

How Witnessed Workplace Ostracism Relates to Employee Outcomes: The Role of Organizational Dehumanization

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Abstract

Drawing on social information processing theory and signaling theory, this research investigates whether witnessing another employee being ostracized is associated with negative employee outcomes through organizational dehumanization and explores one boundary condition of these relationships (i.e., organizational intolerance of mistreatment). Study 1, a three-wave field study ($N = 654$), revealed that witnessed workplace ostracism (Time 1) positively relates to organizational dehumanization (Time 2) which, in turn, relates to employees' well-being (i.e., increased physical symptoms; Time 3), attitudes (i.e., decreased affective commitment; Time 3) and behavioral intentions toward the organization (i.e., increased turnover intentions; Time 3). Study 2, employing a 2x2 between-subjects design ($N = 244$), further demonstrated that witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational intolerance of mistreatment—which were manipulated with vignettes—respectively had a positive and a negative impact on organizational dehumanization, though their interactive effect on organizational dehumanization was not significant. Finally, a cross-sectional study (Study 3; $N = 282$) indicated that the positive relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational dehumanization was stronger when organizational intolerance of mistreatment was high. This interactive effect extended to observers' increased physical symptoms, decreased affective commitment, and increased turnover intentions. Theoretical contributions, directions for future research and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: witnessed workplace ostracism, organizational dehumanization, organizational intolerance of mistreatment, employee well-being, employee attitudes and behaviors

How Witnessed Workplace Ostracism Relates to Employee Outcomes: The Role of Organizational Dehumanization

Workplace ostracism occurs when “an individual or group omits to take actions that engage another organizational member when it is socially appropriate to do so” (Robinson et al., 2013, p. 206). Workplace ostracism, positioned on the subtler end of the mistreatment spectrum, is characterized by a withdrawal from social interactions with the victim, often with an ambiguous intent to cause harm (Ferris et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2013). Prior research has predominantly examined workplace ostracism from the victims' perspective, focusing on employees' perceptions of being ignored or excluded by others at work—i.e., *experienced* workplace ostracism (Ferris et al., 2008). Despite its subtle nature, workplace ostracism can be “witnessed by others who are neither victims nor perpetrators” (Zhou et al., 2021, p. 151). Thus, workplace ostracism may not only be a concern for ostracized victims but could also have ripple effects for other organizational members who witness it—hereafter referred to as observers (e.g., Wang & Lai, 2023). A growing body of empirical inquiry has begun to examine employees' “perceptions of witnessing other employees' episodic or regular exclusionary behaviors against target employees” (Sharma & Dhar, 2022, p. 2)—i.e., *witnessed* workplace ostracism (e.g., Azeem et al., 2024; Haq et al., 2024; Wang & Lai, 2023). Witnessing other employees being ostracized can have negative consequences for observers and their organizations, including feelings of guilt (Azeem et al., 2024), higher

turnover intentions, and reduced performance (Wang & Lai., 2023). However, our understanding of the effects induced by witnessed workplace ostracism, as well as how and when these effects occur, remains limited and warrants further empirical investigation (ul Haq et al., 2024). This represents a necessary advancement in the theoretical development of workplace ostracism (Sharma & Dhar, 2022; ul Haq et al., 2024).

This research aims to address these questions through the lens of social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025; Spence, 1973). While social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) suggests that individuals' perceptions of their environment are shaped by observed social interactions—for instance, incidents of workplace ostracism—, signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025; Spence, 1973) posits that such incidents can signal the organization's negative stance toward employees. Both theories further highlight that individuals may interpret the same social cues or signals differently, leading to varied perceptions of their environment or the signaler—in this case, the organization.

In line with these theoretical frameworks, scholars have recently suggested that employees who witness others being ostracized may feel objectified by their organization, denied personal subjectivity, and reduced to mere tools for organizational success (Demoulin et al., 2023; Stinglhamber & Caesens, 2024; Stinglhamber & Demoulin, 2023). These perceptions—referred to as organizational dehumanization (Bell & Khoury, 2011)—in turn, may impair employees' well-being, job and organizational attitudes, as well as their work behaviors (Demoulin et al., 2023; Stinglhamber & Caesens, 2024; Stinglhamber & Demoulin, 2023). Organizational dehumanization may, therefore, be an important explanatory mechanism through which witnessed workplace ostracism affects observers' employee outcomes. However, organizational dehumanization perceptions and their subsequent harmful effects are rather unlikely to develop uniformly among all employees who witness workplace ostracism. Observers' inferences about the organization might depend on whether they perceive the hostile behaviors they witnessed as tolerated or condemned by the organization—that is, organizational intolerance of mistreatment (Yang et al., 2014). An organization's ability to effectively address and remediate mistreatment incidents is indeed believed to mitigate observers' negative organizational perceptions (Wilkerson & Meyer, 2019), thereby reducing the likelihood of subsequent adverse employee outcomes.

The present research thus examines the influence of witnessed workplace ostracism on observers' perceptions of organizational dehumanization—beyond their personal experiences of workplace ostracism. It further examines whether these perceptions explain the relationships between witnessed workplace ostracism and observers' well-being (i.e., physical symptoms), attitudes toward the organization (i.e., affective commitment), and behavioral intentions (i.e., turnover intentions). To date, intrusive negative work-related thoughts—i.e., ruminations—are the only proposed mechanism explaining how witnessed workplace ostracism leads to negative employee outcomes (Wang & Lai, 2023). Thus, we explore the mediating role of organizational dehumanization in these relationships beyond ruminations. In addition, this research considers the potential mitigating role played by organizational intolerance of mistreatment in the indirect effects of witnessed workplace ostracism on outcomes through organizational dehumanization (Figure 1).

[Figure 1]

In this respect, the present research makes several theoretical contributions. First, by exploring the impact of witnessed workplace ostracism on observers' organizational dehumanization perceptions, it contributes to addressing the asymmetrical emphasis on victims in the literature on workplace ostracism (e.g., Mao et al., 2018; Sharma & Dhar, 2022; Zhou et al., 2021) and on organizational dehumanization (Stinglhamber & Caesens, 2024; Stinglhamber & Demoulin, 2023). Expanding the focus from victims to observers helps clarify an emerging yet not fully understood facet of the workplace ostracism phenomenon (Azeem et al., 2024; Haq et al., 2024; Wang & Lai, 2023). This approach also represents an important step toward fully understanding how interpersonal factors influence employees' perceptions of organizational dehumanization (Stinglhamber & Caesens, 2024).

Second, this research advances the field by introducing organizational dehumanization as an additional mechanism, beyond the established mechanism of ruminations (Wang & Lai, 2023), to explain how witnessed workplace ostracism leads to negative employee outcomes. Shifting the focus toward the organization's role is crucial for understanding why even subtle forms of interpersonal mistreatment, such as workplace ostracism, impact not only victims but also observers (e.g., Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Salin & Notelaers, 2020). By emphasizing that workplace ostracism involves not only the ostracizer, the victim, and observers but also the organization, this approach further expands recent conceptualizations of workplace ostracism as a multi-party phenomenon (e.g., Harvey et al., 2019; Sharma & Dhar, 2022).

Third, by examining organizational intolerance of mistreatment as a factor that might mitigate the harmful effects of witnessed workplace ostracism on observers, this research could help identify organizational—rather than individual (ul Haq et al., 2024)—strategies to cope with workplace ostracism. This might complement existing research by showing that, while witnessing interpersonal mistreatment directed at others in the workplace can indeed harm the observer's relationship with the organization and lead to negative employee outcomes (e.g., Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019; Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Salin & Notelaers, 2020), the extent of these effects may vary based on the organization's perceived stance toward mistreatment (e.g., Wilkerson & Meyer, 2019).

Witnessed Workplace Ostracism

Witnessed workplace ostracism refers to an employee's perception of witnessing another employee being ignored or excluded when the social context demands their inclusion (Sharma & Dhar, 2022). These perceptions include—but are not limited to—noticing that a coworker is left out of an important meeting or seeing someone at work regularly and involuntarily eating lunch alone (Azeem et al., 2024; Harvey et al., 2019; Rudert & Greifeneder, 2019). Scholars have argued that individuals are so sensitive to ostracism that merely witnessing it could result in personal distress similar to being the target of ostracism (Rudert & Greifeneder, 2019; Wesselmann et al., 2009). Supporting this, studies in social psychology indicate that witnessing ostracism elicits empathy-related neural responses (Masten et al., 2011) and activates brain areas involved in the feeling of physical pain (e.g., somatosensory cortex; Beeney et al., 2011). Similarly, witnessing ostracism was found to thwart observers' fundamental psychological needs (Wesselmann et al., 2009), even though this effect was slightly lower in comparison to personally experienced ostracism (Giesen & Echterhoff, 2018).

