Emotionally savvy employees fail to enact emotional intelligence when ostracized

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A B S T R A C T

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been endorsed as a personal asset in navigating social environments. By extoling EI's positive implications for work outcomes, advocators encouraged organizations to integrate EI into selection and training programs. Nevertheless, according to meta-analytical results, the predictive validity of EI for various work outcomes may not be so promising as expected. A possible reason is that high EI individuals may not effectively enact this emotional strength under certain circumstances. However, what influences employee EI-enactment at work remains unclear. Drawing upon whole trait theory, we posit that by workplace ostracism, a salient threat to need for belongingness, may hinder employee EI-enactment and in turn constrain EI's positive impact on service performance. Data collected with a weekly diary design demonstrated that weekly workplace ostracism weakened the relationship between employees' general level of EI and their weekly EI-enactment and reduced the indirect effect of EI on weekly service performance via EI-enactment. By showing that workplace ostracism stretches EI to its limit, we make the first attempt to uncover a boundary condition for employee EI-enactment and offers a valuable insight into when EI fails to make a difference.

1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence has been touted as a valuable asset that empowers accurate understanding of one's own and others' emotional states and effective emotional regulation, which eventually promotes social functioning (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). EI is endorsed as an indispensable quality for employees holding managerial positions (Kerr, Garvin, Heaton, & Boyle, 2006; Wong & Law, 2002) and high emotional labor jobs (Herpertz, Nizielski, Hock, & Schütz, 2016). Helpful as EI is to stress adaptation and adjustment, so that it is also deemed as a resource sustaining effective coping against emotional-laden events (Jordan, Ashkanasy, & Hartel, 2002). Thus, organizations are keen to include EI as a criterion of personnel selection (Christiansen, Janovics, & Siers, 2010) and a core element of training programs (Hodzic, Scharfen, Ripoll, Holling, & Zenasni, 2018).

Behind the enthusiasm toward EI is the assumption that emotionally savvy employees can readily apply this strength at daily work and benefit from it. Scholars have begun to challenge this premise by asserting that that the possession of high EI does not necessarily lead to the effective enactment (Ybarra, Rees, Kross, & Sanches-Burks, 2012).

To illustrate, evidence shows that EI-enactment fluctuates significantly at daily and weekly level and that the general level of EI and EI-enactment are just weakly correlated (Pekaar, van der Linden, Bakker, & Born, 2017). Meanwhile, scholars, in meta-analysis, have reported small correlations of EI with job performance (O'Boyle Jr, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011) and transformational leadership (Harms & Credé, 2010), despite a stronger effect on performance among hospitality workers (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2021). Additionally, mixed evidence was also found regarding the stress protective effect of EI (e.g., Davis & Humphrey, 2012; Ma and Liu, 2019). Yet, the literature has accumulated little insight into what constrains EI-enactment and how to shrug off that drag (Ybarra et al., 2012). This knowledge gap becomes impossible to ignore. Without knowing when high EI employees would be more or less effectively enact their EI at work, it is difficult to strengthen the predictive validity of EI, and the utility of EI-focused selection and training practices becomes questionable.

This research is to explore a contingency for the relationship between an individual's general level of EI and EI-enactment at work. Drawing upon whole trait theory (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Prentice, Jayawickreme, & Fleeson, 2019), we posit that by eliminating

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opportunities for social interaction and disrupting one's capacity to process, manage and utilize emotional information, workplace ostracism should disempower and disenable a high EI employee to efficiently enact EI. Furthermore, because EI-enactment is the actual manifestation and expression of EI, workplace ostracism, by weakening the effect of EI on EI-enactment, may further reduce the positive impact of EI on service performance. Considering that an employee's EI-enactment varies substantially at weekly level (Pekaar, Bakker, Van der Linden, Born, & Sirén, 2018), we conduct a weekly diary study to test the propositions.

