THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE: TOWARD A THEORY OF ORGANIZATIONAL SHUNNING

This paper introduces the term organizational shunning to describe a form of psychological violence against employees. Well established psychological and sociological theories are used to develop propositions regarding organizational shunning and to set a prospective research agenda. In this theory building exercise, an organizational taboo is exposed, and implications are discussed for improved individual and organizational performance.

Introduction

A man’s Social Self is the recognition which he gets from his mates. We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favourably, by our kind. No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all members thereof. 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 nonexisting 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: 293-294)

Shunning and the associated emotional experience have received precious little attention in the management literature. The history of exclusion and shunning can be traced back to tribal persons and in the laws of ancient Athens and Rome (Zippelius, 1986). Zippelius discusses the use of shunning as a long recognized legal sanction lasting well into the medieval European communities. Our modern legal institutions are far less likely to exercise such a form of expulsion from the entire society, except under very rare circumstances (e.g., solitary confinement). While laws and individual rights have become mainstays of Western style democracies, we contend that shunning is alive and well in modern day society in all types of social relationships.

Despite its long history, little has been written on shunning, and the author is unaware of any studies performed outside of the laboratory setting or in the management domain. This is not to say that similar concepts have not been extensively studied. This paper will draw upon the diverse writings in social ostracism, bullying, attachment, learned helplessness (and associated battered wife syndrome), psychoanalysis, disavowal and disowning research to formulate propositions that can be used as the basis for an initial theory of organizational shunning. In so doing, this paper uses well established theories in psychology and sociology to understand a phenomenon that has received little research attention, yet has been anecdotally observed in both public and private sector organizations.

This paper develops propositions for organizational shunning by first defining organizational shunning, drawing upon the work of Lewin (2000), and examining shunning in relation to emotions. The paper then argues that shunning is a relational process with consequences for both the shunned and the shunners. A taxonomy of organizational shunning is developed to more fully understand some of the key variables that may influence the experience, type, duration
and severity of the shunning experience. To provide a more comprehensive view of the shunning phenomena, gender differences are postulated along with potential remedies to this serious behaviour. Finally, the propositions are categorized in order to chart a course for organizational shunning research.

**Defining Organizational Shunning**

Lewin (2000) has written arguably the most comprehensive paper on shunning, yet makes no attempt to discuss the concept in relation to work. Still her definition of shunning as “the process whereby one individual aggressively ignores or avoids another in retaliation for a real or fantasized injury” (Lewin, 2000:125) provides a valuable starting point in differentiating shunning from ostracism. The dominant view of social ostracism is "the silent treatment" (Ciarocco, Sommer & Baumeister, 2001; Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco, & Baumeister, 2001; Williams & Sommer, 1997), which may be a part of the shunning experience, but only a small fraction. Much research has been conducted around social ostracism in our daily lives, especially between angry spouses (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Rusbalt, Vereete, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). While Sommer and her colleagues have examined social ostracism in laboratory settings, shunning can be differentiated on the basis of its duration and severity. That is, shunning tends to last longer than the silent treatment and it can be viewed as a form of psychological violence against an individual (Lewin, 2000). Despite these important conceptual and practical distinctions, the social ostracism literature is far more developed and provides many useful ideas and tools for theory building.

The Oxford dictionary (2001) defines shunning as “the process of avoiding or keeping clear of...”, with its origins in Old English being to “hate [or] shrink back” from, thus implying active participation on the part of the shunner. We draw upon Lewin's (2000) work to define organizational shunning as the process whereby one or more individuals intentionally ignores or avoids another, in retaliation for a real or fantasized injury in the workplace. We have replaced Lewin's use of the term aggressively with intentionally, to clarify that shunning may be passive or overt, but it must be intentional. As such, shunning is conceptually distinct from someone who is disliked, or unpopular.

**Shunning and Emotions**

In general, the emotions have been treated as a lesser human substrate when compared to rational thought. Fortunately this rather pedestrian view has largely been replaced in the literature as we have come to understand that thinking and feeling are inseparable (see Ben-Ze’ev, 2000; Gigerenzer & Selten, 2001; Maturana, 1988). In the past decade there has been a marked increase in the number and quality of publications regarding emotions in the workplace. This area of research shows much promise, in part, due to its links to employee well-being (Zerbe, 2000), leadership (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Drodge & Murphy, 2002) and organizational dynamics (Pratt & Dutton, 2000), but much work remains to be done in incorporating affective experience into organizational studies.