Based on this, organizational scholars have proposed that employees who witness workplace ostracism can empathize with victims (Harvey et al., 2019; ul Haq et al., 2024) and are unlikely to be left unharmed (Mao et al., 2018; Sharma & Dhar, 2022; Zhou et al., 2021). To our knowledge, only two studies (i.e., Azeem et al., 2023; Wang & Lai, 2023) have examined the consequences of witnessed workplace ostracism for observers themselves. Specifically, when observers fail to assist another employee who has been ostracized by a supervisor, they experience heightened feelings of guilt (Azeem et al., 2024). Additionally, witnessed workplace ostracism was found to be associated with increased ruminations, which subsequently were related to increased turnover intentions and decreased performance (Wang & Lai, 2023). These associations were stronger among observers with a highly proactive personality (Wang & Lai, 2023).

Ruminations undoubtedly play a significant role in explaining the negative employee outcomes associated with witnessing workplace mistreatment (e.g., Nielsen et al., 2024), particularly incidents of workplace ostracism (e.g., Wang & Lai, 2023). However, growing evidence indicates that employees who witness workplace mistreatment perceive these incidents as indicative of the organization's negative orientation toward its employees (e.g., Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Salin & Notelaers, 2020; Wilkerson & Meyer, 2020). Aligned with this perspective and consistent with social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025; Spence, 1973), we propose that witnessing coworkers being ostracized may lead observers to perceive organizational dehumanization, ultimately harming their well-being, work attitudes, and behaviors.

Witnessed Workplace Ostracism and Organizational Dehumanization

Emanating from the social psychology literature, the concept of dehumanization refers to any experience involving the denial of an individual's human characteristics (Haslam, 2006). Prior research has largely relied on Haslam's (2006) dual model, which posits that two forms of dehumanization exist. Animalistic dehumanization occurs when individuals are denied the characteristics that differentiate human from animals (i.e., civility, refinement, morality, rationality, maturity). Mechanistic dehumanization occurs when individuals are denied the characteristics that are exclusively typical to humans (i.e., emotionality, interpersonal warmth, cognitive openness, agency, depth).

Described as a phenomenon likely to pervade workplaces, especially in its mechanistic form, dehumanization in organizational settings has sparked scholarly interest (e.g., Baldissarri & Fourie, 2023; Brison et al., 2022; Stinglhamber & Caesens, 2024). Organizational dehumanization is defined as "the experience of an employee who feels objectified by his or her organization, denied personal subjectivity, and made to feel like a tool or instrument for the organization's ends" (Bell & Khoury, 2011, p. 170) and can emerge from a variety of factors (Baldissarri & Fourie, 2023; Brison et al., 2022; Stinglhamber & Caesens, 2024). Among others, prior research highlighted the role played by organizational (e.g., procedural justice; Bell & Khoury, 2016), work-related (e.g., meaning of work; Caesens et al., 2019), environmental (e.g., shared and collective workspaces; Taskin et al., 2019), and interpersonal factors (e.g., abusive supervision; Caesens et al., 2019; Sainz & Baldissarri, 2021) in predicting organizational dehumanization. Of relevance to this research, experiencing workplace ostracism—whether from a supervisor or from coworkers (Brison et

al., 2024)—is also positively associated with organizational dehumanization perceptions among *victims* (Brison & Caesens, 2023).

These findings align with the idea that experiencing workplace ostracism “might signal employees’ decreased worth to the organization” (Brison & Caesens, 2023, p. 122). However, because incidents of workplace ostracism can be witnessed by employees who are neither victims nor perpetrators (e.g., Zhou et al., 2021), victims may not be the only ones perceiving and processing these signals. Employees who witness workplace mistreatment tend to “engage in effortful information processing by thinking, assigning meaning, (re)interpreting the witnessed incident, and considering the cost of their response” (Lyubykh et al., 2024, p. 3). Consistently, social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) has emerged as an insightful theoretical framework to understand how witnessed workplace mistreatment affects observers (e.g., Nielsen et al., 2024; Rosander & Nielsen, 2024). At its core, this theory posits that individuals actively seek information from their social environment—either through direct interactions or by *observing* others’ behavior—and use these cues to shape their perception of the immediate environment (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Insights from signaling theory (Spence, 1973) further suggest that such cues are often perceived by observers as signals originating directly from the organization (e.g., Connelly et al., 2011, 2025). The relationship between employees and the organization is often marked by information asymmetry, as employees do not always have access to the organization’s internal values and intentions (e.g., Connelly et al., 2011, 2025). To reduce this asymmetry, individuals make inferences about the organization’s values and overall approach toward its employees by interpreting visible cues and signals stemming from the organizational environment or its members (e.g., Connelly et al., 2011, 2025).

Given the above, we propose that witnessing incidents of workplace ostracism may serve as a social cue that observers are motivated to process to gain further information about the organization’s true nature. Specifically, witnessing workplace ostracism is particularly likely to signal the organization’s inability to meet its members’ fundamental need to belong (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019; Wang & Lai, 2023) and its disregard for employees’ dignity (Dunford et al., 2015). As a result, employees who witness ostracism from a supervisor or coworkers may conclude that the organization dehumanizes its members, including themselves.

Based on the above rationale, we thus hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: Witnessed workplace ostracism has a positive effect on observers’ organizational dehumanization perceptions.

The Mediating Role of Organizational Dehumanization in the Relationships Between Witnessed Workplace Ostracism and Outcomes

As previously detailed, we propose that witnessing incidents of workplace ostracism may signal to observers that the organization holds a dehumanizing stance toward its employees. Drawing on signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025; Spence, 1973), scholars have suggested that signals sent by organizations, by making organizational (mis)treatment more salient, impact employees’ well-being, shape their attitudes toward the organization, and influence their decision on long-term engagement with the organization (e.g., Dineen & Allen, 2016; Jones et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2020). In line with this, we further propose that

organizational dehumanization should, in turn, relate to poorer well-being, attitudes toward the organization, and work behaviors among observers.

As organizational dehumanization is “a negative experience that diminishes the individual” (Bell & Khoury, 2011, p. 184), this experience likely contributes to mental and physical health issues among employees and fosters disengagement—both emotional and physical—from the organization (Bell & Khoury, 2011; Christoff, 2014). Organizational dehumanization has indeed been found to be associated with declines in mental well-being (e.g., increased job stress and emotional exhaustion; Abou Zeid et al., 2024; Cheung, 2025) and physical well-being (e.g., headaches, loss of appetite, heartburn; Brison et al., 2024; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2019), negative employees’ job and organizational attitudes (e.g., decreased job satisfaction and affective commitment; Sainz & Baldissarri, 2021; Stinglhamber et al., 2022) and increased withdrawal behaviors (e.g., higher turnover intentions or absenteeism; Ahmed & Khan, 2016; Lagios et al., 2022).

Importantly, organizational dehumanization is considered a key factor in explaining the effects of interpersonal mistreatment on employees’ well-being, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Brison et al., 2024; Caesens et al., 2019; Demoulin et al., 2023; Sainz & Baldissarri, 2021). Thus, it may serve as a mechanism through which witnessed workplace ostracism leads to negative outcomes for observers. Consistent with the idea that “well-being can refer to the actual physical health of workers, as defined by physical symptomatology” (Danna & Griffin, 1999, p. 361), the impact of witnessed workplace mistreatment on observers’ well-being is typically assessed as the result of stress-related responses that translate into physical symptoms (e.g., Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019; Lyubykh et al., 2024; Nielsen et al., 2024). Based on this, physical symptoms were retained as an indicator of well-being in this research. Similarly, affective organizational commitment was retained as an indicator of employees’ attitudes toward their organization because it is the essence of organizational commitment and a critical attitudinal outcome in organizational research (Mercurio, 2015). Finally, turnover intentions were included as behavioral outcome as they embody employees’ withdrawal responses to adverse work experiences (e.g., witnessed workplace ostracism; organizational dehumanization) and are key to understanding organizational phenomena (e.g., Berry et al., 2012). Building on the above and considering our first hypothesis, we formulated the following:

Hypothesis 2: Observers’ organizational dehumanization perceptions mediate the relationships between witnessed workplace ostracism and (2a) increased physical symptoms, (2b) decreased affective commitment, and (2c) increased turnover intentions.

The Moderating Role of Organizational Intolerance of Mistreatment

Social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025; Spence, 1973) propose that individuals may interpret the same social cues or signals in different ways, resulting in diverse conclusions about their environment or the source of the signal—in this case, the organization. Observers’ negative inferences about the organization and their subsequent harmful effects are believed to be less likely when clear policies and practices are in place to condemn and effectively address workplace mistreatment, including its subtle forms (Wilkerson & Meyer, 2019). This refers to the construct of organizational intolerance of mistreatment, defined as “a constellation of organizational climate elements that influence organizational members’ perceptions regarding

the extent to which aggressive behavior is (in)tolerated—implicitly or explicitly, in their organization” (Yang et al., 2014, p. 318).

The development of organizational dehumanization perceptions in employees who witness workplace ostracism might therefore be contingent upon their perceptions of organizational intolerance of mistreatment, ultimately affecting their well-being, work-related attitudes, and behaviors to varying degrees. Organizational actions aimed at addressing workplace ostracism incidents and preventing their recurrence can signal that the organization prioritizes reducing mistreatment exposure as much as employee performance and overall organizational effectiveness (Yang et al., 2014). Such inferences about the organization will likely interact with those drawn from witnessing ostracism, possibly leading to less negative perceptions of the organization (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2013). Thus, witnessing another employee being ostracized in an organization that is perceived to take effective measures to remedy the incident and prevent its recurrence may result in lower levels of organizational dehumanization and subsequent negative employee outcomes compared to when such measures are not taken.

