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The impact of ethical leadership on organizational citizenship behavior

Impact of ethical leadership on OCB

The moderating role of workplace ostracism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to clarify the relationship between ethical leadership and employee organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), specifically the mechanisms through which ethical leadership impacts employee OCB, and the moderating role of workplace ostracism.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used the survey-based dyad data collected from middle management team members and their immediate subordinates in Chinese companies. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the research hypothesis.

Findings – The empirical findings indicate that ethical leadership positively influences employee OCB. Organizational commitment mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and employee OCB. Furthermore, the effect of ethical leadership on employee OCB directly and indirectly (via organizational commitment) is moderated by workplace ostracism.

Originality/value – This paper adds to knowledge about the relationship between ethical leadership and employee OCB and contributes to better understand workplace ostracism.

Keywords Organizational commitment, Organizational citizenship behaviour, Ethical leadership, Mixed model, Workplace Ostracism

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is an important topic for understanding the effect of ethical leadership within an organization. For the past decade, researchers have explained the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB through two perspectives: social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Ethical leaders are regarded as role models in caring for and respecting others' well-being; subordinates imitate their leaders' behaviors by becoming caring toward their coworkers and organizations (Frisch and Huppenbauer, 2014; Mayer *et al.*, 2009). Ethical leaders treat all subordinates with respect and care that can develop high-quality affective exchange relationship between them and their subordinates, which in turn elicits OCB (Mayer *et al.*, 2009; Newman *et al.*, 2011). However, there are two gaps that need to be addressed.

First, with the escalating influence of workplace ostracism on organizational behavior, workplace ostracism has become a concern for organizations. Some research works have examined the association between workplace ostracism and employees' citizenship. Ferris *et al.* (2015) theorized and found that ostracized employees showed lower self-esteem and engaged less in citizenship behavior in order to be consistent with their deficient self-views. Leung *et al.* (2011) reported that ostracized employees engage less in citizenship behavior which leads to a lower level of engagement at work; being ostracized depletes employees' regulatory resources. A recent research based on a social identity perspective shows that workplace ostracism decreases citizenship behavior by undermining employees' identification with the organization (Wu *et al.*, 2016). Workplace ostracism, which refers to an individual's perception of being ignored or excluded at work (Ferris *et al.*, 2008), has been



demonstrated to negatively affect core employee attitudes and behaviors, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, prosocial behavior, and well-being (Ferris *et al.*, 2008; Balliet and Ferris, 2013; Leung *et al.*, 2011). When individuals are ostracized, they perceive themselves to be outsiders from the group and believe they are different from their colleagues, thus threatening their sense of belonging (Williams, 2007). To date, we know much about the direct effects of workplace ostracism on citizenship behavior, but only limited studies examine the moderating effect of workplace ostracism (Ma, 2016). We should pay more attention to its moderating effect. The first purpose of the present study was to explore the moderating effect of workplace ostracism to the relationship between ethical leadership and employee OCB. We hope this study would promote more researchers to take organizational context factors into consideration while studying the effectiveness of ethical leadership.

Second, it is thought that an employee's psychological condition impacts his/her behavior. For example, the positive effect of psychological contract fulfillment on an employee's performance (Turnley *et al.*, 2003) and an employee's psychological ownership toward his/her in-role behavior have been found (Park *et al.*, 2015; Avey *et al.*, 2009). Those studies provide substantial evidence that an employee's psychological condition has a vital impact on his/her behavior. However, we do not know enough about the psychological mechanism linking ethical leadership and OCB (Park *et al.*, 2015). Organizational commitment has a positive relationship with ethical leadership (Demirtas and Akdogan, 2015), is an important feeling of attachment to an organization and positively affects an employee's discretionary efforts (Han *et al.*, 2016). Hence, the second purpose of this study is to explore the psychological mechanism of ethical leadership affecting OCB using organizational commitment as a mediator.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1 Ethical leadership and OCB: the mediating role of organizational commitment