The present study makes several important contributions to the literature. First, we offer a possible reason for why those high EI employees sometimes fails to effectively enact EI, filling a critical research gap in the EI literature. Second, scholars have called for integrating social environments into EI theories because "a useful model of EI needs to carefully, deliberately, and explicitly consider the social world that people navigate" (Ybarra et al., 2012, p. 205). We respond to the research call and make a meaningful extension to EI theories by studying workplace ostracism-a social environment variable-as a situational contingency. Third, by demonstrating the impact of EI-enactment on service performance and revealing workplace ostracism as a boundary condition for EI-enactment, we shed a light on building theories that can potentially improve the criterion validity of EI (Harms & Credé, 2010; Joseph & Newman, 2010; Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004) and informs organizational practices how to eliminate the limit on EI's positive potential. Finally, past work has primarily focused on workplace ostracism's direct effect on work outcomes or indirect effect via negative psychological states (e.g., lowered self-esteem Ferris, Lian, Brown, & Morrison, 2015; distress, Wu et al., 2012). We advance the workplace ostracism literature by offering a novel insight regarding how workplace ostracism jeopardizes work outcomes.

1.1. EI, EI-enactment, and workplace ostracism

By definition, EI refers to a set of emotion-oriented competencies for perceiving, understanding, managing, and using emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Based on this four-branch abilities model proposed by Mayer and Salovey (1997), past work assessed EI with either performance-based (i.e., ability-EI) or self-report measures (i.e., trait-EI). The performance-based measures (e.g., Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002) conceptualizes EI as a form of intelligence and evaluates EI with right or wrong answers. Alternatively, self-report measures (e.g., Wong and Law's Emotional Intelligence Scale; Wong & Law, 2002) reflects self-perceptions of emotional abilities and emotional-oriented behavioral tendencies (Miao et al., 2021). We focus on self-report EI because it constitutes a large proportion of EI research to date (Miao et al., 2021) and dominates the currently existing research of EI-enactment (Pekaar et al., 2017). Specifically, we take Wong and Law's (2002) conceptualization that defines EI as comprising one's perceived capacity of self-emotional appraisal (SEA), others' emotional appraisal (OEA), regulation of emotion (ROE), and using of emotion (UOE).

According to whole trait theory (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015), EI is a within-person density distribution of EI-enactment that indicates the extent to which employees actually utilize their EI in a given situation. The theory thus highlights a large amount of intraindividual variations in trait enactment (Prentice et al., 2019). Research found that EI-enactment varied significantly at a daily or weekly basis and that general level of EI was correlated weakly to EI-enactment (Pekaar et al., 2017, 2018). Moreover, whole trait theory claims that motivational and social-cognitive factors can fuel or inhibit trait enactment. Specifically, an event that meets a psychological need can trigger enactment of a trait that is thematically consonant with the pursuit of that need, while an event thwarting the need may hinder the enactment of that relevant trait (Prentice et al., 2019). To illustrate, by facilitating the need for achievement, a challenging project can stimulate the enactment of conscientiousness; situational constrains, by thwarting the need for autonomy, can inhibit the enactment of openness to experience.

Almost all forms of social-emotional traits and abilities are in service of favorable sociality. Even human intelligence was theorized to share this goal (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002). Thus, social interactions, no matter how positive or negative they are, serve as a precondition for those personal strengths to operate. It is no exception for EI: as a sub-component of social intelligence, EI is deployed to promote social belongingness and high-quality interpersonal interactions (Crowne, 2009). Thanks to the opportunities for social interaction and pursuing the need for belongingness, enacting EI-perceiving, understanding, managing, and using emotions-becomes functional and consequential. In light of whole trait theory, it is conceivable that a social environment threatening the need for affiliation or social belongingness should hinder high EI employees from enacting their EI.

Workplace ostracism, namely the perception of being ignored and excluded by others at work (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008), is such a context. It is featured by the omission rather than the commission of socially engaging someone and thwarts severely the victim's need for social belongingness (Williams, 2009). With reference to whole trait theory, the experience of being ostracized should disempower those high EI employees to enact this emotional strength because they are left alone and forgotten. In addition, the thwarted need to belong caused by workplace ostracism may also disenable EI-enactment. The thwarted need compromises cognitive processes of reasoning and thinking and generates a state of emotional numbness rendering an individual to be insensitive to internal feelings (Baumeister et al., 2002; Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007). Emotional understanding is thus compromised. Being ostracized also undermines self-executive functioning including regulating inner states and using emotional information for decision making (Baumeister et al., 2002, 2007; Muraven et al., 1998), hindering high EI employees to enact emotional regulation and utilization. Taken together, we propose:

Hypothesis 1. Weekly workplace ostracism moderates the relationship between EI and weekly EI-enactment such that the relationship is weaker when ostracism is high.