Corroborating this, in organizations characterized by a high climate for inclusion, the negative relationship between witnessed interpersonal conflict and job satisfaction found in environments characterized by a low climate for inclusion becomes non-significant (Nishii, 2013). Similarly, in organizations that firmly—rather than loosely—condemn sexual harassment, employees experience lower levels of hostile emotions and are less likely to resort to active strategies to address incidents of sexual harassment not directed at them personally (Demoulin & Stinglhamber, 2024). Based on the above reasoning, we thus hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 3: Organizational intolerance of mistreatment moderates the positive relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational dehumanization, so that this relationship is weaker when organizational intolerance of mistreatment is high.

Hypothesis 4: The indirect effects of witnessed workplace ostracism on (4a) increased physical symptoms, (4b) decreased affective commitment, and (4c) increased turnover intentions through organizational dehumanization, will be weaker when organizational intolerance of mistreatment is high.

Overview of the Studies

The hypotheses were tested across three studies approved by the ethics committee of the first author’s institution. Study 1, a three-wave field study was conducted to examine whether witnessed workplace ostracism positively relates to organizational dehumanization (H1), which in turn relates to observers’ well-being (i.e., increased physical symptoms), attitudes (i.e., decreased affective commitment), and behavioral intentions (i.e., increased turnover intentions; H2a-c).¹ Study 2, an experimental vignette study based on a 2x2 between-subjects design, in which witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational intolerance of mistreatment were manipulated, goes one step further by testing causality in the relationship

¹ In line with scholars’ recommendations to use cross-sectional designs as a basis for further exploration of a research question (Spector, 2019), a preliminary cross-sectional field study was conducted to provide initial evidence supporting these hypotheses. The method and findings from this preliminary study are available in the online supplements.

between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational dehumanization, as well as the moderating role of organizational intolerance of mistreatment in this relationship (H3). Finally, a last cross-sectional field study (Study 3) was conducted to test the overall theoretical model, including employee outcomes (H4a-c), while controlling for an alternative pathway known to explain the impact of witnessed workplace ostracism on employee outcomes (i.e., ruminations; Wang & Lai, 2023). In all studies (except Study 2, given its experimental nature), the hypotheses were tested while considering observers' personal experiences of workplace ostracism.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure

A three-wave field study, embedded in a larger research project, was conducted. Similar to prior time-lagged studies on witnessed workplace ostracism (Azeem et al., 2024; Wang & Lai, 2023), participants completed online questionnaires with a 4-week interval between measurement times. This aligns with the idea that employees' unmet expectations, such as when they witness workplace mistreatment (Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Salin & Notelaers, 2020), are likely to trigger changes in their perceptions of the organization and subsequently affect employee outcomes within less than three months (Vandenberghe et al., 2011). Supporting this, the effects of workplace mistreatment on observers can begin to emerge just a few hours after witnessing the incident (Totterdell et al., 2012) and may persist for at least 2 to 6 weeks (Arena et al., 2024). Prospective participants were recruited on Prolific Academic and were paid £1.20 at Time 1, £1.40 at Time 2, and £1.60 at Time 3. To participate, they had to have an approval rate on the platform of at least 90%, be native English speakers, not be students or self-employed, and work part-time or full-time. Participants were informed that the study was confidential and were asked for their informed consent before starting the study. Responses at Time 1 were matched with their responses at Time 2 and at Time 3 using anonymous IDs obtained from Prolific Academic. The survey at Time 1 included witnessed and experienced workplace ostracism, while organizational dehumanization was measured at Time 2, and the outcomes at Time 3. At Time 1, 821 participants completed the survey. Of these participants, 759 fully completed the survey at Time 2, and 738 at Time 3. Participants who changed organizations ($N = 15$ between Time 1 and Time 2; $N = 9$ between Time 2 and Time 3), or jobs between measurement times ($N = 7$ between Time 1 and Time 2; $N = 10$ between Time 2 and Time 3), or who failed one or more attentional check questions at one or more time points (e.g., "If you are reading this, tick *strongly agree*"; $N = 11$ at Time 1; $N = 24$ at Time 2; $N = 8$ at Time 3) were excluded². The final sample size consisted of 654 employees ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.22$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.13$), including 55.5% of women, 44.3% of men, and 0.2% of participants who did not disclose their gender. Many of these participants held a bachelor's degree (40.1%) and had been employed full-time (85.1%) in health and social care (15.1%), public administration (10.9%), and information

² Participants who changed organizations between Time 1 and Time 2 and/or between Time 2 and Time 3 ($N = 24$)—that is, individuals who actually turned over after our measure of witnessed workplace ostracism—reported slightly higher levels of witnessed workplace ostracism at Time 1 ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.28$) compared to our final sample ($N = 654$)—that is, participants who remained with the same organization throughout the study ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.22$). However, this difference was not significant ($t(676) = 1.003$, $p = .316$).

technology (9.5%) for an average of 7.78 years ($SD = 7.30$). Most often, they worked in private organizations (58.9%) employing less than 250 people (40.9%).

Measures

Unless otherwise specified, all items were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Full measurement scales are provided in online supplements.

Witnessed workplace ostracism ($\alpha = .97$) was assessed with seven items adapted from the 10-item experienced workplace ostracism scale developed by Ferris et al. (2008), using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Always*). This selection of seven items has been used in prior studies (e.g., Peng & Zeng, 2017). Similar to several scholars (Azeem et al., 2024; Wang & Lai, 2023), participants were asked to report how often they were made aware of or witnessed the ostracizing events described in each item—rather than how often they personally experienced them, as in the original scale. For instance, the original item “Others avoided you at work” was reframed as “I have been made aware of or witnessed my coworkers avoiding another employee”.

Organizational Dehumanization ($\alpha = .95$) was assessed with the 5-item short scale validated by Lagios et al. (2024) (e.g., “My organization considers me as a number”).

Physical Symptoms ($\alpha = .81$) were assessed by asking participants how often they experienced four symptoms from Spector and Jex (1998)’s Physical Symptoms Inventory using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Always*) (i.e., trouble sleeping, headache, loss of appetite, and fatigue). This subset of four symptoms has already been used by other scholars (e.g., Brison et al., 2024).

Affective Commitment ($\alpha = .93$) was assessed using three items from Meyer et al. (1993)’s 6-item scale—namely, the three items with the highest loadings (e.g., “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me”).

Turnover Intentions ($\alpha = .94$) were assessed with the three items from Jaros (1997) (e.g., “I often think about quitting this organization”).

Control Variables. Based on Becker’s (2005) recommendations, only sociodemographic variables that were significantly associated with the dependent variables of the model were included as control variables (Table 1). Specifically, age, education level, and organization size were connected to organizational dehumanization. Age, education level, organization size, and work schedule (part-time vs. full-time) were linked to physical symptoms. Additionally, age, organization size, and tenure were connected to affective commitment, while age, tenure, and employment contract type (fixed-term vs. permanent) were linked to turnover intentions. All hypotheses were tested with and without these sociodemographic variables as control variables, and the findings were contrasted (Becker, 2005). As the difference between findings was negligible (i.e., all standardized coefficients differed by less than 0.1; Becker et al., 2016), only the results without these control variables were reported to ensure parsimony. Additionally, because experienced workplace ostracism positively affects organizational dehumanization (Brison & Caesens, 2023), it was included as

a theoretically relevant control variable. Like other scholars (e.g., Peng & Zeng, 2017), experienced workplace ostracism was assessed with seven items from Ferris et al. (2008) (e.g., “Others ignored you at work”; $\alpha = .96$).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are displayed in Table 1.

[Table 1]

Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted with *Mplus* 8.5 (robust maximum likelihood estimator—MLR) to examine the distinctiveness of the six constructs included in the model (i.e., experienced workplace ostracism, witnessed workplace ostracism, organizational dehumanization, physical symptoms, affective commitment, turnover intentions; see Table S4 in online supplements). Results revealed that the six-factor model satisfactorily fitted the data and was superior to more constrained models ($\chi^2(362) = 760.73$; RMSEA = .04; SRMR = .04; CFI = .97; TLI = .97).

Structural Model

Using structural equation modeling (SEM; *Mplus* 8.5; MLR), we tested a model in which witnessed workplace ostracism relates to organizational dehumanization which, in turn, is linked to outcomes (i.e., physical symptoms, affective commitment, turnover intentions)—while controlling for experienced workplace ostracism. Although this model fitted the data well ($\chi^2(368) = 796.597$; RMSEA = .04; SRMR = .07; CFI = .97; TLI = .96), alternative models adding one-by-one direct paths between variables were tested. An alternative model including direct paths between both forms of workplace ostracism and physical symptoms (for witnessed workplace ostracism $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 18.31$, SBc = 26.07, $p < .001$; for experienced workplace ostracism $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 5.15$, SBc = 6.59, $p = .010$), as well as between witnessed workplace ostracism and turnover intentions ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 9.80$, SBc = 11.58, $p = .001$) was superior, based on the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square difference test (Satorra & Bentler, 2001; see Table S5 in online supplements). This model, displayed in Figure 2, was retained as the final model ($\chi^2(365) = 763.341$; RMSEA = .04; SRMR = .04; CFI = .97; TLI = .97).