Researchers argued that ethical behavior is a key component in a number of leadership theories (Brown and Trevino, 2006), such as transformational leadership (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999), authentic leadership (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), and spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003). The ethical and moral values were also found in the normative theories of servant leadership, spiritual leadership, and authentic leadership (Johnson, 2015; Van Dierendonck, 2011; Yukl, 2010). Ethical leaders demonstrate proper normative behavior in their personal behavior (Brown *et al.*, 2005). Ethical leaders are caring, trustworthy, honest, and fair (Jordan *et al.*, 2013). Organ and Konovsky (1988) defined OCB as "individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization." OCB was employees' discretionary, extra-role behaviors that benefit the entire organization but were not monitored and rewarded by the organization (Organ, 1990). Farh *et al.* (2004) provided a good summary of the OCB dimensions in the western culture and a good source of discussion.

Previous studies indicated that employees show more prosocial behavior, such as OCB, by imitating their ethical leaders (Bedi *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, ethical leaders can foster high social exchange relationships with subordinates (Rego *et al.*, 2009). A high-quality social exchange relationship between ethical leaders and subordinates can increase subordinates' personal obligation, positive working attitude, and OCB (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Ethical leaders can develop high-quality exchange relationships with their followers (Kalshoven and Den Hartog, 2009), which in turn increase followers' loyalty and commitment to the organization (Hassan *et al.*, 2014).

According to O'Reilly *et al.* (1989), organizational commitment is "an individual's psychological bond to an organization, including a sense of job involvement, loyalty, and

belief in the value of the organization.” Organizational commitment involves three phases: compliance, identification, and internalization (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). In the first phase, employees will accept the influence of others in the company for extrinsic rewards, such as compensation or discipline. During the second phase, employees accept others’ influence to preserve a self-defining relationship with the company, i.e., organizational identification. Identification can facilitate citizenship behavior, as employees with high levels of organizational identification tend to feel psychologically intertwined (Ellemers *et al.*, 2004) and have a higher sense of shared fate with their organization (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). In the final phase, employees find the values of the company to be aligned with their personal values, which can be intrinsically rewarding to employees (Kim *et al.*, 2016) and stimulate employees’ additional efforts (Yang *et al.*, 2016). A meta-analysis (Colquitt *et al.*, 2013) indicates a positive connection between organizational commitment and OCB.

On the basis of the above analysis, ethical leadership has a positive effect on employee’s commitment, and employee’s commitment has a positive effect on employee’s OCB too. It suggests that ethical leadership can influence employee’s OCB via employee’s commitment. It shows that there is an indirect positive relationship between ethical leadership and OCB. The indirect relationship will be a mediating relationship if there is a connection between ethical leadership and OCB when the factor of organizational commitment is not considered (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Most of the studies show that ethical leadership has a positive effect on OCB, so we speculated the impact of ethical leadership on OCB via organizational commitment, and thus, proposed the following hypothesis:

H1. Organizational commitment mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB.

2.2 The moderating effect of workplace ostracism

Workplace ostracism is an undermining behavior that may take on different forms (Duffy *et al.*, 2002), expressed as direct actions and/or covert behaviors (Hitlan, Clifton and DeSoto, 2006; Hitlan, Kelly and Schepman, 2006). In both cases, it “can be a unique painful experience” for its targets (Robinson *et al.*, 2013). In particular, ostracized employees are likely to experience psychological distress, anxiety, and depression (Ferris *et al.*, 2008); they also display withdrawal behaviors, counterproductive work behavior, have less satisfaction in their jobs, and tend to perform more poorly than their coworkers (Leung *et al.*, 2011).

