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## Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp)Ostracism and prosocial behavior: A social dilemma perspective <sup>☆</sup>Daniel Balliet <sup>a,c,\*</sup>, D. Lance Ferris <sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, VU University, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, Netherlands<sup>b</sup> The Pennsylvania State University, Smeal College of Business, Management and Organization Department, 434 Business Bldg., University Park, PA 16802, United States<sup>c</sup> Singapore Management University, School of Social Sciences, 90 Stamford Rd. Level 4, Singapore 178903, Singapore

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## ABSTRACT

Prior research has yielded mixed findings regarding the relation of ostracism to prosocial behavior, with studies indicating ostracism leads people to become less prosocial, more prosocial, or that prosocial behavior is unaffected by workplace ostracism. By conceptualizing prosocial behavior at work as a social dilemma, we hypothesized that whether or not individuals reduce prosocial behaviors following ostracism can be understood by how individuals manage the conflict between the immediate temptation to treat others poorly and the long-term benefits of not giving into such temptations. Across three studies – a scenario (Study 1), experimental (Study 2), and field study on employed adults (Study 3) – we find support for the hypothesis that individuals who are less (versus more) oriented towards future outcomes engage in less prosocial behaviors with others who have ostracized them during prior interactions. We discuss both the practical and theoretical implications of these findings.

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## Introduction

Over the past decade research has proliferated on the topic of ostracism, or being ignored or excluded by others (Williams, 2001). To date, studies have shown that ostracism occurs across different age groups, cultures, and demographic lines, and occurs regularly within organizations (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008; Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Williams, 2007). Being the target of ostracism, in turn, is negatively related to numerous organizational and individual outcomes, including job satisfaction, affective commitment, and well-being (Ferris et al., 2008; Penhaligon, Louis, & Restubog, 2009).

While past studies have produced fairly uniform results regarding the negative effects of ostracism, one notable exception lies in the relation of ostracism to prosocial behaviors – behaviors that are intended to benefit another individual, group, or organization (Brief & Motowildo, 1986; Ferris et al., 2011). Although a social exchange theory perspective on organizational prosocial or citizenship behavior (Zellars & Tepper, 2003) suggests individuals should refrain from engaging in prosocial behaviors following ostracism, empirical findings have been mixed: both experimental

(Romero-Canyas et al., 2010; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007; Van Beest & Williams, 2006, 2011; Williams & Sommer, 1997) and field (Ferris et al., 2008; Thau, Aquino, & Poorvtviet, 2007; see also Hitlan, Kelly, Schepman, Schneider, & Zarate, 2006) studies have demonstrated positive, negative, and null effects of ostracism on prosocial behaviors. Organizational research regarding this relation has particularly focused on interpersonal organizational citizenship behaviors (hereafter referred to as OCB),<sup>1</sup> or extra-role behaviors directed towards individuals in the workplace which fall outside of one's job description yet which nevertheless benefit the organization and its employees (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Such behaviors have been shown to impact organizational profitability as well as organizational performance quantity and quality (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997). Thus, whether or not ostracism relates to OCB has both theoretical and practical importance.

We suggest that the answer to this question can be deduced through a different conceptualization of OCB than is typically used. In particular, we subscribe to the notion that OCB, and prosocial behavior more generally, can be understood as a social dilemma whereby an employees' immediate short-term self-interest is in conflict with the long-term collective interest of the organization and the employee. That is, while engaging in OCB or prosocial

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<sup>1</sup> Although the OCB term can refer to conscientious or sportsmanlike behavior (e.g., Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990), in the present paper we use it to specifically refer to interpersonal helping behaviors.

behavior represents a short-term cost to the individual, it has long-term benefits to both the individual and the organization (Joireman, Daniels, George-Falvy, & Kamdar, 2006). This perspective suggests that an employee's future orientation (i.e., concern about future outcomes of behavior) acts as a critical boundary condition for whether or not individuals respond to ostracism with decreased OCB, with individuals oriented towards long-term outcomes being less likely to reduce OCB. Below, we briefly review research on ostracism and OCB, discuss how OCB can be viewed as a social dilemma, and detail the implications this has for understanding the relation between ostracism and OCB. We then report three studies with varied methodologies which examine the hypothesis that either dispositional or state concern for the future reduces the negative effect of ostracism on OCB.

### *Ostracism and OCB: a social dilemma analysis*

Ostracism, defined as being ignored or excluded by another individual or group of individuals (Williams, 2007), occurs in a variety of life domains including organizational contexts (Ferris et al., 2008; Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Work colleagues may not invite their coworker to lunch, they may ignore their coworker's suggestions at meetings, or they may fail to return greetings or salutations to certain coworkers. Drawing from social exchange perspectives on OCB, which represent the dominant paradigm for understanding determinants of OCB (Zellars & Tepper, 2003), one would predict that ostracized individuals should be less likely to engage in OCB following ostracism. In particular, following norms of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), when an individual is treated poorly they should be motivated to return such behavior in kind. One way in which to do so is to minimize OCB: given OCB are not formally required by organizations, OCB represents discretionary behaviors ostracized individuals can minimize without running the risk of organizational sanctions.