We also require a greater understanding of the emotions associated with the behaviour of shunning. Shame, guilt, sadness and anger can all be intuitively linked to shunning, but there may be other emotions involved in the shunning experience. A goal of future research would be to identify the emotions experienced by someone who is being shunned.

Shame can be strongly linked to the action of shunning. The emotion of shame in the workplace has received scant attention (for a theoretical exception, see Poulson, 2000; for an empirical exception see Bagozzi, Verbeke & Gavino Jr., 2003), and remains a highly speculative area requiring empirical study. Rejection and the breaking of interpersonal relations (Kaufman, 1989) or attachment bond (Lansky, 1995) is known to play an important role in the shame
experience. Shame is thought to occur out of a concern of not living up to expectations, and is associated with the need for approval, to belong to a group, or to be accepted by others (Bagozzi et al., 2003; Baumeister, 1995). Thomas (1995: 587) goes so far as to define shame as “a primitive physiological response to a rejection of oneself by another” thus strongly relating the action of shunning to the emotion of shame.

While there is some conceptual overlap between the emotions of shame and guilt, these two constructs should be held conceptually distinct (Poulson, 2000). People who feel guilty experience a sense of “…regret over the ‘bad thing’ that was done, and a sense of tension that serves to motivate reparative action” (Tangney, 1992: 100). In essence, with guilt, the self is not the central object of concern, but rather the thing done or undone is the focus. People who have been shunned may feel guilty that they have done something to warrant being actively ignored.

People who are shunned are also likely to feel sadness, as the peer group they used to belong to no longer recognizes their very presence. These feelings of sadness may give way to anger, especially if the person being shunned believes the actions are unwarranted or has no sense of causal clarity. These emotions are just the most obvious, and may just be the tip of the iceberg.

**Proposition 1: Employees who have been shunned will experience emotions, including shame, guilt, sadness and anger.**

**Shunning as a Relational Process**

Shunning is a relational process involving both those who inflict it (shunners) and those who it is inflicted upon (the shunned). Jane Goodall's (1986) famous work with Gombee chimpanzees in Tanzania showed that our closest primate relatives socially rejected or excluded other members from a core group. Goodall found that this form of exclusion was used only in rare circumstances to ensure survival of the chimpanzee community against competitive interaction (often excessive male aggression) and to maintain social cohesion. Goodall (1986) extensively documented the devastating effects of shunning on the shunned chimpanzee, where the psychological trauma played out in either aggressive behaviour (sometimes against self) or extreme passivity (including keeping to themselves, becoming untrusting of animals and humans previously trusted). This research suggests that there may be an evolutionary (genetic) link to shunning behaviour.

The genetic argument associated with shunning is also bolstered by Bowlby's extensive work on childhood attachment and separation. Bowlby's (1973) seminal article argued that an infant's forced separation from a significant caregiver leads to a disrupted attachment with that figure. Shunning, in this context, was observed to be a "normal" (read genetic) response on the part of the child to being reunited with a previously absent, significant caregiver. Bowlby used the psychodynamic model of separation anxiety, grief and mourning, and defence to conceptualise and explain the child's shunning behaviour. He found that children went through sequential stages of protest, despair, and detachment as a defence mechanism against the psychological trauma induced by the loss of a significant caregiver. In a recent article Green & Goldwyn (2002: 835) found that this attachment disruption is “a powerful predictor of a range of later social and cognitive difficulties in psychopathology”. It is now believed that shame is adaptive and occurs in response to appraisals of an event’s meaning (Lazarus, 1991). In an organizational setting, individuals who are shunned likely employ adaptive coping mechanisms that may include stages of separation anxiety from the work group, grief and mourning related to being shunned, and defence in order to mitigate the psychological trauma.
Proposition 2: Employees who experience organizational shunning will go through stages of separation anxiety, grief and mourning, and defence to cope with the psychological trauma of the experience.

