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Coworker ostracism, depersonalization of coworkers, and thwarted change-oriented OCB:

The mitigating role of employee idealism

Abstract

Purpose—This study details the unexplored link between employees' exposure to coworker ostracism and their engagement in change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), as well as the mediating role of their depersonalization of coworkers and the moderating role of their idealism.

Design/methodology/approach—The research hypotheses are tested with survey data obtained from employees who work in the banking sector.

Findings—A critical reason that a sense of being socially excluded turns employees away from extra-role change efforts is that they respond to their exclusion by treating coworkers as if they were impersonal objects. This explanatory role is mitigated to the extent that employees' personal values reflect an interest in avoiding harm to others.

Originality/value—This study extends human resource management research by explicating how and when a sense of being ignored by coworkers can escalate into diminished efforts to change and improve the organizational status quo voluntarily.

Practical implications—For human resource management practice, this study pinpoints a core conduit, the development of dehumanized perceptions of coworkers, through which frustrations about being ostracized can translate into a reluctance to perform voluntary activities to improve the current organizational situation, which otherwise might help revert the negative treatments. It also showcases how this escalation can be contained by nurturing idealistic values within an organization's workforce.

Keywords— coworker ostracism; depersonalization of coworkers; change-oriented OCB; idealism; conservation of resources theory

Paper type—Research paper

Introduction

Employees can have an instrumental influence on the success of their employing organization by undertaking organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), beyond their formal job descriptions (Goo *et al.*, 2022; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2018). This behavior often is affiliative in nature, such that it reinforces the organization's internal functioning, because employees reaffirm the organization's existing practices through their voluntarism (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022). Yet some employees engage in extra-role work behaviors to challenge the status quo and instill changes (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023d; Li and Xie, 2022; Malik, 2024). Such change-oriented OCB can be valuable for the organization, as well as for its undertakers, to the extent that it generates favorable assessments among leaders (Carter *et al.*, 2014) or creates a sense of personal accomplishment related to employees' organizational membership (Campbell and Im, 2016).

But change-invoking work activities that go beyond explicit job expectations are not without challenges. Going the extra mile in general may be distracting and require significant energy that otherwise could be spent on regular work activities for which employees are formally rewarded (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022; Koopman *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, voluntary attempts to *disrupt* current organizational practices might be received with doubt or suspicion by other members of the organization, particularly if these attempts have the potential to undermine those members' privileges (Hon *et al.*, 2014; Perry-Smith and Mannucci, 2017). In the face of such difficulties, employees who already struggle with depleted resources may be reluctant to allocate significant energy to unsolicited change-invoking activities (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014; Hobfoll, 2001). For example, employees are less likely to exhibit change-oriented voluntarism to the extent that they have to deal with workplace bullying (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023d) or narcissistic supervision (Wang *et al.*, 2021). These sorts of inhibitors tend to generate disappointment with the

employer's lack of respect for their professional well-being, which reduces employees' willingness to contribute to its success, such as by engaging in productive, discretionary efforts (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022).

We investigate another, hitherto overlooked work challenge that also may thwart change-oriented OCB, namely, the experience of coworker ostracism (Huang and Yuan, 2024; Jahanzeb and Newell, 2022). In this resource-draining work condition, employees are socially excluded by the people with whom they work and feel as if they are ignored (Choi, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Substantial research has addressed *why* employees might be targets of ostracizing behaviors; a recent meta-analysis establishes that exposure to ostracism depends on employees' personality traits, the characteristics of their leaders, and the organizational context in which they operate (Howard *et al.*, 2020). In addition, ostracism might stem from perpetrators' defensive motives, which drive them to seek to protect their own interests, or punitive motives, which stem from their desire to protect the interests of their work group (Henle *et al.*, 2023).

To complement these relevant insights into why ostracism occurs, we investigate critical *outcomes* of this experience. Prior research demonstrates that workplace ostracism can elicit adverse behavioral responses, such as diminished task performance (Zhao *et al.*, 2020), creativity (Zhang *et al.*, 2023), or promotive voice (Jahanzeb and Newell, 2022). We know of no studies that consider the potential escalation of this notable source of work hardship into decreased efforts to undertake voluntary, productive change endeavors though. This lacunae is relevant for human resource (HR) management scholarship and practice, because it prevents pertinent insights into how the professional difficulties that employees encounter when they are deprived of social interactions with coworkers may leave them reluctant to go the extra mile and engage in

extra-role change activities that otherwise could produce *novel* solutions to the difficulties (Carter *et al.*, 2014; Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022).

With this study, we accordingly seek to explicate some core factors that explain or affect the translation of coworker ostracism into a hesitancy to engage in discretionary change efforts that contribute to organizational effectiveness. First, we postulate that an important conduit through which this translation takes shape is that employees develop a desire to exhibit depersonalization toward their coworkers—that is, to treat coworkers as if they were impersonal objects and express indifference to their well-being (Boles *et al.*, 2000; Pujol-Cols *et al.*, 2023). Consistent with the premises of conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), social exclusion may render employees unwilling to allocate significant energy to change-oriented OCB, because they start to dehumanize their coworkers, as a means to express their frustration about their depleted social connectivity resources (Baker and Kim, 2021; De Clercq *et al.*, 2020). Second, and also consistent with COR theory, we propose that idealism, as a specific personal resource that some employees possess (Stefanidis *et al.*, 2023), may buffer against the challenges created by coworker ostracism, such that idealistic employees who are ostracized maintain some level of change-oriented OCB. As De Clercq (2022, p. 666) argues, idealism is a personal resource that reflects the extent to which employees’ “personal values emphasize their concern to *avoid* [italics in the original] causing others harm,” such that they believe it is never necessary to sacrifice the welfare of others for their own benefit (Wang and Calvano, 2015).

With these theoretical arguments, which predict a moderated mediation dynamic in the connection between coworker ostracism and change-oriented OCB, this study offers several contributions to HR management scholarship. First, we apply COR theory to detail how resource-depleting coworker ostracism may transform into decreased change-oriented OCB and

how this conversion operates *through* employees' propensity to dehumanize coworkers (French *et al.*, 2022). Employees feel frustrated that their coworkers do not pay attention to them (Fatima *et al.*, 2023), so they treat the coworkers as impersonal entities and become reluctant to allocate energy to discretionary work activities that could add to the welfare of their organization and its constituents (Baker and Kim, 2021). In proposing a mediating role of coworker depersonalization, this study offers novel conceptual insights into a critical, *covert* channel through which a sense of being ignored culminates in work-related sluggishness—namely, employees exhibit indifference to their coworkers' well-being (De Clercq *et al.*, 2023)—and hence that creates unique challenges, because it likely is difficult for organizational leaders to detect and remediate. Diminished change-oriented OCB also threatens to extend the social hardships that ostracized employees suffer, because they are unwilling to pursue change efforts that otherwise might offer long-term solutions to their social isolation (Bedi, 2021). As we show, victims of coworker ostracism inadvertently can create a counterproductive cascade for themselves and worsen their negative work situation, by responding in self-defensive ways that fail to offer solutions to their work-related exclusion (Carter *et al.*, 2014; Vigoda-Gadot and Beeri, 2012).

Second, we respond to calls for studies that use contingency approaches to examine how employees react to workplace ostracism (Sharma and Dhar, 2022). Employees tend to respond less negatively to perceptions of being socially excluded when they can rely on relevant personal resources, including their political skill (Abrar *et al.*, 2022), job self-determination (Qian *et al.*, 2019), or performance goal orientation (Kuo and Wu, 2022). As we add, idealism, or the extent to which personal values emphasize a desire *not* to inflict harm on others (Kang *et al.*, 2024; Wang and Calvano, 2015), represents another protective shield that may help organizations

ensure that their employee bases maintain a certain level of change-oriented voluntarism, even in the face of coworker ostracism. Notably, we specify a *dual* buffering role of this personal value, such that it mitigates the strength of both links that constitute the mediated coworker ostracism–change-oriented OCB relationship. This conceptual focus on idealism also complements limited organizational research on the beneficial role of this personal resource in helping employees cope with other work challenges, such as perceptions of career compromises (De Clercq, 2022) or organizational injustice (Hastings and Finegan, 2011). Employees who are disgruntled by coworker ostracism but can draw from their idealism are more likely to remain dedicated to disruptive work efforts that add to the organizational status quo, instead of becoming “lazy” or complacent (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022).