[Figure 2]

Witnessed workplace ostracism ($\gamma = .15$, $p < .01$) and experienced workplace ostracism ($\gamma = .27$, $p < .001$) were positively related to organizational dehumanization. Organizational dehumanization was, in turn, positively associated with physical symptoms ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$), negatively associated with affective commitment ($\beta = -.53$, $p < .001$), and positively associated with turnover intentions ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$). Moreover, witnessed workplace ostracism was positively related to physical symptoms ($\gamma = .15$, $p < .01$) and turnover intentions ($\gamma = .13$, $p < .01$).

Latent bootstrap analyses (10,000 bootstrap; Lau & Cheung, 2012) were conducted to test the indirect effects of witnessed workplace ostracism on outcomes via organizational dehumanization, while controlling for experienced workplace ostracism. The indirect effects were significant for physical symptoms (indirect effect = .03, BC 95% CI [0.01, 0.05]), affective commitment (indirect effect = -.08, BC 95% CI [-0.13, -0.03]), and turnover

intentions (indirect effect = .07, BC 95% CI [0.02, 0.12]). Overall, these findings fully support Hypotheses 1 and 2a-c.

Study 2

Method

Participants and Procedure

Witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational intolerance of mistreatment were manipulated using vignettes, resulting in a 2 (high versus low witnessed workplace ostracism) x 2 (high versus low organizational intolerance of mistreatment) between-subjects design. Using G*Power, a power analysis was performed to determine the appropriate sample size for linear models involving two predictors and their interaction. Based on the average effect size of mitigating interactions in organizational research (Cohen's $f = .047$; Gardner et al., 2017), a minimal sample size of $N = 220$ was necessary for at least 90% power ($\alpha = .05$), which requires at least 50 participants per condition. Accordingly, as specified in the pre-registration (<https://aspredicted.org/gk25-2chw.pdf>), the experiment remained available online until a minimum of 50 exploitable responses in each condition was reached. Prospective participants, who were required to not be students or self-employed, were recruited via social networks. Voluntary participants were informed of the confidentiality of their responses and were asked to provide their informed consent prior to beginning the study. Among the 314 participants who fully completed the questionnaire, 70 were excluded because they failed the attentional question. The final sample was composed of 244 participants ($N_{\text{condition 1}} = 75$; $N_{\text{condition 2}} = 66$; $N_{\text{condition 3}} = 52$; $N_{\text{condition 4}} = 51$). Among these participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.47$, $SD = 11.91$), 67.2% were women, 29.1% were men, and 3.7% did not specify their gender.

Regarding the procedure, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. In all conditions, they were instructed to read work situations witnessed by an employee working in a fictitious company (i.e., GMP Globe), as well as an email from the company that was sent to all employees following these situations. The fictitious name "GMP Globe" was chosen to prevent potential confounding effects due to familiarity with or the reputation of existing companies (e.g., Harrison & Stone, 2018). The situations involved high versus low ostracism of another employee with a gender-neutral name (i.e., Dominique) and were followed by an email from the company outlining its policy of high versus low intolerance of mistreatment (see online supplements). After that, they rated the dependent variable (i.e., organizational dehumanization) from the perspective of the employee who witnessed the situations. Then, they completed the manipulation checks and a self-affirmation task to prevent any psychological damage, before being fully debriefed.

Measures

Organizational dehumanization was measured using the same scale as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .92$). The only difference is that "My organization" from the original items was replaced by the name of the fictitious company "GMP Globe" (e.g., "GMP Globe considers me as a number"). Full measurement scales are provided in online supplements.

Witnessed Workplace Ostracism Manipulation Check. Participants were asked to rate the same witnessed workplace ostracism items as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .95$), except from one

that was dropped because that specific ostracism situation was not part of the vignettes (i.e., “I have been made aware of or witnessed my coworkers leaving the area when another employee entered”). Additionally, the target of the ostracism from the original items, “another employee”, was replaced by the name of the employee that was ostracized in the vignettes, “Dominique” (e.g., “I have been made aware of or witnessed my coworkers avoiding Dominique”). To fit the short time-frame of the experiment, we used a 7-point agreement scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*), rather than a frequency scale as in Study 1. Participants in high witnessed workplace ostracism conditions reported higher levels of witnessed workplace ostracism ($M = 5.66$; $SD = 1.08$) than in low witnessed workplace ostracism ($M = 2.39$; $SD = 1.36$) conditions ($t(242) = 20.24$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $f = 1.35$), supporting the effectiveness of the manipulation.

Organizational Intolerance of Mistreatment Manipulation Check. Participants completed four items adapted from the organizational intolerance of sexual harassment scale from Walsh et al. (2013), using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) ($\alpha = .79$). Specifically, “My organization” from the original items was replaced by the name of the fictitious company, “GMP Globe”. Moreover, the non-tolerated mistreatment of the original scale, “sexual harassment”, was replaced by “interpersonal mistreatment” to include more subtle, non-sexualized, forms of mistreatment like ostracism (e.g., “GMP Globe does not tolerate interpersonal mistreatment”). Participants reported higher levels of organizational intolerance of mistreatment in the high ($M = 4.75$; $SD = 1.10$) than in the low ($M = 4.14$; $SD = 1.27$) conditions ($t(242) = 4.03$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $f = 0.26$), supporting the effectiveness of the manipulation

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are provided in Table 2.

[Table 2]

Regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses (SPSS 27). Specifically, the witnessed workplace ostracism condition (coded -1 for low and +1 for high), the organizational intolerance of mistreatment condition (coded -1 for low and +1 for high), and the interaction term—built by multiplying the codes of the conditions—were regressed onto organizational dehumanization. As shown in Figure 3, witnessed workplace ostracism had a positive effect on organizational dehumanization ($B = .19$, $p = .019$), supporting Hypothesis 1. However, the interactive effect between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational intolerance of mistreatment on organizational dehumanization was not significant ($B = .02$, $p = .845$), failing to support Hypothesis 3. Additionally, although this was not part of our hypotheses, organizational intolerance of mistreatment had a negative effect on organizational dehumanization ($B = -.30$, $p < .001$).

[Figure 3]

Study 3

Method

Participants and Procedure

In this cross-sectional field study, participants were recruited via social networks. They had to be currently employed by an organization, that is, they could not be self-employed or students to take part in the study. Participation was voluntary, confidential, and

conditional upon participants' informed consent. Among the 320 participants who fully completed the questionnaire, 38 were excluded because they failed the attentional check questions (e.g., "If you are reading this, tick *strongly agree*"). The final sample was composed of 282 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 44.12$, $SD = 10.70$), including 79.1% of women, 11.4% of men, and 1.4% of participants who did not report their gender. Most participants had an average organizational tenure of 12.79 years ($SD = 11.17$) and worked full-time (66.9%) in organizations employing fewer than 50 people (23.7%). The most represented occupational domains were public administration (26.3%) and. The most common education level was a bachelor's degree (45%).

Measures

Witnessed workplace ostracism ($\alpha = .95$), organizational dehumanization ($\alpha = .91$), physical symptoms ($\alpha = .77$), affective commitment ($\alpha = .86$), and turnover intentions ($\alpha = .93$) were measured using the same scales as in Study 1. Organizational intolerance of mistreatment ($\alpha = .85$) was measured with the same items as in Study 2. Full measurement scales are provided in online supplements.

Control Variables. Sociodemographic control variables were handled in the same way as in Study 1. Based on the correlations in Table 3, education level and organizational tenure were connected to organizational dehumanization. Gender and organization size were linked to physical symptoms. Additionally, age was linked to affective commitment, while age, organization size, sector (private vs. public), organizational tenure, and tenure with current coworkers were connected to turnover intentions. When these sociodemographic variables were included as control variables, standardized coefficients differed by less than 0.1. This is considered a negligible difference (Becker et al., 2016). Experienced workplace ostracism was again included as a control variable and was assessed with the same scale as in prior studies ($\alpha = .95$). Because ruminations were found to explain the relationships between witnessed workplace ostracism and negative employee outcomes (Wang & Lai, 2023), they were also included as a theoretically relevant control variable. Following Wang and Lai (2023), ruminations were measured with the 5-item scale developed by Cropley et al. (2012; $\alpha = .95$).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are provided in Table 3.

[Table 3]

Measurement Model

CFA indicated that the eight-factor model (i.e., experienced workplace ostracism, witnessed workplace ostracism, organizational intolerance of mistreatment, organizational dehumanization, ruminations, physical symptoms, affective commitment, turnover intentions) fitted the data well ($\chi^2(637) = 1007.762$; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .05; CFI = .95; TLI = .94) and was superior to more constrained models (see Table S6 in online supplements).

