, or sabotage and omits specific attention on behaviors that represent ostracism (Healthy Workplace Campaign 2013).

The focus on prohibiting explicit forms of mistreatment (i.e., harassment) reflects conventional wisdom. Examples abound of the belief that openly expressing negative attitudes against someone is worse than avoiding someone or giving them the "silent treatment." For instance, the common belief that a "time-out" is a gentler or more humane form of punishment than is yelling for a misbehaving child, or even that solitary confinement of prisoners is more humane than corporal punishment, reflects the belief that negative engagement is more reprehensible than disengagement. The idea that ostracism is a more acceptable way to express displeasure than harassment seems

commonplace. Empirical research indirectly validates this anecdotal evidence. Broadly speaking, individuals tend to show a preference for committing harm through acts of omission rather than acts of commission—dubbed "omission bias" (Baron and Ritov 2004, p. 74). Harmful acts of commission are generally perceived as more offensive than harmful acts of omission (Cushman et al. 2006). Along the same lines, we expect that employees tend to perceive ostracism versus harassment in the workplace much the same way and therefore judge ostracism as less harmful and more socially and organizationally acceptable than harassment.

**HYPOTHESIS 1.** *Ostracism, compared with harassment, is perceived to be less (a) psychologically harmful, (b) socially inappropriate, and (c) organizationally prohibited.*

The perception that ostracism is relatively harmless and acceptable should combine with the lack of organizational policies and sanctions against it to make ostracism a "safer" way than harassment to mistreat someone at work (Björkqvist et al. 1994). One is less likely to be seen as a bad person for ignoring or excluding someone than for openly insulting, yelling at, or threatening him or her. Furthermore, one is less likely to be caught or reported for ostracizing someone and can more easily claim a lack of intent (e.g., being too busy to respond, forgetting to include someone). For these reasons, we also predict that ostracism is more common than harassment in organizations.

**HYPOTHESIS 2.** *Employees experience more ostracism than harassment at work.*

### The Relative Impact of Ostracism and Harassment

Despite the lay perception that ostracism is a relatively benign form of mistreatment compared with harassment, psychological research shows that ostracism can be an extremely painful and unpleasant experience (Eisenberger and Lieberman 2004; Williams 2001, 2007). The powerful impact of ostracism has been documented in laboratory studies, where ostracism is temporary and simulated. Responses to ostracism in laboratory settings include both inward-directed and outward-directed reactions: targets experience hurt feelings, sadness, anxiety, loneliness, and shame (Buckley et al. 2004, Williams et al. 2000) and show less interest in continuing to work with their laboratory groups, dislike for group members, and reduced effort on group tasks (Kerr et al. 2008, Williams et al. 2000).

Given the consistently negative and diffuse way in which ostracism affects individuals in laboratory experiments, ostracism in the workplace—a location of great importance for personal, social, professional, and economic outcomes—is likely to have a particularly negative effect on employees as well. Research into workplace experiences of ostracism has found that it harms employees' sense of well-being and undermines their attitudes

about work (Ferris et al. 2008, Hitlan et al. 2006a). We take a step further to propose that ostracism is not only harmful to employees, it is even more harmful to employees than harassment is. We ground our theorizing in the observation that the need to belong—to have a sense that one is valued and accepted by others—may be the most fundamental social need humans have (Baumeister and Leary 1995, Fiske 2004). Whereas past research reveals that ostracism can thwart a number of core needs (Williams 2007, 2009), we developed our theoretical rationale around the need for belonging for several reasons. Meta-analytic reviews of ostracism's impact on individuals' needs have identified the need to belong as the need that is most directly and consistently related to the impact of ostracism (Blackhart et al. 2009, Gerber and Wheeler 2009). In contrast to other fundamental needs, such as self-esteem, control, or meaningful existence, the need to belong is almost entirely determined by our interactions with others. In light of our research question, we contend that belongingness is the need that is likely more greatly threatened by ostracism than by harassment.

Human emotions, cognitions, and behaviors are enduringly influenced by a need to maintain quality relationships with others and to avoid social rejection (Baumeister and Leary 1995, Maslow 1943). From an evolutionary perspective, humans have always depended on group membership and acceptance for survival. Ostracism can thwart this basic need to belong because it denies people the opportunity to interact with others and to build instrumental social bonds (Williams 2007). It is important to note that because humans are intrinsically inclined to build affective bonds for survival, people are sensitive to and easily receptive of cues that they are not valued or accepted by others in a social circle (Spoor and Williams 2007). Thus, people are capable of detecting even fleeting and episodic experiences of ostracism and can be easily threatened by these experiences (Spoor and Williams 2007).

A sense of belonging is derived from cues of presence and existence in one's social environment. Receiving attention from others signals that one exists, matters to others, and affects others in that environment. In this way, receiving attention contributes to both a sense of belonging and a sense of social influence. Receiving verbal, physical, and/or behavioral attention—even if this attention is negative—should therefore signal that one is important enough to pay attention to, react to, and expend energy on. Harassment, however dysfunctional, reinforces a relational dynamic between the target and the perpetrators of harassment. Such negative attention gives the target a role to play and an opportunity to respond, and hence, some form of engagement and worth (even if negative) in the social group. The attacked, belittled, intimidated, insulted, or threatened employee participates in a (negative) social exchange (Aquino and Lamertz 2004).

In contrast, being ignored, excluded, and shunned signals that one is so inconsequential as a social being that one is unworthy of others' attention or reaction (Bastian and Haslam 2010). Ostracism removes the target from social interaction and does not offer the target a "role" in the interaction, depriving the target of the opportunity to connect with others (Einarsen and Mikkelsen 2003). Ostracism has been described as "social death," because when one is ignored and excluded by another individual or group, it is as though that person is dead or nonexistent to those others (Williams 2001, p. 19). Thus, we expect that ostracism poses an even stronger threat than harassment to an employees' sense of belonging at work.

*HYPOTHESIS 3. Ostracism is more strongly and negatively related to an employee's sense of belonging at work, compared with harassment.*

The threat to a sense of belonging posed by ostracism suggests it is likely to have a particularly negative impact on employees' well-being and work-related attitudes and behaviors. A threat to a fundamental need is pathogenic (Maslow 1943). Those who are deprived of a basic need exhibit a variety of maladies that extend beyond mere discomfort, including greater stress and strain, poorer health, and lower emotional and psychological well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995). As a fundamental need, the need to belong is an organismic necessity and thus essential for individual growth, integrity, and well-being (Deci and Ryan 2000). Social disconnection also decreases individuals' sense of duty and obligation to others (Harkins and Petty 1982). As a result, employees who feel left out of the social fabric at work are likely to have reduced levels of commitment to their workplace and higher turnover intentions, and they are more likely to leave their organization should the opportunity arise.

The relative threat that ostracism poses to the fundamental need to belong suggests that ostracism is likely to have an even more negative effect than harassment on an employee's sense of psychological well-being, work-related attitudes, and desire to remain in the organization over time. Although being the target of harassment at work is often quite damaging and has been shown to be associated with depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, health problems, and work withdrawal (see Bowling and Beehr 2006 for a meta-analytic review), as the epigraph by William James at the beginning suggests, to be treated as though one does not even exist may well be even worse. A lack of social attention from others should send even stronger cues than receiving negative attention from others that one is not worthy of social attention. In short, having no role to play in a social context should be even more detrimental to one's well-being and attitudes than having a negative role to play.

In line with our theorizing, Zadro et al. (2005) found that receiving the silent treatment from someone is a more discomforting experience than engaging in a verbal

dispute. We extend this research to examine the impact of ostracism, compared with harassment, in a workplace setting on a variety of psychological and work-related outcomes. Based on our theoretical reasoning, we offer the following hypotheses.

**HYPOTHESIS 4.** *Ostracism, compared with harassment, has a more negative impact on employees' (a) personal well-being, (b) work-related attitudes, and (c) turnover.*

**HYPOTHESIS 5.** *Employees' sense of belonging at least partially mediates the relationships between ostracism and their (a) personal well-being, (b) work-related attitudes, and (c) turnover.*

We believe a sense of belonging will at least partially mediate the relationship between ostracism and employee outcomes because ostracism threatens other psychosocial needs, even if the need to belong is the most fundamental and directly affected of these (cf. Williams 2007). We test our hypotheses with three studies. Study 1 tests our first hypothesis that ostracism, compared with harassment, is perceived to be less socially inappropriate, psychologically harmful, and prohibited by one's organization. Studies 2 and 3 test whether ostracism is more common than harassment and whether ostracism has a more negative impact on employees' sense of belonging and therefore personal well-being, work-related attitudes, and turnover.

