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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Intensity, intent, and ambiguity: Appraisals of workplace ostracism and coping responses

Erdem O. Meral[1,2] | Ivana Vranjes[1] | Yvette van Osch[3] | Dongning Ren[1] | Eric van Dijk[4] | Ilja van Beest[1]

[1]Department of Social Psychology, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

[2]Work and Organizational Psychology, Social Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

[3]Netherlands Labor Authority, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, The Hague, The Netherlands

[4]Social, Economic and Organizational Psychology Unit at Institute of Psychology, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Correspondence
Erdem O. Meral, Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Amsterdam, P.O. Box 15919, 1001 NK Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: erdemozanmeral@gmail.com

Abstract

Using both correlational and experimental designs across four studies ($N = 1251$ working individuals), the current project aimed to contribute to the understanding of workplace ostracism by studying two research questions. First, we tested whether the subjective experience of targets reflects the current theorizing of ostracism. Second, drawing from the transactional theory of stress and coping, we investigated whether this subjective experience impacts targets' coping responses. Findings based on exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supported the current theorizing of workplace ostracism such that perceived intensity, intent, and ambiguity were reflected in how targets appraised being ostracized at work. The appraisals were also related to coping responses. Perceived intensity predicted more approach-oriented (e.g., confrontation) and less avoidance-oriented coping responses (e.g., minimization). While attributions of intent also predicted some coping responses (e.g., instrumental support seeking), the explanatory power of perceived ambiguity was lower than the other two appraisals. Although these researcher-defined dimensions may be reflective of targets' experience, we propose that predictions made based on these dimensions need further refinement. The theoretical and practical significance of these findings are discussed in relation to how workplace ostracism is typically studied in the literature.

KEYWORDS

ambiguity, appraisals, coping, intensity, intent, workplace ostracism

Imagine going to work and greeting your colleagues and receiving no answer, having to sit alone during lunch or realizing that your colleagues are not inviting you when they go for a coffee break. These seemingly subtle occurrences are just a few examples of workplace ostracism. Being ostracized at work is associated with a multitude of negative outcomes such as increased turnover intentions and rates (O'Reilly et al., 2014), lower job performance (Feng et al., 2019; Xia et al., 2019), increased emotional exhaustion (Thompson et al., 2019) or psychological distress (Wu et al., 2012) to name a few. Therefore, considerable research up to date has focused

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on identifying antecedents and outcomes associated with workplace ostracism (for recent meta-analyses, see: Bedi, 2021; Howard et al., 2020).

Yet, how people appraise ostracism and how this appraisal shapes their coping strategies has received relatively less attention. This is an issue because effective mitigation or prevention of ostracism would be challenging without understanding how targets (i.e., those who are ostracized) deal with such instances. Therefore, in this project we study how targets cope with workplace ostracism by drawing from transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and investigating how targets' subjective appraisals relate to coping responses. We aim to gain a refined understanding of workplace ostracism by (1) assessing whether targets' subjective appraisals reflect the current theorizing of ostracism and (2) whether their subjective appraisals impact coping responses.

This study has several theoretical and practical contributions. First, this project can contribute to the understanding of workplace ostracism as a theoretical construct. What differentiates workplace ostracism from other workplace aggression constructs is that it is defined as an act of omission that is characterized by low intensity, lack of clear intent to harm, and ambiguity (Ferris et al., 2017; Robinson & Schabram, 2017; Robinson et al., 2013). However, it is currently unclear whether targets' appraisals of ostracism really encompass these three appraisals. We fill this gap by testing whether targets' appraisals are in line with how workplace ostracism is defined. By doing so, this study also contributes to the discussion on the distinctiveness of how workplace aggression constructs are defined (Hershcovis, 2011; Hershcovis & Reich, 2013).

Second, it is often implied that appraisals of ostracism influence how people respond to being ostracized at work (e.g., Ferris et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2013). Yet, researchers rarely measured or manipulated appraisals of ostracism to study their effects. In the current project we examined if the researcher-defined criteria surrounding intensity, intent, and ambiguity determined coping responses to workplace ostracism. As such this can help refine predictions regarding behavioral outcomes associated with ostracism at work.

Finally, our project has important practical implications. Knowing how people cope with workplace ostracism may help organizations identify how to help and assist ostracized employees. For instance, previous studies on coping show that not all strategies are equally constructive or beneficial (e.g., Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Biggs et al., 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Because poor coping with this prevalent organizational stressor can affect both individual and organizational effectiveness (e.g., due to loss in productivity), identifying factors contributing to it carries both individual and organizational benefit.

1 | DEFINING WORKPLACE OSTRACISM

In the current project we rely on a dominant stream and define ostracism as "the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she is ignored or excluded by others" (Ferris et al., 2008; p. 1348). We rely on this definition also because of its emphasis on the targets' subjective experience. This variance in subjective experience can be consequential for how targets deal with being ostracized at work. For instance, while one person may consider not being invited for coffee as ostracism, another person may not interpret the event as such. Due to varying interpretations of the same situation (cfr. appraisal; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) people will react differently to the same types of occurrences. Therefore, relying on a definition of workplace ostracism that incorporates the subjective experience of the targets is more valuable for the purposes of the current project than looking at workplace ostracism solely as an act of omission (Robinson et al., 2013).

Past decades witnessed a proliferation of workplace aggression constructs which was met by a call for integration (e.g., Hershcovis, 2011), and more rigorous investigation of specific antecedents and outcomes associated with these constructs (e.g., Ferris et al., 2008, 2017; O'Reilly et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2013). In comparing workplace ostracism to other constructs, researchers have characterized workplace ostracism by appraisals of low intensity, low intent, and ambiguity (Ferris et al., 2017). Specifically, the appraisal of low intensity refers to the fact that ostracism, in comparison to other workplace mistreatment constructs such as harassment or bullying, would be perceived as less intense or severe by the targets (e.g., O'Reilly et al., 2014). Next, the appraisal of low intent captures how targets of ostracism may attribute low levels of harmful intentions to acts of ostracism or that they may have a hard time deciphering intent. Finally, the appraisal of ambiguity refers to how ostracism is ambiguous as to whether it happened or not mainly due to being an act of omission (Robinson et al., 2013).