Theoretical background and research hypotheses

The nature of change-oriented organizational citizenship behavior

Prior HR management research has underscored the usefulness of employees’ activities beyond their explicit job duties, which constitutes their organizational citizenship behavior (Jnaneswar and Ranjit, 2022; Schwarz *et al.*, 2023). Traditional conceptualizations of OCB assume that it aligns with, rather than disrupts, existing organizational practices (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2018). But change-oriented OCB, involving “constructive efforts made by employees to identify and implement necessary changes to work methods, policies and procedures in the context of their jobs or organizations” (Wang *et al.*, 2021, p. 2164), constitutes another crucial, relatively rarely investigated facet of extra-role work behavior. Employees who engage in change-focused voluntarism aim to increase their organization’s well-being through their discretionary, dedicated efforts to alter and enhance the current organizational situation (Bettencourt, 2004; Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli, 2012). For example, they might go out of their way to suggest novel procedures

for enhanced efficiency or identify dispensable practices to abolish (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022; Younas *et al.*, 2021).

Both employers and employees can benefit from extra-role change efforts. Employers can enhance their financial performance and market position relative to competitors (Schwarz *et al.*, 2023); employees who undertake them can better their professional standing or experience a sense of personal satisfaction (Carter *et al.*, 2014; Li and Xie, 2022). Yet the disruptive nature of change-oriented work activities also means that they might generate substantial difficulties for employees, particularly if other organizational members consider their efforts threatening to privileges they have developed (Hon *et al.*, 2014; Hultman and Hultman, 2018). Dismissive responses appear especially likely when employees voluntarily propose such changes, without any mandate in formal job descriptions (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022; Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli, 2012). In such scenarios, employees may *hesitate* to engage in change-oriented OCB, and we seek to clarify when and why that might be the case, by addressing the effects of coworker ostracism.

Our perspective thus complements the significant research that investigates positive drivers or enablers of change-oriented OCB, such as employees' religiosity (Haq *et al.*, 2020) and learning orientation (Bettencourt, 2004), the presence of knowledge-focused organizational practices (Kao, 2017), and exposure to organizational leadership that is ambidextrous (Iqbal *et al.*, 2022), inclusive (Younas *et al.*, 2021), or empowering (Li *et al.*, 2016). The potentially disruptive nature of this behavior makes it equally important to understand why employees who already confront resource-depleting work situations may be reluctant to devote their discretionary energy to change-oriented OCB (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022). Notably, recent research indicates that extra-role work activities that change the organizational status quo tend to be less common among employees who have to endure other resource-depleting conditions, such as

workplace bullying (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023d), narcissistic leaders (Wang *et al.*, 2021), or family-to-work conflict (De Clercq, 2020). To add to these insights, we focus on the potentially inhibitive role of coworker ostracism (Jahanzeb and Newell, 2022).

Coworker ostracism and conservation of resources theory

As extant HR management research defines it, coworker ostracism is “negative interpersonal treatment and ... a situation where an employee feels ignored or excluded” (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2024, p. 3599). Coworkers who exhibit this highly unprofessional, ubiquitous type of mistreatment seek purposefully to isolate or shut out certain employees (Henle *et al.*, 2023). Ostracized employees may sense that they do not receive adequate attention from coworkers, are not invited to coworker meetings or social gatherings, are deprived of social support by coworkers, or receive “the silent treatment” (Ferris *et al.*, 2008; Howard *et al.*, 2020). Prior research on ostracism relies on COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) to explicate its resource-depleting effects, including enhanced psychological distress (Choi, 2019) and work-to-family conflict (Choi, 2021), as well as diminished job performance (Abrar *et al.*, 2022) and creativity (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). In drawing from this same theory, we investigate, as an unexplored consequence, thwarted change-oriented OCB, with a specific focus on the potential mediating role of employees’ depersonalization of coworkers (De Clercq *et al.*, 2020) and the moderating role of their idealism (Stefanidis *et al.*, 2023) in this process.

In his groundbreaking work, Hobfoll (1989) presented COR theory as a useful framework to predict that people cope with stressful situations by applying their resources. In particular, “when confronted with stress, individuals ... strive to minimize net loss of resources” (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 517). Expanding on these early reflections, Hobfoll (2001) detailed two core principles of COR theory: (1) the motivation to avoid resource loss is disproportionately more prominent

than the motivation to achieve resource gains, and (2) people must invest resources to safeguard themselves against resource losses, recuperate from such losses, and obtain additional resources. These two principles in turn inform four corollaries: (1) People who have access to more resources have a lower risk of experiencing resource loss and are better placed to obtain resource gains; (2) initial resource losses engender future losses (i.e., produce resource loss spirals); (3) initial gains engender future gains (i.e., produce resource gain spirals), but loss spirals are stronger than gain spirals; and (4) people who suffer drained resources have a strong desire to adopt self-protective strategies to conserve their remaining resources (Hobfoll, 2001).

For the purposes of this study, we apply two premises derived from these corollaries that have been used in recent applications of COR theory. The first premise, in line with the fourth corollary, is that the resource drainage caused by adverse work circumstances directs employees toward negative responses that enable them to *cope*, such as by expressing their dismay about resource threats (Luo *et al.*, 2022; Wu *et al.*, 2023). For example, prior studies that leverage COR theory illustrate that employees' experience of incongruent values (Doblhofer *et al.*, 2019) or damaging leadership styles (Pandey *et al.*, 2021) lead them to undertake self-defensive reactions, as ways to cope with the associated difficulties. The second premise, consistent with the first corollary, is that employees' possession of valuable personal resources can decrease their desire to adopt such coping responses (Abbas *et al.*, 2014; Hobfoll, 2001). These personal resources make it less necessary or attractive to formulate adverse responses as means to alleviate disappointments about resource-depleting treatments (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). As prior research has established, employees' negative responses to resource-draining abusive supervision are mitigated by their core self-evaluations (Usman *et al.*, 2022) and that they respond less negatively to emotional labor when they can rely on their spirituality (Zou and Dahling, 2017).

The notion of “resources” is broadly defined in COR theory, but one pertinent resource that employees consider very precious—included in Hobfoll’s (2001) encompassing list of core COR resources—is the social support they receive from coworkers, or the extent to which they enjoy social connectivity resources together with other organizational members. Consistent with the aforementioned first COR premise, we propose that employees’ depersonalization of coworkers and refusal to engage in voluntary change efforts represent meaningful reactions to their experience of coworker ostracism, because these reactions enable them to vent their frustration with the depletion of their social connectivity resources (Choi, 2021; Fatima *et al.*, 2023). We do not capture these resources explicitly, but we theorize that their depletion triggers a desire in ostracism victims to treat their coworkers as impersonal objects and then to stay away from change-oriented OCB (Baker and Kim, 2021; Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022). Through these reactions, employees can release their disillusionment and feel less bad about their experience of being ignored by coworkers (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). This proposed mediating effect of depersonalization aligns with, and extends, evidence of the similar resource-conserving role of such responses in the negative connections of employees’ experience of work-induced sleep deprivation (De Clercq and Pereira, 2024c), role stress (Kang and Jang, 2019), broken organizational promises (De Clercq *et al.*, 2023), or customer incivility (Baker and Kim, 2021) on the one hand with their willingness to undertake productive work activities on the other.

According to the second COR premise, the *strength* of these coping responses is contingent on the degree to which they can leverage personal resources that subdue the experience of social adversity (De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia, 2024a). We specifically propose that when employees can rely on their personal idealism and associated desire to avoid generating damage for others (Stefanidis *et al.*, 2023), it decreases the probability that (1) they

seek to deal with their social isolation by developing depersonalized perceptions of coworkers and (2) these perceptions, if still present, translate into work-related complacency in the form of lower change-oriented OCB. As shown in prior studies, employees who possess idealistic values find it easier to deal with disappointing career situations or unfair organizational treatments (De Clercq, 2022; Hastings and Finegan, 2011). We theorize a similar buffering effect in relation to how they experience coworker relationships. To the extent that employees can draw from their idealism, the detrimental effect of their suffering from coworker ostracism on their change-oriented OCB, through dehumanized perceptions of coworkers, gets mitigated, because they experience a lower need to express their dismay in harmful ways (Wang and Calvano, 2015).