## Study 1: Employee Lay Perceptions of Ostracism

### Sample and Procedures

To test our first hypothesis regarding perceptions of ostracism, we surveyed 100 respondents using an online survey distributed through Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online marketplace in which participants can volunteer to respond to surveys for a nominal remuneration. We requested a sample of 100 participants, and the survey was hosted on a first-come, first-served basis. A total of 146 participants opened the link to the survey, of which 100 were completed (44% male; mean age in years = 32.64, S.D. = 11.07; mean tenure in years = 5.29, S.D. = 5.34). The sample was composed of employed U.S. citizens who had worked at their current organization for at least the previous six months. Participants were employed in a broad array of industries. We included two test questions to ensure that the participants were paying sufficient attention to the survey. Specifically, we asked participants to give a specific response on a Likert-type response scale (specific details of the scales below). For example, one test question asked participants, "Please answer 1 NEVER for this question." The other question asked participants, "Please answer 5 COMPLETELY for this question." Five participants were removed because they failed to answer at least one of the test questions correctly.

## Measures

**Perceptions of Ostracism vs. Harassment.** Participants were provided with a list of 28 types of mistreatment that could occur at work. Ten of these items represented ostracism, drawn from the validated ostracism measure of Ferris et al. (2008). Eighteen items were drawn from the Aggressive Experience Scale (AES) (Glomb 1998) to measure harassment. We did not include two items of the original AES scale that conceptually overlapped with ostracism.<sup>1</sup> All responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale. Participants were asked to indicate the following: the social inappropriateness of each behavior (e.g., "How SOCIALLY INAPPROPRIATE do you believe each behavior is on a scale of 1 (not at all socially inappropriate) to 5 (completely socially inappropriate)?"), the extent to which each behavior is likely to cause harm to the target (e.g., "How PSYCHOLOGICALLY HARMFUL to a person's self-esteem and well-being do you believe each behavior is on a scale of 1 (not at all psychologically harmful) to 5 (completely psychologically harmful)?"), and the extent to which they believed each behavior is punished in their workplace (e.g., "To what extent is each behavior FORMALLY PUNISHED within your organization (either by a supervisor or someone in upper management) on a scale of 1 (never punished) to 5 (always punished)?"). Responses were averaged across the ostracism and harassment scales, and all scales showed good reliability (all  $\alpha$ 's > 0.91).

## Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that, compared with harassment in organizations, ostracism is considered less socially inappropriate, less psychologically harmful, and less likely to be prohibited in organizations. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a series of paired-sample *t*-tests comparing the average scores of ostracism with the average scores of harassment. As predicted, participants perceived ostracism to be less socially inappropriate ( $M = 3.19$ ;  $S.D. = 0.97$ ) than harassment ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $S.D. = 1.23$ ,  $M_{diff} = -0.49$ ,  $t(94) = -6.06$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), less psychologically harmful ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $S.D. = 0.92$ ) than harassment ( $M = 4.03$ ,  $S.D. = 0.67$ ,  $M_{diff} = -0.46$ ,  $t(94) = -7.35$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and less likely to be organizationally prohibited in their workplace ( $M = 1.77$ ,  $S.D. = 0.91$ ) than harassment ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $S.D. = 0.74$ ,  $M_{diff} = -1.32$ ,  $t(95) = -16.93$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Based on these results, we found full support for Hypothesis 1, (a)–(c).

## Study 1 Discussion

This first study demonstrates that ostracism, compared with harassment, is conventionally perceived to be a less psychologically harmful and more socially and organizationally acceptable form of mistreatment. If ostracism is so viewed, it should also be more common than harassment. Our next two studies examine whether ostracism is more common than harassment and whether it really is less harmful to employees.

## Study 2: Employee Experiences of Ostracism in Varied Organizations

### Sample and Procedures

The second study involved a sample provided by MarketTools, an organization that maintains a database of 2.5 million potential survey respondents who receive points for survey completion that can be exchanged for goods. The survey company emailed invitations to their pool of potential respondents of working adults, with demographics similar to the larger U.S. population. A total of 1,814 individuals opened the link to our invitation, and we requested data collection to continue until 1,300 participants had completed the survey (49% male; mean tenure in years, 7.52, S.D. = 8.38). Participants worked full time and came from a diverse range of occupations.

### Measures

Unless stated otherwise, items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

*Ostracism.* We used the psychometrically validated 10-item Workplace Ostracism Scale (Ferris et al. 2008; see the appendix). Participants were asked about the extent to which they had experienced each item in the past six months, using a scale from 1 (“never”) to 7 (“always”). Example items include “Others ignored you at work” and “Others at work treated you as if you weren’t there” ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

*Harassment.* We used a revised version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire (Hoel et al. 2001). We chose this measure because it includes a broad array of harassing forms of treatment. We excluded items that could not be performed by everyone in one’s work environment (i.e., behaviors unique to one’s supervisor) and removed items that captured harassment based on a target’s gender or ethnicity to keep this scale conceptually consistent with our measure of ostracism. Finally, we removed items that reflected ostracism to ensure a stronger conceptual distinction between ostracism and harassment in our study. The result was an 11-item measure. All items were measured using the same stem question and seven-point Likert-type scale as the ostracism measure. A full list of items is provided in the appendix ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

*Sense of Belonging.* We used a five-item measure adapted from Van Beest and Williams (2006) to measure employees’ sense of belonging at work. All items are provided in the appendix ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

*Personal Well-Being.* Self-esteem was measured to assess psychological well-being. Self-esteem has been shown to be a reliable indicator of a person’s overall sense of well-being and is negatively correlated with negative affect, depression, and anxiety (Rosenberg 1965). Furthermore, individuals’ levels of self-esteem are subject

to the experiences they encounter in their everyday lives, including how they are treated at work (McAllister and Bigley 2002). We used the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965). An example item is “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

*Work-Related Attitudes.* Measures of organizational affective commitment and psychological withdrawal assessed work-related attitudes. Affective commitment was measured using Allen and Meyer’s (1990) scale ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ). Psychological withdrawal was measured via eight items drawn from Lehman and Simpson’s (1992) psychological withdrawal scale ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

*Control Variables.* We controlled for the demographic variables of gender and organizational tenure. Past research has shown that women can sometimes interpret and respond differently to being ostracized than men (Williams and Sommer 1997), suggesting that women might also experience workplace ostracism differently. Furthermore, if our supposition that those who are ostracized at work are more likely to leave their organization to find employment that satisfies this social need is correct, then those who have been at their organizations longer are less likely to experience ostracism—or at the very least are more likely to have developed personal coping mechanisms to deal with ostracism. Furthermore, those who have stayed with their organization longer likely already feel a sense of commitment to their organization and engage in less withdrawal.

## Results

*Preliminary Analyses.* Before testing our hypotheses, we first assessed the empirical distinction between our measures of ostracism and harassment using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS 20. We assessed the fit of the two-factor model (i.e., ostracism and harassment) and compared it with a one-factor model solution. To examine the fit of these models, we relied on a several fit statistics, including the comparative fit index (CFI; see Bentler 1990), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; see Steiger and Lind 1980), the normed fit index (NFI; see Bentler and Bonett 1980), and the incremental fit index (IFI; see Bollen 1989, 1990). Standards for robust statistical fit have increased over recent years, from 0.90 to 0.95 for the CFI, IFI, and NFI and from 0.08 to 0.06 for the RMSEA, though respective 0.90 and 0.08 cutoffs are still commonly used (Bentler and Bonett 1980, Hu and Bentler 1999). Given that the major focus of our research is to compare ostracism with harassment, we will consider 0.90 and 0.08 as acceptable degrees of fit. When comparing ostracism with harassment, our theory explicitly predicts that ostracism will be a better predictor of our outcome variables. If our theory is correct, then it is reasonable to assume that the inclusion of harassment in our models will reduce the overall level of fit. Thus, we

feel that the cutoff levels of 0.90 and 0.08 are appropriate given the context of our research.