The subtle and innocuous nature of workplace ostracism may raise the question whether workplace ostracism is indeed a type of aggressive behavior. A dominant view describes aggressive behavior as behavior intending to hurt or harm another individual who is trying to avoid such harm (Baron, 1977; p. 7). Ostracism may not always be aggressive in intent (e.g., incidental ostracism: Lindström & Tobler, 2018), but it can be. For instance, scholars studying various forms of aggressive behavior categorize ostracism as a form of indirect aggression (e.g., Campbell & Muncer, 2008; Owens et al., 2000). Indirect forms of aggression are more covert in nature, and they are employed with the intention to harm others indirectly. Examples include excluding people from a group or talking behind someone's back (Chester et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2000). This form of aggression is also sometimes referred to as social or relational aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005). In addition, measurement of numerous aggression constructs incorporate incidents of ostracism such as bullying (e.g., "I was excluded from entertaining activities after work." in Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2004) or abusive supervision (e.g., "Gives me the silent treatment" in Tepper, 2000). Furthermore, in research on specific forms of aggression such as bullying there is ongoing debate on whether intention should be a defining factor of the construct or not (Cowan, 2012) because some suggest that "it is normally impossible to verify the presence of intent" (Einarsen et al., 2003; p. 12). Instead, it is suggested that the

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focus should be on the harm done on the target. The negative consequences of being ostracized at work (e.g., O'Reilly et al., 2014) therefore, justify viewing workplace ostracism as an aggressive act. Finally, past empirical and theoretical work directly studying workplace ostracism also classified it as form of aggressive behavior (Ferris et al., 2016; Fiset & Robinson, 2018; Robinson & Schabram, 2017). In agreement with these lines of evidence, we conceptualize workplace ostracism as an aggressive behavior and study how individuals appraise and cope with this experience.

2 | APPRAISALS OF WORKPLACE OSTRACISM AND COPING

Coping refers to any cognitive or behavioral effort aimed at managing or tolerating a specific stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) categorizes coping responses into two higher-order categories, emotion- and problem-focused coping. While problem-focused coping responses are classified as responses focusing on solving the issue at hand (e.g., confrontation or instrumental support seeking), emotion-focused coping responses deal with the emotional aftermath instead of trying to resolve the problem (e.g., emotional support seeking or avoidance). This also relates to the approach and avoidance orientation for dealing with stress (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Coping responses that orient oneself towards the source of the problem (i.e., the ostracizer or the feelings associated with being ostracized) can be classified as approach-oriented, whereas coping responses that move away from the source of the problem can be classified as avoidance-oriented (also akin to engagement-disengagement coping put forth by Tobin et al., 1989). According to the transactional theory of coping and stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), people determine whether and how to cope with a stressful event based on their appraisals of this event. People assess how threatening an event is, and whether they have sufficient resources to deal with it. Empirical studies examining the relationship between workplace ostracism appraisals and coping are lacking, but prior literature did theorize about the relationship between these appraisals and target's responses to ostracism.

Regarding intensity, both theoretical (Ferris et al., 2017; Scott & Duffy, 2015) and empirical work (O'Reilly et al., 2014) suggest that workplace ostracism is perceived as less intense than some other forms of workplace aggression. For example, O'Reilly et al. (2014) suggest that individuals perceive ostracism as more acceptable and less socially inappropriate than harassment. Consequently, low intensity may relate to subdued coping responses. Appraising mistreatment as more or less negative (Marchiondo et al., 2018) stressful (Bunk & Magley, 2013; Cortina & Magley, 2009) or intense (Nixon & Spector, 2015; Nixon et al., 2021) is related to how targets respond to it. More specifically for coping, Cortina and Magley (2009) found that when people did not perceive incivility to be very stressful, they engaged more in minimization or detachment as a way of coping. In contrast, when incivility was perceived as stressful, people responded with support seeking or more assertive coping strategies. Drawing from these findings, we expect that targets of workplace ostracism may also engage in more approach-oriented and less avoidance-oriented coping to the extent that they appraise workplace ostracism as intense.

Attributions of intent can also relate to how targets cope with being ostracized at work. Liu (2019) suggested that when attributions of harmful intent are low, targets of ostracism make more internal attributions (i.e., self-blame) about why ostracism took place (e.g., "I was socially awkward") instead of external attributions (e.g., "The perpetrator tried to hurt me"). This self-blame may in turn lead to more rumination (He et al., 2020; Rimé et al., 1992) and distress by being reminded of negative information about oneself (Kim et al., 2021). Seeking support from others or confronting the perpetrator—approach-oriented responses—may be unpopular strategies when one thinks that they are the root of the problem. Alternatively, the perception that one is being intentionally harmed or hurt may lead to anger (DeWall et al., 2009; Reijntjes et al., 2011). This anger may lead to more approach-oriented coping given that anger is an emotion associated with approach behaviors (C. S. Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Reiter-Scheidl et al., 2018). Taken together, we expect that attributing harmful intent to the sources will be positively related to approach-oriented coping and negatively related to avoidance-oriented coping.

Regarding appraisals of ambiguity, Robinson et al. (2013, p. 208) argue that this characteristic of ostracism "makes ostracism much more difficult to cope with and respond to than incivility, aggression, harassment, bullying, and the like." Moreover, Robinson et al. (2013) suggest two reasons as to why the ambiguity may lead to less approach-oriented coping responses. First, they suggest that confronting someone about an act of omission (i.e., something they have not actively engaged in) is more difficult than confronting someone about a more tangible act, like an act of commission. Second, they argue that ambiguity may enable the perpetrator to deny wrongdoing, making it difficult for the targets to approach the source of the stressor. On a similar note, Ferris et al. (2016) argue that the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding ostracism may lead the targets to feel anxious and consequently respond with avoidance-oriented responses. Taken together, these insights suggest that the ambiguous nature of ostracism will lead to more avoidance-oriented behaviors. Building on these studies, we propose that an increase in perceived ambiguity of workplace ostracism will lead to less approach-oriented, and more avoidance-oriented coping responses.