The leader steers the organizational climate, and leadership itself is an important antecedent of that climate (Gumusluoglu and Ilsev, 2009). When an employee suffers from workplace ostracism, they develop psychological precautions, which prevent them forming high-quality exchange relationships with their leader (Hitlan, Clifton and DeSoto, 2006; Hitlan, Kelly and Schepman, 2006). Trust between leader and employees is dampened due to the lack of high-quality relationships. In this case, employees will consider their leader as a hypocrite when their leader displays ethical behavior due to lack of trust, do not regard their leader as a role model, and do not imitate their leader’s behavior to implement OCB. Thus, the effect of ethical leadership on OCB will be weak. We propose the following hypothesis:

H2a. Workplace ostracism moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB. When workplace ostracism is high, the influence of ethical leadership on OCB is weak.

Organizational commitment is the degree of agreement, input, and loyalty of staff to the organization. The mechanism that ethical leadership influences organizational commitment is a social exchange with the leader (Celik *et al.*, 2015; Zhu *et al.*, 2013). Social exchange relationships between a leader and employee trigger commitment with the leader, which in

turn raises commitment to organization (i.e. organizational commitment) because the leader is the representative of an organization. Workplace ostracism can dampen social exchange relationships between leader and employee and reduce the effect of ethical leadership on organizational commitment. When employees perceived workplace ostracism, they do not see their leader as a moral person and moral manager and regard their leader who shows ethical leadership as a hypocrite too, which harms employees' emotional attachments to an ethical leader and dampens trust between them and the ethical leader.

In particular, when there is a lack of trust between employee and an ethical leader, the emergences of high-quality social exchange relationships between them are difficult. Workplace ostracism impedes to form a social exchange relationship between an ethical leader and employees, and the way through which ethical leadership influences organizational commitments is cut off. So, organizational commitment is difficult to manifest even if their leader shows ethical behavior. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2b. Workplace ostracism moderates the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational commitment. When workplace ostracism is strong, the influence of ethical leadership on organizational commitment is weak.

Ostracized individuals tend to dislike group members (Pepitone and Wilpizeski, 1960) and avoid interacting with them (Cheuk *et al.*, 1994). Moreover, ostracism represents an interpersonal stressor (Williams *et al.*, 2000; Sommer *et al.*, 2001), which is responsible for aversive reactions and antisocial behavior (Warburton *et al.*, 2006).

The key mechanism that connects organizational commitment to OCB is reciprocity (Pooja *et al.*, 2016), which is theoretically related to psychological contracts between the employee and organization. Psychological contracts are sets of beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of the reciprocal exchange agreement between organization and employees (Robinson and Morrison, 1995; Robinson, 1996). Unlike the formal contract, a psychological contract is the employee's perception of what contribution employees should make for the organization and what the organization should provide for the employees in return. Previous researchers, to a large extent, explain employees' OCB in the aspect of psychological contract fulfillment (Organ and Konovsky, 1989; Konovsky and Pugh, 1994). That is, if employees believe that psychological contract, which is characterized by mutual trust and reciprocity, will be performed, they are more likely to voluntarily demonstrate behavior beyond their formal roles (Stamper and Van Dyne, 2001). When employees suffer from ostracism, they will gradually develop negative feelings. The negative feelings destroy their belief in reciprocity, and dampen their trust for organization (Williams, 2007). Hence, because workplace ostracism cripples employee's belief of mutual trust and reciprocity (Hitlan, Clifton and DeSoto, 2006; Hitlan, Kelly and Schepman, 2006), committed employees no longer believe that the psychological contract will be fulfilled. They will reduce discretionary efforts and only perform tasks described in the formal contract even if they have organizational commitments. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H2c. Workplace ostracism moderates the relationship between organizational commitment and OCB. When workplace ostracism is high, the influence of organizational commitment on OCB is weak.

The concept model is shown in Figure 1.