Conceptual framework

In the theoretical framework in Figure 1, we depict the predicted mediating role of depersonalization of coworkers, together with the moderating effects of idealism along the two paths that constitute the mediation link. Notably, our theorizing focuses on employees' dehumanized perceptions of coworkers as a *focal* explanatory mechanism of the link between coworker ostracism and change-oriented OCB; we do not hypothesize a direct relationship between coworker ostracism and change-oriented OCB.¹ The hypotheses that underpin the proposed conceptual model are detailed next.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Mediating role of depersonalization of coworkers

We hypothesize a positive relationship between coworker ostracism and depersonalization of coworkers. According to COR theory, employees' perceptions that they are exposed to resource-draining work conditions, as arise when they are ignored by coworkers,

¹ A direct-effect hypothesis would necessitate a detailed explanation and tests of the various reasons, *other* than depersonalization, that coworker ostracism might lead to reduced voluntary change behaviors, which is beyond the scope of the current study.

trigger them to express themselves in ways that enable them cope with the experienced difficulties (Wu *et al.*, 2023). As mentioned, we do not assess the link between coworker ostracism and depleted social connectivity resources directly, but we recognize it indirectly, by theorizing about its consequences for how victims of ostracism respond to the sources of their experienced hardships, namely, by dehumanizing them (Baker and Kim, 2021; Pujol-Cols *et al.*, 2023). Employees may develop a desire to treat coworkers as if they were impersonal, in response to resource-draining coworker ostracism, because their social exclusion gives them a sense that their coworkers do not deserve their personal concern (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Previous studies, also anchored in COR theory, similarly indicate that employees who suffer from resource-draining psychological contract breaches (De Clercq *et al.*, 2023) or surface acting (Lee *et al.*, 2018) use depersonalization to vent their dismay. We therefore predict:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between employees' experience of coworker ostracism and their depersonalization of coworkers.

Employees who engage in depersonalization of coworkers in turn may be less likely to undertake discretionary change efforts from which their organization and its constituents could benefit (Carter *et al.*, 2014). Consistent with COR theory, their refusal to allocate discretionary energy to change-invoking organizational improvements, in response to their depersonalization of coworkers, may create resource gains in the form of a sense of personal fulfillment (Baker and Kim, 2021; Campbell *et al.*, 2013). In particular, it feels fulfilling to these employees to refrain from exhibiting change-oriented voluntarism in an organization that seemingly is not able to stimulate meaningful coworker relationships (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022). Their sense of being ignored by coworkers fuels their convictions that they work for an organization that is not concerned about their professional well-being (Arabaci, 2010), which makes them reluctant to invest energy resources in extra-role behaviors to enhance the organizational status quo (Quinn

et al., 2012). Extant research similarly has leveraged COR theory to show that employees are less likely to engage in change-oriented OCB to the extent that they consider their work meaningless (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023d). We thus propose:

Hypothesis 2: There is a negative relationship between employees' depersonalization of coworkers and their engagement in change-oriented OCB.

In addition to these two direct-effect hypotheses, we combine their arguments to postulate a key mediation logic. In particular, employees' depersonalization of coworkers represents a critical explanation for *why* their experience of social exclusion escalates into tarnished change-oriented OCB. When employees feel upset that coworkers ignore them, they might halt their productive change-oriented work efforts, because they feel indifferent about whether their employer and its members could suffer from their work-related complacency (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022). As we noted, prior studies identify a similar explanatory role of employees' depersonalization in the negative link between their exposure to other adverse work situations—such as psychological contract breaches (De Clercq *et al.*, 2023) or rude customer treatments (Baker and Kim, 2021)—and their propensity to engage in constructive work behaviors. As an extension, we posit that employees' depersonalization of coworkers mediates the translation of their exposure to coworker ostracism into diminished change-oriented OCB.

Hypothesis 3: Employees' depersonalization of coworkers mediates the relationship between their experience of coworker ostracism and their engagement in change-oriented OCB.

Moderating role of idealism

The extent to which employees are marked by high levels of idealism—such that their personal values underscore a preoccupation with avoiding harm to others (Wang and Calvano, 2015)—may attenuate the relationships between their experience of coworker ostracism and depersonalization of coworkers (Hypothesis 1) and between such depersonalization and change-

oriented OCB (Hypothesis 2). As postulated by COR theory, the adverse effects of resource-draining coworker-related treatments or beliefs become subdued when employees can draw from personal resources that serve as protective safeguards against the experienced resource drainage (De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia, 2024a; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). We similarly predict that employees' idealism may shield them from the social challenges that stem from coworker ostracism, as well as negative work sentiments that arise with the resulting depersonalization.

First, the experience of coworker ostracism may prompt employees' depersonalization of coworkers to a lesser degree when their personal values convey idealism. In line with COR theory, employees' desire to treat coworkers as if they were impersonal entities, as a means to help them cope with resource-depleting coworker ostracism, should be less prominent if they have access to personal resources that render this coping tactic less appealing (De Clercq, 2022; Hobfoll and Shirom, 2000). That is, ostracized employees' motivation to dehumanize coworkers likely is lower when their personal values advise them against hurting others (Stefanidis *et al.*, 2023). Employees marked by high idealism tend to hold positive energy toward other people, even those who treat them in suboptimal ways (Hastings and Finegan, 2011; McClaren and Vocino, 2017). This energy should decrease their propensities to release frustration with depleted social connectivity resources, caused by ostracism, through depersonalization of their coworkers. In short, idealistic employees assign less weight to the professional hardships of social exclusion, so in line with COR logic (Hobfoll, 2001), it becomes less likely that their dismay with resource-draining coworker ostracism triggers a desire to dehumanize coworkers (Bedi, 2021).

Hypothesis 4: The positive relationship between employees' experience of coworker ostracism and their depersonalization of coworkers is moderated by their idealism, such that this relationship is weaker among employees who are more idealistic.

Second, the likelihood that employees' depersonalization of coworkers escalates into diminished voluntary change efforts should be mitigated by their idealism too. As predicted by COR theory, the adverse effect that coworker-related indifference has on employees' willingness to undertake productive behaviors is mitigated to the extent that they possess personal resources that help them put the indifference in perspective (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Personal values that prioritize avoiding harm to others could make employees realize that their dehumanized perceptions of coworkers are unfounded and unduly informed by their individual biases in difficult work situations (De Clercq, 2022; McClaren and Vocino, 2017). That is, their convictions that others' well-being supersedes their self-interested concerns reduce the likelihood that employees use depersonalization of organizational colleagues as a justification to withhold discretionary work efforts that otherwise could enhance the organizational status quo (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022). Idealism redirects employees' focus away from their disappointment with an employer that deprives them of satisfactory coworker relationships and toward an interest in supporting that employer's success (Stefanidis *et al.*, 2023), which should diminish their propensities to halt extra-role, change-oriented work efforts. We predict:

Hypothesis 5: The negative relationship between employees' depersonalization of coworkers and their engagement in change-oriented OCB is moderated by their idealism, such that this relationship is weaker among employees who are more idealistic.

The integration of the preceding arguments points to a moderated mediation dynamic (Hayes and Rockwood, 2020). The personal resource of idealism serves as a notable contingency factor of the negative indirect relationship between coworker ostracism and change-oriented OCB, through the depersonalization of coworkers. According to this moderated mediation logic, among employees whose values reflect a goal to avoid inflicting harm on others (Wang and Calvano, 2015), the role of a desire to treat coworkers as impersonal objects, as a mechanism

that explains the translation of coworker ostracism into lower voluntary change efforts, is mitigated. This personal resource provides a useful protection against the social deprivation that employees experience when they are ignored by others, so they can maintain some degree of change-oriented OCB, reflecting their diminished depersonalization of the sources of this deprivation (Baker and Kim, 2021). But if they exhibit less idealistic values, depersonalization becomes a more potent explanation for how coworker ostracism translates into work-related complacency, in the form of curtailed change-oriented voluntarism.

Hypothesis 6: The indirect negative relationship between employees' experience of coworker ostracism and their engagement in change-oriented OCB, through their enhanced depersonalization of coworkers, is moderated by their idealism, such that this indirect relationship is weaker among employees who are more idealistic.

Research method

Sample and data collection

We applied a deductive, quantitative research design to the empirical tests of the hypotheses, which are anchored in the well-established framework of COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). In particular, we administered a quantitative survey among employees who work for a large organization in the banking sector in Mozambique. It is not possible to establish conclusively whether this organization is representative of the country's entire banking sector, which includes 15 organizations, but we have no reason to believe it differs fundamentally from its peers, in light of its focus on typical banking activities (e.g., deposits, credit, payment cards) and the homogeneity of the banking sector in Mozambique (Hanlon, 2002; Intupo, 2023). Our investigation of a single organization is intentional, as a means to diminish the potential influence of pertinent differences in organizations' internal climates (Kao, 2017) or firm-level union practices (Hu *et al.*, 2023) on employees' voluntary change efforts. Similarly, examining a company that operates in *one* industry sector helps

mitigate the biases that can result from unobserved differences in external market contexts, which shape perceptions of the need for or usefulness of substantial discretionary efforts to enhance the organizational status quo (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022; Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli, 2012).