3 | CURRENT RESEARCH

In this project, we investigate (1) whether the researcher-defined criteria for workplace ostracism are reflected in the subjective experience of the targets and (2) whether this subjective experience relates to coping responses. To address these questions, we conducted four studies. Given the scarcity of empirical work on the topic we started with an exploratory study. Following past work (Hershcovis et al., 2018; Marchiondo et al., 2018), we used a critical

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incident approach in Study 1, and aimed to provide insights into how people appraised and coped with a lived experience of workplace ostracism. Note, however, that the memory of a stressor is related to how one copes with this stressor (e.g., Levine et al., 2012). It follows that any relationships we observe between targets' appraisals and coping with a critical incident approach may be prone to memory biases. To overcome these biases, we conducted three experiments (Studies 2.1–2.3) and manipulated appraisals of intensity, intent, and ambiguity (all high vs. low) to test how each relates to coping responses. Relying on this method also allowed us to test causal relationships between appraisals and coping responses.

All studies were pre-registered. For Study 1 (exploratory) we preregistered our measures, sample size and exclusion criteria; and for Studies 2.1–2.3 (confirmatory), we also preregistered our hypotheses. Hypotheses for Study 2 are in the relevant introduction section. All data, analysis scripts and preregistrations can be found in a publicly accessible repository at https://osf.io/qnukh/.

4 | STUDY 1

Using a critical incidents approach, we examined whether targets' subjective appraisals reflect the current theorizing of ostracism at work and whether these appraisals are related to specific coping strategies for dealing with workplace ostracism.

4.1 | Methods

4.1.1 | Participants

Based on our a priori determined sample size, we recruited 300 participants online (screening criteria: UK citizens, English as first language, with approval rates >95%, employed fulltime or parttime, always or sometimes works from a central place of work [also during Covid-19]) via Prolific UK (Peer et al., 2017). We paid participants 1.70 pound for their efforts. We preregistered to exclude participants who wrote a memory in less than 30 s ($n = 1$) or failed two of the three attention checks ($n = 0$). We also excluded participants who did not write a memory of workplace ostracism or indicated that they were never ostracized at work ($n = 41$). The final sample consisted of 258 participants (127 female, 131 male). The age ranged from 18 to 69 ($M = 35.96$, $SD = 11.92$). Most participants were employed full time ($n = 203$), followed by part-time employees ($n = 46$), few were unemployed and looking for work ($n = 3$) and lastly, one participant was a student ($n = 1$) at the time of the study. All participants approved the informed consent before starting the study.

4.1.2 | Procedure

First participants completed the 10-item Workplace Ostracism Scale (WOS: Ferris et al., 2008) reflecting on the past year. Then we asked all participants to describe a recent workplace ostracism experience in detail. We provided the items from the WOS (Ferris et al., 2008) as examples and did not provide a detailed description of workplace ostracism. Next, participants rated their perception of the experience on perceived intensity, intent, and ambiguity. The items pertaining to these constructs were presented on three separate pages. Afterwards, participants saw the coping scale on a single page. We randomized the order of constructs and the order of items within each construct except coping responses due to a technical error. Next, participants described the way in which they coped with the event in their own words followed by questions on general self-efficacy. Finally, participants answered some demographic questions and were debriefed.

4.1.3 | Measures and materials

4.1.3.1 | *Workplace ostracism*

The WOS (Ferris et al., 2008) is a 10-item measure of workplace ostracism assessing the frequency of experienced ostracism for the past year (e.g., "Others ignored you at work," 1 = *never*, 7 = *always*, Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

4.1.3.2 | *Perceived intensity*

Similar to previous work (e.g., Nixon et al., 2021) we wanted to stay close to definitional criteria and directly asked participants to assess the intensity of the episode by three items we devised (e.g., "*To what extent do you think what happened to you was intense?*" 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

4.1.3.3 | *Perceived ambiguity*

Based on our theoretical conceptualization of ambiguity and previous work on various forms of ambiguity (e.g., Breaugh & Colihan, 1994; McLain et al., 2015) we constructed three items (e.g., "*I am certain I was excluded* [reversed]," 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). We coded the items such that higher scores indicated more perceived ambiguity.

4.1.3.4 | *Perceived intent*

We measured perceived intent by utilizing nine items from past research (Marchiondo et al., 2018) that asks the extent to which participants attributed intent to the source (e.g., "*The primary person (s) planned this behavior,*" 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*; Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

4.1.3.5 | *Coping responses*

For the coping strategies we relied on previous work on coping with stressors (e.g., C. Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and work investigating coping with various forms of workplace mistreatment (e.g., Cortina & Magley, 2009; Hershcovis et al., 2018). We asked participants about confrontation (*e.g., "I confronted the primary person(s),"* Cortina & Magley, 2009), seeking instrumental support (e.g., "*I talked to someone to find out more about the situation,*"

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C. Carver et al., 1989), seeking emotional support (e.g., "*I asked people who have had similar experiences what they did*," C. Carver et al., 1989), minimization and conflict avoidance (e.g., "*I told myself that what happened wasn't important*," Cortina & Magley, 2009). When needed, we adopted the wording of certain items to fit the context of workplace ostracism. In addition, we included several items to assess mild forms of confrontation for a subscale we called "soft-confrontation." We opted to include mild forms because previous research reported low rates of confrontation to cope with subtle instances of workplace mistreatment (Cortina & Magley, 2009; Hershcovis et al., 2018). Additionally, Hershcovis et al. (2018), argued that confrontation might be too direct and strong for a subtle workplace mistreatment. We used three items (e.g., *"I asked the primary person(s) why I was excluded."*). This set of coping responses differed based on whether they are emotion- versus problem-focused (e.g. emotional support seeking vs confrontation, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); and whether they are approach- or avoidance-oriented (e.g., confrontation vs. avoidance, Roth & Cohen, 1986). Participants indicated to what extent each statement described how they dealt with the situation (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *a great deal*). We ran exploratory factor analyses (EFA) to understand the factor structure of the coping responses The final EFA with 16 items and a four-factor solution provided acceptable fit χ^2 (87, N = 258) = 278.68, p < .001, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.94, tucker-lewis index (TLI) = 0.90, root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.092, 95% confidence interval (CI) = (0.078, 0.107). More details about the factor analysis and the factor loadings can be found in the Supporting Information Materials: S1. Based on the factor analysis we created subsets for the coping responses as confrontation (combination of confrontation and soft-confrontation items; Cronbach's α = .94), emotional support seeking (Cronbach's α = .91), instrumental support seeking (Cronbach's α = .89), and minimization (three minimization items and one item from the initial avoidance subscale: Cronbach's α = .75).