Structural Model

Relying on SEM, we tested a model where—while controlling for experienced workplace ostracism—witnessed workplace ostracism, organizational intolerance of mistreatment, and the interaction between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational intolerance of mistreatment were related to organizational dehumanization, which, in turn, was associated with outcomes (i.e., physical symptoms, affective commitment, turnover intentions). Ruminations were added as an alternative explanatory mechanism to control for other processes at stake in the relationships between witnessed workplace ostracism on employee outcomes (Wang & Lai, 2023). In order to test interactive effects with latent variables (Marsh et al., 2004), parcels were created using the item-to-construct balance technique (Little et al., 2002) to have an equal number of indicators for the independent (i.e., witnessed workplace ostracism) and moderating (i.e., organizational intolerance of mistreatment) variables (see online supplements for a full description of the parceling procedure). Although this model fitted the data well ($\chi^2(798) = 1271.810$; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .07; CFI = .94; TLI = .93), alternative models adding one-by-one direct paths between variables were tested. Model comparisons indicated that an alternative model adding a direct path between organizational intolerance of mistreatment and affective commitment ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 14.47$, SBc = 14.47, $p < .001$) significantly better fitted the data, based on the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square difference test (Satorra & Bentler, 2001; see Table S7 in online supplements). This model, displayed in Figure 4, was thus retained as the final model ($\chi^2(797) = 1257.336$; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .07; CFI = .94; TLI = .93).

[Figure 4]

Results showed that both witnessed workplace ostracism ($\gamma = .25$, $p < .001$) and experienced workplace ostracism ($\gamma = .25$, $p < .001$) were positively related to organizational dehumanization. Organizational dehumanization was, in turn, positively associated with physical symptoms ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$), negatively associated with affective commitment ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .001$), and positively associated with turnover intentions ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$). Additionally, witnessed workplace ostracism was not significantly related to ruminations ($\gamma = .15$, $p = .077$), whereas experienced workplace ostracism was ($\gamma = .29$, $p < .001$). Ruminations were subsequently positively associated with physical symptoms ($\beta = .53$, $p < .001$) and turnover intentions ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$), but were not significantly related to affective commitment ($\beta = .09$, $p = .164$). In addition, organizational intolerance of mistreatment was directly and positively associated with affective commitment ($\gamma = .24$, $p < .001$). Latent bootstrap analyses revealed that the indirect effects of witnessed workplace ostracism on outcomes through organizational dehumanization were significant (physical symptoms = .08, BC 95% CI [0.03, 0.13]; affective commitment = -.12, BC 95% CI [-0.25, -0.06]; turnover intentions = .10, BC 95% CI [0.06, 0.26]). Altogether, these findings support Hypotheses 1 and 2a-c.

Regarding Hypothesis 3, the interactive effect of witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational intolerance of mistreatment on organizational dehumanization was significant ($\gamma = .15$, $p = .003$; Figure 5). Additionally, organizational intolerance of mistreatment was negatively linked to organizational dehumanization ($\gamma = -.25$, $p < .001$). The simple slopes tests revealed that the relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational dehumanization was statistically significant at one standard deviation above ($B = .63$, $t(278) =$

5.73, $p < .001$) and below ($B = .34$, $t(278) = 3.46$, $p < .001$) the mean of organizational intolerance of mistreatment. These findings unexpectedly indicate that the relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational dehumanization is stronger (rather than weaker, as posited in Hypothesis 3) when observers perceive high organizational intolerance of mistreatment.

[Figure 5]

Regarding Hypotheses 4a-c, results of the moderated mediation model (Cheung & Lau, 2017) indicated that the indirect effects of witnessed workplace ostracism on outcomes via organizational dehumanization were significant at high (physical symptoms = .10; BC 95% CI [.04, .17]; affective commitment = -.20; BC 95% CI [-.33, -.09]; turnover intentions = .20; BC 95% CI [.10, .34]), but not at low (physical symptoms = .03; BC 95% CI [-.01, .08]; affective commitment = -.07; BC 95% CI [-.18, .02]; turnover intentions = .07; BC 95% CI [-.03, .18]) levels of organizational intolerance of mistreatment. Moreover, the index of moderated mediation was significantly different from 0 for physical symptoms (index = .03; BC 95% CI [.01, .06]), affective commitment (index = -.06; BC 95% CI [-.13, -.02]), and turnover intentions (index = .06; BC 95% CI [.02, .13]). Overall, these findings contradict Hypotheses 4a-c, which posited that these indirect effects would be weaker at high levels of organizational intolerance of mistreatment.

Discussion

This research draws on social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025; Spence, 1973) to examine whether witnessed workplace ostracism is associated with increased organizational dehumanization perceptions in observers. Moreover, it explores the subsequent consequences of this relationship (i.e., physical symptoms, affective commitment, turnover intentions; Studies 1 and 3), as well as one factor that might mitigate it (i.e., organizational intolerance of mistreatment; Studies 2 and 3). These hypotheses were tested while controlling for observers' personal experiences of workplace ostracism (Studies 1 and 3) and an alternative pathway known to explain the impact of witnessed workplace ostracism on employee outcomes (i.e., ruminations; Study 3; Wang & Lai, 2023).

First, support was found for the positive relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational dehumanization in all studies. Specifically, witnessed workplace ostracism was associated with increased organizational dehumanization perceptions in observers when accounting for experienced workplace ostracism. Using an experimental vignette-based procedure, Study 2 tested the causal processes at stake and confirmed that witnessed workplace ostracism is an antecedent of organizational dehumanization. Consistent with prior research (Brison & Caesens, 2023; Brison et al., 2024), experienced workplace ostracism was also positively associated with organizational dehumanization.

By showing that organizational dehumanization—far from arising solely in victims of workplace ostracism (Brison & Caesens, 2023; Brison et al., 2024)—can also emerge in witnesses, this research is part of the necessary efforts to better understand the effects of workplace ostracism on observers (e.g., Azeem et al., 2024; Haq et al., 2024; Sharma & Dhar, 2022; Wang & Lai, 2023). These findings also demonstrate the relevance of expanding the victim's perspective on organizational dehumanization to include observers of interpersonal

mistreatment (Stinglhamber & Demoulin, 2024; Stinglhamber & Demoulin, 2023). This suggests that the role of interpersonal factors in shaping employees' perceptions of organizational dehumanization may be wider than previously thought (e.g., Baldissarri & Fourie, 2023; Brison et al., 2022). Overall, this approach integrates two intertwined research lines that have surprisingly evolved independently (i.e., third-party perspectives on workplace mistreatment [e.g., Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019] and on organizational dehumanization [e.g., Stinglhamber & Demoulin, 2023]) into a single more comprehensive model depicting third-party responses to witnessed workplace mistreatment. In doing so, this research provides empirical support for the social information processing theory's tenet that observations of social dynamics influence the individual's relationship with the broader context in which these dynamics occur (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), in this case the organization. Additionally, signaling theory typically explains how outsiders (e.g., job seekers, investors) respond to deliberate organizational signals that highlight the organization's positive attributes (Connelly et al., 2011, 2025). This research demonstrates that signaling theory also applies in cases where organizations inadvertently convey negative signals (e.g., organizational dehumanization inferred from witnessed workplace ostracism) to insiders (e.g., observers).

Second, witnessed workplace ostracism was found to be related to observers' lower well-being (i.e., increased physical symptoms) and to more negative attitudes (i.e., decreased affective commitment) and behavioral intentions (i.e., increased turnover intentions) through organizational dehumanization (Studies 1 and 3). These findings align with the broader workplace mistreatment literature, which emphasizes the importance of the employee-organization relationship in understanding how even subtle forms of mistreatment can lead to negative outcomes for employees who witness such incidents (e.g., Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Salin & Notelaers, 2020). These findings shift the focus in the literature on witnessed workplace ostracism by demonstrating that, while workplace ostracism undoubtedly involves the ostracizer, the victim, and observers (e.g., Harvey et al., 2019; Sharma & Dhar, 2022), it also implicates the organization. Previous third-party research on workplace ostracism has treated the organization as a passive bystander to exclusionary phenomena (e.g., Azeem et al., 2024; Haq et al., 2024; Wang & Lai, 2023). However, our findings suggest that, from the perspective of observers, the organization plays a dehumanizing role. Importantly, observers' perceptions of being dehumanized by the organization help explain why incidents of workplace ostracism lead to negative outcomes not only for victims but also for observers.

Interestingly, contrary to prior findings, Study 3 did not support the explanatory role of ruminations in the relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and employee outcomes (Wang & Lai, 2023), as the association between witnessed workplace ostracism and ruminations was not significant. This replication failure could be attributed to the fact that, unlike in the study by Wang and Lai (2023), *experienced* workplace ostracism was controlled for in the present study, which was positively associated with ruminations. Consistent with prior research (e.g., He et al., 2020), this suggests that, while observers of workplace ostracism may ruminate over the incident, intrusive recurring thoughts appear to be more prevalent among victims of workplace ostracism. Longitudinal research with repeated measures is still needed to further explore the role of ruminations as an explanatory mechanism in the relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and observers' employee outcomes, beyond the explanatory role of organizational dehumanization.