As children grow, shunning most often rears its head in peer groups where it can occur in a passive-aggressive form (most often in the form of peer exclusion), or in the form of bullying. Neufeld (2002: 207) discusses the psychological trauma of bullying on children and concludes that “the results of denying, rationalizing, justifying, and minimizing the effects of violence are children developing defences of blaming, withdrawing, keeping secrets, and stifling feelings of anger, frustration, fear, guilt, or shame.” Her study illuminates the importance of cultural norms that either encourage or are silent with respect to bullying. This same argument can be made for organizational cultures where the organization can act as the facilitating back-drop. Further evidence of the importance of organizational culture can be drawn from Liefooghe & Davey's (2001: 375) bullying study, where respondents blamed both “the pathologized individual and the facilitating environment to account for bullying...”, and “...they also use the notion of a pathologized organization”.

Shunning may have potentially useful roles for those who employ the tactic. In very young children, shunning helps to mitigate the psychological damage of disrupted attachment. In adults, shunning may also play important protective functions. For instance, we may shun individuals who have caused us harm (mental or physical), or someone who has broken our trust. While there may be perfectly legitimate reasons for employing shunning as a protective technique, it may still cause psychological trauma to the shunned individual. We argue that in a work environment, where the individual is not physically exiled, shunning uses up psychological resources for both the shunners and the shunned, thus depleting one’s ability to perform optimally (Ciarocco, Sommer & Baumeister, 2001). While intentionally ignoring someone throughout the course of our lives may serve a valuable purpose, we question whether it is ever the most appropriate tactic to use in an organizational setting. Whatever the perceived harm an individual may be feeling to induce shunning in the workplace may be interpreted as a sign of poor management/leadership and/or a dysfunctional organizational culture. It may be in the best interest of the organization to deal directly with the underlying issues causing the shunning.

Proposition 3: The culture of the organization will play an important role in the number and severity of shunning incidents.

While we propose that employees will go through stages in the shunning experience, whether adults experience shunning in the same manner as children is somewhat unclear. Unlike early childhood shunning as a response to separation, shunning in adult behaviour is argued to be a chosen and destructive course of action (Lewin, 2000). We know very little about employee shunning, including, but not limited to, a lack of data regarding the impact of organizational cultural norms, management behaviours, and leadership (or the lack thereof) on shunning. What we do know about adults is that shame and self-righteousness may be used as intrapsychic coping mechanisms to protect the individual from “vulnerability to humiliation and the loss of contact in the relationship” (Erskine, 1994: 6).

Clark (1995) describes the term disavowal, as a coping mechanism, which can also be used to better understand adult shunning. Clark defines disavowal as “an internal process whereby one refuses to acknowledge the existence of one's feelings, needs, or desires... When disavowed, an affect, memory or internal process is removed from accessibility so that one believes one simply does not have it” (cited in Lewin, 2000: 127). One challenge for organizational researchers would be to examine the extent to which individuals in organizations are disavowing their shunning experiences. Here, we would likely encounter the same difficulty as shame researchers who have trouble finding direct evidence of negative self-appraisals that are presumed to underlie the shame experience (Tangney, 1995b). Tangney (1995a) also argued that many shame experiences
(potentially including organizational shunning) are too difficult to discuss or admit openly. While this is a significant research challenge, it is not insurmountable as the psychological literature, for example, has established signals (or markers) that will allow a well informed counsellor (or researcher) to probe gently into shame experiences (for measures of shame see Tangney (1995b), but for a more detailed discussion of measures and methods refer to the appendix of Tangney & Fischer (1995)). For example, self-righteous discourse or blaming others for past experiences may be more comfortable than recognizing the roots of pain (Stewart & Joines, 1987), and would allow a researcher an avenue into a potentially painful topic.

**Proposition 4: Employees who experience organizational shunning will employ a coping mechanism to mitigate the psychological trauma of the experience.**

**Shunning as a Form of Violence**

**The Shunned**

Being shunned can be considered a form of violence because while it is maintained an individual refuses to acknowledge the existence of another and treats him/her as an inanimate object (Lewin, 2000). As the powerful quote at the beginning of this paper suggests, being shunned denies the very existence of a person. Unlike avoidance, shunning is a relational process, damaging both those upon whom it is inflicted and those who inflict it (Lewin, 2000). It has been argued that shunning, therefore, belongs in the same general relational category of psychological violence that includes mocking, teasing, bullying and excluding. Due to the potential psychological consequences, we propose that employees who are shunned will describe their experiences as a form of violence inflicted upon them.