4.1.3.6 | *Self-Efficacy*

We measured self-efficacy by using the eight-item New General Self Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001) with items such as "*I will be able to overcome many challenges*" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*, Cronbach's α = .91).

4.2 | Results

4.2.1 | Appraisals of workplace ostracism

To establish whether the definitional characteristics of workplace ostracism (i.e., intensity, intent, and ambiguity) were distinguishable in our sample we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). We used parallel analysis for factor extraction; principal axis factoring method with oblique (Oblimin) rotation and conducted the analysis using the fa() function of the R package psych (Revelle, 2021). We excluded one item from the perceived intent subscale because it did not load on any of the three factors. The final three-factor solution provided a good fit for the data with the remaining set of items χ^2(52, N = 258) = 126.46, p < .001, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.074, 95% CI = (0.055, 0.094). Factor loadings of the final model can be seen in Table 1. Based on the results of the EFA we created separate indices for perceived intensity (α = .90), intent (α = .91), ambiguity (α = .80) by calculating the means of respective items into single scores. We report the best fitting factor solution here, but we also explored other factor solutions (see Supporting Information Materials: S1).

4.2.2 | Which factors predict coping responses?

See Table 2 for descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all the variables in Study 1. We first examined the frequency of using different strategies by comparing the mean score for each coping type (full set of results in Supporting Information Materials: S1). The least used coping response was confrontation, and the most used coping response was minimization. Participants reported using instrumental support seeking and emotional support seeking less than they reported using minimization. The results suggested that avoidance-oriented coping responses—in this case minimization—are more frequently adopted than more approach-oriented coping responses such as confrontation or instrumental support seeking.

We then investigated what predicts coping responses. We used the sem() function in the R package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) to conduct the SEM analyses (with Maximum Likelihood estimation with robust standard errors, i.e., "MLR" estimator method) and report 95% BCI standard errors and p values (1000 bootstrap). For each endogenous variable an error term was automatically created by lavaan and its error variance was estimated while constraining the path loading to 1.0. The endogenous variables were allowed to covary. Here we present models built with manifest variables since we already investigated the underlying factor structures of the relevant constructs. In testing the relationship with appraisals and coping responses we controlled for the effect of gender and age on coping responses because one's gender and age may relate to the experience of and coping with mistreatment in the workplace (e.g., Cortina et al., 2002; Hobfoll et al., 1994; Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2004). Additionally, given that previous experience of mistreatment can impact how one copes with it (e.g., Cortina & Magley, 2009), we also controlled for the effect of previous experience of workplace ostracism on all coping responses. Finally, given its influence on coping responses (e.g., Haney & Long, 1995; Herman et al., 2018; Schaubroeck et al., 2000), we also controlled for the effect of general self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2001).

In our model we included direct paths from perceived intensity, intent, and ambiguity to each of the coping responses (see Figure 1 for the simplified visual depiction of the model with loadings) and paths from the control variables (i.e., gender, age, self-efficacy, WOS) to coping responses. Since we identified every possible relationship there were no degrees of freedom, and the model was overidentified,

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TABLE 1 Factor loadings from the EFA for perceptions of workplace ostracism

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Ambiguity			
1. I am certain I was excluded.	0.00	−0.02	**0.90**
2. I clearly know that I was ignored or excluded.	−0.02	−0.04	**0.86**
3. I am not sure if I was left out. (R)	−0.11	0.07	**0.48**
Intensity			
1. To what extent do you think what happened to you was severe?	−0.01	**0.90**	0.01
2. To what extent do you think what happened to you was intense?	0.02	**0.80**	−0.03
3. To what extent do you think what happened to you was serious?	0.03	**0.85**	−0.05
Intent			
1. The primary person(s) committed this behavior on purpose.	**0.84**	−0.05	−0.04
2. The incident was accidental. (R)	**0.71**	0.00	−0.13
3. The primary person(s) did not intend for this incident to happen. (R)	**0.80**	−0.15	−0.08
4. The primary person(s) intended to hurt me in some way.	**0.71**	0.13	0.01
5. The primary person(s) was unaware of the implications of their behavior. (R)	**0.75**	−0.04	0.09
6. The primary person(s) was intentionally being rude.	**0.70**	0.07	−0.12
7. The primary person(s) planned this behavior.	**0.77**	0.14	0.09
8. The primary person(s) used their behavior to get something that they wanted.	**0.51**	0.18	0.08

Note: The factor loadings higher than 0.30 are shown in bold. Letter "R" indicates items that are reverse coded.
Abbreviation: EFA, exploratory factor analyses.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all variables in Study 1

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Perceived Intent	3.00	1.00	–										
2. Perceived Ambiguity	2.88	1.41	−0.60***	–									
3. Perceived Intensity	1.91	0.95	0.51***	−0.39***	–								
4. WOS	1.77	0.71	0.28***	−0.26***	0.35***	–							
5. Self-efficacy	4.00	0.61	0.18**	−0.11	0.04	−0.07	–						
6. Confrontation	1.57	0.93	0.28***	−0.09	0.30***	0.07	0.11	–					
7. Emotional Support	2.14	1.16	0.39***	−0.34***	0.52***	0.18**	−0.01	0.42***	–				
8. Instrumental Support	1.78	1.01	0.45***	−0.29***	0.55***	0.23***	0.07	0.47***	0.74***	–			
9. Minimization	3.35	1.04	−0.18**	0.07	−0.40***	−0.03	0.12	−0.32***	−0.27***	−0.28***	–		
10. Gender (0 = female)	0.51	0.50	0.12	−0.05	0.04	0.12	0.13*	0.22***	−0.06	0.02	0.04	–	
11. Age	35.96	11.92	0.07	−0.10	0.13*	−0.04	0.03	−0.04	0.01	−0.02	−0.05	0.10	–

Note: Due to the non-normality of some of the variables we report spearman correlation coefficients. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.
Abbreviation: WOS, Workplace Ostracism Scale.

