Ostracism: Consequences and Coping

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Abstract

Ostracism means being ignored and excluded by one or more others. Despite the absence of verbal derogation and physical assault, ostracism is painful: It threatens psychological needs (belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence); and it unleashes a variety of physiological, affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Here we review the empirical literature on ostracism within the framework of the temporal need-threat model.

It is not hard to imagine that we suffer significantly from physical injury or even verbal insult. What may be more difficult to imagine is that we suffer greatly from simply being ignored and excluded—the two components of ostracism. Over the last five decades, social psychologists have generated a considerable body of evidence suggesting, either directly or indirectly, that people frequently go to great lengths to avoid being ostracized. As classic research in social psychology has shown, people will often conform, obey, or fail to offer assistance when others are around because they are unwilling to accept the risk of behaving differently from others. Schachter (1951) made it quite clear that opting to maintain one's position in dissent of the majority results in being kicked out of groups. Until relatively recently, however, we knew little about what happens to those who experience the fate of ostracism.

Although a few experiments dealing with being excluded or ignored could be found in the social psychological literature from the 1960s and 1970s, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that researchers began a concerted effort to understand the consequences of ostracism and related phenomena. The interest was no doubt boosted by an influential paper by Baumeister and Leary (1995) that put forth a compelling theory, based on a vast literature from the social and health sciences, that people have a need to belong and that threats to belonging have very real and very devastating consequences on the individual, both psychologically and physically.

Subsequently, several different laboratories have begun to display an interest in ostracism (Williams), exclusion (Baumeister), and rejection (Leary). These research programs have developed a variety of methods to manipulate ostracism, exclusion, and rejection in the laboratory. In this article, we examine current research using these paradigms, as well as future directions.

Temporal Need-Threat Model of Ostracism

The overarching framework that has guided our research is the need-threat temporal model of ostracism (Williams, 2009). This model posits three stages: immediate (or reflexive), coping (or reflective), and long-term (or resignation). During the immediate stage, ostracism is felt as pain and as a threat to four fundamental needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. Belonging and self-esteem are needs associated with maintaining and developing social connections; control and meaningful existence can be achieved without regard to social connections. Ostracism also increases anger and sadness. Contextual factors (e.g., who is doing the ostracism and why) and individual differences have little impact on the target's immediate experience of pain and distress. During the coping stage, ostracized individuals reflect on the meaning and relevance of the ostracism experience and, if it merits attention, will think and act in ways that fortify the threatened need(s). During this stage, contextual factors and individual differences do play an important role and can amplify or minimize the reaction and desire to cope. If exposure to ostracism continues over a long period of time, then the individual's resources for coping are depleted, and he or she is likely to experience alienation, depression, helplessness, and unworthiness.

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Manipulating Ostracism

The first manipulation of ostracism consisted of a procedure beginning with three people who sit in a room awaiting the start of an experiment; only one of these is an actual research participant. As they wait, one of the two confederates picks up a small ball that happens to be on a shelf in the room and tosses it to one of the others. As the seemingly impromptu ball-tossing game continues, the two confederates follow a script that leads to the inclusion or exclusion of the actual participant. Eventually a computerized version of this paradigm known as *Cyberball* (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000) was developed, thus enabling individuals all over the world to take part in studies of ostracism via the Internet. Other commonly used manipulations of exclusion or rejection involve being given a prognosis, based on answers to a questionnaire, that the participant will lead a "life alone" (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001), finding out that another student in the study (actually a confederate) does not wish to work with the participant (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007), getting feedback that everyone in a get-acquainted task chose not to work with the participant (Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997), and even writing about a rejection/exclusion experience (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000). Role-playing to simulate ostracism is also effective and can be used as a teaching tool (Zadro & Williams, 2006).

Effects of Ostracism

More than 5,000 individuals have now taken part in studies employing the Cyberball paradigm, and we have consistently found that enduring approximately 2 to 3 minutes of ostracism in this context will produce strongly negative feelings—especially those of sadness and anger (Williams, 2009). Furthermore, self-reports of belonging, self-esteem, control, and sense of meaningful existence—the four psychological needs theorized to be threatened by ostracism—all consistently show the negative impact of ostracism. How can it be that such a brief experience, even when ignored and excluded by strangers with whom the individual will never have any face-to-face interaction, has such a powerful effect?