Third, although this was not the case in Study 2, the interactive effect between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational intolerance of mistreatment on organizational dehumanization was significant in Study 3. While organizational intolerance of mistreatment was expected to mitigate the harmful effects of witnessed workplace ostracism on organizational dehumanization and subsequent employee outcomes, an unexpected pattern emerged. Specifically, in organizations where no concrete measures against mistreatment were perceived, employees reported high levels of organizational dehumanization, regardless of whether they witnessed other employees being ostracized. Conversely, when actions against mistreatment were perceived to be in place (i.e., in highly intolerant organizations), employees' organizational dehumanization perceptions depended on whether they witnessed workplace ostracism. More precisely, employees generally reported lower levels of organizational dehumanization when they did witness workplace ostracism. These levels of organizational dehumanization were comparable to those reported by employees working in organizations perceived to take no action against mistreatment. Echoing the literature on corporate hypocrisy (e.g., Effron et al., 2018; Palanski, & Yammarino, 2009), this unexpected finding suggests that the benefits of organizational interventions against mistreatment vanish if they are followed by incongruent facts (i.e., witnessing workplace ostracism). Indeed, "for these employees, who hold a positive view of their organization, there may be a psychological disconnect between their perceptions of their organization on one hand, and their experiences on the other", which prevents zero-tolerance policies from having the desired mitigating effect on observers (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2013, p. 475).

Interestingly, prior work on corporate hypocrisy also indicates that, when employees witness a negative incident (e.g., witnessed workplace ostracism) that is followed by an intervention aimed at improving the situation (e.g., zero-tolerance policies for mistreatment), the organization is perceived as a reformed sinner less deserving of moral condemnation, rather than as hypocritical (e.g., Effron et al., 2018). In Study 2, the organizational intolerance of mistreatment manipulation followed that of witnessed workplace ostracism, which may have prevented the interactive effect observed in Study 3 from emerging. Overall, these findings provide preliminary evidence that the (in)congruence between anti-mistreatment measures and employees' actual experiences—rather than the presence of anti-mistreatment measures alone (e.g., Wilkerson & Meyer, 2019)—may be critical in understanding observers' reactions to witnessed workplace ostracism. Nonetheless, it is premature to draw firm conclusions regarding the role of organizational intolerance of mistreatment in the relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational dehumanization. Future research should further explore the temporal dynamics between observations of workplace ostracism and anti-mistreatment measures to better understand their interaction. Another factor that may explain the absence of an interactive effect between witnessed workplace ostracism and organizational intolerance of mistreatment on organizational dehumanization is the way organizational intolerance of mistreatment was manipulated. While organizational intolerance of mistreatment includes both efforts to adequately respond to mistreatment (e.g., taking complaints seriously) and efforts to prevent mistreatment (e.g., training sessions; Demoulin & Stinglhamber, 2024), our manipulation primarily focused on the former (e.g., taking complaints seriously). This focus may explain the medium-sized effect of the manipulation on the manipulation check (Cohen's $f = 0.26$; Cohen, 1988). Future

experimental studies should consider strengthening the manipulation of organizational intolerance of mistreatment by incorporating organizational efforts to prevent mistreatment.

Practical Implications

These findings have implications for practitioners. The relationships identified between witnessed workplace ostracism and negative employee outcomes (i.e., increased physical symptoms, decreased affective commitment, increased turnover intentions) through observers' organizational dehumanization perceptions highlight the multi-party, rather than dyadic (i.e., ostracizer-victim), nature of workplace ostracism. This underscores the need for comprehensive organizational interventions to address workplace ostracism and improve the overall well-being of all organizational members—not just the victims.

Concretely, organizational attempts to prevent workplace ostracism should focus on raising employees' awareness of the far-reaching implications of workplace ostracism, including unintentional incidents (Al-Atwi et al., 2024). Specifically, in addition to the detrimental effects of workplace ostracism on victims, its ripple effects on observers should also be emphasized in training sessions or disseminated through internal newsletters. Moreover, since supervisors' ostracizing behaviors tend to be imitated by their subordinates (Huang & Yuan, 2023), it is particularly important for managers to act as inclusive role models by, for instance, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to voice their opinions during meetings. A complementary approach to addressing workplace ostracism is to increase employees' knowledge about how to handle it constructively as a witness (Nielsen et al., 2024; Vranjes et al., 2023). By doing so, observers can provide managers with the necessary information for timely interventions, which can help end ostracism at an early stage and prevent its recurrence (Nielsen et al., 2024).

Although organizations should first and foremost strive to prevent workplace ostracism, it is not always possible to eliminate this phenomenon entirely. Therefore, some companies may wish to implement zero-tolerance policies regarding mistreatment to mitigate its negative effects on employees. However, our findings indicate that zero-tolerance policies do not effectively limit the harm caused by witnessed workplace ostracism to employees. Nevertheless, although this was not part of our hypotheses, a negative relationship was consistently found between organizational intolerance of mistreatment and organizational dehumanization. This suggests that zero-tolerance policies regarding mistreatment are an important lever for preventing employees' organizational dehumanization perceptions and subsequent ill-being in employees. The first step toward creating a zero-tolerance organization is to provide employees with reporting procedures that are accessible, trustworthy, and welcoming of subtle incidents like workplace ostracism (e.g., Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007).

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations should be acknowledged. First, this research relies on self-reported measures which—although recommended to assess employees' subjective perceptions like in the present research (Cruz, 2022)—may be affected by social desirability bias.

Second, although the causal effect of witnessed workplace ostracism on organizational dehumanization was demonstrated using an experimental design, a bi-directional relationship

between these variables cannot be excluded. Specifically, it is possible that organizational dehumanization fosters witnessed workplace ostracism as well. Indeed, employees who feel dehumanized by their organization may engage in aggressive behaviors, including exclusion, directed at less powerful targets (i.e., subordinates) rather than retaliating against the organization (Lagios et al., 2023). Therefore, workplace ostracism might be more frequent in organizations where employees experience organizational dehumanization, making it more likely to witness workplace ostracism. In a similar vein, the relationships between organizational dehumanization and employee outcomes were only explored with cross-sectional and multi-wave designs (where each construct was measured at a single time point), preventing conclusions regarding causality from being drawn. Cross-sectional and multi-wave designs do not account for autoregressive effects—i.e., the extent to which a variable predicts itself over time—which can lead to biased parameter estimates in mediation models (e.g., Mitchell & Maxwell, 2013). To address these limitations, future research could estimate the indirect effects of witnessed workplace ostracism on outcomes via organizational dehumanization by testing a cross-lagged panel model with longitudinal data, where all constructs are measured at each time point (e.g., Preacher, 2015). Future longitudinal studies should also consider replicating our findings using multiple time lags (Preacher, 2015; Selig et al., 2012). Combining diary studies (e.g., Totterdell et al., 2012) with longitudinal studies featuring longer time lags (e.g., 6 months; Holm et al., 2021) could help determine how quickly the relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and employee outcomes, through organizational dehumanization, unfolds, as well as when these effects begin to dissipate (or not).

Third, our assessment of witnessed workplace ostracism focused solely on ostracism perpetrated by coworkers and did not differentiate between observers who perceived the ostracism they witnessed as occurring accidentally (e.g., due to poor social skills) versus with the intention to harm (Al-Atwi et al., 2024). Yet, observers' appraisal of unintentional mistreatment—as compared to intentional mistreatment—might damage their relationship with the organization to a lesser extent (Wilkerson & Meyer, 2019). In addition, knowing that ostracism perpetrated by a supervisor can have specific effects on observers (Azeem et al., 2024), it would be interesting to replicate these findings while considering witnessed workplace ostracism from different sources (i.e., supervisor, coworker, customers) simultaneously (Brison et al., 2024). Future studies should, therefore, capture observers' perceptions of intentionality and adopt a multi-foci perspective to further explore the effects of witnessed workplace ostracism.

Fourth, this research highlighted the role of organizational dehumanization in explaining the relationship between witnessed workplace ostracism and observers' impaired well-being (i.e., increased physical symptoms), negative attitudes (i.e., decreased affective commitment), and withdrawal intentions (i.e., increased turnover intentions). Since witnessing mistreatment may indicate how any employee could be treated in the future (e.g., Nielsen et al., 2024; Rosander & Nielsen, 2024), another pathway through which witnessed workplace ostracism might impair observers' employee outcomes could be that observers imagine themselves as potential future victims. Disentangling the effects of organizational

dehumanization and fear of experiencing workplace ostracism could provide valuable insights into why observers report lower well-being and poorer work-related attitudes and behaviors.

