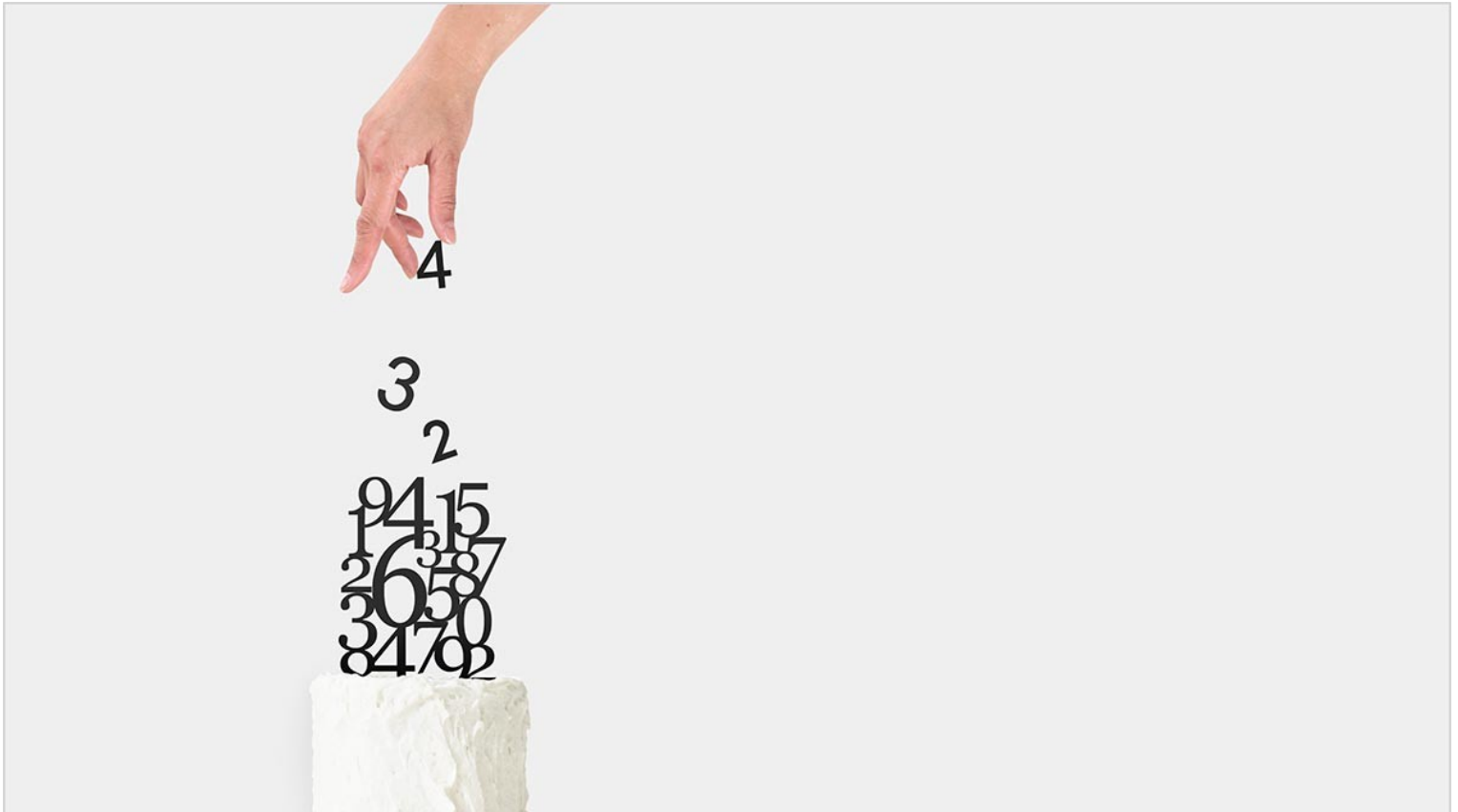


PSYCHOLOGY

If You Feel Left Out at Work, Visualize Money

by Aurelia Mok and David De Cremer

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Money is often associated with unethical tendencies, selfish strivings, and a competitive rather than communal spirit. Research has even shown that those with money on their mind have trouble understanding others' points of view. But there's also a body of research that suggests money can lead us to behave in more positive ways - even if we're just thinking about cash.