$\chi^2 = 0.00$, $df = 0.00$, $p = NA$, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.000, standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) = 0.000, akaike's information criterion = 8084.23, expected cross-validation Index = 0.512. The results pertaining to paths between appraisals and coping responses revealed a complex pattern of relationships between the constructs. Perceived intensity was directly related to all coping responses. Attributions of intent was directly related only to confrontation and instrumental support seeking, and to perceived intensity. Finally, perceived ambiguity was not directly related to any of the coping responses. The results also revealed that perceived intensity and intent were positively correlated, and both were negatively correlated with perceived ambiguity.

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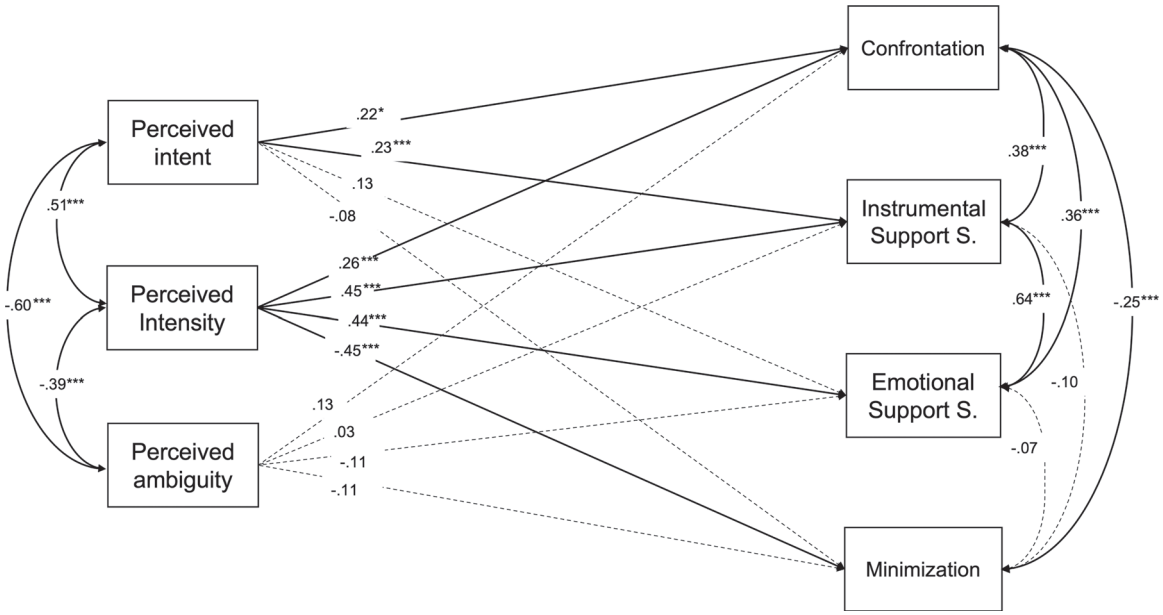

FIGURE 1 Manifest model with direct effects from appraisals of workplace ostracism to all coping responses. For the sake of simplicity, we left out the paths from control variables to the outcome variables (age, gender, self-efficacy, and WOS). ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$. WOS, Workplace Ostracism Scale

4.3 | Discussion

The results of the EFAs on appraisals suggested that the best solution was a three-factor solution differentiating perceived intensity, intent, and ambiguity. This supports previous theorizing such that targets seem to be able to distinguish the researcher-defined dimensions in appraising their experiences of being ostracized at work. We also used SEM to understand the relationship between targets' appraisals and their coping behavior. Perceived intensity had the largest (and direct) relationship on all coping responses. Although participants reported mostly using minimization (an avoidance-oriented coping response), the targets who appraised the situation as more intense and (to a lesser extent) as more intentional were more likely to also use other, more approach oriented, coping responses such as confrontation.

5 | STUDIES 2.1, 2.2, AND 2.3

In Studies 2.1–2.3, we manipulated all three of the appraisals—intensity, intent, and ambiguity, in three separate vignette studies and asked participants to indicate how they would cope with these situations. We relied on an experimental method for two reasons. First, we wanted to test the relationship between appraisals and coping responses without the potential memory biases of a recall paradigm. Second, we wanted to investigate causal relationships between appraisals of workplace ostracism and coping responses.

Each participant saw a single vignette depicting an incident of workplace ostracism. In separate studies, we manipulated the extent to which the experiences in the vignettes varied (high vs. low) on intensity (Study 2.1), intent (Study 2.2), and ambiguity (Study 2.3). The methods of the studies are identical except for the type of appraisal that is manipulated, and thus, we present these three studies together and highlight the differences when necessary. We investigated how each appraisal (high vs. low) relates to each coping response (i.e., confrontation, instrumental and emotional support seeking, and minimization). We also investigated how manipulating each appraisal influences the other two appraisals.

Hence, we were able to investigate three questions in Study 2. First, we investigated whether the three-factor solution for appraisals which was observed in Study 1 would also be observed in a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) in Study 2. Second, we investigated whether appraisals of workplace ostracism predicted coping responses in ways as we proposed (and in line with Study 1). And third, we explored how the manipulation of one appraisal impacted the other two appraisals. We preregistered our predictions about how the manipulated appraisals would impact coping responses based on the results of Study 1 and prior theorizing about coping with workplace ostracism (e.g., Ferris et al., 2016; Robinson & Schabram, 2017; Robinson et al., 2013):

Hypothesis 1: Participants in the low intensity condition will report using less confrontation (1a), less instrumental support (1b), less emotional support (1c) and more minimization (1d) as a potential coping response.

Hypothesis 2: Participants in the low intent condition will report using less confrontation (2a), less instrumental support (2b), less emotional support (2c) and more minimization (2d) as a potential coping response.

Hypothesis 3: Participants in the low ambiguity condition will report using more confrontation (3a), more instrumental (3b) and emotional

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support seeking (3c), and less minimization (3d) as a potential coping response.