The EI literature has long recognized that EI is an enabler of service performance (Prentice & King, 2011), defined as behaviors of serving and helping customers (Liao & Chuang, 2004). Whole trait theory holds that regardless how high an employee is scored on an EI measure, it is the employee's EI-enactment during service encounters that ultimately affects service performance. To meet customers' expectations and effectively help them, service employees need to enact their capacity to accurately understand customers' inner states during service encounters (Liao & Chuang, 2004). Furthermore, as forward-thinking and anticipatory responses are essential for delivering high-quality service, it is critical for a high EI service employees to utilize the capacity of using emotional information for judgments and take service initiatives (Raub & Liao, 2012). Finally, service performance entails ongoing emotional regulation in which employees suppress undesired feelings, generate desired states, and exhibit favorable responses toward customers (Chi & Grandey, 2019). Logically then, EI-enactment is the central mechanism linking an employee's EI to service performance. However, as we noted that a high EI employee is less able to enact EI-enactment when ostracized, workplace ostracism should weaken the indirect effect of EI on service performance via EI-enactment (Fig. 1)

Hypothesis 2. Weekly workplace ostracism moderates the indirect relationship of EI with servant performance via weekly EI-enactment such that the relationship is weaker when ostracism is high.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

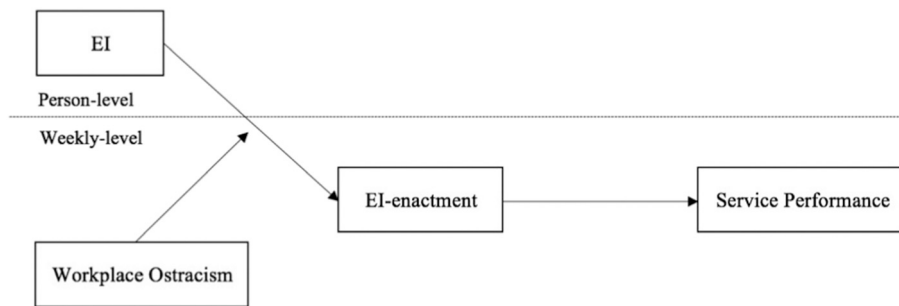The sample involves 136 retail sales staff in a large retail center

Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

located in Hong Kong, China. The data collection procedure complied with the APA ethical guidance and was approved by the first author's affiliated institute and the head of the organization. We used a weekly diary design to collect data in two phases. First, we sent the participants a consent form and a general survey assessing their EI and demographic variables. In the following five consecutive weeks, we collected weekly-level workplace ostracism, EI enactment and service performance by sending online surveys via Qualtrics. The regular Monday-to-Friday basis is less applicable for many service employees who have irregular working hours and flexible work shifts. To better assess their experience of a work week, we documented each participant's work schedule in prior and sent them the weekly survey on the specific day they finish their weekly work. To further reduce common method bias and allow a robust test of our research model, we also contacted their direct supervisors to evaluate their service performance every week. We eliminated surveys completed outside the prescribed time frame and retained the data of the participants who responded at least three weekly surveys. We successfully matched 415 weekly observations of 105 participants and also obtained 346 supervisor-reported weekly service performance ratings of 103 participants. For the final sample ($N = 105$), the mean age was 28.42 years (SD = 4.38 years), average job tenure was 3.17 years (SD = 1.75), and 61.00% were female.

2.2. Measures

Otherwise noted, the employees and supervisors rated their agreement with each item on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Wong and Law's (2002) 16-item Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) (e.g., "I am able to control my temper and handle difficulties rationally")($\alpha = 0.87$). According to Côté's (2014) recommendation, we use the composite score of EI in analysis as our rationale is applicable to all branches of EI.

Weekly workplace ostracism was assessed with 9 items from the Ferris et al.'s (2008) scale. We adapted the items to reflect weekly experiences (e.g., "In this week, others ignored me at work")(average $\alpha = 0.93$).