**Proposition 5: Organizational shunning will be perceived by the shunned as a form of violence.**

The consequences of shunning derive from interference with the human desire for belonging, as it has been well established that humans have an underlying longing for attachment and connection to others (see Bowlby, 1973; Erskine, 1994). If a person feels as though social groups are oblivious to his/her presence it has been argued that their basic needs are not being met (Sommer et al., 2001). The consequences of such damaging behaviour include a decreased sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), mental and physical illness (Williams & Sommer, 1997), low self-esteem (Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988), a reduced sense of control over interactions with others (Bruneau, 1973), and questioning the very essence of whether existence is meaningful or important (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1992). These consequences affect the very core of what it means to be human and we propose that organizational shunning will lead to decreased mental health outcomes.

**Proposition 6: Employees who are shunned will experience decreased mental health.**

The limited research evidence suggests that being shunned is a powerfully negative experience. In fact, to avoid exclusion from others, people conform, obey, comply or inhibit their self-perceived socially undesirable behaviour, work harder, and try to present themselves in a favourable manner (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Of course, these findings have important implications for organizational life. The most obvious is the creation of “in-groups” and “outsiders”. While gender differences will be discussed in response to social ostracism (see Williams & Sommer, 1997), there appears to be widespread agreement that individuals will change their behaviour as a result of shunning. These behavioural changes may also include increased aggression and decreased mental performance (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002).
Proposition 7: Employees who experience organizational shunning will alter their work behaviour.

Much research is needed to understand the reasons that people are shunned at work, how people are affected by the shunning experience, and the potential behavioural or coping strategies adopted in order to be accepted back into the socially desirable group. Not only is this an important topic to understand at an individual level (due to the above noted consequences), but also because the consequences could logically lead to decreased job satisfaction, commitment, and productivity, and increased absence and extended sick leave.

Proposition 8: Organizational shunning will lead to decreased job satisfaction, commitment and productivity, and increased absence and sick leave.

This begs perhaps the most interesting research question, "Why do people who are shunned by members of their organization stay?" Clearly this question calls for a detailed research agenda. However, to begin to address this question we draw upon the human and career development, perceived mobility and learned helplessness literatures.

The human development literature is largely based upon Erikson's (1963) theory of eight stages of human life. Slater (2003) examined psychosocial conflicts that can lead to generativity or stagnation, that can better help us to understand life development, including inclusivity vs. exclusivity, pride vs. embarrassment, responsibility vs. ambivalence, career productivity vs. inadequacy, being needed vs. alienation. Here we can see strong potential theoretical ties between all of these psychosocial conflicts and career stagnation due to shunning. Specifically, feeling excluded, embarrassed, ambivalent, inadequate, and alienated may all be fundamental to the shunning experience. Thus, employees being shunned may feel "stuck" in their lives due to the psychosocial conflicts created by shunning and therefore may have greater self-doubt and fewer psychological resources to devote to changing jobs.

Organizational shunning, by definition, limits a person's career growth within the organization, as they are being ignored. The career development literature refers to unanticipated or unwanted levelling of careers as plateauing (Bryant, 1990), and individuals may perceive the levelling of their careers as a sign that they have reached the pinnacle of what they can attain in the job market. Closely associated with this notion is the concept of perceived mobility. Perceived mobility refers to the employees perception of how easy it would be to find a similar job with the same or greater pay and benefits (Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, & Flesh, 1979). Employees who are being shunned may be less likely to perceive that their skills are marketable due to the psychosocial damage that is being inflicted upon them, and thereby feel forced to stay in the shunning situation.

