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Potential Detrimental Health and Social Effects of Ghosting

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ABSTRACT

Ghosting, which is the unilateral termination of communication with a partner, is allegedly most frequently done using technology. Scholarly interest in the practice has increased recently. Ghosting is usually viewed as a novel relationship-breakup method since many academics attribute its prominence to media technology. This study revealed that ghosting is a frequent occurrence in the workplace and is not a new phenomenon. Historically, the emergence of depressive illnesses and job discrimination have been linked by several studies. However, the relationship between job discrimination and ghosting is rarely discussed in literature. This study investigates the possible negative health and social impacts of ghosting on both private and professional lives. First, this study used thematic analysis to explore the interpersonal theory of psychiatry, the relational self concept, and ghosting as a social phenomenon. Ghosting in both private and professional contexts and its psychological effects were also covered. According to this study, getting ghosted can be incredibly painful and have a negative impact on one's mental health and self-esteem. In addition, this paper argues that administrative silence at work and communication refusal by an employer can have detrimental financial, legal, and emotional effects on the party being ghosted. This paper makes a case for the necessity of tighter rules in the workplace that would control inter-personnel professional communication and make people legally compelled to give thorough responses to important questions. The methodology used for this study is the content and textual analysis of primary and secondary works of literature.

Keywords: Ghosting; discrimination; workplace; psychology.

INTRODUCTION

A crucial element of wellness and good health is having healthy relationships. In various ways and for different reasons, men and women need relationships. Yet how men and women create strong relationships with others varies. According to Gurian (2010), women often depend on girlfriends or a mate for things like parental advice, romantic fulfillment, someone to help with our children's development and cognitive abilities, learning how to be better at life and in a relationship, and learning from experiences. Thus, women are much more emotionally invested and connected than men in terms of relationships (Jaggar, 1989).

Despite the above, irrespective of the gender, strong relationships have been linked to a long, healthy, and happy life, according to Rath et al. (2010). On the other hand, the health hazards linked with being alone or isolated are equivalent to those brought on by cigarette smoking, high blood pressure, and obesity (Shankar, 2011). According to John & Gross (2004), having healthy relationships makes people live longer, handle stress better, develop better habits, and withstand colds more effectively. Holt-Lunstad et al., (2010) also discovered that social relationships lengthen lives in a 2010 evaluation of 148 studies. Healthy long-term relationships also help reduce the risk of early death by 50% compared to those without them (Friedman, 2020). Living without these relationships is as bad as smoking in terms of life expectancy! (Ross & Mirowsky, 2002).

In line with the positions above, Aristotle was accurate when he said that because people are social animals, the nature of human relationships has an impact on their mental, emotional, and physical health. Brené Kendrick (2022) further explains, "A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all men, women, and children. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong" (p. 11). Without healthy connection, life is more than just quieter and duller. The result is substantially worse than that. Brown reminds us that when these requirements are not addressed, "we don't function as we were supposed to" (Ziv, 2010).

When there is a gap between the interpersonal relationships that a person desires and the ones that they believe they already have, the person is said to be in the adverse state of loneliness (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Thus, several researchers have claimed that loneliness has a significant impact on psychological issues, mental health, and physical wellbeing (e.g., Fromm-Reichmann, 1959; Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999; Asher & Weeks, 2013; McHugh-Power et al., 2019). Shyness, neuroticism, social disengagement, and a decreased frequency of dating have all been proven to be strongly linked to loneliness (Russell et al., 1980; Hojat, 1982; Horowitz et al., 1982). There is evidence of a link between loneliness and less effective social interactions (Segrin, 1998; Hawkley et al., 2003). According to Hawkley et al. (2003), loneliness is associated with less positive and more negative emotions during social contacts. More precisely, loneliness was strongly associated with less closeness, comfort, and understanding as well as increased caution, mistrust, and conflict. Low social skills, victimization and rejection by peers, a lack of close connections, and more unfavorable assessments of social support have all been associated with loneliness (Rubin & Mills, 1988; Crick & Ladd, 1993; Lasgaard et al., 2010; Olenik-Shemesh & Heiman, 2014).