3. Methods

3.1 Sample and procedure

To test the hypotheses, data were collected from employees and their immediate supervisors from a group company in a northwest province of the People's Republic of China (PRC). To avoid common method variance as much as possible, we used dyadic data

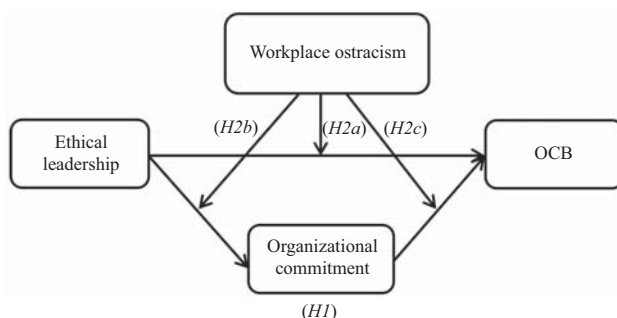


Figure 1.
Conceptual model

(Jarvis *et al.*, 2003). Every immediate supervisor evaluated four to six direct subordinates' OCB. Subordinates evaluated the leadership of their immediate leaders, their organizational commitment, and their perception of workplace ostracism.

Before we conducted the survey, a senior human resources officer – the survey coordinator in the participating organization – prepared a list of respondents and their supervisors from across the departments in that organization. From the list, we randomly selected 80 supervisors, each with 4-7 subordinates. We then held a briefing session with our potential respondents. One of our authors explained the objective of the survey and the procedures for completing the questionnaires, in addition to assuring them that only the researchers would use all of the collected data. All procedures were conducted according to the ethical standards of the field. Three weeks after processing the subordinate questionnaires, the respondents' supervisors were invited to another session where the same author again explained the survey's objectives and requested the supervisors to rate the OCB of their focal subordinates. The questionnaires completed by the supervisors were then returned to the author directly. We used some information comprising age, gender, education year, department, and tenure to ensure matched supervisor-subordinate data.

In total, we distributed 80 questionnaires to supervisors and 401 questionnaires to subordinates. We received 69 supervisor questionnaires and 311 subordinate questionnaires, representing response rates of 86.25 and 77.56 percent, respectively. We eliminated 88 invalid questionnaires due to lack of information and logic; finally we obtained 223 valid questionnaires.

3.2 Analytical procedure

First, we conducted a CFA on the four variables in our study (i.e. ethical leadership, workplace ostracism, OCB, and organizational commitment) to examine their discriminant and convergent validities. Second, we performed a path analysis on ethical leadership, OCB, and organizational commitment to examine the effect of the mediator by using Mplus 6.0. Third, we tested *H2a-H2c*. We adopted a multiple regression by using SPSS 18.0 because the concept model of this research is a moderated moderation. To examine the moderation and mediation together, we used the method recommended by Lambert, which is a useful method to examine the mediation and moderation mixed model offering a way to examine the mediation and moderation effects together.

3.3 Measures

Unless indicated, the questionnaires used in this study adopted a five-point Likert scoring method, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

OCB was measured with a nine-item scale developed by Farh. The scale has been previously used in the Chinese context and showed good reliability (Farh *et al.*, 2007).

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We measured three etic dimensions of this construct, drawing from the PRC OCB scales developed by Farh *et al.* (2004): work help/altruism, voice, and conscientiousness. Coefficient α 's were 0.80 (altruism), 0.86 (voice), and 0.84 (conscientiousness) and the overall Cronbach's α coefficient was $\alpha = 0.87$. Sample items included "Initiates assistance to coworker who has a heavy workload" and "Actively raises suggestions to improve work procedures or processes."

Ethical leadership was measured with a ten-item scale by Brown *et al.* (2005). Sample items included "My supervisor sets an example of how to do things the right way in terms of ethics." The scale had been used many times undertaken with a Chinese sample and showed high reliability. For example, Wang and Sung (2016) reported that the reliability is 0.95, while Yang and Liu (2014) reported that the reliability is 0.92. The reliability of this research was 0.88.

Organizational commitment was measured using the six-item scale developed by Meyer *et al.* (1993). Sample items included "I really feel as if the organization's problems are my own" and "I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization (R)." The reliability of this scale was 0.86.

Workplace ostracism was measured using the 13-item scale developed by Ferris *et al.* (2008) on a 7-point scale, with 1 = never and 7 = always. Sample items included "Others ignore you at work" and "Others refuse to talk to you at work." The reliability of this scale was 0.81.