Fifth, while it is undoubtedly necessary to investigate workplace ostracism from the perspective of observers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (e.g., Mao et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2021), it is equally important to focus on the underexplored reactions of perpetrators to fully unveil the unspoken facet of workplace ostracism (e.g., Sharma & Dhar, 2022). Perpetrators of workplace ostracism may experience negative emotions such as guilt or shame (Harvey et al., 2019), especially when they realize they have unintentionally ostracized a colleague. Conversely, they may also feel a heightened sense of control (Harvey et al., 2019) when engaging in ostracizing behaviors aimed at punishing employees who perform poorly or exhibit deviant behaviors. Additionally, examining how ostracizers react to observers' interventions presents a promising avenue for future research (Vranjes et al., 2023) to fully understand the dynamics of workplace ostracism.

Lastly, all samples used in this research are overwhelmingly composed of educated employees from the United-States (Study 1) and Europe (Studies 2 and 3) with a majority of women (Studies 2 and 3). These sample demographics may raise concerns regarding the generalizability of the findings. For instance, prior research indicates that Western European employees (i.e., from the United Kingdom) experience more negative consequences (e.g., lower job satisfaction and more turnover intentions) following organizational dehumanization compared to employees in other parts of the world (i.e., from Vietnam; Nguyen et al., 2021). Therefore, the relationships between organizational dehumanization and employee outcomes identified in this research may be weaker in other cultural contexts. Extending the scope of this research to encompass more diverse samples from various cultural backgrounds should help determine the extent to which the present findings reflect cultural specificities.

Conclusion

Across three studies, we found that witnessed workplace ostracism was associated with observers' perceptions of being dehumanized by their organization. These perceptions are, in turn, associated with more physical symptoms, reduced affective commitment, and more turnover intentions in observers (Studies 1 and 3). Contrary to our predictions, these effects were not significantly different (Study 2) or were stronger (Study 3) when firm anti-mistreatment policies were endorsed, compared to when such policies were not implemented. These effects emerged beyond observers' personal experiences of workplace ostracism (Studies 1 and 3) and an alternative pathway known to explain the impact of witnessed workplace ostracism on employee outcomes (i.e., ruminations; Study 3).

Declarations

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this research.

Data Availability

For all studies, data and code behind analyses are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no known financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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Table 1*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables for Study 1*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Gender	--	--	--														
2. Age	38.22	10.13	-.18***	--													
3. Education	--	--	.11**	-.10**	--												
4. Organizational size	--	--	-.05	-.05	.09*	--											
5. Sector	--	--	-.15***	.11**	-.08	-.12**	--										
6. Organizational tenure (years)	7.78	7.30	-.14***	.51***	-.14***	.08	.00	--									
7. Part-/full-time employment	--	--	-.16***	-.10*	.07	.16***	.02	.04	--								
8. Teleworking (days/week)	2.09	2.08	-.01	-.04	.14***	.14***	.16***	-.06	.13***	--							
9. Employment contract	--	--	.02	-.13**	-.11**	.08*	.02	.01	.21***	.02	--						
10. Witnessed workplace ostracism	2.11	1.22	.02	-.06	-.04	-.02	-.05	-.00	-.02	-.20***	.02	--					
11. Experienced workplace ostracism	1.81	1.16	.04	-.03	-.02	-.00	-.03	-.05	-.07	-.10*	-.01	.65***	--				
12. Organizational dehumanization	3.80	1.65	-.02	-.13***	-.10*	.21***	-.06	-.04	-.03	-.07	.01	.31***	-.35***	--			
13. Physical symptoms	3.39	1.22	.16***	-.16***	.01	-.06	-.06	-.13***	-.08*	-.07	.00	.27***	.28***	.23***	--		
14. Affective commitment	4.43	1.72	.03	.14***	.04	-.12**	.02	.15***	-.07	.05	.01	-.14***	-.17***	-.50***	-.15***	--	
15. Turnover intentions	3.22	1.89	.04	-.17***	.01	.03	-.04	-.14***	-.08	-.07	-.08*	.26***	.27***	.48***	.27***	-.49***	--

Note. *N* = 654 (except gender and age *N* = 653, education *N* = 645, organizational size, part-/full-time employment and employment contract *N* = 643, organizational tenure *N* = 632, teleworking *N* = 642). Gender was coded 0 = men and 1 = women. Education was coded 1 = elementary education, 2 = high school, 3 = some college, 4 = bachelor's degree, 5 = master's degree, and 6 = Ph.D. Organizational size was coded from 1 = less than 10 people to 8 = more than 10000 people. Organizational sector was coded 0 = public sector and 1 = private sector. Part-/full-time employment was coded 0 = part-time and 1 = full-time. Employment contract was coded 0 = fixed-term contract and 1 = permanent job. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables for Study 2*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Age	40.46	11.91	--			
2. Witnessed workplace ostracism condition	--	--	-.01	--		
3. Organizational intolerance of mistreatment condition	--	--	-.01	.03	--	
4. Organizational dehumanization	3.49	1.31	.03	.14*	-.23***	--

Note. *N* = 244 (except age *N* = 235). Witnessed workplace ostracism condition was coded -1 = low witnessed workplace ostracism and +1 = high witnessed workplace ostracism. Organizational intolerance of mistreatment condition was coded -1 = low organizational intolerance of mistreatment and +1 = high organizational intolerance of mistreatment. **p* < .05. ****p* < .001.

Table 3*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables for Study 3*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Gender	--	--	--																
2. Age	44.12	10.70	.11	--															
3. Education	--	--	-.08	-.05	--														
4. Organizational size	--	--	-.12*	.13*	.16**	--													
5. Sector	--	--	.05	.19**	-.04	.30***	--												
6. Organizational tenure (years)	12.80	11.17	.05	.61***	-.16**	.22***	.11	--											
7. Tenure with coworkers (years)	7.38	7.10	.07	.45***	-.14*	.17**	.14*	.68***	--										
8. Part-/full-time employment	--	--	.26***	.06	-.13*	-.15*	-.07	.07	.08	--									
10. Teleworking (days/week)	1.05	1.36	-.06	.03	.12*	.25***	.08	-.04	-.05	-.20***	--								
11. Witnessed workplace ostracism	2.62	1.29	.05	.12*	-.29***	-.03	.08	.23***	.19**	.09	-.12	--							
12. Experienced workplace ostracism	2.13	1.42	.12*	.10	-.16**	-.08	.10	.13*	.07	.02	-.10	.53***	--						
13. Organizational intolerance of mistreatment	3.90	1.59	-.11	-.11	.01	.16**	-.06	-.16**	-.14*	-.01	.22***	-.28***	-.27***	--					
14. Organizational dehumanization	4.07	1.71	.08	.06	-.19**	.10	.03	.22***	.11	.06	-.11	.41***	.41***	-.33***	--				
15. Ruminations	3.86	1.51	.13*	-.02	.09	-.12*	-.06	.00	-.06	-.04	.03	.30***	.35***	-.20***	.37***	--			
16. Physical symptoms	3.90	1.20	.20**	-.11	-.08	-.17**	-.01	-.03	-.03	.03	-.08	.28***	.34***	-.16**	.41***	.54***	--		
17. Affective commitment	4.71	1.56	.10	.13*	-.07	-.05	-.03	.06	.08	.06	-.00	-.18**	-.22***	.37***	-.46***	-.13*	-.21***	--	
18. Turnover intentions	3.03	1.98	-.11	-.26***	.04	-.15*	-.12*	-.16**	-.17**	-.01	-.09	.24***	.31***	-.26***	.49***	.44***	.45***	-.51***	--

Note. *N* = 282 (except for sociodemographic variables *N* = 278). Gender was coded 0 = men and 1 = women. Education was coded 1 = elementary education, 2 = high school, 3 = some college, 4 = bachelor's degree, 5 = master's degree, and 6 = Ph.D. Organizational size was coded from 1 = less than 10 people to 9 = more than 10000 people. Organizational sector was coded 0 = private sector and 1 = public sector. Part-/full-time employment was coded 1 = full-time, 2 = 4/5 time, 3 = 3/4 time, 4 = half-time, and 5 = less than half-time. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