Relational partners often encounter a number of issues as a result of the ambiguous nature of relationships (Monsour et al., 1994). This is due to the fact that conflict is an expected and natural aspect of human existence. Specifically, cross-sex friendships can also be challenging because it's unclear whether the relationships could be romantic or

sexual in nature. Many cross-sex friendships dissolve due to physical distance or failed efforts at romance, and some people feel a sexual desire for their cross-sex friends (O'Meara, 1989; Kaplan & Keys, 1997; Bleske-Rechek & Buss, 2001).

It can be difficult to distinguish between personal cross-sex friendships and passionate love relationships based on behavior and psychology (O'Meara, 1989). If there is an obvious separation between these relationships, it will probably be along their sexual aspect (Argyle & Dean, 1965). However, by contrast, individuals in cross-sex friendships may downgrade sexuality more than usual when one of the friends is in the position of rejecting romance. Indeed, promoting or discouraging movement toward romance is likely to be an important and sometimes difficult part of relational maintenance in cross-sex friendships, especially when cross-sex friends have different romantic intentions and experience uncertainty about the state of their relationship (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that all relationships have inherent issues. One of the major problems, which this attempts to unravel in relationships is *ghosting*.

Ghosting can be defined as a way of ending a relationship with someone suddenly by stopping all communication with them (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). LeFebvre (2017) defined ghosting as unilateral access to individual sudden or gradual prompting relationship dissolution that is usually enacted via one or more technological mediums, as today people mostly rely on such mediums for communication. Ghosting can manifest in various ways, such as not responding to phone calls, text messages, or e-mails, or no longer following or blocking partners on social network platforms. The main problem of ghosting may be that it is left to the party that is being ghosted to understand what the lack of communication actually means (Freedman et al., 2019). The person that is being ghosted is not able to close the relationship (LeFebvre et al., 2019) and therefore is left in a state of confusion and constant distress. Although available scientific literature discusses mostly ghosting in personal relationships, this type of psychological misconduct can also be applied in professional life as well, and as such, may be understood as a form of covert discrimination.

INTERPERSONAL THEORY OF PSYCHIATRY

Harry Stack Sullivan was one of the first individuals to make a significant claim on the value of interpersonal relationships (Evans, 2006). Sullivan (1953), who was influenced by older self-theorists like Cooley and Mead, placed a strong focus on the social and interpersonal foundations of the development of the self, especially the early bond between the newborn and mother. Sullivan contends that the sentiments encountered when interacting with others and a child's reflections on how they are seen by others help to shape the self. The "good me" of the self is associated with enjoyable experiences; the "bad me" is associated with pain and threats to security; and the "not me" or parts of the self that are rejected because they are associated with intolerable anxiety are all significant parts of the self, especially in relation to the experience of anxiety as opposed to security.

The *Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, developed by Sullivan (1953), contends that the core of personality is formed through persisting patterns of interpersonal relationships. The theory's main claim is that a person's personality is defined by their relatively long-lasting pattern of recurring interpersonal interactions (Sullivan, 1953). According to Sullivan, personality is a fictitious concept that cannot be separated from interpersonal interactions; hence, the only aspect of personality that can be seen in action

is interpersonal conduct. Sullivan reasoned that since a person cannot exist without their relationships, it is absurd to refer to a person as the topic of study. He argued that a person's relationships with other people have a significant influence on their personality. Sullivan also asserts that personality develops as a result of a mix of personal preferences and environmental factors. He says that we may have as many personalities as we do interpersonal interactions. According to Sullivan, a person is a part of an interpersonal situation from the moment they are born, and they continue to be a part of a social field for the rest of their lives. Sullivan believed that what makes a person uniquely human is the result of social interactions, even if he acknowledged the significance of heredity and maturation in the formation and molding of the organism.

Furthermore, according to Sullivan, a person's interpersonal experiences can and often do change how they function strictly physiologically. As a result, even the organism itself loses its status as a biological being and transforms into a social organism with socialized mechanisms for breathing, digesting, eliminating, circulating, and other bodily functions. Sullivan stressed again and again that interpersonal interactions are necessary for character observation and study. The interpersonal circumstance, not the individual, is the study's unit. Personality is organized around interpersonal interactions, and it only becomes apparent when a person acts in a way that affects one or more other people. All psychological processes, including perception, memory, thought, and imagination, are interpersonal in nature. As they often depict the dreamer's relationships with other people, even nighttime dreams are interpersonal. According to Sullivan, the most important psychosocial risks to a person's wellness are intrinsically social in nature.