Yet prior research has produced decidedly mixed findings with regards to this seemingly straightforward prediction. Experimental, survey, and field studies have found that being ostracized can lead individuals to be less likely to engage in a variety of helping behaviors (Hitlan et al., 2006; Thau et al., 2007; Twenge et al., 2007; Van Beest & Williams, 2006, 2011). In contrast, other field studies have found no relation between workplace ostracism and interpersonal helping behavior at work (Ferris et al., 2008), and experimental research has also suggested that ostracism has no impact on the prosocial behavior of males (compared to control conditions where individuals are neither ostracized nor included; Williams & Sommer, 1997).<sup>2</sup>

One way to reconcile these conflicting findings becomes apparent when OCB is viewed from a social dilemmas perspective, compared to a social exchange perspective. Importantly, people in groups and organizations are interdependent – meaning the behavior of each group member affects the other group members and vice versa (e.g., the amount of effort each group member invests in a group project affects the group output). While both the social dilemmas perspective and social exchange perspective

acknowledge this aspect of OCB, the social dilemmas perspective goes further by detailing the underlying structure of outcomes for OCB. As we will see, doing so can further enhance our understanding of the determinants of OCB (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kelley et al., 2003).

Joireman, Kamdar, Daniels, and Duell (2006) were the first to suggest that OCB may be conceptualized as a social dilemma. Social dilemmas are situations when individual and collective interests conflict (Komorita & Parks, 1994). More specifically, OCBs in particular can be characterized as a certain type of social dilemma, a *social fence*, where individuals have to incur a *short-term* individual cost to receive a *longer-term* collective benefit (Joireman et al., 2006; Messick & McCelland, 1983). For example, an employee may have to decide between spending time completing his or her own work or helping a new colleague get oriented to the job. Although completing one's own work may provide greater immediate benefits to the self (while providing help results in an immediate cost), helping a new colleague may result in better long-term outcomes for the organization and, by extension, for the employee. Importantly, Joireman et al. (2006) found that people do actually perceive OCB as a trade-off between short-term costs to the self and long-term benefits to the organization and the self. They had participants rate 30 different OCB's, most of which were studied in prior research, according to the short-term and long-term costs/benefits of each behavior to the individual and organization. Supporting their predictions, OCB's were viewed as more costly to the self in the short-term, yet more beneficial to the organization in the long-term, suggesting social dilemmas are an appropriate framework for understanding OCB.

A social dilemma perspective on OCB can be generally informative about what features of the person and situation may affect behavior (Kelley et al., 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). Specifically, one underlying dimension characterizing the structure of social situations that has important implications for behavior involves the temporal dimension. When people must make a trade-off between a small immediate cost and larger long-term gain, features of the person or situations that induce concern for the future may affect behavior (Joireman et al., 2006; Kelley et al., 2003; Van Lange, Klapwijk, & Van Munster, in press). Thus, conceptualizing OCB as a social dilemma implies temporal orientation plays an important role in determining whether individuals engage in OCB. As we argue below, this feature of OCB may be key for understanding the effects of ostracism on prosocial behavior.

### *The moderating role of temporal orientation*

Temporal orientations are defined as a bias for current decisions to be influenced by a focus on the past, present, or future (Holman & Silver, 1998). Individuals can vary in their temporal orientations with one of these temporal orientations claiming greater cognitive involvement (Holman & Silver, 1998; Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Given social dilemmas deal with the consideration of long-term outcomes associated with behaviors, an individual's future orientation is particularly relevant to an individual's decision to engage in OCB. In general, future oriented individuals pay more attention to, care more about, and give greater weight to the possible future outcomes of their current behavior when making decisions about how to behave (Joireman, Strathman, & Balliet, 2006; Shipp et al., 2009). For example, in deciding whether to exercise or watch television, highly future oriented individuals may focus more on the distant future outcomes associated with exercise (e.g., good health) and be concerned about how exercise affects progress towards long-term goals (e.g., weight loss) (Ouellette, 2005). However, less future oriented individuals will think less about the long-term outcomes of exercise and may even care less about how exercise affects weight loss. Theo-

<sup>2</sup> Additionally, some prior experimental research reports an increase in prosocial behavior following ostracism (e.g., Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). However, most studies on this topic are different from our own research because they have employed designs whereby ostracized participants had an opportunity to behave prosocially towards a person or group who did not previously ostracize them, e.g., interacting with an anonymous other in a prisoners dilemma (Twenge et al., 2007), donating money to charity (Van Beest & Williams, 2006; Van Beest & Williams, 2011), and sharing money with another participant (Maner et al., 2007; for an exception see, Romero-Canyas et al. 2010). As we argue in the paper, an important challenge for understanding ostracism within organizations is that employees continue to be interdependent during subsequent interactions following an act of ostracism and recognizing this future interdependence has important consequences for understanding prosocial behavior towards ostracizers.

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