Consistent with Williams's model, studies have consistently demonstrated that ostracism's initial impact does not vary according to the target's personality. We also know that the effects of ostracism produced at the hands of the Internet-based cartoonish figures depicted in Cyberball are as strong as those resulting from ostracism that occurs in a face-to-face setting and that enduring ostracism by despised others is just as painful as when individuals are ostracized by those who are similar to them (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007). Other researchers have demonstrated that people often suffer psychologically and/or physically when one of the four basic needs that we have linked to ostracism is threatened: belonging (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995), self-esteem (e.g., Steele, 1988), sense of control (e.g., Seligman, 1975), and sense of meaningful existence (e.g., Solomon, Greenberg, &

Pyszczynski, 1991). Collectively, these and other studies suggest that we are predisposed to respond to ostracism at a very, very basic level.

Ostracism is prevalent in a variety of subhuman species; it serves the well-being of the group when weak or otherwise burdensome members are ostracized. At the same time, having a mechanism for detecting ostracism readily would be adaptive for individual members of a species, who might maximize their chances of survival if able to engage in efforts to remain included within the group. We believe that humans are equipped with such a system and that the signal to which that system responds is pain—*social* pain. Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams (2003) found that research participants who played Cyberball and experienced ostracism while in a magnetic resonance image scanner showed activation in the same area of the brain that is activated when people experience physical pain (the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex). In other words, ostracism—regardless of its source—triggers an immediate response that directs the person to stop and pay attention to what is going on. For most social creatures, ostracism leads to death (Gruter & Masters, 1986). The early detection of ostracism maximizes the chances that the affected individual will be able to respond to it successfully.

For humans, ostracism over a long period of time is a form of *social death*. In the short term, however, there are several ways in which a person might counter such a threat: by attempting to resecure his or her place in the group, trying to regain control that has been lost, or striking back by lashing out in some way. The social pain created by ostracism and the change in affect can both alert individuals to focus on the ostracism episode and to reflect on its meaning. During this reflective stage, the most threatened needs direct the coping goals. Furthermore, situational and characterological factors unique to that individual can affect how that person responds. Long-term exposure to ostracism, however, can deplete the individual's resources that are necessary to fortify the threatened needs and can lead to alienation, helplessness, and depression (e.g., Allen & Badcock, 2003). Even recollections of short-term ostracism can retrigger the original pain associated with the event (Chen, Williams, Fitness, & Newton, 2008).

Fortifying Threatened Needs

Restoring social inclusion

Cognitive and behavioral responses to ostracism vary in dramatic ways, and we believe this variability can be traced to the needs that are most threatened. Mediational analyses support a link between the needs that are threatened and the subsequent responses. Pain and affect have rarely been found to mediate subsequent responses. Although ostracism can affect all four needs, it is likely that as long as reinclusion is perceived to be possible, belonging and self-esteem needs will direct the individual to strive for reinclusion. The prospect that one can regain inclusion with someone allows the individual a sense of control over his or her future. Fortifying belonging and

self-esteem needs can be achieved through becoming more attentive to social information and engaging in behaviors that encourage favorable responses from other people. As reviewed by Williams (2009), studies have found that those who are ostracized are indeed more likely to attend to and remember social information, as well as more likely to take note of social/emotional inconsistencies. Ostracized individuals are more likely to engage in behaviors that increase their future inclusion by new individuals or groups. Hence, they are more likely to mimic (consciously and nonconsciously), comply with requests, obey orders, cooperate, and express attraction to others, even if those others express unusual beliefs. In short, those who are ostracized are socially susceptible in a number of different ways, and they will go to great lengths to enhance their sense of belonging and self-esteem.

Attempting to restore control and meaningful existence

We propose that when reinclusion with another individual or group appears unlikely, the control and meaningful-existence needs are more likely to direct the coping response. Consistent with this view is a sizable body of research demonstrating behavioral reactions to ostracism that do not facilitate reinclusion but instead afford the individual a sense of control and force others to recognize the individual's existence. As reviewed by Williams (2009), we know, for instance, that people who have been ostracized are less helpful and more aggressive to others, whether or not the others are the perpetrators of the ostracism. An analysis of school shootings in the United States (Leary, Kowalski, & Smith, 2003) found that the shooters in 13 of the 15 cases examined had been targets of ostracism, as was evident also in the tragic shootings that took place at Virginia Tech in 2007.

Though ensuring further exclusion, such antisocial behaviors may provide a way to reestablish control over the social environment; if ostracism threatens one's sense of control, aggressive behavior is one way to restore it. In one study, participants who had been either ostracized or included in the standard ball-tossing game were forced to listen to ten loud blasts of extremely unpleasant noise (Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006). Half of these participants were able to control its onset, whereas the other half of them could not. Using the amount of hot sauce delivered to another person as the measure of aggression (when the person who was required to consume all of it was known to dislike hot sauce), only those participants who had been both ostracized *and* deprived control over the aversive noise demonstrated a significant amount of aggression. In fact, these individuals showed five times as much aggression as the other participants! Those who had been ostracized but who were allowed to regain control in some other manner were no more aggressive than were those individuals who had not experienced rejection.