Individuals who experience high levels of psychological trauma, consistent with the shunning experience, are also likely to experience learned helplessness. Learned helplessness refers to the process whereby an individual comes to expect that negative events will occur and nothing can be done to avoid them (Overmier & Seligman, 1967). Here we can draw links to "battered wife syndrome", where long term violence (whether psychological or physical) has been shown to increase depression, anxiety, social withdrawal and lower self-esteem (Street, King, King, & Riggs, 2003). Thus, the duration of the shunning experience is hypothesized to play a significant role in whether employees have depleted their psychological reserves to such an extent that changing jobs would be unmanageable.

Finally, the culture and context may play a large role in whether an employee feels able and willing to relocate after experiencing shunning (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Kearney (2001) found that cultural contexts are critical in examining whether violence has become normalized. Extending her work into the organizational realm, it is conceivable that an organizational culture that uses
shunning as a regular means of dealing with individuals who no longer fit "the mould" of the organization, will have created an atmosphere in which such behaviour has become an organizational norm. Employees in these environments may choose to stay in the organization, for the reasons discussed above, but also because they may believe that their fortunes will change, when the persons or strategy responsible for their shunning is no longer in vogue.

**Proposition 9: The longer the duration of the organizational shunning experience, the less likely employees will be able to leave the organization on their own terms.**

**The Shunners**

The act of shunning has been shown to be a draining task, irrespective of whether the target is liked or disliked (Ciarocco, Sommer & Baumeister, 2001). Sommer et al. (2001) argue that shunners justify their objectionable behaviours thereby denying their long term impact. In so doing, it is believed that people who shun others are able to avoid (or more likely disavow) feelings of guilt or shame. In a seminal article that examined disowning in boys, Spilka & Lewis (1959) found that interpersonal judgements that included a disowning projection (toward another boy) were significantly associated with a lack of empathy. In an experimental study using adults, Sommer et al. (2001) found that low self-esteem was a strong predictor of the tendency to use shunning against someone in everyday life. Regardless of age, it appears to take a great deal of energy to shun an individual for a prolonged period of time. In addition to this effort expenditure, it takes even more psychological resources to disavow the accompanying feelings of guilt and shame, thus potentially reducing the psychological resources available to work optimally. Thus, where an entire work unit (or more) of an organization is shunning one of its members, this action may well be diminishing the ability of the unit to be engaged productively toward organizational goals. "If a mere three minutes of avoiding conversation can produce significant impairments on subsequent performance, one can scarcely imagine the toll that hours or weeks of ostracism might take" (Ciarocco, Sommer & Baumeister, 2001: 1163).

**Proposition 10: Employees who shun others in the workplace will have reduced psychological resources to devote to other cognitive functions.**

In the next section we develop a taxonomy of organizational shunning that could be used to focus research attention on specific variables key to the organizational shunning experience.

**A Taxonomy of Organizational Shunning**

Organizational shunning can be organized into a taxonomy by simultaneously examining the causal clarity of the shunning experience and differentiating between physical and social ostracism. Williams & Sommer (1997) defined causal clarity as the extent to which targets understand why they are being ignored. The authors argue that the lack of causal clarity is a dilemma faced by many shunned individuals because the very nature of silence may preclude a target from receiving any explanation for why s/he is being ignored. The lack of causal clarity is thought to magnify the shunning experience as the individual is left without any understanding of why they are being ignored. In contrast, targets who have a clear understanding of why they are being ignored are more likely to feel self-righteous (Stewart & Joines, 1987) or employ another technique to mitigate the psychological trauma.

**Proposition 11: Employees who are shunned but lack causal clarity will experience more distress than shunned individuals with causal clarity.**
Williams & Sommer (1997) also distinguish between physical and social ostracism. Physical ostracism involves physical separation, banishment, exile, solitary confinement, "time-outs" etc. In contrast, social ostracism involves instances in which people are ignoring or being ignored in the presence of others. The authors created a third category, punitive; to include acts of ignoring that are perceived or intended to be deliberate and aversive. We argue that not only might physical and social ostracism have conceptual overlap, but we have defined shunning as being intentional and punitive and therefore have eliminated a separate punitive ostracism category from our taxonomy presented in Table 1.