When using CFA to examine factor structures, individual items in a scale tend to have low reliabilities and can often violate the assumptions of multivariate normality. To address these issues, we conducted CFAs using homogeneous item clusters, or “parcels” (Bandalos 2002, Nasser and Wisenbaker 2003). We created parcels based on classical test theory and content by averaging multiple items on the same scale together, and used these parcels in the CFA. All parcels in the ostracism scale had two items. We first randomly chose two items to pair together, and continued until only two items remained, which were then paired together. Because harassment was measured using 11 items, four parcels were created by averaging 2 items together; one parcel included 3 items averaged together. Again, which items were averaged together was decided upon at random until only three items were left (which were then averaged together). Both ostracism and harassment were collapsed into five total parcels.

Based on the results, the two-factor model showed a strong degree of fit ( $\chi^2(34) = 151.46$ , CFI = 0.99, IFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.06), and all parcelled items loaded at 0.85 or higher on their respective scales. The results also indicated poorer fit for the one-factor model ( $\chi^2(35) = 2,168.78$ , CFI = 0.82, IFI = 0.82, NFI = 0.82, RMSEA = 0.25). A chi-square difference test indicated that the two-factor model fit the data significantly better than the single-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 2,017.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These results are consistent with the results of Ferris et al. (2008) establishing a distinction between ostracism and social undermining, and empirically support the distinction between ostracism and harassment in our study.

**Relative Frequency.** The means, standard deviations, and zero order correlations of all variables appear in Table 1. Hypothesis 2 predicted that ostracism is a more common experience than harassment. Consistent with this prediction, a paired-sample *t*-test revealed that the mean frequency of ostracism ( $M = 1.64$ ,  $S.D. = 0.97$ ) was significantly higher than the mean frequency of harassment ( $M = 1.42$ ,  $S.D. = 0.90$ ,  $M_{diff} = 0.23$ ,  $t(1,155) = 13.03$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Although experiences of ostracism and harassment were not high overall, a full 71.0% of the sample experienced some degree of ostracism in the prior six months, compared with 48.8% of participants who experienced harassment in the prior six months.

**Relative Impact.** In testing our hypotheses, we performed structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses, using AMOS 20. SEM offered several advantages over standard regression for our research. Of primary importance is that SEM facilitates the comparison of model fit across different models and in doing so provides us with a formal way to test for statistical difference between

path coefficients. It also corrects for measurement error in latent variables and simultaneously tests the relationships in a model.

We first conducted confirmatory factor analysis to provide support for the construct validity of our scale measures. All analyses included listwise deletion of missing variables resulting in a final sample size of 970. To increase the ratio of participants to free parameters in our structural model, we again created parcels of items for each of our variables using the same procedures outlined above. The control variables were excluded from this analysis. We tested the degree of fit of the six-factor measurement model. Fit statistics supported an acceptable degree of fit ( $\chi^2(260) = 1,609.83$ , CFI = 0.94, IFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.07). All 30 parcelled items were statistically significant and averaged as follows: ostracism (0.90), harassment (0.92), belonging (0.89), self-esteem (0.79), affective commitment (0.80), and psychological withdrawal (0.72). Note that the six-factor model fit the data statistically better than the alternative models we tested based on a  $\chi^2$  difference test. Those alternative models included a model that combined the work-related dependent variables, resulting in a five-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 5) = 983.38$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and a model that measured all dependent variables on one factor, resulting in a four-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 9) = 2,915.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In proceeding with our hypothesis testing, we conducted structural equation modeling in which the structural paths were supplemented by the six-factor measurement model.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that ostracism would be more strongly and negatively related to belonging, compared with harassment, and that ostracism would also have a greater negative impact on employees' well-being (i.e., self-esteem) and work-related attitudes (i.e., affective commitment and psychological withdrawal). To test these hypotheses, we compared the fit of a model in which ostracism and harassment predicted sense of belonging, self-esteem, affective commitment, and physical withdrawal to a series of models in which the path coefficients between ostracism and harassment and each single focal dependent variable were constrained to equal one another. The underlying logic behind this technique is that if ostracism has a stronger impact than harassment, the model in which the paths are left unconstrained should show greater statistical fit. To test for the comparative fit, we conducted a chi-square difference test for each dependent variable. To find support that ostracism is a stronger predictor of each dependent variable, we must find that (1) it has a larger direct relationship than harassment with the dependent variable of interest overall when the paths are left unconstrained, and (2) the constrained model indicates a *poorer* fit. This technique takes into account the positive correlation between ostracism and harassment.

Our base model included ostracism and harassment predicting sense of belonging, well-being (i.e., self-esteem),

**Table 1 Study 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations**

	M	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.51	0.50	—							
2. Tenure	7.52	8.38	-0.18	—						
3. Ostracism	1.64	0.98	-0.08	-0.04	(0.95)					
4. Harassment	1.42	0.90	-0.10	-0.04	0.81	(0.95)				
5. Sense of belonging	3.77	0.80	0.06	0.07	-0.49	-0.40	(0.81)			
6. Self-esteem	3.85	0.72	0.03	0.17	-0.31	-0.31	0.41	(0.90)		
7. Affective commitment	3.21	0.86	0.05	0.20	-0.26	-0.23	0.53	0.31	(0.78)	
8. Psychological withdrawal	2.71	0.82	0.02	-0.09	0.30	-0.27	-0.24	-0.30	-0.33	(0.81)

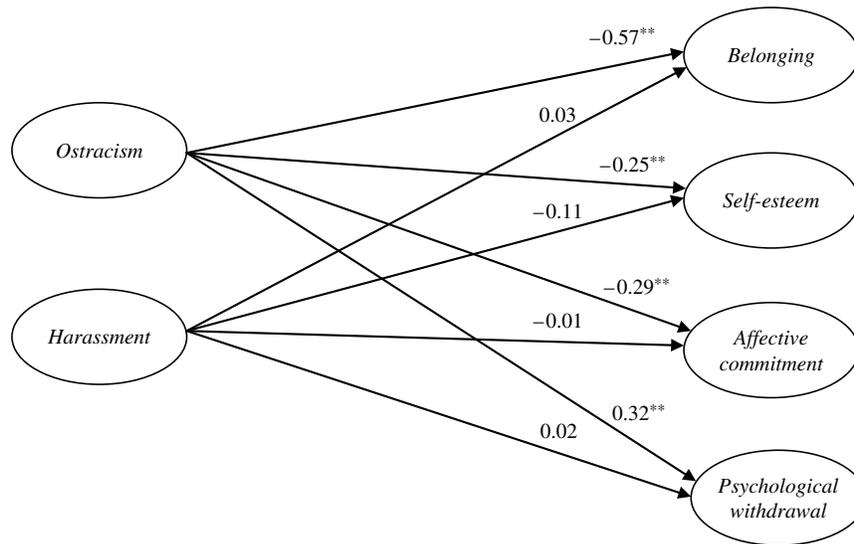
Notes. Correlations of |0.06| and higher are significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ . Gender is coded such that 0 = male and 1 = female. Values in parentheses report Cronbach's alpha values.

and work attitudes (affective commitment and psychological withdrawal), and controlled for tenure and gender. The results of this model are depicted in Figure 1. The control variables were included by adding direct paths from tenure and gender to each of the four dependent variables. These control variables are not depicted in the figure, but the relationships between tenure and belonging ( $\beta = 0.06, p < 0.05$ ), affective commitment ( $\beta = 0.17, p < 0.01$ ), and self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.17, p < 0.01$ ) were statistically significant. The model showed an acceptable degree of fit to our data ( $\chi^2(304) = 2,134.24, CFI = 0.91, IFI = 0.91, NFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.08$ ). Based on this model, ostracism had stronger relationships with sense of belonging ( $\beta = -0.57, p < 0.01$ ), self-esteem ( $\beta = -0.25,$

$p < 0.01$ ), affective commitment ( $\beta = -0.29, p < 0.01$ ), and psychological withdrawal ( $\beta = 0.32, p < 0.01$ ) compared with harassment (sense of belonging,  $\beta = 0.03, ns$ ; self-esteem,  $\beta = -0.11, ns$ ; affective commitment,  $\beta = -0.01, ns$ ; and psychological withdrawal,  $\beta = 0.02, ns$ ).