The possibility of aggressive responses is even influenced by the extent to which individuals are able to feel control over predicting the reactions of others. If individuals can guess that the group does not like them, then the (anticipated) rejection by the group is less aversive than when those individuals are blindsided by an unanticipated group rejection; this threat to predictive control increases aggressive responses (Wesselmann, Butler, Williams, & Pickett, 2010). Of course, in extreme cases, the ostracized individual may feel totally invisible and completely unable to generate any kind of response from others, favorable or unfavorable. At this point the primary goal is to be noticed with little if any concern for being liked. This may be exactly what was at work in the famous case of Oklahoma's BTK (bind, torture, kill) killer, who wrote, "How many people do I have to kill before someone notices me?"

It seems that trying to restore one's place in the group is the more likely type of reaction to being ostracized, while aggressive and antisocial strategies for countering ostracism may be more of a last resort course of action that becomes viable when individuals conclude they simply have no voice whatsoever.

Long-Term Ostracism

If a 5-minute experience with ostracism in a relatively meaningless social situation in a lab or in front of a computer is sufficient to produce consistent and appreciable cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes, then it seems more than reasonable to think that extreme experiences with ostracism in the real world might have dramatic effects. One example of this type has already been identified, at least indirectly: the possible link between ostracism and antisocial behavior. Fortunately, school shootings and the like are probably not the most likely result of long-term ostracism, and another aspect of our research program has provided insights into what happens to people who endure ostracism extending over months and years.

Interviews with victims of extended ostracism suggest that such individuals eventually experience the depletion of their coping resources. Consistent with the final stage of the temporal need-threat model, these individuals appear to accept the essential message of their ostracism—that they are completely insignificant—and they experience a sense of alienation and worthlessness. They seem, then, to self-ostracize, perhaps in a misguided effort to prevent further rejection at the hands of others; they report high levels of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts, as well as other indicators of psychological difficulties.

Conclusions, Future Questions, and Directions

Fifteen years of research on ostracism (and exclusion and rejection) have yielded consistent and socially significant findings. Although it is cliché to say that "humans are social animals," it is nonetheless true. Nothing threatens this fundamental aspect of our being more than being excluded and ignored by others. That ostracism can be regarded as the absence of behavior (e.g., of attention and responsiveness) and that it leaves no trace of physical bruises can lead us to underestimate its impact. Nevertheless, ostracism causes pain—at least the affective

experience of pain—and we can see this using neuroimaging technology. Unlike physical pain, this social pain can be relived over and over again whenever the experience is recalled (Chen et al., 2008). This ability to relive the social pain of ostracism suggests that individuals could, after just one potent episode, continually cycle through the reflexive and reflective stages, possibly leading to the depletion of resources that sends the individual into the resignation stage. We believe that this endless cycle is unlikely for most people. Recollection of painful events, especially to the degree needed to reinstantiate the pain, may require the presence of strongly associated cues (e.g., music, smells) or the willingness to bypass defense mechanisms that serve to protect the self from such pain. Perhaps depressed individuals with strong propensities to ruminate are more likely to be hurled into this cycle (Poznanski, Wirth, & Williams, 2010). While we propose that the depletion of resources necessary to fortify threatened needs can lead to the resignation stage, future research should determine whether individuals can, perhaps with intervention, muster the resources necessary to return to a relatively more functional reflexive-reflection cycle.

Finally, whereas ostracized individuals can become either overly compliant or violent, future research should also focus on the interplay between ostracized individuals and ostracized groups. Perhaps people who are ostracized—and thus predisposed to be attracted to anyone acting interested in them—are susceptible to the untoward influence of fringe groups that prey on such vulnerable individuals by offering them an opportunity to belong and be significant. These groups may be more inclined to respond to societal ostracism by exerting control and provoking recognition rather through violence or other antisocial means. Although an ostracized group can provide its members with a sense of belonging, self-worth, control, and meaning, it can also set into motion intragroup narrowness, radicalism, and intolerance, as well as the propensity and means to accomplish intergroup hostility and violence. This possibility serves to remind us that issues such as the nature of the group processes associated with extremism and the relationship between ostracism and gullibility are fruitful avenues for future research.

Recommended Reading

Baumeister, R.F., & Leary, M.R. (1995). (See References). Provides strong evidence for the importance of the need to belong.

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Williams, K.D. (2007). Ostracism. *Annual Review of Psychology, 58*, 425-452. Provides a comprehensive review of ostracism and related phenomena.

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