Control variables: following previous research literature on OCB (Farh *et al.*, 1997), we used demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and education as control variables. Gender (0 = female; 1 = male) was measured by creating dummy variables, while age and education were self-reported in years.

4. Results

4.1 Discriminant validity

As ethical leadership, organizational commitment, and workplace ostracism are rooted in the same data source (i.e. employee), we followed the recommendation of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis to examine the distinctiveness of the four constructs that assessed employee's perception and behavior: ethical leadership, workplace ostracism, OCB, and organizational commitment. When we performed CFA on the four variables, we used item parceling. The results in Table I showed that the satisfactory discriminant validity was attained on the measurement of the four variables.

4.2 Descriptive statistics

Table II shows the descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, correlations, and Cronbach's α 's of the major variables. The Cronbach's α 's of OCB, ethical leadership, organizational commitment, and workplace ostracism all exceed 0.8. Furthermore, ethical leadership was positively associated to OCB ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$) and to organizational commitment ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$). Organizational commitment was positively associated to OCB ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$).

Model	Factor	χ^2	df	RMSEA	TLI	CFI	AGFI	IFI	NFI	RMR	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δ df)
Model1	4 factors: OC; EL; OCB; WO	117.38	48	0.06	0.92	0.93	0.90	0.95	0.91	0.05	
Model2	3 factors: OC+OCB	232.52	51	0.11	0.89	0.89	0.88	0.90	0.88	0.07	115.14 (3)
Model3	2 factors: EL+OCB; WO+OC	357.23	53	0.24	0.78	0.81	0.78	0.81	0.79	0.13	239.85 (5)
Model4	1 factor: EL+OC+WO+OCB	1,017.69	54	0.32	0.63	0.56	0.61	0.70	0.71	0.27	900.31 (6)

Notes: EL, ethical leadership; OC, organizational commitment; WO, workplace ostracism; OCB, organizational citizenship behavior; +, merge

Table I.
Results of
confirmatory
factor analyses

4.3 Hypotheses testing

First, we test *H1*, organization commitment mediates the effect of ethical leadership on employee's OCB. Before we tested *H1*, an optimization model confirmation is necessary. According to the theoretical significance, we first constructed three models. Model 1 was a partially mediated model (i.e. the proposed model), Model 2 was a fully mediated model, and Model 3 was a direct effect model. Table III shows that Model 1 has a better fit than the other two models.

Then, we conducted the PRODCLIN program recommended by Tofighi and MacKinnon (2011) to test *H1*. This method produces asymmetric confidence intervals for the indirect effect, yielding more accurate Type I error rates and greater power when compared with other frequently used methods for test mediation.

The results showed that a significant indirect effect exists between ethical leadership and OCB in the predicted direction ($\beta = 0.18, p < 0.01$). A one-tailed Sobel test supported the significance of this indirect effect ($z = 3.62, p < 0.01$), as did the bootstrap results, showing a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval from 0.03 to 0.15 that did not contain 0. Hence, *H1* received support.

Second, we tested *H2a-H2c*, the moderating effect of workplace ostracism. The procedure is as follows. First, we constructed the following equations:

$$OC = a_0 + a_x EL + a_z WO + a_{xz} EL \times WO + e_M \quad (1)$$

$$OCB = b_0 + b_x EL + b_M OC + b_z WO + b_{XZ} EL \times WO + b_{MZ} OC \times WO + e_Y \quad (2)$$

OC represents organizational commitment; EL represents ethical leadership; WO represents workplace ostracism; and OCB represents OCB. Using multiple regression processes on the sample data, we get all kinds of regression coefficients displayed in Table IV.