To test Hypothesis 3, which predicts that ostracism, compared with harassment, is a stronger predictor of a sense of belonging, we compared the fit of the base model with the fit of a model in which the path coefficients between ostracism and sense of belonging and harassment and sense of belonging were constrained to equal one another. The results indicated that the constrained model—reflecting no differences between ostracism and harassment ( $\chi^2(305) = 2,162.61$ )—offered a poorer fit

**Figure 1 Structural Equation Model, Unconstrained Model Output: Study 2**



$\lambda^2$ difference tests comparing path coefficients				
	Belonging	Self-esteem	Affective commitment	Psychological withdrawal
Unconstrained model (df = 304)	2,134.24	2,134.24	2,134.24	2,134.24
Constrained model (df = 305)	2,162.61	2,135.18	2,138.99	2,139.23
$\lambda^2$ difference	28.37**	0.94	4.75*	4.99*

Note. Numbers reported in the figure are standardized path coefficients.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

than the unconstrained model, and that this difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 28.37, p < 0.01$ ). These results support Hypothesis 3. Ostracism, compared with harassment, had a stronger negative relationship with sense of belonging.

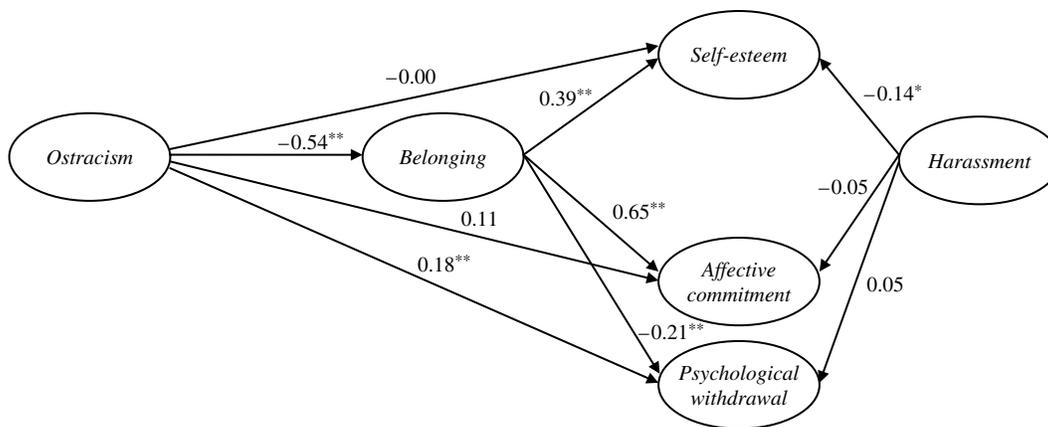
To assess Hypothesis 4, which predicted that ostracism, compared with harassment, would be a stronger predictor of well-being (i.e., self-esteem) and work-related attitudes (i.e., affective commitment and psychological withdrawal), we followed the same procedures as above. When we constrained the path coefficients between ostracism and self-esteem and harassment and self-esteem to be equal, the constrained model did not exhibit statistically poorer fit than the unconstrained model ( $\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 0.94, ns$ ). Thus Hypothesis 4 was not supported for self-esteem; ostracism was not a statistically stronger predictor of self-esteem than harassment. However, we did find support for both affective commitment ( $\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 4.75, p < 0.05$ ) and psychological withdrawal ( $\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 4.99, p < 0.05$ ). Thus, two of our three predicted relationships were supported, providing partial support for Hypothesis 4: ostracism, compared with harassment, has a more negative effect on employees' work-related attitudes of affective commitment and psychological withdrawal, but not on employees' well-being, when operationalized by self-esteem.

**Mediation Analysis.** Hypothesis 5 predicted that a threatened sense of belonging would at least partially mediate the relationships between ostracism and personal

well-being and work-related attitudes. To test Hypothesis 5 we contrasted two a priori structural models: one in which the relationships between ostracism and self-esteem, affective commitment, and psychological withdrawal were fully mediated by sense of belonging, and one in which mediation was only partial. For each of these two models, the control variables were included by adding direct paths from gender and tenure to our three dependent variables, and we also modeled the direct effects of harassment on our three dependent variables.<sup>2</sup> Both models provided reasonable fit to the data (full mediation model,  $\chi^2(305) = 1,760.67, CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.93, NFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07$ ; partial mediation model,  $\chi^2(302) = 1,748.83, CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.93, NFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.07$ ). A chi-square difference test indicated that the partial mediation model fit the data statistically better ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 3) = 11.84, p < 0.01$ ), thus we discuss the support for our hypotheses drawing from the partial mediation model, depicted in Figure 2. The control variables, gender and tenure, are not depicted in this figure, but the results indicated that those who had been employed by their organization longer also reported higher affective commitment ( $\beta = 0.13, p < 0.01$ ) and self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.15, p < 0.01$ ); women reported higher affective commitment than men ( $\beta = 0.06, p < 0.05$ ).

The results indicated that ostracism had a statistically significant relationship with participants' sense of belonging ( $\beta = -0.54, p < 0.01$ ). A sense of belonging, in turn, predicted self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.39, p < 0.01$ ), affective commitment ( $\beta = 0.65, p < 0.01$ ), and psychological withdrawal ( $\beta = -0.21, p < 0.01$ ), and harassment predicted self-esteem ( $\beta = -0.14, p < 0.05$ ), affective commitment ( $\beta = -0.05, p < 0.05$ ), and psychological withdrawal ( $\beta = 0.05, p < 0.05$ ).

**Figure 2 Structural Equation Model, Testing Mediation Hypothesis Output: Study 2**



$\lambda^2(302) = 1,748.83; CFI = 0.93; IFI = 0.93; NFI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.07$

<p><i>Self-esteem effect decomposition:</i></p> <p>Total effect = -0.21**</p> <p>Indirect effect = -0.21**</p> <p>Direct effect = -0.00</p>	<p><i>Affective commitment effect decomposition:</i></p> <p>Total effect = -0.24**</p> <p>Indirect effect = -0.35**</p> <p>Direct effect = 0.11</p>	<p><i>Psych. withdrawal effect decomposition:</i></p> <p>Total effect = 0.29**</p> <p>Indirect effect = 0.11**</p> <p>Direct effect = 0.18**</p>
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Notes. The numbers reported are standardized path coefficients. The model includes tenure and gender as control variables.  
 \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

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withdrawal ( $\beta = -0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). As shown in Figure 2, sense of belonging fully mediated the relationships between ostracism and self-esteem and between ostracism and affective commitment, and it partially mediated the relationships between ostracism and psychological withdrawal. These results support Hypothesis 5.

### Study 2 Discussion

Based on a sample of respondents from a wide variety of employment sectors, occupations, and geographical regions of the United States, the results of Study 2 demonstrate that, compared with harassment, ostracism is relatively more common in the workplace. Ostracism was more strongly related to an employee's sense of belonging than was harassment and was also more strongly related to affective commitment and psychological withdrawal. Finally, the impact of ostracism on a sense of belonging partially mediated the effects ostracism had on psychological withdrawal, and it fully mediated the relationships between ostracism and self-esteem and ostracism and affective commitment. We will discuss these findings further when we turn to our general discussion.

One limitation of research that seeks to compare the effects of two independent variables is that it is susceptible to creating an "unfair comparison" (Cooper and Richardson 1986), in which the scale is inadvertently tipped in favor of one independent variable over the other. We took several precautions to level the playing field when comparing ostracism and harassment in our research based on suggestions from Cooper and Richardson (1986). First, we ensured sufficient variance on each of the competing variables by drawing from a large representative sample of working U.S. citizens. We also used the same Likert-response scale to measure ostracism and harassment to ensure that one variable did not falsely receive more variance than the other and to equalize the potential range of each variable. The veracity of our claim that ostracism has a greater negative relationship with variables that capture employee well-being and work-related attitudes, compared with harassment, was also strengthened by testing our hypotheses using a variety of relevant dependent variables. Despite these strengths, Cooper and Richardson suggested that replication (across samples, measures, and dependent variables) is important to robustly defend comparison propositions. With this in mind, Study 3 uses extant data to test the relative effects of ostracism and harassment.

Study 3 uses different measures of ostracism, harassment, sense of belonging, psychological well-being, and work-related attitudes. In addition, Study 3 extends upon our findings in Study 2 by examining the longitudinal impact of ostracism and harassment on employee turnover. Specifically, we assess whether employees are more likely to leave their organization because of their experiences of ostracism than of harassment. Leaving one's organization is perhaps the most extreme outcome of mistreatment, because it has far-reaching professional as well as personal

consequences to the individual departing as well as the organization that loses the employee.