We conducted a series of survey-based studies to figure out how the mere thought of money affected a pervasive workplace problem: ostracism.

Social ostracism at work can take many forms, including employees finding themselves ignored by teammates in meetings, or alienated by a supervisor who doesn't listen to their concerns. It's an unfortunate truth that such ostracism happens regularly in most companies. In fact, a recent survey indicates that workplace ostracism is a more common experience than harassment. Of 1,300 U.S. working adults surveyed, 71% participants reported some degree of ostracism in the past six months, compared with 29% who experienced harassment.

Unsurprisingly, organizational research finds that ostracized employees feel dissatisfied with their jobs, show low commitment to the organization, and withdraw prosocial helping behaviors. When employees are unwilling to apply energy towards helping their colleagues, the organization's productivity, performance, and overall functioning stall.

Despite these negative consequences, and despite the proliferation of various anti-harassment programs, it is painstakingly clear that many organizations do nothing about ostracism - even though being ostracized can harm the victim at least as much as being harassed. Indirect aggressions such as being ignored or marginalized can be just as detrimental as direct provocation.

We wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the organizational factors that could help ostracized individuals recover their social adjustment and prosociality at work. Since one of the main reasons we work is to procure cold, hard cash - and since money has been shown to

mitigate the effects of ostracism in previous research - we wanted to see if it would help ostracized people recover in a work context.

Specifically, in surveys conducted online of roughly 100 working adults, we first asked individuals to rate their levels of experienced ostracism at work. (Participants were based in the U.S. and employed across a variety of industries including financial, retail, technology, and healthcare.) Then participants engaged in a description task. A random half were asked to describe money (e.g., “list three thoughts about cash”) or a money-neutral object (e.g., “list three thoughts about a bottle”). Then we asked their intentions to engage in prosocial behaviors at work. Examples included: lend a compassionate ear when a coworker has a work problem; initiate better ways of doing your core tasks; or come up with ways of increasing efficiency within the organization.

We found that the people who felt more ostracism were less likely to have any prosocial intentions when we asked them to describe a bottle. The results of this control group are consistent with the results of prior research that ostracism undermines prosocial tendencies toward others. But for the participants who were reminded of money, the negative relationship between ostracism and prosocial intentions was weaker or even eliminated – even without reference to any actual financial compensation.

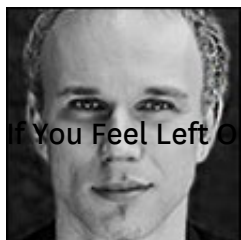
Why is this? From a survival point of view, money provides greater control over one’s physical and social circumstances. Psychological research found that situational reminders or simple thoughts of money can provide a sense of strength, making people feel able to withstand difficulties, including (the pain of) social rejection.

Our research, focused on the workplace context, finds that simple thoughts of money can reinforce ostracized employees’ perceived belonging in the organization. Such perceptions lead ostracized employees to maintain, rather than withdraw, their prosocial tendencies at work.

Our study shows that reminders of money can have positive *behavioral* consequences for ostracized individuals, not limited to buffering psychological distress. It can actually promote prosocial behaviors in work organizations. And very interestingly, it does not require a cash bonus. Simply thinking of money will do.

So the next time your boss ignores you in a meeting or a colleague excludes you from after-work drinks, perhaps try thinking of some cash or savings. You just might feel better.

Aurelia Mok received her Ph.D. in Management from Columbia University. She is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Management at the City University of Hong Kong. Her research examines how individuals respond to reminders of money and the implications for judgment, decision making, and behavior. She is also interested in cross-cultural psychology and consumer behavior.



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