Weekly emotional intelligence enactment. Following Pekaar et al. (2017) who assessed daily EI enactment, we assessed weekly EI enactment by using eight items from the WLEIS, with each facet of EI assessed with two items. We adapted the items to reflect the degree of enacting emotional intelligence in the particular week (e.g., "In this week, I had a good understanding of my own emotions")(average $\alpha = 0.92$).

Weekly service performance was assessed by the participants and by their direct supervisors with 6 item taken from Liao and Chuang's (2004) instrument. We adapted the items to reflect the level of the participants' service performance exhibited in the week (e.g., In this week, I/this employee pointed out and related item features to a customer's needs) (average α was 0.76 for supervisor-rating and 0.82 for self-rating).

2.3. Analytical strategy

The Intraclass Correlation (ICC(1)) of the weekly variables (See Table 1) indicated the within-person variance (Level 1) of the variables ranged from 20.00% to 68.00%, justifying the use of multilevel modeling for hypothesis testing. We estimated all the parameters simultaneously in an overall multilevel path model using Mplus 7.1 by combining Preacher, Zhang, and Zyphur's (2011)) procedure for creating an unconflated $2 \rightarrow 1 \rightarrow 1$ multilevel path model and their (2016) procedure for testing moderation in a $1 \times (2 \rightarrow 1)$ design (i.e., a Level 1 variable moderating the effect of a Level 2 variable on a Level 1 outcome). According to Preacher, Zhang, and Zyphur's (2016) statistical approach, the analysis includes two interaction effects:1) the interaction between general EI (Level 2) and between-person part of weekly workplace ostracism (Level 2), and 2) the cross-level interaction between general EI (Level 2) and within-person part of weekly workplace ostracism (Level 1). However, only the former interaction effect is of interest for a $1 \times (2 \rightarrow 1)$ design that our research model proposed. The later, cross-level interaction is in fact conceptually different from our hypothesis as it estimates a Level 2 variable moderating the effect of a Level 1 variable on a Level 1 outcome (Preacher et al., 2016). Although the path model estimates both interaction effects, our hypothesis testing is based on the one between general EI and between-person part of weekly workplace ostracism. The within-person (Level 1) predictors were person-mean centered and the between-person (Level 2) predictors were grand-mean centered prior to analysis.

3. Results

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations at within- and -between person levels. Results of the multilevel path model are presented in Table 2. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, weekly workplace ostracism significantly moderated the relationship between EI and weekly EI enactment ($\gamma = -0.33$, $p = .037$) such that the relationship was nonsignificant in the week with higher levels of workplace ostracism (*simple slope* = 0.08, $p = .50$) than in the week with lower levels (*simple slope* = 0.71, $p < .001$) (See Fig. 2). Weekly EI enactment was positively related to both self-report and supervisor-report service performance. Further, weekly EI mediated the relationship of EI with both self-report and supervisor-report service performance. Finally, in line with Hypothesis 2, we found that weekly workplace ostracism significantly weakened the indirect relationship of EI with both self-report and supervisor-report service performance via weekly EI enactment.[1]

4. Discussion

As EI can potentially facilitate emotional understanding, regulation

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[1] In an extra analysis, we also controlled for the participants' age, gender, and job tenure. Age significantly predicted self-report ($\gamma = 0.03$, $p = .02$) and supervisor-report ($\gamma = 0.03$, $p = .03$) service performance. Gender and job tenure failed to significantly predict any endogenous variables. The results remained roughly the same with and without these variables.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for study variables.

Variables	M	SD	ICC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	28.42	4.38	–	–	−0.12*	0.60**	0.02	−0.10	0.15**	0.08	0.14**
2. Gender	1.61	0.49	–	−0.12*	–	−0.15**	0.11*	−0.02	−0.03	0.13**	0.08
3. Job tenure	3.71	1.75	–	0.60**	−0.15**	–	0.04	−0.03	0.12*	−0.05	−0.04
4. EI	3.74	0.49	–	0.02	0.11*	0.04	(0.87)	0.23**	−0.001	0.21**	0.25**
5. Weekly EI-enactment	3.25	0.92	0.56	–	–	–	–	(0.92)	−0.65**	0.46**	−0.24**
6. Weekly workplace ostracism	3.17	1.06	0.80	–	–	–	–	−0.56**	(0.93)	−0.09	0.38**
7. Weekly service performance (self-report)	3.78	0.67	0.32	–	–	–	–	0.33**	−0.41**	(0.82)	0.28**
8. Weekly service performance (supervisor-report)	3.66	0.64	0.35	–	–	–	–	0.50**	0.10	0.30**	(0.76)