### Study 3: Employee Experiences of Ostracism and Turnover at a University

An extant data set from a survey of employees at a large public research university provided an excellent opportunity to replicate and extend the findings from Study 2. This survey measured a variety of forms of mistreatment and included measures that tapped feelings of social belonging at work, personal well-being, and work-related attitudes.

#### Sample and Procedures

Approximately one-third (1,048) of the staff members at a large research university in Canada participated in a survey about their work environment (26% male; mean age in years = 43.49, S.D. = 10.83; mean tenure in years = 11.59, S.D. = 9.66). Respondents were similar to nonrespondents in comparable characteristics (job classifications, part- versus full-time status, salary, and gender). The survey itself could be linked through key codes to human resource data containing information about employee retention at the university over time. We used this approach to collect information regarding whether an employee was still with the organization three years after completing the survey. Most employees (858, or 82%) entered their key number, enabling us to link their survey responses to whether they remained in the organization three years later.

#### Measures

This survey was designed to study employee experiences of their work environments. Among other things, it included items drawn from scales designed to measure generalized workplace harassment, incivility, and bullying (Björkqvist et al. 1994, Cortina et al. 2001, Neuman and Keashly 2004, Rospenda and Richman 2004).

*Ostracism.* Six items measured employee experiences of ostracism. Respondents were asked to indicate how often at least one person in their workplace had treated them in a particular way within the past year (from 1 indicating never to 5 indicating five or more times). A full list of items is provided in the appendix ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

*Harassment.* Five items, provided in the appendix, were used to measure harassment. The items were measured on the same scale as ostracism ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

*Sense of Belonging.* Eight items, provided in the appendix, measured participants' sense of being valued, respected, and cared for at work. Respondents indicated whether they strongly disagreed (1) to strongly agreed (7) with each statement ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

*Personal Well-Being.* The survey included measures of depression and physical health that served as indicators of personal well-being. Depression was measured with the Center for Epidemiological Studies Short Depression Scale (CES-D 10; see Radloff 1977). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they felt different ways (e.g., fearful, happy, lonely, depressed) within the past year, from 1 (“rarely or none of the time”) to 4 (“most or all of the time”). Responses were averaged across the 10 items ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ). Physical health was measured with the Health Conditions Index (Brodman et al. 1949, Fitzgerald et al. 1997). This index typically offers yes/no response options for a variety of health conditions (e.g., back problems, respiratory problems, headaches, stomach pains, and trouble sleeping). The survey offered four response options, from 1 (“rarely or none of the time”) to 4 (“most or all of the time”) ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ).

*Work-Related Attitudes.* Job satisfaction was measured with eight items asking respondents how satisfied they were with various facets of their work life (e.g., coworkers, pay, unit head/manager, administration and leadership, benefits, work, opportunities for advancement, work environment;  $\alpha = 0.84$ ). Turnover intentions were measured by asking respondents how likely they were to leave the university in the next three years, from 1 (“very unlikely”) to 7 (“extremely likely”).

*Three-Year Turnover.* Turnover was measured with human resource data, which indicated whether an employee remained at (0) or had left (1) the university three years after the survey was administered. Each employee was given a unique key number and the option to enter the key in their survey if they agreed to have their survey answers linked to human resource data. The decision to look at turnover three years after our initial data collection was determined in large part by practical circumstance, but should also provide an ideal window of time for enough employees to depart the organization to enable us to test our hypotheses. Only one or two years out, for example, may be an insufficient amount of time for the number of employees to be significant, yet more than four years may be so long that too many employees departed, or did so for reasons unrelated to their work environments. Respondents were assured that only the researcher would have access to the linked data set and that all names and identifying information would be deleted.

*Control Variables.* As in Study 2, we controlled for gender and organizational tenure.

## Results

*Preliminary Analyses.* Before testing our hypotheses, we again first assessed the empirical distinction between our measures of ostracism and harassment using CFA with item parcels (Bandalos 2002, Nasser and

Wisembaker 2003). We used the same procedures described in Study 2 to create the parcels. Ostracism was collapsed into three parcels of two items each, and harassment was collapsed into two parcels with two items in one and three in the other. Based on the results, the two-factor model showed a strong degree of fit ( $\chi^2(4) = 20.33$ , CFI = 0.99, IFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.08), and all parcel items loaded at 0.83 or higher on their respective scales. Importantly, the results indicated poorer fit for the one-factor model ( $\chi^2(5) = 292.16$ , CFI = 0.83, IFI = 0.83, NFI = 0.83, RMSEA = 0.32). Furthermore, a chi-square difference test indicated that the two-factor model fit the data significantly better than the single-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 271.83$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Consistent with Study 2, these results support an empirical distinction between ostracism and harassment in Study 3.

*Relative Frequency.* Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations of the study variables appear in Table 2. Supporting Hypothesis 2, a paired-sample *t*-test revealed that the mean frequency of ostracism ( $M = 1.97$ , S.D. = 0.77) was significantly higher than the mean frequency of harassment ( $M = 1.39$ , S.D. = 0.58,  $t(1, 977) = 28.54$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Over twice as many (91%) respondents reported being the target of ostracism as reported being the target of harassment (45%).

*Relative Impact.* We used the same analytical approach described in Study 2 to test Hypotheses 3 and 4 for all dependent variables except actual turnover. This included SEM performed in AMOS 20. To test our hypotheses regarding employee turnover, we used logistic regression given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable. We describe these analyses and the results below.

For the SEM analyses, we first assessed the degree of fit of the seven-factor measurement model. Fit statistics indicated reasonable degrees of fit ( $\chi^2(255) = 739.33$ , CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.93, NFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.06). All items were statistically significant and averaged as follows: ostracism (0.76), harassment (0.87), belonging (0.86), depression (0.75), health problems (0.52), and job satisfaction (0.75).<sup>3</sup> The seven-factor model, however, fit the data statistically better than the alternative models we tested based on a chi-square difference test. Those alternative models included a model that combined the work-related dependent variables together and the well-being dependent variables together, resulting in a five-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 10) = 1,196.53$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and a model that measured all dependent variables on one factor, resulting in a four-factor model ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 19) = 1,572.26$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In proceeding with our hypothesis testing, we conducted structural equation modeling in which the structural paths were supplemented by the seven-factor measurement model.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that ostracism would be more strongly and negatively related to belonging compared with harassment, and that ostracism would

**Table 2 Study 3: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations**

	M	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender	0.73	0.45	—								
2. Tenure	11.59	9.66	−0.01	—							
3. Ostracism	1.97	0.78	0.06	0.02	(0.87)						
4. Harassment	1.39	0.58	0.06	0.00	0.60	(0.86)					
5. Sense of belonging	4.34	0.97	−0.02	−0.05	−0.60	−0.42	(0.92)				
6. Depression	1.88	0.58	0.00	0.05	0.51	0.41	−0.53	(0.85)			
7. Health problems	1.61	0.45	0.03	0.11	0.32	0.29	−0.28	0.53	(0.68)		
8. Job satisfaction	4.96	1.08	−0.01	−0.09	−0.53	−0.38	0.77	−0.54	−0.32	(0.84)	
9. Turnover intentions	2.96	1.62	−0.05	0.03	0.21	0.11	−0.28	0.20	0.06	−0.34	—
10. Turnover (3 years)	0.20	0.40	0.01	−0.02	0.07	0.03	−0.09	0.06	−0.04	−0.08	0.39

Notes. Correlations of  $|0.07|$  and higher are significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ . Gender is coded such that 0 = male and 1 = female. Values in parentheses report Cronbach's alpha values.

have a more negative impact on employees' (a) personal well-being, (b) work-related attitudes, and (c) turnover. In this study, personal well-being was operationalized with depression and health problems, and, consistent with our theorizing, we would expect ostracism to be positively related to these outcome variables. Work-related attitudes were operationalized with job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Consistent with Study 2, to test these hypotheses we compared the fit of a model in which ostracism and harassment predicted sense of belonging, depression, health problems, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions to a series of models in which the path coefficients between ostracism and harassment and each individual focal dependent variable were constrained to equal one another.