5.1 | Methods

5.1.1 | Participants and design

We powered Study 2 based on the smallest significant correlation we observed in Study 1 between appraisals and coping ($r = -.18$, or a Cohen's $d = 0.37$). A priori power analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for a two-tailed t-test with a $p = .0125$ ($p = .05$ Bonferroni corrected for four outcome variables), and 80% power revealed that we needed at least 330 participants to detect $d = 0.37$. Based on this analysis, we recruited 330 participants online for each study (screening criteria: English as first language, with approval rates >95%, participated in at least 10 studies on the platform, employed fulltime or parttime) via Prolific UK (Peer et al., 2017). We preregistered our exclusion criteria as failing 2 of the 3 attention checks or giving the wrong answer to both comprehension checks.[1] Across three studies we excluded some participants because they started the study but did not continue ($n = 21$), no participant failed the attention checks or comprehension checks. Participants were randomly assigned to either high or low appraisal conditions in each study. The final sample size for Study 2.1 was 333 (165 male, 164 female, 4 other, $M_{age} = 33.71$, $SD_{age} = 14.48$), for study 2.2 330 (162 male, 163 female, 5 other, $M_{age} = 35.70$, $SD_{age} = 10.24$), and for Study 2.3 it was 330 (166 male, 162 female, 2 other, $M_{age} = 36.10$, $SD_{age} = 11.41$). All participants approved the informed consent before starting the study.

5.1.2 | Procedure

Each vignette in Study 2 started with the same workplace ostracism situation that was adapted from previous work (Fiset et al., 2017). The vignette described a workplace ostracism incident with a colleague named "Alex" as the source. We appended the specific appraisal manipulation (high or low) based on the study (intensity, intent, or ambiguity). For a full list of how we manipulated each appraisal see the Supporting Information Materials: S1. An example vignette from the condition of high intensity appraisal (Study 2.1) read:

> "You have been working at a new company for a while. One of your colleagues – Alex – is roughly the same age as you, and you both work in similar positions within the organization. After working together with Alex for a while you realize that Alex rarely answers your phone calls or emails. Alex also seems to give you the cold shoulder when you meet, and you feel like Alex does not usually invite you to after-work events. This makes you feel ignored and excluded and you think that these behaviors are kind of a big deal. You are bothered by these behaviors."

5.1.3 | Measures and materials

5.1.3.1 | *Coping responses*

For coping responses, we used the coping items from Study 1 which were retained after the EFA (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). We randomized the order of all coping responses. We changed the "primary person(s)" placeholder in Study 1 to "Alex." Finally, we also changed the wording of one of the items (from "*I would make a joke about it to primary person(s)*" to "*I would jokingly say something about it to Alex*.").

5.1.3.2 | *Appraisals*

We used the same items as in Study 1 for perceived intensity and perceived ambiguity as in Study 1[2]. For attributions of intent, we selected three items from the set of items in Study 1 (e.g., *"I would think that the primary person(s) committed this behavior on purpose,"* α's = .70–.90, full results in the Supporting Information Materials: S1). We asked about all three appraisals in each study.

5.1.3.3 | *Manipulation checks*

The appraisal questions served as manipulation checks in each study according to which appraisal was manipulated. For example, for Study 2.1, perceived intensity ratings served as manipulation checks for the intensity manipulation (high vs. low).

5.1.4 | Results for Studies 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3

We first ran CFAs to validate the factor structures that we observed in Study 1 both for the appraisals and the coping responses. For the CFAs we used the R package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) with maximum likelihood estimation. We report both absolute and incremental fit indices for the CFAs and interpret the results based on the cutoff values proposed by previous work (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Due to the similar pattern of results observed across all three studies, we report the results of the CFAs together. For appraisals of intensity, intent and ambiguity, the three-factor solution observed in Study 1 (see Table 1) provided acceptable fit across all three studies (CFIs > 0.97, TLI > 0.95, RMSEA < 0.068, SRMR < 0.51). For coping responses, the 4-factor solution also provided good fit across all three studies (CFIs > 0.95, TLI > 0.94, RMSEA < 0.066, SRMR < 0.59). These findings validated the results of the EFAs conducted in Study 1 (more detailed reporting of the CFAs can be found in the Supporting Information Materials: S1). Therefore, we retained the factors structure we observed in Study 1 in Study 2 both for appraisals and coping responses.

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5.1.5 | Manipulation checks

The manipulation was successful for intensity ($t(330.8) = -6.76$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.74$, 95% CI = [−0.96, −0.52])[3], intent ($t(303.76) = -9.14$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.01$, 95% CI = [−1.24, −0.78]), and ambiguity ($t(324.75) = -6.96$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.77$, 95% CI = [−0.99, −0.54]).

5.1.6 | Relationship between appraisals and coping responses

The full set of descriptive and test statistics can be found in Table 3. Participants in the high intensity condition reported that they would engage in more confrontation, more instrumental support, more emotional support, and less minimization supporting hypotheses 1a through 1d. Further, when participants read a high intent (vs. low intent) ostracism vignette they indicated that they would engage in more instrumental and emotional support seeking and less minimization. Intent to harm did not have a statistically significant effect on confrontation. These results offer support for hypotheses 2b through 2d but not for Hypothesis 2a. Finally, participants in the low ambiguity condition reported using more confrontation and more instrumental support seeking. These results support Hypotheses 3a and 3b. The level of ambiguity did not have a statistically significant effect on participants' emotional support seeking and minimization response, failing to offer support for Hypotheses 3c and 3d.

5.1.7 | Relationship between different appraisals

We also wanted to know how different appraisals were related to one another in the three studies. In Study 2.1, participants in the low intensity condition perceived the situation as less intentional ($t(330.16) = -4.38$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.48$, 95% CI = [−0.70, −0.26]), and less ambiguous ($t(330.44) = 3.45$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.38$, 95% CI = [0.16, 0.59]) than participants in the high intensity condition. In Study 2.2, participants who read the low intent vignette perceived the situation as less intense ($t(323.41) = -5.65$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.62$, 95% CI = [−0.84, −0.40]) and more ambiguous ($t(326.88) = 5.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.62$, 95% CI = [0.40, 0.84]) than participants who read the high intent vignette. Finally, in Study 2.3, participants in the low ambiguity condition perceived the situation as more intense ($t(327.85) = 5.06$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.56$, 95% CI = [0.34, 0.78]) and more intentional ($t(327.97) = 3.50$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.39$, 95% CI = [0.17, 0.60]) than participants in the high ambiguity condition.