The banking sector in Mozambique is marked by high levels of market turbulence, such that organizations that compete in this context can benefit greatly from employees' extra-role change efforts (Barros *et al.*, 2018; Gil-Alana *et al.*, 2017). Our investigation of how exposure to adverse coworker treatments may dampen employees' efforts to alter and enhance the organizational status quo on a voluntary basis thus is very relevant for the studied setting.² The country context also is appealing because its cultural features may influence the proposed mediation link in *opposing* ways. In particular, its high score on the collectivism dimension (Hofstede, 2011; Sartorius *et al.*, 2011) suggests that employees may feel upset or even offended when their coworkers do not pay attention to them, such that negative reactions in the form of depersonalization and then thwarted change-oriented OCB become more likely. But collectivism also may elicit employees' interest in supporting the organizational collective (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010), such that victims of ostracism may be less likely to take out their dismay on their employing organization through work-related complacency. In light of these contrasting logics, Mozambique offers a relevant setting for examining the proposed conceptual model, with additional value for other countries with similar cultural profiles. Finally, this specific country focus complements recent COR theory-based studies that explicate Mozambican employees' reliance on valuable resources to address challenges created by other professional or personal

² Single-organization, single-industry studies of employees' behavioral reactions to adverse work treatments also are common practice across various country settings, as illustrated by studies undertaken in Mexico (De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia, 2024b), Spain (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023c), Portugal (De Clercq and Pereira, 2025), Israel (De Clercq and Pereira, 2022b), Angola (De Clercq and Pereira, 2021b), and Guinea-Bissau (De Clercq and Pereira, 2021a), as well as Mozambique (De Clercq and Pereira, 2024b).

hardships, such as politicized organizational decision-making (De Clercq and Pereira, 2022c) or rude treatment in the family sphere (De Clercq and Pereira, 2022a).

The survey instrument was developed using the well-recognized translation–back-translation approach (van Dick *et al.*, 2018). An English version was first translated into Portuguese by a person fluent in the two languages, then back-translated into English by another bilingual person. After fixing a few minor points, we pretested a pilot version of the Portuguese survey with five employees who did not participate in the actual data collection. Their input and recommendations led to a few minor revisions to improve the survey’s readability. We administered the final instrument electronically, using an institutional license of the Microsoft Forms software owned by the research institution of one of the authors. The employees of the banking organization were very familiar with this software and found it easy to navigate; the survey platform also complied with standard ethical regulations with respect to data collection and storage. Our reliance on a quantitative *survey*, designed to capture employees’ general perceptions about their professional functioning, instead of a controlled experiment that manipulates different levels of coworker ostracism, is in line with recent research efforts to establish how employees in African organizations (e.g., Angola, De Clercq and Pereira, 2023a; Guinea-Bissau, De Clercq and Pereira, 2021c; Mozambique, De Clercq and Pereira, 2024a) respond to difficult work situations.³

We also sought to decrease the probability of biases that can emerge through the collection of survey data, particularly in a power-distant country such as Mozambique (Hofstede, 2011). First, to diminish the risk of expectancy bias, which results when research participants can

³ Similar to extant studies that also pertain to African countries with a history of Portuguese colonization, we did not perform cross-cultural validation checks and compare the construct validity of our results with those obtained from parallel data collections in other countries, including English-speaking ones. Further studies could helpfully compare the validity of the focal constructs across cultures.

identify proposed theoretical relationships and adjust their responses accordingly, a statement that preceded the survey described the research goals in a very general manner, without detailing any specific hypotheses. We also did not mention the construct names in the survey (Malhotra, 2021). Second, we took various steps to diminish the probability of acquiescence and social desirability biases. The statement that preceded the survey underscored the entirely voluntary nature of employees' participation and the complete confidentiality of their answers; they knew that their employing organization would have no information about who partook in the research study, no individual-level data would be mentioned in any research output, and they could leave the study at any time (Burns and Burns, 2008). Third, to decrease framing bias, the survey instructions clearly explained that there were no right or wrong responses, that it was expected that different participants would express varying viewpoints about particular questions, and that it was crucial for the validity of the study that participants offer their truthful opinions about their work conditions (Malhotra, 2021).

The sample frame encompassed all of the approximately 2,500 employees of the organization, provided by its HR department. We *randomly* selected 500 employees from this employee list as potential participants, using a random digit generator, to increase the chances that they would be representative of the organization's workforce. Among these 500 employees, 289 completed the survey, for a response rate of 58%. Although this response rate is high, we still assessed the possibility of non-response bias by checking for differences between early and late respondents on the study variables. Because the *p*-values of an independent group t-test exceed .05 for each of the study variables, we find a lack of significant differences; the probability of non-response bias is low. In combination with the random sampling approach, this finding suggests it is unlikely that the sample is not representative (Armstrong and Overton,

1977; Malhotra, 2021). Among the respondents, 43% were men and 57% were women, they had worked for their current organization for an *average* of 12 years (ranging from 1 to 37 years), and 75.4% had at least some supervisory responsibilities.⁴

Measures

To operationalize the constructs central to our research hypotheses, we used measurement items that have been established by previous studies. The scales featured seven-point Likert anchors, from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

Coworker ostracism. We assessed the extent to which employees feel socially excluded by coworkers with a ten-item scale of workplace ostracism (Ferris *et al.*, 2008). For example, the respondents rated whether “Coworkers treat me as if I weren’t there” and “Coworkers ignore me at work” (Cronbach’s alpha = .97).

Depersonalization of coworkers. To measure the extent to which employees develop dehumanized perceptions of coworkers, we applied a five-item scale of depersonalization (Boles *et al.*, 2000). Two sample items were: “I treat coworkers as if they were impersonal objects” and “I don’t really care what happens to coworkers” (Cronbach’s alpha = .90).

Change-oriented OCB. We measured the extent to which employees undertake voluntary efforts to change and improve the organizational status quo with a nine-item scale of change-oriented citizenship behavior (Bettencourt, 2004). In line with Morrison and Phelps (1999), the questions were preceded by a statement that clarified that participants should indicate whether

⁴ We captured supervisory responsibilities with a *job level* control variable, as detailed in the Measures subsection. Some respondents did not have any supervisory responsibilities, yet the nature of the banking sector, which employs white-collar instead of blue-collar workers, largely alleviates concerns that the respondents might not be qualified to reflect on the topics under study. The methodological design, including the various efforts to diminish response biases, also increases the likelihood that participants were both able and motivated to provide meaningful answers to the survey questions. Prior research in this power-distant context similarly has relied on the opinions of banking employees, across various job levels, to determine how employees assess and respond to adverse organizational treatments (De Clercq and Pereira, 2024a), including in situations in which they depend on leaders’ authority (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023e).

they undertake certain activities that extend beyond their formal job duties. They rated, for example, whether “I try to bring about improved procedures for the organization” and “I try to introduce new work approaches to improve organizational efficiency” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$). Our reliance on a self-rated measure of change-oriented OCB aligns with previous research (e.g., Haq *et al.*, 2020; Hu *et al.*, 2023; Simo *et al.*, 2016) and reflects the argument that other raters, such as supervisors or peers, typically have incomplete insights into the entire range of discretionary change efforts that employees might engage in, because these efforts often stay under the radar for other members (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022; López-Domínguez *et al.*, 2013)

Idealism. We measured the extent to which employees exhibit personal values that avoid causing harm to others with a seven-item scale of idealism (Wang and Calvano, 2015). Two example items were, “A person should make certain that their actions never intentionally harm another even to a small degree” and “One should not perform an action, which might in any way threaten the dignity and welfare of another individual” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$).⁵

Control variables. The statistical models included four control variables: gender (0 = male; 1 = female), organizational tenure (in years), job level (1 = lower, 2 = intermediate, 3 = higher),⁶ and decision centralization.⁷ Relative to men, women may have weaker propensities to engage in change-oriented work activities that disrupt the status quo (Huang *et al.*, 2020).