Loneliness, isolation, and rejection are the biggest dangers. It takes skill in relationships to achieve the intimacy aspirations of young adulthood. Clinical symptomatology is influenced by interpersonal loss or an inability to develop intimate, sustaining relationships (Sullivan, 1953). Thus, according to Sullivan, responses to one's relationships might indicate either healthy or harmful psychological growth. The interpersonal theory of psychiatry served as the foundation for Sullivan's desire to highlight the significance of relationships in a person's life. The interpersonal method in psychology was influenced by this notion.

THE RELATIONAL SELF

The idea of a relational self is being considered by theorists (Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999; Andersen & Chen, 2002; Sedikides & Brewer, 2015). Individuals frequently refer to their roles in relationships (such as mother, husband, or son) or as members of a profession (and thus as members of a social group). Even personality features are often thought of in terms of other individuals (one is not extraverted per se, but extraverted compared to others). Self-esteem is a reflection of what others think of you (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Self-control exercises may either help or hurt others (e.g., drinking and smoking; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). Social rejection or exclusion can have a significant impact on people's behavior (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2005).

The self is also intrinsically interpersonal since it functions in part through interpersonal relationships. As a means of establishing a connection between the individual organism and other members of its species, the self is created, utilized, transformed, and preserved. The relational self takes into account a person's involvement in interpersonal relationships, mainly dyadic relationships, and how these relationships

are integrated into the self. When the self is defined, at least to some extent, in terms of interpersonal relationships, a relational self emerges (Agnew & Etcheverry, 2006). These relationships and relationship partners acquire special authority to affect behavior, cognition, affect, and self-perceptions since they are linked to the self.

Throughout the course of a lifetime, a person starts several relationships, many of which are not included in the relational self. The interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; StJohn et al., 2011) states that only relationships in which two people are highly interdependent—meaning that one person’s actions have a significant impact on the other’s outcomes—are most likely to be incorporated into a person’s sense of self.

GHOSTING AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

With the rise of online dating roughly ten years ago, the term “ghosting” gained popularity; in 2017, Merriam-Webster added it to their vocabulary. Surprisingly, though, the phrase was really in use in the 1990s. The word “ghosting” refers to the behavior of abruptly cutting off all contact and communication with another person without giving any prior notice or explanation and disregarding any follow-up messages. The phrase is often used in the context of dating. “Ghosting” is when someone stops responding to communications and vanishes from a relationship without explanation. The term can also refer to any circumstance in which a person abruptly ceases communicating or shows up, such as when a friend abruptly ignores a text from another person or when a worker abruptly ignores one or more coworkers.

The phrase “ghosting” can also be used to describe similar behaviors among coworkers, friends, family members, and employers. Preventing emotional distress in a relationship is one of the most frequent reasons for “ghosting” in intimate relationships. Ghosters frequently give little thought to how their actions may affect the other person. Ghosting has been characterized by some mental health specialists as a passive-aggressive type of emotional abuse or cruelty since it has been linked to detrimental mental health impacts on the person experiencing it. There are many possible causes of “ghosting”, but social media is frequently held responsible, along with dating apps, divisive politics, and the relative seclusion and isolation of contemporary dating and hookup cultures, which make it simpler to break off communication with little social fallout. As a result, the more common a behavior gets, the more likely it is that individuals may grow desensitized to it. In the framework of hookup culture, there is an assumption that if the ghoster received what they were seeking—frequently sex—that’s it; they don’t need to communicate with that person anymore (Thomas & Dubar, 2021). After all, additional conversation may be construed as a desire for something more emotionally close. In certain circumstances, people may believe they do not need to prove their worth to anybody; as a result, the persons involved may ghost. In this scenario, ghosting can be viewed as a valuable strategy of self-protection and peace of mind. Some people will ghost someone in order to protect the other person’s feelings. That is, it is better to ghost than to produce the sad sentiments that come with outright rejection.

Furthermore, according to psychologist Kelsey M. Latimer, those who ghost connections are more likely to exhibit self-centered, avoidant, and manipulative personality characteristics and behaviors (Macki, 2008). Yet, ghosting might be an indication of self-isolation among persons suffering from despair, suicidal ideation, or relapsing from an addiction. There has been little direct research on the effect of ghosting on the individual

on the receiving end. Nonetheless, research shows that ghosting is the most painful way to end a relationship when compared to other strategies such as direct confrontation. It has been demonstrated to create emotions of rejection, ostracism, and exclusion. Furthermore, the lack of social indicators, along with the ambiguity of ghosting, can result in a type of emotional instability that an individual perceives as out of control.