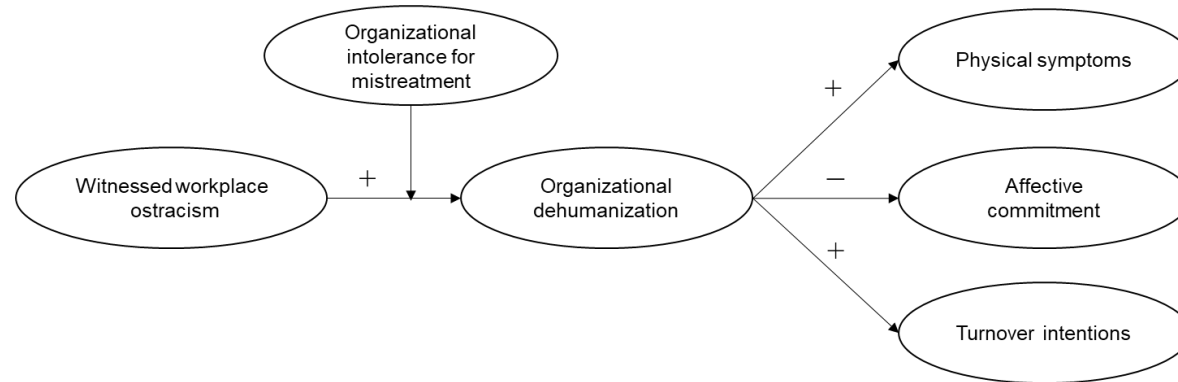
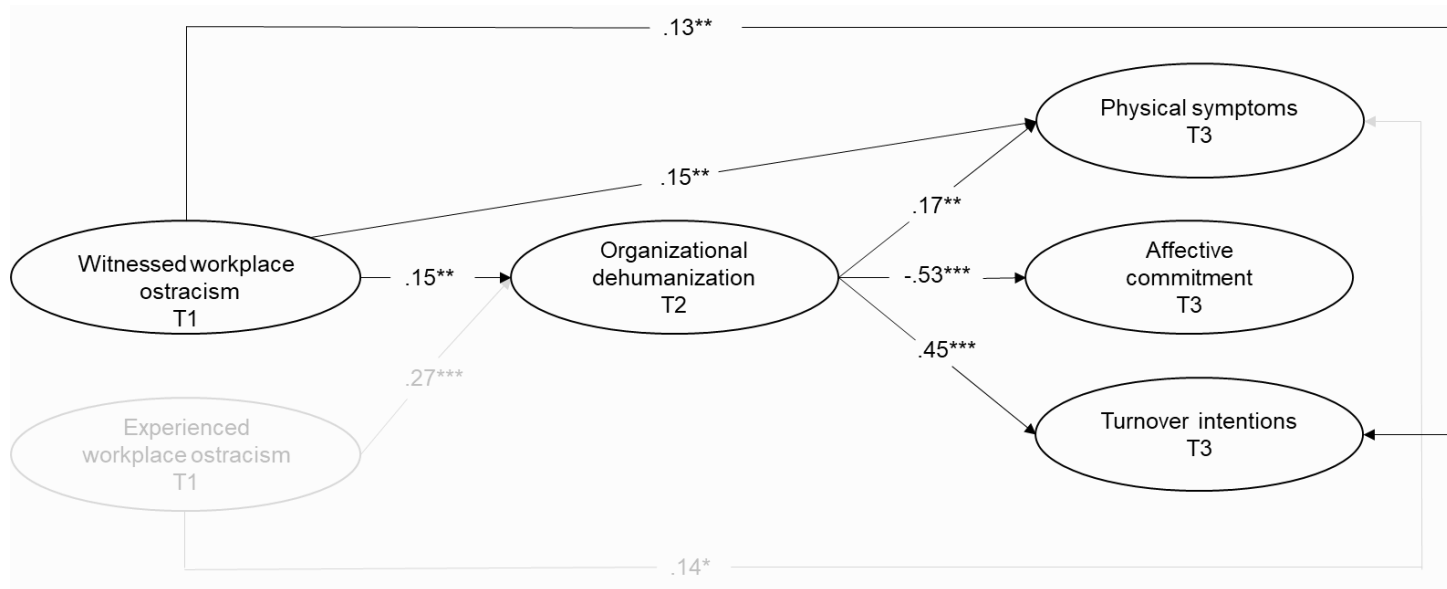
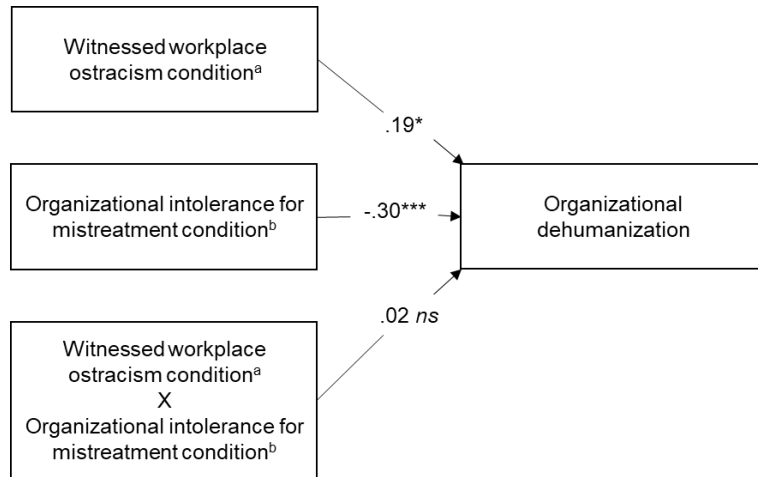
Figure 1*Hypothesized Model*

Figure 2*Standardized Coefficients for the Retained Structural Equation Model of Study 1*

Note. $N = 654$. Experienced workplace ostracism was included as a control variable.

ns = not significant. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

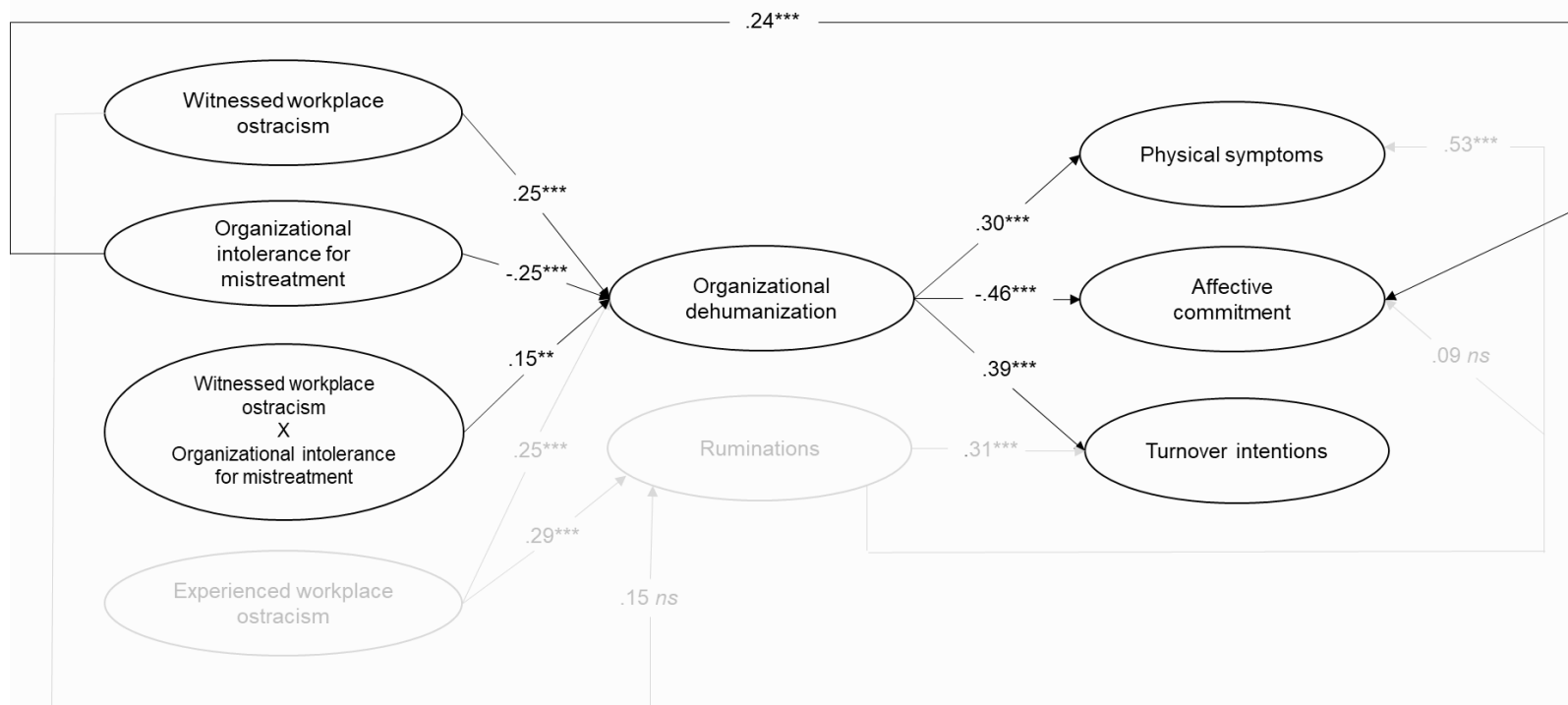
Figure 3*Unstandardized Regression Coefficients of Study 2*

Note. $N = 244$. Witnessed workplace ostracism condition was coded -1 = low witnessed workplace ostracism and +1 = high witnessed workplace ostracism. Organizational intolerance of mistreatment condition was coded -1 = low organizational intolerance of mistreatment and +1 = high organizational intolerance of mistreatment. The interaction term was built by multiplying the codes of the witnessed workplace ostracism and the organizational intolerance of mistreatment conditions.

ns = not significant. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 4

Standardized Coefficients for the Retained Structural Equation Model of Study 3



Note. $N = 282$. Experienced workplace ostracism and ruminations were included as control variables.

Ns = not significant. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 5

Relationship between Witnessed Workplace Ostracism and Organizational Dehumanization as a Function of Organizational Intolerance of Mistreatment