Employees who have worked for their company for a longer time or who have attained a higher

⁵ Two items—“Risks to another should never be tolerated, irrespective of how small the risks might be” and “The existence of potential harm to others is always wrong, irrespective of the benefits to be gained”—were omitted from the analyses because of their low factor loadings, obtained from a confirmatory factor analysis (reported hereafter). The loadings ($< .30$) indicated that the items had less than 10% of their variance in common with the idealism construct (Lattin *et al.*, 2003). Cross-country validation studies might check if this issue could be related to our translation-back-translation procedure.

⁶ The survey specified that the lower category referred to employees with no supervisory responsibilities, the intermediate category to employees with some supervisory responsibilities, and the higher category to employees with significant supervisor responsibilities.

⁷ With a four-item scale, we captured the extent to which employees perceived a lack of decision autonomy (e.g., “Any decision that my colleagues or I make needs to be approved by top management”; De Clercq *et al.*, 2011; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .72$).

job level may have more confidence in their capacity to alter current organizational practices (Ng and Feldman, 2013; Nguyen and Malik, 2022). Employees who perceive centralized decision-making likely are less able or motivated to undertake voluntary change efforts (Zhang *et al.*, 2017). According to recent research conducted in Angola, a country with a cultural profile similar to Mozambique's, the rigidity of organizational decision-making, as manifest in decision formalization (akin to but not identical with decision centralization; Tripathi and Tripathi, 2022), constitutes a relevant element of organizations' internal climates that affects employees' depersonalization and work-related voluntarism (De Clercq and Pereira, 2024c).⁸

Construct validity. We assessed the validity of the study's four focal constructs through a confirmatory factor analysis performed on a four-factor measurement model. The fit of this measurement model was good: $\chi^2(350) = 987.66$, confirmatory fit index = .92, incremental fit index = .92, Tucker-Lewis index = .90, and root mean square error of approximation = .08. Evidence of convergent validity was confirmed in the significant factor loadings of each item ($p < .001$; Hair *et al.*, 2019) and the average variance extracted (AVE) values that ranged between .49 and .74 (Lattin *et al.*, 2003). There also was evidence of discriminant validity because (1) each of the AVE values exceeded the squared correlations between the associated construct pairs, and (2) the fit of the models that included restricted construct pairs, in which the correlation between two constructs was forced to equal 1, was significantly worse than the fit of the corresponding unrestricted models, in which the correlation between the constructs could vary freely, for each of the six possible construct pairs ($\Delta\chi^2_{(1)} > 3.84$, $p < .05$; Hair *et al.*, 2019).

⁸ Further studies could account for the simultaneous effects of *both* centralization and formalization as pertinent dimensions of an organization's decision-making climate, as well as the extent to which the organizational climate supports change specifically (De Clercq and Pereira, 2023b) or is marked by power distance or uncertainty avoidance (Ishaq *et al.*, 2022).

Common source bias. With two well-established tests, we checked whether common source bias might be an issue. First, an exploratory factor analysis assessed whether a single factor accounted for the majority of the total data variance (Oh *et al.*, 2018; Sadiq, 2022). This was not the case; the first extracted factor accounted for only 36% of this variance. Second, we compared the fit of the aforementioned four-factor model with that of a one-factor model in which all items loaded on a single construct. The former model had a significantly better fit than the latter ($\chi^2(6) = 2,179.44, p < .001$), which provided further evidence that our reliance on a common respondent was not a concern (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Third, and from a theoretical angle, the likelihood of common source bias is drastically subdued when testing complex conceptual frameworks that entail one or more moderated links, because it is challenging for respondents in this scenario to understand or predict the framework's research hypotheses and then adapt their responses accordingly (Malhotra, 2021; Simons and Peterson, 2000).

Statistical procedure

The research hypotheses were tested with the Process macro, which offers the advantage that direct, mediation, and moderated mediation effects can be assessed in a comprehensive fashion (Hayes, 2018). This macro uses a bootstrapping procedure, which provides the additional benefit that the calculations are valid even if the indirect or conditional indirect effects are not normally distributed (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2004). In a first stage, we relied on Process macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) to calculate the indirect relationship between coworker ostracism and change-oriented OCB through depersonalization of coworkers, in conjunction with the associated direct paths that underpin the mediation link. In a second stage, we leveraged Process macro Model 58 (Hayes, 2018) to calculate the moderating effect of idealism on the relationship between coworker ostracism and depersonalization of coworkers, as well as between

depersonalization of coworkers and change-oriented OCB. As explicated in the Process macro, these conditional indirect effects are calculated at three distinct levels of the moderator: at one standard deviation (SD) below its mean, at its mean, and at one SD above its mean.

Results

Table 1 contains the correlations and descriptive statistics of the study variables, and Table 2 offers the results related to the proposed mediation link, as obtained from Process macro Model 4. In terms of the control variables, Table 2 indicates that gender did not significantly relate to depersonalization of coworkers ($b = -.104$, *ns*) or change-oriented OCB ($b = -.143$, *ns*), which might reflect the general instead of organization-specific nature of this demographic characteristic. Employees who had worked for their company for a longer time ($b = -.018$, $p < .10$) or occupied a higher job level ($b = -.203$, $p < .10$) were (somewhat) less likely to depersonalize coworkers, possibly because these employees are more familiar with, or feel more responsible for, their peers. Yet these two control variables were not significantly related to change-oriented OCB ($b = .012$, *ns*; $b = .060$, *ns*, respectively). Perhaps two mechanisms balance each other out: More experienced or higher ranked employees may feel better able to change the organizational status quo voluntarily (Ng and Feldman, 2013), but they also might be hesitant to invoke such change, to protect their hard-earned, current privileges (Hon *et al.*, 2014). Finally, perceptions of decision centralization did not significantly relate to depersonalization of coworkers ($b = -.018$, *ns*), but as expected, these perceptions made employees (somewhat) less likely to take initiative to change the organizational status quo voluntarily ($b = -.069$, $p < .10$).

[Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here]

With respect to the hypothesized relationships that underpin the proposed mediation link, the Table 2 results indicate that coworker ostracism was positively related to depersonalization

of coworkers ($b = .398, p < .001$), in line with Hypothesis 1, which in turn was negatively related to change-oriented OCB ($b = -.202, p < .001$), consistent with Hypothesis 2. The evaluation of the mediation effect itself indicated an effect size of $-.084$ for the indirect relationship between coworker ostracism and change-oriented OCB through depersonalization of coworkers; its confidence interval (CI) did not include 0 ($[-.143, -.032]$), affirming the mediating role of employees' propensities to treat coworkers as impersonal objects, as postulated by Hypothesis 3.

Table 3 presents the results for the moderation and moderated mediation effects. There was a negative, significant effect of the coworker ostracism $\times$ idealism interaction term ($b = -.281, p < .001$, Hypothesis 4) on predicting the depersonalization of coworkers, as well as a positive, significant effect of the depersonalization of coworkers $\times$ idealism interaction term ($b = .065, p < .05$, Hypothesis 5) on predictions of change-oriented OCB. The statistical findings, generated by Process macro Model 58, clarify that the positive relationship between coworker ostracism and depersonalization of coworkers was subdued at higher levels of idealism ($.672$ at $-1SD$, $.377$ at the mean, $.082$ at $+1SD$). The other equation for the mediation link revealed similar, decreasing effects in the relationship between the depersonalization of coworkers and change-oriented OCB at increasing levels of idealism ($-.246$ at $-1SD$, $-.178$ at the mean, $-.110$ at $+1SD$). These results support Hypotheses 4 and 5. Figure 2 graphs the two moderating effects. Both the positive slope of the connection between coworker ostracism and depersonalization of coworkers (Panel A) and the negative slope of the connection between depersonalization of coworkers and change-oriented OCB (Panel B) are *weaker* at higher levels of idealism.

[Insert Table 3 and Figures 2A–2B about here]

The formal assessment of the presence of moderated mediation entailed an evaluation of the strength of the conditional indirect relationship between coworker ostracism and change-

oriented OCB through depersonalization of coworkers at different levels of idealism. The bottom parts of Table 3 contain these findings. We note diminishing effect sizes at more elevated levels of this personal resource: from $-.165$ (at $-1SD$) to $-.067$ (mean) to $-.009$ ($+1SD$). The CIs did not span 0 at the two lower levels of idealism ($[-.282; -.066]$ and $[-.122; -.026]$, respectively), but the CI included 0 at its highest level ($[-.044; .031]$). These findings confirm that idealism functioned as a buffer of the negative indirect relationship between coworker ostracism and change-oriented OCB through depersonalization of coworkers, consistent with Hypothesis 6 and the study's overarching theoretical framework.