According to Alexander Abad-Santos (2014), in his online article “*In Defense of Ghosting*,” he avers that “the thing that undermines these diatribes against ghosting is that... we know what happened with their ghost. It just didn’t work out, and sometimes we just can’t accept it.” He continues: “At the heart of it, ghosting is as clear as any other form of rejection. The reason we complain about it is that we wanted a different outcome, which is totally understandable.” This explanation, however, ignores the fundamental ambiguity of ghosting—the individual being ghosted does not know if they are being rejected because of anything they or someone else did, or whether the one doing it is embarrassed, unsure how to break up, or afraid of hurting the other’s feelings. However, the ghost may simply no longer wish to date the victim or may have begun dating someone else while maintaining the ghostee as a backup plan in case the relationship with this other date does not work out, or they may be dealing with major troubles in their lives. It may become hard to discern which is which, causing stress and agony.

GHOSTING IN PRIVATE AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Navarro et al. (2020) argue that those participants who experienced breadcrumbing (defined as the act of sending out flirtatious but non-committal text messages to lure a sexual partner without having any intentions of taking things further) or the combined forms of misconduct (breadcrumbing and ghosting), reported less satisfaction with life, helplessness, and self-perceived loneliness. Ghosting may also be experienced during psychotherapy when the therapist decides to inappropriately and self-initiated terminate the treatment without prior notice to the patient. Results of a study carried out by Ferber et al. (2022) showed that patients who experienced ghosting by their therapist reported feelings of shock, frustration, anxiety, resentment, and sadness. This may affect their treatment and their response to treatment. Furthermore, ghosting, although usually referring to romantic relationships, may also be experienced in friendships and in the workplace. People may respond to such behavior on a spectrum, from feeling indifferent to feeling deeply betrayed (Psychology Today, 2023). There is no available scientific literature that would explain the potential health and social hazards of ghosting in the workplace, which may occur between two employees or between an employee and their employer.

One form of ghosting may be the so-called administrative silence (failure to issue a ruling within the fixed term), in which one party cannot receive a timely administrative response from another party in an ethically acceptable and timely manner. Such adverse experiences have been rumored by many citizens in Croatia, but no adequate scientific research and publications have been made available up until today. In September 2022, young medical doctors protested in front of the Croatian Ministry of Health because of numerous issues during their residency training, among which was the problem of not achieving any communication with the so-called chief mentor, and such communication is crucial in order to realize proper training and be able to become a specialist doctor (Croatian Medical Chamber, 2022). Such a relationship, in which the chief mentor is the ghoster and the resident physician is the party that is being ghosted, may cause numerous

problems to the resident physician, including a feeling of being abandoned, frustration, anxiety, and distress, and this form of behavior may be understood as unethical and even as a form of covert discrimination.

Also, taking into account that Croatian resident physicians are bound to their employers by slave ownership contracts (Croatian Medical Chamber, 2020), the inability to complete specialist training due to, but not exclusively, ghosting by the chief mentor may cause significant financial problems for the resident physician and consequently significant psycho-social adverse effects; more research on this issue is mandatory. Being ghosted by your chief mentor, boss, employer, or another employee may cause a state of confusion in which the ghosted party cannot understand why there is no proper communication and what the actual problem is. Such behavior may sometimes be based on discrimination based on one or more protected grounds, and therefore it should be prohibited by law. All parties that are in some form of professional relationship should be obliged by law to respond timely to important inquiries in written and/or electronic form. These kinds of high-quality legislation would potentially minimize the risk of being ghosted and discriminated against at the workplace.

A cross-sectional study conducted in Iran showed that there were moderate workplace discrimination scores among nurses and moderate scores for the dimensions of vertical and horizontal discrimination, the consequences of discrimination, and unfair promotion. Scores for gender and cultural-organizational discrimination were low. The authors concluded that managers should take measures to reduce discrimination and establish organizational justice regarding nurse morale and performance (ZareKhafri et al., 2022).