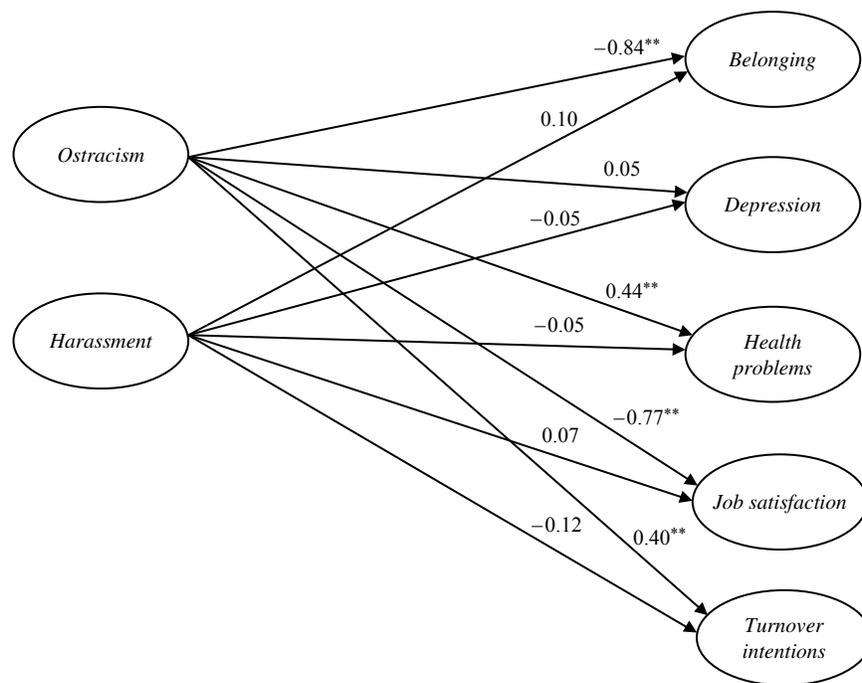
Our base model included ostracism and harassment predicting sense of belonging, depression, health, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and controlled for tenure and gender. The results of this model are depicted in Figure 3. The control variables were included by adding direct paths from tenure and gender to each of the dependent variables. These control variables are not depicted in the figure; the only significant relationship was between gender and depression, such that women reported more depression than men ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). As in Study 2, the model showed an acceptable degree of fit ( $\chi^2(301) = 1,064.26$ , CFI = 0.90, IFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.86, RMSEA = 0.07). Based on this model, ostracism had a larger relationship with sense of belonging ( $\beta = -0.84$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), health symptoms ( $\beta = 0.44$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), job satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.77$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and turnover intentions ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) compared with harassment (sense of belonging,  $\beta = 0.10$ , ns; health problems,  $\beta = -0.05$ , ns; job satisfaction,  $\beta = 0.07$ , ns; and turnover intentions,  $\beta = -0.12$ , ns). Neither ostracism ( $\beta = 0.05$ , ns) nor harassment ( $\beta = -0.05$ , ns) had a significant relationship with depression.

To test Hypothesis 3, we compared the fit of the base model with the fit of a model in which the path coefficients between ostracism and sense of belonging, and harassment and sense of belonging, were constrained to equal one

another. The results indicated that the constrained model offered poorer fit ( $\chi^2(302) = 1,134.42$ ) and that this difference was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 70.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These results support Hypothesis 3, that ostracism has a stronger negative relationship with sense of belonging than harassment. We followed the same procedures for testing each of the remaining outcome variables. When the path coefficients between ostracism and health problems and harassment and health problems were constrained, the resulting model exhibited poorer fit ( $\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 11.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). We also found support for job satisfaction ( $\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 40.87$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and turnover intention ( $\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 16.62$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) providing support for Hypothesis 4. Given that neither ostracism nor harassment was related to depression, we did not find support for Hypothesis 4 for depression.<sup>4</sup>

**Mediation Analysis.** Hypothesis 5 predicted that a threatened sense of belonging would at least partly mediate the relationships between ostracism and participants' well-being and work-related attitudes. We predicted that ostracism would have a negative relationship with belongingness; a positive impact on depression, health problems, and turnover intentions; and a negative impact on job satisfaction. Again we contrasted two a priori structural models: one in which the relationships between ostracism and the dependent variables were fully mediated by sense of belonging, and one in which mediation was only partial. For each of these two models, the control variables were included by adding direct paths from gender and tenure to our four dependent variables, and we examined the direct effects of harassment on our four dependent variables. Both models provided reasonable fit to the data (full mediation model:  $\chi^2(304) = 876.58$ , CFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.92, NFI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.06; partial mediation model:  $\chi^2(300) = 869.55$ , CFI = 0.92, IFI = 0.92, NFI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.06). A  $\chi^2$  difference test indicated that the partial mediation model did not fit the data statistically better ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 4) = 7.03$ , ns). This result suggests that, overall, the direct model does not provide a better fit to the data than the full mediation model; however, to remain consistent with the results offered in Study 2,

**Figure 3 Structural Equation Model, Unconstrained Model Output: Study 3**



$\lambda^2$  difference tests comparing path coefficients

	<i>Belonging</i>	<i>Depression</i>	<i>Health problems</i>	<i>Job satisfaction</i>	<i>Turnover intentions</i>
Unconstrained model (df = 301)	1,064.26	1,064.26	1,064.26	1,064.26	1,064.26
Constrained model (df = 302)	1,134.42	1,064.81	1,075.47	1,105.13	1,080.87
$\lambda^2$ difference test	70.16**	0.55	11.21**	40.87**	16.62**

Note. Numbers reported in the figure are standardized path coefficients.  
 \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

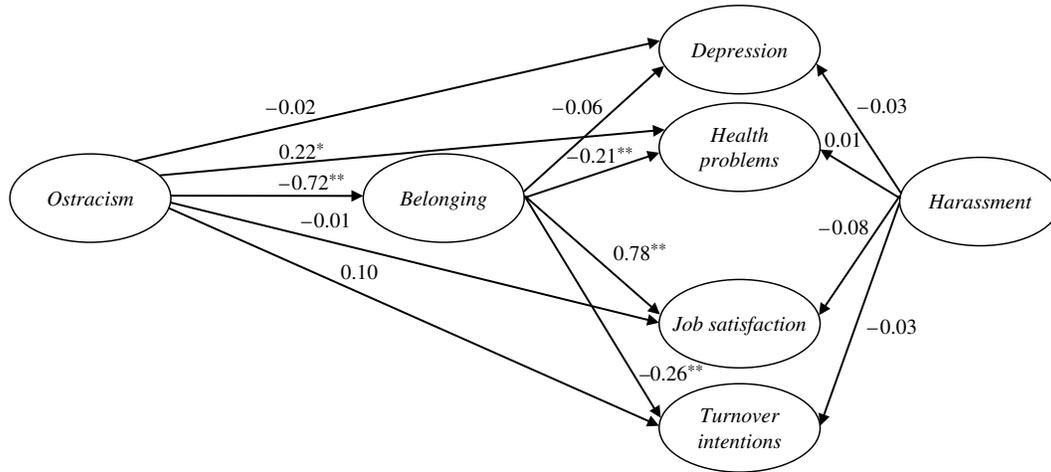
we discuss the results of the partial mediation model, depicted in Figure 4. The control variables, gender and tenure, are not depicted in this figure, but the results indicated a significant relationship between gender and depression ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

The results indicated that ostracism was significantly related to participants' sense of belonging ( $\beta = -0.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). A sense of belonging, in turn, predicted health problems ( $\beta = -0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), job satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.78$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and turnover intentions ( $\beta = -0.26$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The results supported a significant indirect relationship between ostracism on health problems ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), job satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.56$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and turnover intentions ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) via belonging. As seen in Figure 4, the direct relationship between ostracism and health problems also remains significant ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating partial mediation of belonging for this outcome. There were no significant relationships between ostracism and depression and belonging and depression. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported for the well-being outcome of health and the work-related attitudes of job satisfaction and turnover intentions, but not for the well-being outcome of depression.

*Analyses Predicting Turnover.* To test our hypothesis predicting actual employee turnover, we used logistic regression. In predicting turnover, we included three additional control variables in our analyses. Given that employees can leave for a variety of reasons, we controlled for whether participants had indicated at time 1 that they would likely be leaving their job in subsequent years as a result of child-rearing requirements or retirement. We also controlled for the full-time equivalent hours they worked, because those who worked part-time might be more likely to leave to find full-time employment elsewhere.