Finally, we undertook a post hoc power analysis (G*Power software; Faul *et al.*, 2007) to make sure the sample of 289 employees was sufficiently large to produce adequate statistical power. To achieve a high, acceptable statistical power of .95 for a model that includes six predictors (gender, organizational tenure, job level, decision centralization, coworker ostracism, and idealism; left-side model in Table 2), in combination with an effect size of Cohen's $f^2 = .259$ (in line with the R^2 value of .206 obtained in that statistical model), the minimum required sample size is 87 participants. Our sample substantially exceeds this level. The minimum sample sizes needed for the other three statistical models (i.e., right-side model in Table 2; left- and right-side models in Table 3) equal 73, 70, and 72, respectively. Overall then, the post hoc analysis indicates that the statistical power levels obtained with the study's sample were much higher than the conservative threshold of 95% (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Discussion

Theoretical implications

We have investigated how employees who encounter ostracism in their coworker relationships may exhibit diminished extra-role efforts, as well as which factors may underpin or

influence this connection. Extant research affirms that social exclusion at work steers employees away from disruptive behavior in general (Kwan *et al.*, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2023), but it has not explicated the specific and relevant outcome of change-oriented OCB, let alone why and when this harmful process may unfold. The theoretical value of investigating *voluntary* change efforts specifically derives from the argument that organizations can reap particularly great benefits from activities that are unsolicited and go beyond formal job duties (Carter *et al.*, 2014; Jain *et al.*, 2011). We have drawn from COR theory (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) to propose that (1) employees may halt their extra-role change efforts in response to coworker ostracism because they treat coworkers as depersonalized objects, but (2) their idealistic values can serve as buffers of this process. The statistical findings provide empirical evidence for these conceptual predictions.

The first theoretical implication of this research therefore is that irritations that arise with coworker ostracism may lead to decreased extra-role efforts to enhance the organizational status quo, because employees become indifferent about their coworkers' well-being. Consistent with the logic of COR theory, employees who feel ignored may consider this resource-depleting treatment as an indication that their organization does not care about their professional functioning in relation to other members (Fatima *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). They release their associated frustrations by exhibiting depersonalization toward the causes of their social isolation and halting their voluntary change efforts—which they consider justified responses to the depletion of social connectivity resources (Hobfoll, 2001). In demonstrating this mediating role of depersonalization, this study contributes to prior research that predicts that existing, close personal relationships can help employees deal with the challenges of workplace adversity (De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia, 2023; Jiang *et al.*, 2024). By adopting a different perspective, our research reveals that employees start treating coworkers as if they were impersonal objects *in*

response to experiences of coworker ostracism, which leaves them reluctant to contribute to the organization with discretionary, change-oriented work efforts (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022). As emphasized in the Introduction, this sequence of effects is conceptually interesting. It pinpoints a significant danger for organizations and their constituents: Coworker relationships might be marked by ostracism, but the organization's ability to address this unfavorable social situation likely is undermined if employees, having become indifferent to others in their immediate work environments, are not motivated to undertake discretionary change behaviors that otherwise might provide pertinent solutions (Carter *et al.*, 2014; Vigoda-Gadot and Beeri, 2012).

As a second theoretical implication, we clarify that this harmful dynamic—in which exposure to coworker ostracism escalates into work-related complacency—can be mitigated by the rarely explored personal value of idealism. As we predicted, employees' propensity to dehumanize coworkers becomes a less powerful channel through which social exclusion translates into halted change-oriented OCB to the extent that employees exhibit high levels of idealism or seek to avoid causing harm to others (Wang and Calvano, 2015). In line with COR theory, adverse responses to resource-draining coworker ostracism and depersonalization become subdued if employees can rely on their personal resource of idealism (De Clercq, 2022). Employees who find it important not to threaten others' well-being put less weight on social hardships that they might encounter (Hastings and Finegan, 2011), such that they (1) experience coworker ostracism as less intrusive to their professional functioning and thus feel a lower need to exhibit indifference toward the sources of the hardships and (2) are more likely to remain committed to undertaking extra-role change efforts, even if they cannot avoid a certain level of such indifference. As the moderated mediation findings underscore, idealism can be essential for avoiding this downward cascade.

This beneficial effect of employee idealism also features a counterintuitive element, which provides a related theoretical insight. An argument could be made that employees with strong idealistic values might feel especially upset with coworkers who fail to uphold the same values (Li *et al.*, 2018), such as those who ostracize other organizational members. In this view, the idealistic employees might retaliate by dehumanizing the ostracizers and refraining from productive change-oriented OCB. Yet our findings instead suggest that this negative dynamic gets superseded by a beneficial spillover effect. That is, idealistic employees respond to resource-depleting coworker ostracism by exhibiting *less* evidence of being upset about the associated hardships (De Clercq, 2022).

From a more general perspective, the buffering role of idealism, as found herein, also extends research that identifies *direct* beneficial effects of this personal value for stimulating people's moral judgment (Li *et al.*, 2018) and work engagement (Stefanidis *et al.*, 2023) or diminishing their job stress (Shukla and Srivastava, 2017) and endorsement of lying tactics (Banai *et al.*, 2014). We highlight an indirect but no less important role: Idealism functions like a protective shield against the risk that a sense of being ignored culminates in employees' refusal to contribute to their employer's welfare with voluntary suggestions for organizational improvement, due to their tendencies to treat coworkers as if they were impersonal entities.

Finally, the conceptual arguments we advance are neither industry- nor country-specific, so we predict that they generalize across various industries and countries. Nonetheless, the study results, obtained from the Mozambican banking sector, are theoretically interesting for their ability to complement research on employees' change-oriented behaviors undertaken in similar settings, geographic regions, or both. For example, bank employees in Canada appear less likely to undertake voluntary change efforts when they endure negative interferences of their family

with their work, unless they can leverage valuable resources such as peer support and procedural justice (De Clercq, 2020). The change-invoking, creative work behaviors of bank employees in Guinea-Bissau are compromised by resource-draining sleep deprivation (De Clercq and Pereira, 2021c), whereas these same behaviors are more common among employees in the distribution sector in Angola, to the extent that they can rely on their personal resource of resilience (De Clercq and Pereira, 2019). The results of the current study advance this expanding research stream by providing useful insights into how the discretionary change-focused activities of employees in the Mozambican banking sector are hampered by their sense of social isolation at work, though to a lesser extent when they can draw from their idealistic values.

Practical implications

This investigation of the roles of coworker ostracism and idealism in influencing employees' depersonalization and subsequent change-oriented OCB has important implications for HR management. In particular, HR managers should recognize a notable pitfall that comes with social exclusion in the workplace. The phenomenon may leave employees indifferent about their organizational peers and also steer them away from voluntary efforts to change and enhance the ways that the organization operates (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2022). Employees who are ignored by coworkers may consider their social isolation an indication that senior organizational leaders do not care about creating work environments that foster meaningful interpersonal relationships, to which they respond with sluggishness in their own work (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). An associated challenge in this regard is that some employees may be hesitant to complain about their sense of being ostracized, out of shame or fear that the negative treatment may get worse if they were to do so (Bedi, 2021). To resolve these barriers, HR managers could facilitate plenary discussion forums, in which employees can openly share their frustrations when other members seemingly

do not pay attention to them (Sharma and Dhar, 2022). These forums could be useful means to bring irritations with ostracism into the open, as well as to foster inclusive team dynamics and effective conflict resolution strategies, rather than depersonalization responses. Furthermore, HR managers could establish private channels for expressing concerns about ostracism, including the appointment of ombudspersons who can guarantee complete confidentiality when they receive complaints about social exclusion (Myers and Witzler, 2014). Creating opportunities for workers to express frustration *proactively* may be particularly important in bureaucratic organizations marked by highly centralized decision-making, as are common in the banking sector (Saparito and Coombs, 2013), because in such contexts, employees might anticipate that top managers are unlikely to listen to their concerns.⁹

Yet it also may be difficult to eradicate ostracism completely from the workplace, whether due to the size of the company or the covert nature of this form of coworker mistreatment (Mao *et al.*, 2018). This study provides one specific path through which HR managers can halt a harmful spiral, in which employees' negative perceptions about their coworkers escalate into work-related complacency. In particular, the extent to which employees maintain personal values that focus on avoiding harm to others can be instrumental in protecting victims of ostracism against the experienced challenges (Wang and Calvano, 2015).