Having obtained all the regression coefficients (including a constant), we calculated the first stage, second stage, direct, indirect, and total effects, bootstrapping 1,000 samples to compute bias-corrected confidence intervals. The results are shown in Table V.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender	0.51	0.50	–						
Age	29.45	4.62	0.06	–					
Education	12.97	3.31	0.06	–0.01	–				
Organizational citizenship behavior	3.39	0.83	0.07	0.03	0.12	0.87			
Ethical leadership	3.76	0.69	0.10	0.07	0.07	0.33**	0.88		
Organizational commitment	3.84	0.71	0.08	0.07	0.08	0.36**	0.23**	0.86	
Workplace ostracism	2.83	0.81	0.12	0.02	0.04	–0.13*	–0.07	–0.19*	0.81

Table II. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of variables

Notes: $n = 223$. Diagonal number for internal consistency coefficient. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Structural equation model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	TLI	CFI	AGFI	IFI	RMR	$\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$
Model 1 (partial mediation): EL → OCB and EL → OC → OCB	63.15	24	0.05	0.91	0.93	0.90	0.94	0.04	
Model 2 (total mediation): EL → OC → OCB	117.63	25	0.10	0.89	0.89	0.87	0.88	0.08	54.48 (1)
Model 3 (direct effect): EL → OCB and OC → OCB	131.27	25	0.17	0.80	0.81	0.72	0.71	0.18	68.12 (1)

Notes: EL, ethical leadership; OC, organizational commitment; WO, workplace ostracism; OCB, organizational citizenship behavior

Table III. Model comparison

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As shown in Table V, the first stage effect of ethical leadership on employee organizational commitment was stronger for low workplace ostracism ($\beta = 0.44, p < 0.01$) than for high workplace ostracism ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.05$). In addition, the differences in the first stage were significant ($\Delta\beta = -0.34, p < 0.01$). The second stage of organizational commitment on OCB was stronger for low workplace ostracism ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.01$) than for high workplace ostracism ($\beta = 0.09, p < 0.05$), and the differences in the second stage were significant ($\Delta\beta = -0.18, p < 0.01$). Likewise, the direct effect of ethical leadership on OCB was stronger for low workplace ostracism ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.01$) than for high workplace ostracism ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.05$), and the differences in the direct effect were significant ($\Delta\beta = -0.21, p < 0.01$). Thus, 2a-2c were all supported. The indirect effect and the total effect were stronger for low workplace ostracism than for high workplace ostracism, and the differences were significant, respectively. Thereby, providing support for our proposed hypotheses.

We further plotted the total effect using the procedure recommended by Edwards and Lambert. The results are shown in Figure 2.

5. Discussion

As predicted, workplace ostracism moderates the effects of ethical leadership on OCB, on organizational commitment, and the effects of organizational commitment on OCB. The results also revealed that organizational commitment mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB.

Table IV.
Parameter estimation

Moderation variable	a_x	a_z	a_{xz}	R^2	b_x	b_m	b_z	b_{xz}	b_{mz}	R^2
Workplace ostracism	0.27**	-0.23*	-0.21**	0.25	0.22**	0.18**	-0.14**	-0.13*	-0.11*	0.29

Notes: $n = 223$. The value for the non-standardized regression coefficient. Constant is not listed. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table V.
Simple effect

Moderator variable	Stage		Direct	Effect	
	First	Second		Indirect	Total effect
<i>WO</i>					
Low	0.44**	0.27**	0.33**	0.12**	0.45**
High	0.10*	0.09*	0.12*	0.01	0.13*
Difference	-0.34**	-0.18**	-0.21*	-0.11**	-0.32**

Notes: $n = 223$. The difference coefficient equal to the high group coefficient minus low group coefficient, grouping criterion for the: $Z_{\text{high}} = \text{mean} + 1\text{SD}$, $Z_{\text{low}} = \text{mean} - 1\text{SD}$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Figure 2.
Total effect



5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

This research has some theoretical contribution to the relationship between ethical leadership and employee's OCB.