### Table 1
A Taxonomy of Organizational Shunning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ostracism Type</th>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Social</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Causal Clarity</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causally Clear</td>
<td>Employee exiled for known reasons</td>
<td>Employee shunned for known reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causally Unclear</td>
<td>Employee exiled for unknown reasons</td>
<td>Employee shunned for unknown reasons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are primarily focused on the fourth quadrant of the taxonomy as we assert that most shunned persons are not aware (at least not fully) of the reasons they are being ignored (i.e., lack causal clarity), and we propose that most organizational shunning does not include physical exile.

**Gender Differences in Organizational Shunning**

It would be remiss to discuss shunning without also explicitly touching upon gender differences. In infants and very young children, very few gender differences are believed to exist with respect to shunning as a defence mechanism against the loss of a caregiver (Bowlby, 1973; Green & Goldwyn, 2002). As children encounter their first peer interactions (usually upon entry to pre-school or elementary school) girls are less likely than boys to bully their peers, but are more likely to exhibit passive-aggressive shunning behaviour by ignoring other girls (Neufeld, 2002).

While it is important to understand the social development of shunning behaviour in the sexes (as they may help unravel adult shunning patterns), we are primarily concerned with research findings related to workplace gender differences. In an experiment, Williams & Sommer (1997) found that women tried to socially compensate for being shunned by working harder, while men tended to socially loaf. Female participants who were ignored for unknown or unclear reasons (i.e., lacked causal clarity) worked harder on collective tasks compared to those who worked on individual tasks. Males have been found to express their shunning experiences in a self-righteous manner, often asserting that the shunning experience was not forced upon them, but self chosen (Ciarocco, Sommer & Baumeister, 2001). In discussing their findings, Williams & Sommer (1997) assert that while both sexes labelled their experiences as ostracism and suffered comparable deprivations in belongingness, men and women employ different coping mechanisms to deal with the psychological trauma. In a similar vein, Leary (1995) has argued for the presence of gender differences in impression management, as societal norms expect women to be more self-revealing and expressive while men risk the formation of a negative social impression and therefore tend not to disclose much about their feelings. Of course gender differences in emotional intelligence have been well documented in the literature, with females being deemed generally more in-tune with their own feelings and underlying issues (see George, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Lewis, 2000; Mumby & Putman, 1992).
Shunning provides significant psychological challenges for both males and females, yet the research suggests that the sexes employ different coping mechanisms to deal with the trauma.

**Proposition 12:** Men and women will cope (and explain) their shunning experiences in a significantly different manner, with women being more open to self-questioning and men being more likely to be self-righteous.

Given the high potential costs of shunning to the individual and organization, we should now focus our attention on the sparse literature regarding remedies for organizational shunning.

**Remedies for Organizational Shunning**

Consistent with the positive psychology (see Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and organizational behaviour (see Luthans, 2002) approaches towards optimal functioning and happiness, it is important to propose potential remedies for organizational shunning. Some potentially useful theories can be drawn from the psychoanalytic work regarding forgiveness and atonement. Jensen (1992) has explored the nature of forgiveness and has written about the costs (to the forgiver) of forgiving something as serious as being shunned. “To forgive… we need to feel the pain of the original disavowal wound and we need to take responsibility for attending to it” (Lewin, 2000: 130-131). Psychoanalysts would likely argue that the original disavowal and associated pain are representations of trauma experienced earlier in life, but would likely agree that gaining self-awareness surrounding the source of the original disavowal feelings is key to psychological recovery.

**Proposition 13:** Employees who have worked through an emotional process of developing insights associated with the shunning experience are significantly more likely to forgive and move on with their lives in a productive fashion than employees who refuse to acknowledge or work through the pain of the shunning experience.

While the above discussion can be considered reactive in nature, as it deals with the inevitable employees who have been shunned or are currently being shunned, more proactive approaches could be taken to minimize organizational shunning in the first place. This line of argument is supported by the work of Kearney (2001) who emphasized the importance of cultural context in setting the conditions for violence. In an organizational context, Liefooghe & Davey (2001) discuss how the organization acts as a facilitating backdrop to violence due to its culture. We believe that the organizational culture has a major role to play in the extent to which shunning occurs. Interventions aimed at elevating awareness of this important phenomena, and related efficacy studies would be a welcome addition to the literature.