5.2 | Discussion

We conducted Studies 2.1–2.3 to confirm and validate the results observed in Study 1 and to investigate the causal links between the appraisals and coping responses. First, we confirmed the three-dimensional nature of the ostracism appraisals. Next, most of our confirmatory hypotheses with regards to the relationship between appraisals and coping responses were supported. Participants reacted

TABLE 3 Descriptive and test statistics for studies 2.1, 2.2., and 2.3. on all coping responses

Study 2.1—intensity	Low *M (SD)*	High *M (SD)*	*t*	*df*	*p*	*d*	95% CI
Confrontation	2.37 (1.00)	2.82 (1.03)	−4.09	330.60	<.001	−0.45	[−0.67, −0.23]
Instrumental Support	2.57 (0.98)	3.06 (0.99)	−4.57	330.90	<.001	−0.50	[−0.71, −0.28]
Emotional Support	2.48 (1.02)	2.94 (1.10)	−4.00	329.09	<.001	−0.44	[−0.66, −0.22]
Minimization	2.92 (0.96)	2.51 (1.01)	3.81	330.12	<.001	0.42	[0.20, 0.63]
Study 2.2—intent	***M (SD)***	***M (SD)***	***t***	***df***	***p***	***d***	**95% CI**
Confrontation	2.49 (0.94)	2.74 (1.06)	−2.34	323.10	.02	−0.26	[−0.47, −0.04]
Instrumental Support	2.75 (1.06)	3.10 (1.06)	−3.00	328	.002	−0.33	[−0.55, −0.11]
Emotional Support	2.70 (1.07)	3.02 (1.11)	−2.71	327.57	.007	−0.30	[−0.52, −0.08]
Minimization	2.82 (0.93)	2.53 (1.03)	2.65	324.76	.009	0.29	[0.07, 0.51]
Study 2.3—ambiguity	***M (SD)***	***M (SD)***	***t***	***df***	***p***	***d***	**95% CI**
Confrontation	2.86 (1.14)	2.56 (0.97)	2.57	322.06	.011	0.28	[0.07, 0.50]
Instrumental Support	3.28 (1.08)	2.94 (1.03)	2.99	327.87	.003	0.33	[0.11, 0.55]
Emotional Support	3.12 (1.02)	2.86 (1.05)	2.34	327.19	.02	0.26	[0.04, 0.47]
Minimization	2.44 (1.03)	2.61 (0.99)	−1.53	327.96	.13	−0.17	[−0.38, 0.05]

Note: The critical alpha value for the confirmatory tests in Studies 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 is .0125.
Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

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to high (vs. low) intensity and intent in similar ways in terms of most coping responses. More specifically, participants indicated that they would seek more support (both emotional and instrumental) and engage in less minimization both when the situation was characterized by high (vs. low) intensity and intent. While high intensity (vs. low) also predicted higher confrontation rates, high intent (vs. low) did not have a statistically significant effect on confrontation. The level of ambiguity was also related to confrontation and instrumental support seeking but not emotional support seeking and minimization. Intensity appraisals had the largest effect on coping responses overall (average $d = 0.43$), followed by intent (average $d = 0.30$), and lastly by ambiguity (average $d = 0.26$). This pattern is in line with Study 1, where only perceived intensity had significant direct relationships with all four coping responses and the sizes of these effects were larger than for the other two appraisals.

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

To further the understanding of coping with workplace ostracism we conducted four pre-registered studies and studied two questions. First, we asked whether the criteria that are used to define workplace ostracism as a separate construct (i.e., intensity, intent, and ambiguity) would be reflected in targets' appraisals. The findings that people distinguish between the three appraisals related to workplace ostracism offer empirical support for the previously theorized defining features of workplace ostracism (Ferris et al., 2017; Robinson & Schabram, 2017; Robinson et al., 2013). By translating researcher-defined criteria into targets' subjective experience, these findings also contribute to the broader issue of refining the defining criteria of workplace mistreatment (Hershcovis, 2011; Hershcovis & Reich, 2013). Second, we asked how targets' subjective experience of ostracism would relate to these coping responses. The results across both studies revealed that targets engage in more approach-oriented coping (e.g., confrontation) and less avoidance-oriented coping responses (e.g., minimization) when they perceive the ostracism experience as more intense (on all coping responses) and to a lesser extent as more intentional. The perceived ambiguity of workplace ostracism experience was a weaker predictor of coping responses in relation to perceived intent and perceived intensity.

To our knowledge, there was no empirical work on how targets' appraisals of workplace ostracism relate to coping responses at the time of conducting this study. One reason for the lack of such studies may be related to the way in which workplace ostracism is frequently studied. Most often, researchers rely on the very popular Workplace Ostracism Scale (Ferris et al., 2008) to measure the frequency in which various incidents of workplace ostracism were experienced by the participants in the recent past. While this is undoubtedly a valuable method for studying antecedents and outcomes of being ostracized at work, using an alternative approach (i.e., critical incident approach and vignettes) may be more informative for understanding targets' subjective experiences of workplace ostracism and how they cope with such instances. Future work can adopt similar methods to continue investigating how the experience of being ostracized can lead to various behavioral or psychological responses. Alternatively, researchers can also integrate WOS (Ferris et al., 2008) and measure the subjective experience by asking participants to appraise each questionnaire item individually (similar to Nixon et al., 2021).

Previous theorizing about workplace ostracism focused on perceived ambiguity as a defining feature of workplace ostracism (Ferris et al., 2017) that relates to how targets would respond to being ostracized (Ferris et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2013). Our results paint a slightly different picture. Although perceived ambiguity seems to be a part of how people experience workplace ostracism (as evidenced by the factor structure observed across all studies) its predictive value is lower compared to other appraisals. Knowing for sure that one is excluded may not be sufficient to motivate targets to engage in various coping responses. Instead, targets' coping responses seem more dependent on appraisals of intensity and intent. Coping with workplace ostracism may thus be better understood as stemming not just from ambiguity but also from appraisals of intensity and intent.