Hypothesis 4(c) predicted that ostracism would have a greater impact on employee turnover than harassment. To test this hypothesis we compared the log-likelihood statistic of nested models. We first observed the pattern of relationships and log likelihood statistic of a model that included the control variables, ostracism, and harassment predicting turnover (base model). The results are provided in Table 3. The results indicate that ostracism at time 1 positively predicted employee turnover three years later ( $B_{\log\text{odds}} = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Harassment, on the other hand, did not predict turnover ( $B_{\log\text{odds}} = -0.01$ , ns).

Figure 4 Structural Equation Model, Testing Mediation Hypothesis Output: Study 3



$\lambda^2(300) = 869.55$ ; CFI = 0.92; IFI = 0.92; NFI = 0.89; RMSEA = 0.06

<p><i>Health problems effect decomposition:</i></p> <p>Total effect = 0.37**</p> <p>Indirect effect = 0.15**</p> <p>Direct effect = 0.22**</p>	<p><i>Job satisfaction effect decomposition:</i></p> <p>Total effect = -0.57**</p> <p>Indirect effect = -0.56**</p> <p>Direct effect = -0.01</p>	<p><i>Turnover intentions effect decomposition:</i></p> <p>Total effect = 0.29**</p> <p>Indirect effect = 0.19**</p> <p>Direct effect = 0.10</p>
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Notes. The numbers reported are standardized path coefficients. The model includes tenure and gender as control variables.  
 \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

We compared the log likelihood ratio of this model to two comparison models. In the first comparison model, only ostracism was included. Conducting a log likelihood ratio test between the base model and a model that does not include harassment would tell us whether adding harassment to the base model improved the fit of the base model. The log likelihood ratio test uses the  $\chi^2$  statistic and is calculated by multiplying the difference between two likelihood statistics, multiplied by  $-2$ . The results indicated that adding harassment to the model does not significantly improve the fit ( $\lambda(1) = 0.00$ , ns).

In the second comparison model, only harassment was included. Thus, comparing this model to the base model indicates whether adding ostracism to the model improves the overall fit. The results of the log likelihood ratio test indicated that adding ostracism did improve the overall fit of the model ( $\lambda(1) = 7.04$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These results indicate that ostracism was a stronger predictor of employee turnover than harassment and support Hypothesis 4(c).

Hypothesis 5(c) predicted that ostracism’s impact on employee turnover would be at least partly mediated by employees’ sense of belonging. We used the bootstrap

Table 3 Study 3: Binary Logistic Regression Analyses Investigating the Effects of Ostracism and Harassment on Turnover Three Years Later

	Model 1: Base model		Model 2: Ostracism		Model 3: Harassment		Model 4: Belonging	
	B	Wald	B	Wald	B	Wald	B	Wald
Constant	-0.47	0.21	-0.47	0.22	-0.38	0.14	0.84	0.43
Gender	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.03	-0.00	0.00	0.03	0.01
Tenure	-0.02	3.50+	-0.02	3.50+	-0.02	2.85	-0.02	3.99*
Percent full time	-0.02	3.89*	-0.02	3.90*	-0.02	3.15+	-0.02	4.30*
Depart for retirement	-0.63	6.09*	-0.63	6.09*	-0.56	4.82*	-0.67	6.75**
Depart for child(ren)	0.82	4.39*	0.82	4.42*	0.82	4.35*	0.86	4.73*
Harassment	-0.01	0.00			0.30	3.32+	0.04	0.04
Ostracism	0.40	7.10**	0.40	10.40**			0.27	2.43
Sense of belonging							-0.21	2.78+
Model log likelihood	-357.71		-357.72		-361.23		-356.33	

Notes. Gender is coded such that 0 = male and 1 = female. Reported statistics represent unstandardized coefficients in log-odds units.  
 + $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ .

estimation of conditional indirect effects (see Preacher et al. 2007) to test this hypothesis. These analyses were performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS, which accommodates dichotomous dependent variables. This approach offers several advantages over conventional procedures described by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test for mediation (see Bollen and Stine 1990; MacKinnon et al. 2002, 2004; Preacher and Hayes 2004; Shrout and Bolger 2002). According to the bootstrapping approach, to establish mediation, we must observe a significant direct effect between the independent variable (ostracism) and the mediator (belonging; this has been established above). We must also observe a direct relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable. The results of a logistic regression analysis predicting turnover and including belonging indicate that belonging was marginally related to turnover ( $B_{\log\text{odds}} = -0.21, p < 0.10$ ). The bootstrapped bias-corrected 95% and 90% confidence intervals (CIs) around the indirect effect were estimated by generating 5,000 resamples of the data (with replacement). The results indicated that the indirect effect of ostracism on turnover via belonging was not significant at the 95% CI since the CIs included 0 ( $-0.02$  to  $0.30$ ) but was significant at the 90% CI ( $0.01$  to  $0.27$ ). These results provide marginal support for Hypothesis 5(c) for employee turnover.

### Study 3 Discussion

Study 3 shows that ostracism is more strongly related than is harassment to employees' sense of belonging, well-being (i.e., health problems), and work-related attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction and turnover intentions) and, more important, to employees' actual turnover within three years. The results in Study 3 are consistent with those of Study 2, in which we used different measures. Across both studies, we find reliable evidence for our theory that workplace ostracism has more harmful effects than harassment.

### General Discussion

Despite decades of research in psychology that has focused on ostracism as a unique form of social mistreatment, the organizational sciences have only recently begun to investigate workplace ostracism apart from other types of mistreatment that can occur in organizations (Balliet and Ferris 2013, Ferris et al. 2008, Hitlan et al. 2006a). To some, workplace ostracism may intuitively be perceived as a more mundane form of mistreatment than harassment. Indeed, on the surface, harassing behaviors that directly demean, insult, belittle, or humiliate someone seem particularly more belligerent and threatening than behaviors that "simply" deny a person social connection and attention. In line with this assumption, in Study 1 we found that employees generally perceive ostracism to be less psychologically harmful and more socially

acceptable than harassment. Furthermore, employees recognize that their organizations are comparatively less concerned about formally prohibiting behaviors that represent ostracism than about formally prohibiting behaviors that represent harassment. Our findings are consistent with broader research that has established that harmful acts of commission are generally perceived to be more reprehensible than acts of omission (Baron and Ritov 2004, Cushman et al. 2006). Also in line with this, our research demonstrates that ostracism is more common than harassment. However, building on theory that has established the powerful human need to belong and feel accepted by others, we tested not only whether ostracism is distinct from harassment but whether ostracism is more damaging, contrary to conventional wisdom about this act of omission.

Contrary to lay perceptions of ostracism as relatively harmless, our studies found that ostracism, compared with harassment, is more strongly related to negative outcomes for employees. The results of two studies, which involved multiple operationalizations of personal well-being and work-related attitudes, show a clear pattern: ostracism is associated with more health problems, lower affective commitment and job satisfaction, and higher psychological withdrawal and intentions to quit above and beyond those explained by the effects of harassment. The potent longitudinal impact of ostracism was also observed in Study 3. Ostracism exhibited a stronger relationship to employees' exit behavior: those who were ostracized at work were more likely to leave their organization, whereas harassment had a comparatively weak impact on employee turnover. These results are consistent with the study by Zadro et al. (2005) of simulated role play in a laboratory experiment that showed that being ignored was more discomforting than being engaged in a verbal dispute. Our research extends this research by examining the actual experience of ostracism at work and comparing it with being the target of a whole host of well-studied and particularly harmful social interactions (i.e., harassment) that occur in the workplace. Moreover, we identify a potential reason for the stronger impact of ostracism upon employees.

It is important to point out that our results do not suggest that harassment is an inoffensive or nontoxic form of behavior within organizations. Indeed, empirical research has clearly documented the negative impact of harassment on employees (e.g., Bowling and Beehr 2006), and our results indicate that ostracism and harassment have similar relationships to two of the three well-being outcomes we studied (i.e., self-esteem in Study 2 and depression in Study 3). An important implication of our research, however, is that it highlights ostracism as a particularly toxic social behavior in organizations and to be more negatively related than harassment to employees' physical health and work-related attitudes and turnover over time. Our results should not be interpreted

to suggest that ostracism is a more important or worthy social problem than harassment in organizations, but rather that it is important for organizational scholars to study ostracism as a construct unto itself.