A nationwide survey conducted in China showed that the prevalence rate of preceding five-year workplace discrimination and victimization was 33% and 12.9%, respectively. Individuals with unemployment anxiety were more likely to experience job discrimination or victimization (Zhang, 2021). Results of a prospective Danish cohort study showed that 4.8% of participants reported workplace discrimination during the past twelve months, and 15.5% of these participants, in comparison with 4.3% of unexposed participants, had an onset of depressive disorders during follow-up (odds ratio 2.73; 95% confidence interval 1.38–5.40). The authors concluded that exposure to workplace discrimination is a risk factor for the onset of depressive disorders, and therefore, the elimination or reduction of workplace discrimination may be important for the prevention of depressive disorders in working populations (Clausen et al., 2022).

Results of a study conducted in South Korea showed that women who experienced gender discrimination at work had higher odds of developing depressive symptoms, with these associations being consistent in younger women below 40 years of age in regard to hiring, promotion, paid wages, and firing and inconsistent among older women (Kim et al., 2020). There may be a higher risk for the development of discrimination-associated depressive symptoms in younger workers.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECT OF GHOSTING

Ghosting may have a variety of psychological effects on both people involved in a relationship, whether it be platonic, amorous, or work-related. Sadly, individuals of all ages might assert having experienced either side of such a sudden breakup of a relationship (ghosting). What are the psychological effects behind ghosting, then?

Being ghosted can affect how people approach relationships (Navarro, et al., 2021), even if it does not always result in nightmares and depression. Since dating doesn't provide anyone with closure on what went wrong, it can make people scared to show vulnerability in potential relationships in the future. However, many people may harbor unresolved childhood emotions that they are not aware of, and being the victim of something emotionally draining like ghosting can cause those memories to reemerge. This kind of person could be more sensitive to rejection if, for instance, their parents separated or if their needs are unmet. When these victims are ghosted, it will cause them to release all those emotions once more, and they may even unconsciously look for someone who would ghost them once more in an effort to figure out what went wrong. By leaving someone in a state of guessing, the victim of ghosting can become prone to blaming themselves as the reason why the other person ghosted. Self-blame can spiral down into further negative thoughts, affecting one's well-being.

The obvious consequences of the ghosting situation cannot be avoided. Ghosting hurts. Ghosting can also be more distressing for some people than a traditional breakup (Koessler, et al., 2019). Someone could feel degraded, irrelevant, and disposable as a result. Many people do not know how to handle this harsh sort of rejection when it occurs. No explanation, justification, or comprehension of why the contact stopped is offered to the victim of ghosting. No matter how intense the relationship was, when a friend or someone in a relationship is ghosted, they never find closure. Not receiving closure after a breakup might cause confusion and uncertainty about what to do next. Ghosting may undermine confidence in anybody, but it is particularly harmful to those who already have poor self-esteem (Konings, et al., 2023). Since the ghoster won't explain why they did it and the victim is in a state of confusion, they might begin to blame themselves. The victim may even come to feel that they are unlovable in the end.

Someone being ghosted may feel stressed. They may feel mistreated. They might even think they made a terrible choice. They could feel inadequate. Such victims are capable of having a wide range of inquiries and concepts. Some individuals, sadly, have hearts that yearn for things they cannot have or things beyond their reach. As a result, they can grow to like the person who ghosted them more and perceive themselves as being on the outs in the relationship.

CONCLUSION

Ghosting, defined as a way of ending a relationship with someone suddenly by stopping all communication (usually via technological media) with them, may occur in romantic relationships, friendships, psychotherapist-patient relationships, and at the workplace. In the latter case, this form of psychological and/or administrative misconduct (administrative silence) may be understood as potentially unethical behavior and a form of covert discrimination. Administrative silence or refusal of any kind of verbal, written, or official electronic communication by the employer or other person in a position of power may cause significant financial, legal, and psychosocial consequences to the party that is being ghosted.

As several studies reviewed above have shown, there is a link between workplace discrimination and the onset of depressive disorders; ghosting at the workplace as a form of covert discrimination may also be associated with such psychological consequences, but more research on this issue is mandatory. Younger workers may be at a higher risk

for the development of discrimination-associated onset of depressive symptoms. In order to minimize the risk of covert discrimination and ghosting at the workplace, there may be a need for better legislation that would regulate professional communication between two or more parties, in which an adequate and timely response to important inquiries would be made legally binding.

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