**Proposition 14:** Organizations that openly discuss the merits of treating all employees with dignity at all times are less likely to report shunning experiences.

**Setting the Course for Organizational Shunning Research**

This paper has introduced a new term into the management lexicon: organizational shunning. While clear links have been drawn to similar concepts with long histories of research, no empirical attention has been paid to shunning in organizational settings. Organizational shunning is a phenomenon that needs to be better understood due to the high potential costs to individuals and organizations. The fourteen propositions developed in this paper need to be tested. To date, most of the "shunning literature" (the amalgamation of literatures presented here) has examined social ostracism in the laboratory. We concur with the views of Williams & Sommer (1997: 704), specifically, that “understanding the effects of long term social ostracism [shunning] will probably require non-experimental methodologies”.

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This paper has outlined fourteen propositions that, when tested, would yield a more comprehensive understanding of shunning. As shown in Table 2, the propositions can be divided into four major areas of inquiry: understanding the shunning experience, the consequences of shunning (for the shunned, the shunners, and the organization), the potential moderating influences on shunning and possible remedies.

Clearly many management areas of study would benefit from a greater understanding of organizational shunning. As Ciarocco, Sommer & Baumeister (2001) suggest, the study of work-family, for example, might benefit from exploring the depletion of inner resources as one mechanism by which family (or work) conflict could impair work (or family) performance. Other obvious links include a better understanding of workplace emotions that could lead to better adjusted, more productive employees. In addition, understanding how transformational leaders or managers prevent or deal with shunning in the workplace would also be a valuable addition to the management domain. Of course, these are just a sample of the plethora of potential connections associated with a more comprehensive understanding of organizational shunning.

Qualitative research employing interviews and content analysis could yield potentially rich data surrounding the psychological complexities that surround the shunning experience. Shunning has been largely swept under the carpet in both organizations and the organizational literature, and efforts to shed light on this important phenomenon should keep employee well-being and organizational performance in the forefront of research agendas. Positive change is unlikely to occur until this taboo subject is exposed and openly discussed.

References


James, W., *Principles of psychology*, New York: Dover, 1890.


### Table 2
Summary of Propositions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Inquiry</th>
<th>Focus of examination</th>
<th>Proposition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the Shunning Experience</td>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>1. Employees who have been shunned will experience emotions, including shame, guilt, sadness and anger.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stages</td>
<td>2. Employees who experience organizational shunning will go through stages of separation anxiety, grief and mourning, and defence to cope with the psychological trauma of the experience.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Culture-context</td>
<td>3. The culture of the organization will play an important role in the number and severity of shunning incidents.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>4. Employees who experience organizational shunning will employ a coping mechanism to mitigate the psychological trauma of the experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of experience</td>
<td>5. Organizational shunning will be perceived by the shunned as a form of violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences of Shunning Shunning</td>
<td>Mental and physical health</td>
<td>6. Employees who are shunned will experience decreased mental health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Altering behaviour</td>
<td>7. Employees who experience organizational shunning will alter their work behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Job satisfaction, commitment, productivity, absence, and sick leave</td>
<td>8. Organizational shunning will lead to decreased job satisfaction, commitment and productivity, and increased absence and sick leave.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Duration-mobility relationship</td>
<td>9. The longer the duration of the organizational shunning experience, the less likely employees will be able to leave the organization on their own terms.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Shunners</td>
<td>10. Employees who shun others in the workplace will have reduced psychological resources to devote to other cognitive functions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderating Influences</td>
<td>Causal clarity</td>
<td>11. Employees who are shunned but lack causal clarity will experience more distress than shunned individuals with causal clarity.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender differences</td>
<td>12. Men and women will cope (and explain) their shunning experiences in a significantly different manner, with women being more open to self-questioning and men being more likely to be self-righteous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remedies</td>
<td>Emotional maturity</td>
<td>13. Employees who have worked through an emotional process of developing insights associated with the shunning experience are significantly more likely to forgive and move on with their lives in a productive fashion than employees who refuse to acknowledge or work through the pain of the shunning experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational Interventions and Values</td>
<td>14. Organizations that openly discuss the merits of treating all employees with dignity at all times are less likely to report shunning experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>