Finally, our study results also provide some insights into how targets generally cope with workplace ostracism. In this project targets of workplace ostracism reported coping more with avoidance-oriented coping responses like minimization than approach-oriented coping responses such as confrontation or support seeking. These results suggest that targets usually refrain from talking about being ostracized to others (e.g., confrontation, support seeking) unless they think the incident was intense or severe. This paints a potentially grim picture given that targets anticipate social costs upon sharing such ostracism experiences with others (Meral et al., 2021). If targets of workplace ostracism choose to minimize and think that talking about it to others is not the best outcome, they could potentially suffer in silence and progress into the so-called resignation stage of ostracism which is characterized by feelings of alienation, depression and loneliness (Riva et al., 2014, 2017; Williams, 2009). Coupled with the fact that workplace ostracism is seen as more socially appropriate than other forms of mistreatment (O'Reilly et al., 2014), these findings highlight the need for organizational policy and practices aiming at dealing with ostracism proactively instead of waiting for targets to speak up.

7 | LIMITATIONS AND ADDITIONAL FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A limitation of the current study is the use of self-report measures in combination with a cross-sectional design in Study 1. However, since the current project focuses on targets' subjective experiences, we deemed self-report measures as a viable option (Spector, 1994). Furthermore, in Study 2 we have tested the relationships that were observed in Study 1 by employing an experimental design. That said, future work can undoubtedly build on these findings by adopting different data sources (e.g., coworkers) or alternative designs such as longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships in alternative ways.

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We also would like to acknowledge some drawbacks of the experimental vignette methodology which we employed in Study 2. Written vignettes are used widely in social science research for their practical (i.e., resource effective) and ethical (i.e., minimally invasive) advantages (Hughes & Huby, 2002), but their use is not without criticism. For instance, one may argue that how people respond to hypothetical scenarios does not always correspond to their real-life behaviors. This may be especially true in some high-stake scenarios but past research found that intentions measured in vignette studies tend to resemble real-life behaviors remarkably (e.g., Hainmueller et al., 2015; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Additionally, one may question the external validity of the vignette methodology given that participants usually only respond to a limited subset of possible situations. We tried to overcome these shortcomings in the current study by combining the critical incident method with the experimental vignette method. While the former is higher in external validity, the latter is higher in internal validity. This combination helped solidify our contribution more so than what it would have been with either of these methods. If researchers wish to build on our findings and implement a vignette methodology, they can incorporate more situations by increasing the number of vignettes used. This would offer a further test of the generalizability of our findings (for guidance on designing vignette experiments, see: Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010; Steiner et al., 2017).

Here we have not compared workplace ostracism to other aggression constructs. For instance, research still has to determine whether workplace ostracism is perceived as less intense, or more ambiguous than other forms of mistreatment. There is some relevant evidence (O'Reilly et al., 2014) and theorizing (Ferris et al., 2017) on these differences but a more comprehensive investigation remains to be conducted (for a similar call, see Robinson & Schabram, 2017). We propose that future work can compare workplace ostracism to other forms of mistreatment to investigate whether (a) whether constructs differ as they are suggested, and (b) whether targets cope with them differently. This could help refine predictions about how targets respond to being the target of various forms of mistreatment at work.

We tested how targets would cope with workplace ostracism by relying on a set of coping responses that differ based on whether they are emotion- versus problem-focused and whether they are approach- or avoidance-oriented. This is not an exhaustive list of coping responses one could engage in after being ostracized at work. Targets could also turn to religion (Aydin et al., 2010), resort to eating comfort foods (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011) or watching favorite tv shows (Derrick et al., 2009) to name a few options. Future work can build on our findings and incorporate more coping responses (e.g., C. Carver et al., 1989) to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of coping with workplace ostracism.

Since appraisals are not the single determinant of coping responses, researchers can build on the current contribution by investigating additional predictors of coping responses. For instance, given that targets of aggression likely engage in multiple coping responses (e.g., Zapf & Gross, 2001), the outcome of one specific coping response may possibly influence subsequent responses. For example, a person who talks about the stressor with their friends or other colleagues may decide to confront the source based on their advice. Thus, future research can investigate coping with workplace ostracism with a longitudinal method to understand temporal effects on different types of coping responses. In addition, future work can also focus on situational factors such as characteristics of the source (e.g., gender, age, role) or the organization (e.g., organizational norms or climate). For example, the type of coping response may shift according to whether one is ostracized by a colleague or by their supervisor (e.g., Ferris et al., 2016) or based on the norms surrounding how people respond to negative interactions at work (Aquino et al., 2004). Finally, personal factors such as resilience (Jiang et al., 2021) or political skill (Wu et al., 2012) can influence not only how one experiences ostracism but also how one deals with it. Therefore, we suggest that future work can investigate temporal, situational, or individual factors such as the ones we listed above to contribute to the understanding of how people cope with being ostracized at work.

8 | CONCLUSION

This study aimed to offer an empirical investigation of what has long been theorized about the nature of workplace ostracism and the responses of targets. In line with previous theorizing, targets' subjective experience suggested a three-dimensional structure based on perceived intensity, intent, and ambiguity. Crucially, these dimensions were related to how targets choose to cope with workplace ostracism. While intensity, and to a lesser extent, intent emerged as direct predictors of coping responses, the explanatory power of perceived ambiguity was lower than the other appraisals. These findings suggest that the researcher-defined dimensions of workplace ostracism do indeed resonate with targets, but also stress that explicitly measuring these dimensions is necessary to refine predictions on behavioral outcomes.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/qnukh/?view_only=ba1c7ed0d59d44969c83c1518b38de62.

ORCID

Erdem O. Meral https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6326-7840
Ivana Vranjes http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2650-3015
Yvette van Osch https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6693-6977
Dongning Ren http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7749-2419
Eric van Dijk https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4030-2452
Ilja van Beest http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2855-3638

ENDNOTES

[1] We mistakenly included only two attention checks in Study 2.1. We opted to only exclude participants who failed both attention checks in that study.

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[2] Due to a typo in Study 2.3 in one of the perceived ambiguity items, we relied on two items on that study instead of three. And we calculated a spearman-brown correlation coefficient than Cronbach's alpha.

[3] There was a technical error in the perceived intensity and perceived ambiguity question blocks in Study 2.1—intensity. The anchors "slightly" and "moderately" were switched such that "moderately" came before "slightly" instead of the other way around. We report the analyses as if there were no mix up with the anchors. The direction of the results and the statistical significance of the tests remain the same when we recode the variables to reflect the correct ordering of the anchors.

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