Note. For self-report data, $N_{between} = 105$, $N_{within} = 415$. For supervisor-ratings on weekly service performance, $N_{between} = 103$, $N_{within} = 346$. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, ICC (Intraclass Correlation) = between-person variance / total variance. EI = emotional intelligence. Internal consistency reliabilities are on the diagonal within prentices, with averaged reliabilities reported for weekly variables. Correlations at the within-person level were presented below the diagonal. Correlations at the between-person level were presented above the diagonal.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 2

The results of path estimates, indirect effects and conditional indirect effects.

Predictors	Weekly EI-enactment	Weekly service performance (self-report)	Weekly service performance (supervisor-report)
	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)
Within-person effects			
Weekly workplace ostracism	−0.39** (0.09)		
Weekly EI-enactment		0.54** (0.07)	0.30** (0.07)
Between-person effects			
General EI	0.40** (0.13)	0.09 (0.10)	0.18 (0.10)
Weekly workplace ostracism (person-mean score)	−0.50** (0.06)		
Weekly EI-enactment (person-mean score)		0.27** (0.06)	0.18* (0.07)
Interaction			
Weekly workplace ostracism (person-mean score) x general EI	−0.52* (0.25)		
Weekly workplace ostracism x general EI (cross-level interaction)	−0.33* (0.10)		

Indirect effects	Estimate	Bayesian 95% CI
General level of EI →weekly EI enactment→service performance (self-report)		
Average indirect effect	0.11	[0.04, 0.21]
Conditional indirect effect at low weekly workplace ostracism (-1SD)	0.18	[0.06, 0.38]
Conditional indirect effect at high weekly workplace ostracism (+1SD)	0.02	[−0.06, 0.09]
Difference (high vs. low weekly workplace ostracism)	0.16	[0.01, 0.39]
General level of EI →weekly EI enactment→service performance (supervisor -report)		
Average indirect effect	0.07	[0.02, 0.15]
Conditional indirect effect at low weekly workplace ostracism (-1SD)	0.12	[0.04, 0.29]
Conditional indirect effect at high weekly workplace ostracism (+1SD)	0.01	[−0.05, 0.08]
Difference (high vs. low weekly workplace ostracism)	0.11	[0.02, 0.28]

Note: $N = 105$. We person-mean centered the within-person predictors and grand-mean centered the between-person predictors in prior.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

and social functioning, organizations have spent much on EI-oriented selection tools and training interventions. Recent research suggests a high level of EI does not necessarily lead to effective EI-enactment at work, which in turn may hinder its potential (Pekaar et al., 2018). Drawing upon whole trait theory, this weekly diary study showed that workplace ostracism, a salient threat to social belongingness, is a reasonable boundary condition for the relationship between EI and weekly EI-enactment. High EI employees failed to enact their EI effectively during the week when experiencing a high level of workplace ostracism. Our research helps account for the substantial within-person variation in EI-enactment.

We also responded to the call for integrating social environments into EI models and demonstrated their influence over EI (Ybarra et al., 2012). Past research theorized EI as a personal resource that enables better adaptation when an individual is faced with unfavorable social events at work (e.g., interpersonal conflict, Liu, 2019). This point of view implies that EI is resilient to situations, and individuals high in EI are even better able to apply this strength when faced with interpersonal clashes. However, our research reveals something opposite: a high EI employee failed to enact EI in the face of workplace ostracism. This impact has negative ramifications for work outcomes. We found weekly EI-enactment a proximal predictor of weekly service performance, which mediated the indirect effect of EI on weekly service performance. But weekly workplace ostracism reduced the indirect effect by disrupting the EI-enactment process. In this way, our study provided an insight into when and why social environments may compromise EI's positive impacts. Notably, we do not intend to negate the positivity of EI in the context of unfavorable social environments but rather suggest that certain social events (e.g., ostracism) may stretch the function/enactment of EI to the limit. It is likely that EI-enactment breaks down in situations threatening one's need for social belongingness (e.g., ostracism or social exclusion). To further strengthen our conclusion, future research may need to compare the effect of ostracism to that of other unfavorable social events that pose little threat to social belongingness (e.g. abusive supervision and interpersonal conflict).