First, previous research works show that ethical leadership has a positive effect on OCB (Wang and Sung, 2016; Yang *et al.*, 2016; Brown and Trevino, 2006; Frisch and Huppenbauer, 2014). Researchers explaining the mechanism that ethical leadership affects OCB mainly depend on social learning and social exchange theory. This research contributes to the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB using social identity theory, offering an additional perspective to understand the relationship. Otherwise, this research shows that ethical leadership can affect OCB through shaping one's organizational commitment, which widens the outcome of ethical leadership and the antecedent of OCB.

Second, given that we know limited about the moderating effects of workplace ostracism, this research contributes to the theoretical research on workplace ostracism by revealing its moderating effect. Previous studies indicated that workplace ostracism has a negative effect on employees' work behavior and attitude (Panagiotis and Victoria, 2016; Wu *et al.*, 2016; Zhao *et al.*, 2013; Robinson *et al.*, 2013). The extant research mainly focused on the directing and/or mediating effect of workplace ostracism, and few studies on the moderating effect. This study introduced workplace ostracism as a moderator to examine its impact on the relationship between ethical leadership and OCB. Although the findings indicate that ethical leadership still has a positive effect on OCB even if workplace ostracism is taken into consideration, workplace ostracism undermines the link between ethical leadership and OCB and employee organizational commitment, and between employee organizational commitment and OCB. Workplace ostracism mitigates the effects of ethical leadership on OCB, organizational commitment and the effect of organizational commitment on OCB.

Third, this research also contributes to an understanding of the relationship between organizational commitment and OCB. Some previous studies have indicated that organizational commitment is one of the critical antecedents of OCB (Kim and Chang, 2014; Ucanok and Karabati, 2013; Lau *et al.*, 2016; Chang *et al.*, 2015). Conversely, some researchers have argued that the relationship between organizational commitment and OCB is not significant. The results indicate that workplace ostracism moderates the effect of organizational commitment on OCB. When ostracism in the workplace is high, the relationship between organizational commitment and OCB is not significant, but when ostracism is low, the relationship is significant, which thereby provides a better understanding of the issues in this debate.

In addition to the above-mentioned theoretical contributions, this research yields several practical implications.

First, our findings show that the workplace ostracism impairs the positive relationships between ethical leadership and OCB, ethical leadership and organizational commitment, and organizational commitment and OCB. Hence, it is important to eliminate the negative effects of workplace ostracism. A direct approach to reduce the occurrence of workplace ostracism is encouraging employees to use face-to-face discussions to solve problems (Williams, 2007). Therefore, cultivating a climate of direct discussions is an important task for leaders.

Second, our findings indicate that organizational commitment plays a mediating role between ethical leadership and OCB. Hence, fostering employee organizational commitment is important. Research indicates that perceived organizational support, such as developmental assignments and support from senior management significantly increased organizational commitment (Cao and Hamori, 2016; Kim *et al.*, 2016). So, organizations can provide more support to foster employee organizational commitment.

5.2 Limitations and future research direction

Although this study has achieved some meaningful conclusions, there are inevitably some shortcomings.

First, in the research design we adopted cross-sectional data. This is not an optimal way to explain cause and effect, although there was a short interval between the collection of subordinate and supervisor data. In future, stricter longitudinal-data research design should be adopted: researchers could collect employee data first, and then gather data from their immediate supervisors two or three months later.

Second, the scales we used to assess the variables in this study are developed in the western context. Cultural diversity may affect the study's validity, especially in the field of leadership. More attention should be paid to cultural diversity because the perception of employee of ethical behavior of leaders varies between cultures (Gerstner and Day, 1994). Hence, the effectiveness of the theory and measuring instrument still needs to be tested in China and other countries.

In conclusion, the present study enriches our understanding of ethical leadership in more realistic conditions by taking workplace ostracism into consideration. However, there are some problems that still need to be explored. For instance, the extant studies mainly focus on the impact of leadership on employees, while few research works focus on the impact of employee's characteristic on leadership. We know little about the effect of employees on the effectiveness of leadership. This is not only important in theory, but also has great practical significance to guide leaders in choosing more suitable leadership styles.

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Further reading

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