In addition to establishing a quantitative difference between the relationships of ostracism and harassment to well-being, work attitudes, and turnover, our research underscores an important qualitative difference between ostracism and harassment. Drawing from theory on the fundamental human need to belong, we demonstrate that ostracism appears to pose a stronger threat than harassment to employees' sense of belonging at work. Across Studies 2 and 3, after taking into account employees' experiences of ostracism, harassment had a negligible effect on their sense of belonging. In line with our theorizing, being harassed, although certainly threatening and painful, nonetheless still conveys that one exists and is worthy of some social attention and effort, even if this attention and effort is in a negative direction. Ostracism, on the other hand, signals that one is so inconsequential to others to be unworthy of attention and effort at all. Although both ostracism and harassment have negative effects on employees, our research identifies a very different mechanism for the effects of ostracism compared with harassment. Our research underscores the potentially powerful impact that organizational environments can have on satisfying, or depriving, the basic psychological and social needs of employees.

We focused on employees' sense of belonging because it has been well established as a fundamental human need, and has even been argued to be the most basic social need we have as human beings (Baumesiter and Leary 1995, Fiske 2004). Belongingness needs are directly satisfied (or thwarted) through our interactions with others. Given the central role the workplace plays in many employees' lives, it is reasonable to assume that workplace relationships have a potent effect on employees' sense of belonging. We have discussed why ostracism, more than harassment, thwarts a sense of belonging. Focusing on belongingness brings parsimony to our theory; however, our research does not preclude the possibility that ostracism can be a unique threat to the fulfillment of other needs as well. The needs model of ostracism, for example, recognizes that, in addition to belonging, ostracism thwarts self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (see Williams 2007, 2009). It is possible that the greater impact of ostracism also operates through one or more of these other needs (cf. Williams and Nida 2009). Our findings suggest that ostracism is not more negatively related to self-esteem compared with harassment, but the comparative threat to control and meaningful existence requires further research attention.

Our research also contributes to the broader discussion concerning the division of mistreatment constructs in the organizational sciences (cf. Hershcovis 2011, Tepper

and Henle 2011). On the one hand, considerable conceptual overlap among many of these constructs (e.g., interpersonal deviance as in Robinson and Bennett 1995, incivility as in Cortina et al. 2001, aggression as in Glomb 1998, social undermining as in Duffy et al. 2002, abusive supervision as in Tepper 2000) points to a need for amalgamation. On the other hand, as our research suggests, even subtle theoretical distinctions between mistreatment constructs can have a considerable and relevant impact on their different effects. In this regard, our work is an extension of the scale validation study of Ferris et al. (2008), which established workplace ostracism as a unique construct. Beyond being a unique workplace phenomenon, our research indicates that the incremental effect ostracism can have on employees' well-being and work-related attitudes, compared with that of workplace harassment, is significant, and that ostracism's effects operate through at least one unique mechanism. These results have important implications for how organizations mitigate the impact of these two negative social phenomena. Going forward, it will be important for scholars to continue to consider similarities and differences between seemingly similar constructs, as even minute differences may have important implications for how employees respond to these forms of behavior, and how managers should ultimately address them.

Finally, we hope this study will encourage additional research that compares the relationship between, and differential impact of, constructs in organizational behavior. As our field continues to develop new constructs, it is imperative that we not only theoretically justify the addition of such constructs but also identify their value added through comparative tests. Although there are challenges to conducting such comparative studies, it will be important to understand these challenges and implement the methodological guidelines for offsetting them (Cooper and Richardson 1986).

The findings of this study also have several managerial implications. Managers may be quick to reign in and sanction obvious harassment among employees, given its visibility and apparent harm, but managers may be less likely to acknowledge or sanction ostracizing behavior. Given our results showing the prevalence of ostracism and its relationship to employee well-being, work-related attitudes, and turnover, organizations should take ostracism at least as seriously as other, more obvious acts of mistreatment in the work environment. Organizations can do so by educating management and their workforce about the nature and consequences of ostracism, creating and implementing policies that define and discourage exclusion and encourage inclusion, and assisting employees in learning more direct and effective methods of conflict resolution and managing their relationship tensions.

A noteworthy feature of our paper is that we replicate our effects across multiple samples, multiple measures of

ostracism and harassment, and multiple indicators of well-being and work-related outcomes, which is important when testing comparative hypotheses (Cooper and Richardson 1986). Each of our studies has unique strengths as well as unique weaknesses. Study 3, because it uses extant data in one organization, lacks validated measures of the key constructs. Its benefit, however, is that it enabled us to examine the differential effects of ostracism and harassment on the objective outcome of turnover three years later. Study 2, in contrast, involved a diverse sample of employees and relied on standardized, validated measures, but its limitation is that it involved only self-reported, cross-sectional data and thus reduced our confidence about the direction of causality. We contend that concerns about the direction of causality are offset by the fact that other experimental studies have already shown the causal effects of ostracism, and the focus of our research here was to demonstrate not the direction, but rather the differential strength of the relationships between ostracism and harassment and employee outcomes.

Taken together, our findings from these different studies provide consistent empirical evidence that ostracism at work really matters. Ostracism is both more common and more negatively related to detrimental employee outcomes than harassment is. The impact of ostracism appears to be not only unique, but stronger, than the impact of harassment. To date, relatively less attention has been given to ostracism as a distinct and important social behavior in organizations. We hope the findings from this set of studies will give the phenomenon of ostracism at work the attention it deserves and encourage future organizational research on this important topic.

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### Appendix. Full List of Items for Ostracism, Harassment, and Sense of Belonging in Studies 2 and 3

#### Study 2

##### *Belonging:*

1. I feel as one with my coworkers.
2. I have the feeling that I belong with my coworkers.
3. I do not feel accepted by my coworkers.
4. I feel connected with one or more of my coworkers.
5. I feel like an outsider at work.

##### *Ostracism:*

1. Others ignored you at work.
2. Others left the area when you entered.
3. Your greetings have gone unanswered at work.

4. You involuntarily sat alone in a crowded lunchroom at work.
5. Others avoided you at work.
6. You noticed others would not look at you at work.
7. Others at work shut you out of the conversation.
8. Others refused to talk to you at work.
9. Others at work treated you as if you weren't there.
10. Others at work did not invite you or ask you if you wanted anything when they went out for a coffee break.

##### *Harassment:*

1. Spreading of gossip and rumors about you.
2. Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person (i.e., habits and background), your attitudes, or your private life.
3. Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger (or rage).
4. Intimidating behavior such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking/barring the way.
5. Threats of violence or physical abuse.
6. Being humiliated or ridiculed.
7. Practical jokes carried out by people you don't get along with.
8. Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm.
9. Threats of making your life difficult.
10. Insulting messages, telephone calls, or emails.
11. Having allegations made against you.

#### Study 3

##### *Belonging:*

1. My work is valued.
2. People let me know they appreciate my work.
3. I am treated like an individual.
4. I am greeted by name.
5. People care about me.
6. I am listened to.
7. I have influence over decisions affecting my work.
8. What I am paid tells me that my work is important and respected.

##### *Ostracism:*

1. Ignored or failed to respond to your communication.
2. Paid little attention to your statement or showed little interest in your opinion.
3. Treated you as nonexistent.
4. Excluded you from important work activities or meetings.
5. Excluded you from influential roles or committee assignments.
6. Kept information from you that you should have known.

##### *Harassment:*

1. Made comments about you to others that put you down.
2. Humiliated or belittled you in front of others.
3. Did things to embarrass you.
4. Teased you in a hostile way.
5. Called you something demeaning or derogatory.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>These items are “Avoiding you” and “Giving you the silent treatment.”

<sup>2</sup>We did not include a path between harassment and a sense of belonging because our theory did not suggest that harassment would be a threat to an employee’s sense of belonging and the results of testing Hypothesis 3 indicated that harassment was not significantly related to belonging.

<sup>3</sup>Turnover intentions were measured using one item. As a result, the average for this factor was 1.00.

<sup>4</sup>Our measure of ostracism in Study 3 included three items that could potentially capture politicking behaviors in addition to social ostracism (items 4–6 in the appendix). To ensure that our results were not driven by such a confound, we reran our comparison analyses measuring ostracism using only the first three items. Our results were consistent with the ones reported using the six-item scale. Again, when compared with harassment, ostracism was a stronger predictor of sense of belonging ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 131.98, p < 0.01$ ), health symptoms ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 17.15, p < 0.01$ ), job satisfaction ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 99.82, p < 0.01$ ), and turnover intentions ( $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df = 1) = 31.10, p < 0.01$ ). Ostracism was not a stronger predictor of depression, compared with harassment.

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