Workplace Ostracism More Distressing Than Harassment

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Being ignored, excluded, or overlooked at work inflicts more damage on our physical and mental health than does being harassed, a new study shows.

Canadian researchers found that while most people consider workplace ostracism more benign than harassment, such exclusion is actually more likely to spur job dissatisfaction, health problems, and resignations.

Led by Jane O'Reilly of University of Ottawa, the research team theorized that ostracism is a more common experience at work than is harassment, and wanted to see how employees perceive those conditions.

They conducted an online survey of US workers from an array of industries. The participants were presented with a series of behaviors and asked to rate each. Specifically, they were asked how socially inappropriate and psychologically harmful they regarded each of the behaviors. They also rated the extent to which each action would be formally punished in their place of employment.

Participants consistently rated actions such as ignoring, excluding, or overlooking a co-worker as less egregious and prohibited than belittling, teasing, or gossiping about a co-worker.

"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," the researchers note in a forthcoming issue of *Organization Science*. "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)."

Next, the researchers conducted another survey of 1,300 full-time workers, asking them to rate the extent to which they had experienced certain forms of treatment, ranging from being avoided to being

threatened with violence. The participants also rated their sense of belonging, personal well-being, and attitudes in their workplace.

As they predicted, ostracism was a more common experience than was harassment. More than 70% of respondents said they had experienced some form of exclusion in the prior six months, while only 48% reported being harassed or bullied during that time period. What's more, ostracism was more likely to douse individuals' sense of belonging and their organizational commitment and engagement compared with harassment.

The researchers also took an employment survey by a Canadian university that included feedback on feelings of workplace isolation and harassment and compared it to turnover rates three years after the survey was conducted. They found that, compared to victims of harassment, people who reported feeling ostracized were significantly more likely to have suffered health problems and to have ultimately quit their jobs.

O'Reilly and her colleagues in no way minimize the psychological harms created by workplace harassment. But they argue that managers should focus on preventing ostracism to the same extent they fight against the more overt forms of mistreatment captured by harassment.

"The impact of ostracism," they write, "appears to be not only unique, but stronger, than the impact of harassment."