Accordingly, HR managers would benefit from assessing the degree to which employees find it important not to threaten the well-being of others, even if these others might not treat them with respect, and then design recruitment and retention procedures accordingly. Organizations in which some coworker ostracism is unavoidable also can benefit from finding ways to *enhance*

⁹ In this regard, it is interesting that we uncovered a negative correlation between (perceived) decision centralization and change-oriented OCB ($r = -.122, p < .05$; Table 1), implying that the organizational structure influences this behavior. However, a post hoc analysis did not reveal any significant interaction between coworker ostracism and decision centralization for predicting depersonalization or subsequent change-oriented OCB.

employees' idealism by providing ethical guidelines about what are acceptable responses, or not, when they confront social exclusion (Stefanidis *et al.*, 2023). This point should not be taken to suggest that HR managers should prioritize idealism exclusively. To keep employees grounded, a healthy dose of realism has merit; it can prevent employees from exhibiting naiveté or excessive forgiveness toward coworkers who exhibit ostracism (Fehr and Gelfand, 2020). Nor does the positive, buffering role of idealism that we find imply that HR managers can simply ignore or condone ostracism. They must work to eliminate it, to the extent possible. But by nurturing employees' personal resource of idealism and encouraging them to leverage it, HR managers can avoid scenarios in which beliefs about being ignored turn employees into laggards who refuse to contribute to their organization's well-being with discretionary change efforts.

Limitations and further research directions

This study has some shortcomings, which suggest avenues for continued research. First, the presence of reverse causality cannot be completely eliminated; the fulfillment that employees gain from impactful voluntary change efforts might instill them with positive work energy (Li and Xie, 2022), which in turn might generate favorable perceptions about the quality of their coworker relationships. The theorized direction of causality was clearly anchored in the logic of the well-established COR theory, which postulates that resource-depleting coworker treatments elicit a desire to unleash disappointment in the form of negative sentiments and behaviors toward coworkers and the organization in general (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014). Additional investigations that measure the study's focal constructs at various points in time could offer formal checks of causality (Hair *et al.*, 2019). We also did not explicitly assess the theorized mechanism that connects employees' exposure to coworker ostracism with depersonalization of coworkers and subsequent diminished change-oriented OCB, that is, the desire to express frustration about

compromised social connectivity resources (Hobfoll, 2001); further research could do so.

Another related extension might build and test sequential mediation models that include previously studied determinants of the likelihood that employees become victims of coworker ostracism and thus capture the deeper-rooted reasons that employees avoid voluntary change efforts in the presence of such ostracism.

Second, our investigation of the buffering role of idealism aligns with extant research that points to the beneficial role of this specific personal resource in helping employees cope with adverse work situations (De Clercq, 2022; Hastings and Finegan, 2011). It would be interesting to consider the mitigating roles of other personal resources too, such as employees' resilience (Kimura *et al.*, 2018) or mindfulness (Shaffakat *et al.*, 2022). Alternatively, factors that have been shown to encourage perceptions of coworker ostracism—such as Big Five personality traits or leadership characteristics (Howard *et al.*, 2020)—could serve as boundary conditions of how employees *respond* to a sense of isolation. For example, neurotic employees are more likely to perceive being ostracized (Wu *et al.*, 2011) and also perhaps less able to deal with the hardships that come with ostracism, such that their propensities to formulate negative responses to these hardships may increase. Moreover, relevant *contextual* resources could protect employees against the hardships that stem from social exclusion, including person–organization fit (Junaedi and Wulani, 2021) or perceived organizational justice (Nauman *et al.*, 2020). It would be particularly useful to compare the relative benefit of each of these resources in shielding employees against work situations in which they feel ignored, as well as to investigate how the mitigating role of idealism stacks up against these alternative moderators.

Third, this research focuses on one company that operates in one industry. As detailed in the Sample and data collection subsection, the focus on one organization reflects an intentional

effort to alleviate concerns about the presence of unobserved, organizational-level drivers of employees' change-oriented OCB, as can arise in multi-organization studies. Single-organization approaches also are well-established—including in organizational research undertaken in African settings (e.g., De Clercq and Pereira, 2021b, 2024b)—but we acknowledge that they offer weak external validity. Our focus on the banking sector also leaves open questions about the generalizability of the results across industries. However, because the proposed theoretical links are industry neutral, we expect that their nature and signs should apply to most, if not all, sectors, even if their *strength* might vary with the influences of relevant industry characteristics. In hypercompetitive industries that put significant pressures on organizations for example (Lin and Huang, 2023), employees may be more accepting of work environments in which they do not receive substantial attention from other members, such that they would not take their frustrations about being ostracized out on their coworkers and employer. Multi-industry studies could account for this and other relevant industry factors.

Fourth, regarding the role of culture, we pinpointed two potentially opposing mechanisms, related to a country's collectivism, a dimension on which Mozambique scores high (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). This cultural factor may render employees highly upset with an organization that condones social exclusion within its ranks, and thus spur work-related complacency among the employees, but it also might generate concerns that such complacency could threaten the organizational collective. The empirical support for the theorized mediated link seems to suggest that the former logic overrides the latter, but this interpretation is speculative. From this perspective, a useful extension to our research would undertake *multi-country* studies to explicate if and how the strength of the proposed mediated relationship is contingent on particular cultural features. Such studies also could go beyond the role of

collectivism, to investigate uncertainty avoidance or power distance for example (Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Uncertainty avoidance (on which Mozambique earns an average score) might lead employees to experience uncertainty-inducing coworker ostracism as especially intrusive (Bedi, 2021), such that they react with strongly negative behaviors toward their coworkers or organization. Power distance (on which Mozambique scores high) could prompt employees to accept ostracizing treatment, particularly if exhibited by supervisors (Azeem *et al.*, 2024). A related research extension could investigate how the *individual* versions of these orientations might interfere with our conceptual framework, such as employees' own collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, or power distance (Cai *et al.*, 2020; Yang, 2020).

Conclusion

This research highlights the adverse effect of coworker ostracism on employees' depersonalization of coworkers and subsequent reluctance to go the extra mile in productive change efforts, as well as the beneficial role of employees' idealism in this process. The desire to treat coworkers as depersonalized entities is a key explanatory mechanism through which disappointment with being excluded limits employees' efforts in discretionary change activities. The strength of this mechanism is contingent, however, on the idealistic values that employees uphold. We hope these research insights serve as stepping stones for additional investigations of how organizations might subdue the risk that frustrating interpersonal relationships escalate into work-related laziness within their employee bases.