This research also extends the workplace ostracism literature by offering a new research paradigm. In contrast to most research linking workplace ostracism to work outcomes (e.g., Ferris et al., 2015; Liu, 2019), we posited that workplace ostracism can constrain trait enactment and in turn prevents employees from reaching their potential. This perspective is novel in theorizing and elaborating on the detrimental implications of workplace ostracism for employee outcomes. Future studies can rely on this rationale to further explore the constraining effect of workplace ostracism on other favorable individual difference variables (e.g., cognitive ability or conscientiousness). This finding also has significant implications for organizational practices. It is helpful to select high EI employees in certain occupations (e.g., service employees) and implement EI trainings to build high EI workforce. But building an
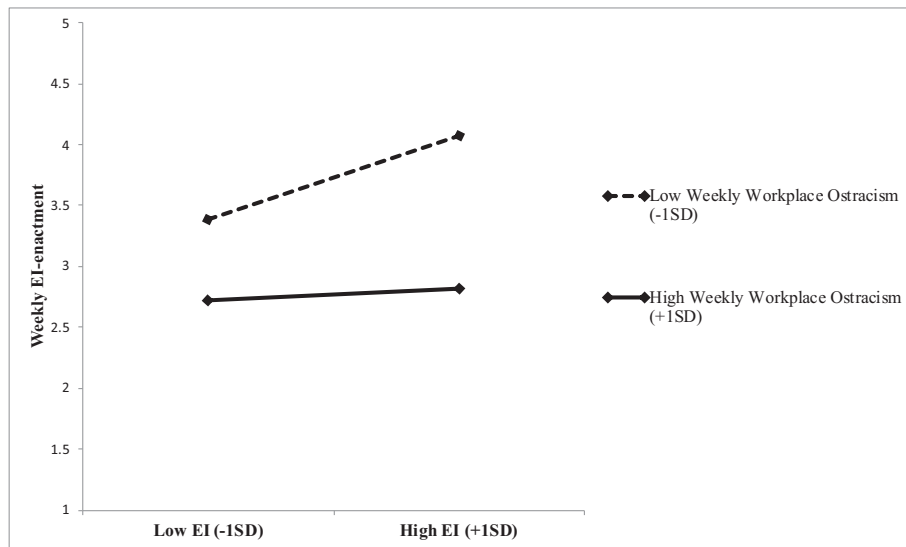
Fig. 2. The pattern of the moderating effect of weekly workplace ostracism on the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and weekly EI-enactment.

exclusive work environment satisfying employee need to belong also matters as it ensures that employees are able to effectively enact their EI at daily work. Otherwise, organizations and employees may fail to enjoy EI's real-term benefits.

Our research has a few limitations. First, our sample only involved service employees, limiting the external validity of the findings. Future studies can sample participants from other occupations and industries to examine if the findings will hold. Second, we did not explicitly assess thwarted need for social belongingness on which we based our reasoning for prediction. It is helpful to fully examine this whole chain effect that workplace ostracism inhibits EI-enactment by thwarting the need to belong. It is also valuable to compare the effect of workplace ostracism to other types of workplace mistreatment varying in their impact on the need. Moreover, our findings do not support causal inferences. We deem it crucial to conduct experimental research manipulating ostracism to replicate the findings. We also found weekly workplace ostracism had a main negative effect on weekly EI-enactment. From a whole trait theory perspective, this result implies that workplace ostracism turns the distribution of EI-enactment positively skewed. But it is also possible that low EI-enactment may increase workplace ostracism. As we assessed these variables in one survey, we were unable to disentangle this debate. Experimental studies may help clarify this issue. Altogether, we supported the idea that workplace ostracism constrains the effect of EI on weekly EI-enactment and reduces the positive implications of EI for work outcomes.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jie Ma: Conceptualization, Data-collection, Statistical Analysis, Writing-Reviewing and Editing,
Zhiliang Zeng: Funding and Data-collection.
Fang Ke: Literature collection, Reviewing and Editing.

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