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Figure 1. Conceptual model

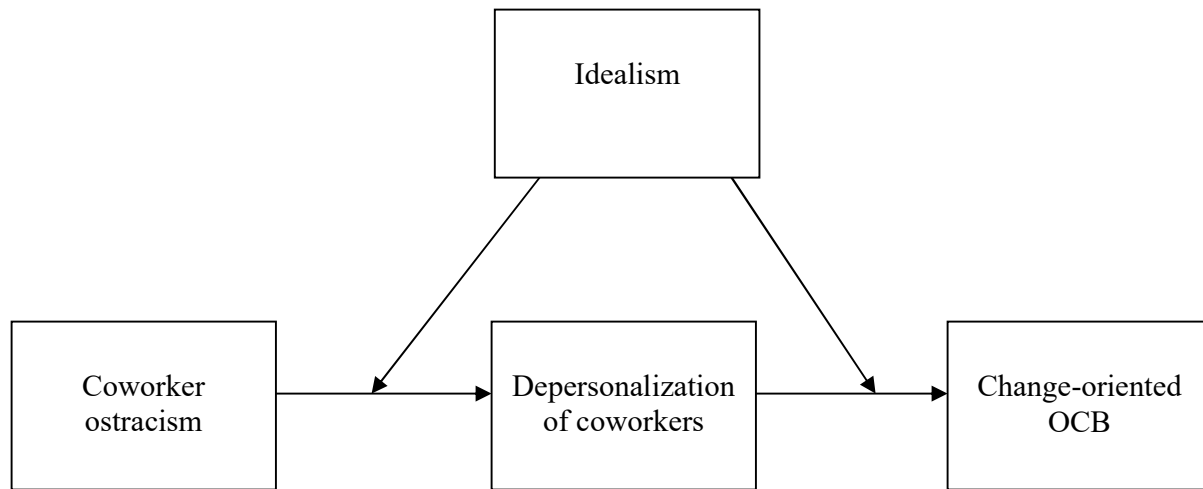
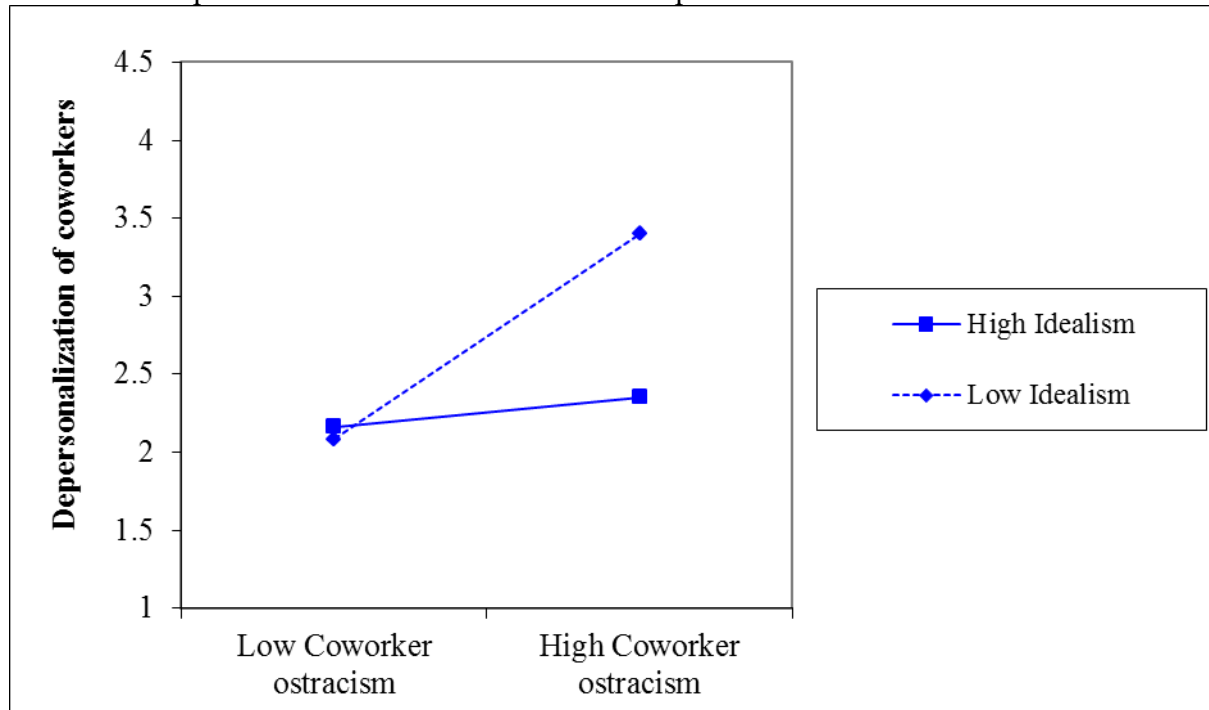


Figure 2. Moderating effects of idealism

A. Relationship between coworker ostracism and depersonalization of coworkers



B. Relationship between depersonalization of coworkers and change-oriented OCB

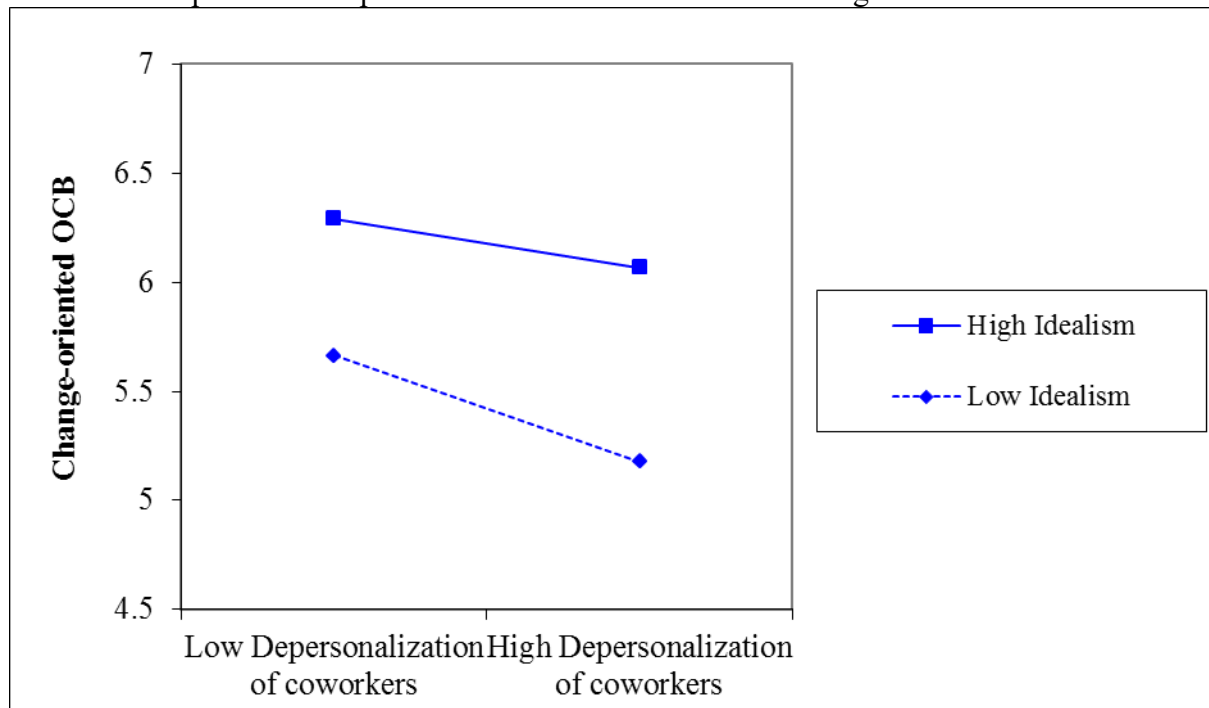


Table 1. Correlation table and descriptive statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Coworker ostracism								
2. Depersonalization of coworkers	.406**							
3. Change-oriented OCB	-.088	-.304**						
4. Idealism	-.156**	-.253**	.439**					
5. Gender (1 = female)	.026	-.033	-.042	.023				
6. Organizational tenure	.031	.088	.066	-.006	-.028			
7. Job level	-.119*	-.139*	.116*	.065	-.109	.183**		
8. Decision centralization	-.237**	-.082	-.122*	-.101	-.060	.040	.029	
Mean	2.515	2.828	5.890	5.330	.567	12.404	1.920	4.137
Standard deviation	1.174	1.391	1.158	1.049	.496	8.074	.638	1.642
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Maximum	7.000	7.000	7.000	7.000	1.000	37.000	3.000	7.000

Notes: n = 289.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Mediation results (Process macro Model 4)

	Depersonalization of coworkers	Change-oriented OCB		
Gender (1 = female)	-.104	-.143		
Organizational tenure	.018 ⁺	.012		
Job level	-.203 ⁺	.060		
Decision centralization	-.018	-.069 ⁺		
Coworker ostracism	.398***	.047		
Idealism	-.259***	.410***		
Depersonalization of coworkers		-.202***		
R ²	.206	.252		
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
Indirect effect	-.084	.028	-.143	-.032

Notes: n = 289; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval.

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Moderated mediation results (Process macro Model 58)

	Depersonalization of coworkers	Change-oriented OCB		
Gender (1 = female)	-.043	-.161		
Organizational tenure	.016 ⁺	.013		
Job level	-.196 ⁺	.046		
Decision centralization	-.030	-.061		
Coworker ostracism	.377***	.054		
Idealism	-.241***	.379***		
Coworker ostracism × idealism	-.281***			
Depersonalization of coworkers		-.178***		
Depersonalization of coworkers × idealism		.065*		
R ²	.259	.263		
Conditional <i>direct</i> relationship between coworker ostracism and depersonalization of coworkers				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
- 1SD	.672	.090	.495	.849
Mean	.377	.065	.249	.504
+ 1 SD	.082	.097	-.109	.272
Conditional <i>direct</i> relationship between depersonalization of coworkers and change-oriented OCB				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
- 1SD	-.246	.055	-.354	-.139
Mean	-.178	.051	-.279	-.077
+ 1 SD	-.110	.068	-.244	.024
Conditional <i>indirect</i> relationship between coworker ostracism and change-oriented OCB				
	Effect size	Bootstrap SE	LLCI	ULCI
- 1SD	-.165	.056	-.282	-.066
Mean	-.067	.025	-.122	-.026
+ 1 SD	-.009	.018	-.044	.031

Notes: n = 289; SD = standard deviation; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval.

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.