

CHAPTER 32



Ostracism as an Existential Threat

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Ostracism is defined as being excluded and ignored (Williams, 2009). This phenomenon, commonly encountered in various social contexts, has significant consequences for individuals' well-being. Human beings, as inherently social animals, possess a profound instinct to belong, a crucial element for survival and successful reproduction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Deeply rooted in our evolutionary history, those who were oblivious to cues of ostracism faced a distinct disadvantage in terms of survival (Wesselmann et al., 2012). This (hyper-) sensitivity to ostracism is not merely a by-product of evolution; it also reflects a fundamental aspect of our existence.

Ostracism is an experience that can be observed in different situations and relationships, and most individuals have experienced it at some point in their lives. Research suggests that this experience may occur at least once a week (Bernstein et al., 2021), but may even occur daily (Nezlek et al., 2012). While the effect of ostracism is most often examined from the perspective of the target

(the person being ostracized), it is also shown to have some negative impact on the sources of ostracism. For instance, Legate and colleagues (2013) show that individuals experience negative affect and thwarted needs (e.g., self-esteem) both when they themselves are ostracized *and* when engaging in the act of ostracizing others. Further, the responsive theory of social exclusion supports this notion that both parties (the source and the target) are negatively impacted by social exclusion and fare better when explicit rejection is used (Freedman et al., 2016). Ostracism may also negatively impact third-party observers in which audience members experience vicarious ostracism (e.g., Paolini et al., 2017; Wesselmann et al., 2013b)

Although a negative experience, ostracism may serve as a way to protect individuals from threat, to signal that an individual's behavior needs to be adjusted, and to permanently remove deviant group members (Hales et al., 2017). Ultimately, this indicates both the costs and benefits associated with the act of ostracism, at least from the source's perspective. Though ostracizing others may initially provide a sense of control, the ostracizer (i.e., source of ostracism) may eventually find themselves just as helpless in the situation as the target (Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014).

The consequences of ostracism (and other social threats) extend beyond only the immediate social discomfort. Individuals subjected to ostracism may also experience a profound sense of insignificance, feeling that their existence lacks meaning to others (Williams, 2009; Williams & Zadro, 2001). Research by Hames and colleagues (2018) and Legate and colleagues (2013) further emphasizes the profound impact of ostracism, showing that both those who experienced and those who administered ostracism suffered negative psychological effects (e.g., threatened needs). Poulsen and Kashy (2012) also found that more severe forms of exclusion led to more significant negative outcomes.

In this chapter, we first provide a brief overview of ostracism, as well as how it poses an existential threat and how it is studied. Next, we discuss the leading theoretical model for understanding the consequences of ostracism: the temporal need-threat model. Finally, we discuss the use of ostracism as a conformity tool and how individuals may feel ostracized from a variety of sources.

OVERVIEW OF OSTRACISM

In its broadest definition, ostracism encompasses both severe and dramatic instances of being ignored and excluded (e.g., excommunication from the church; Hales et al., 2020) as well as even its subtlest forms (e.g., gender-exclusive language, like using a generic *he*; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011) and everyday behaviors like cell-phone use during a social interaction (phubbing; Hales et al., 2018). Similarly, ostracism may vary in intensity, from partial (e.g., lack of eye contact from a virtual confederate; Dvir et al., 2021; Wirth et al., 2010) to complete exclusion. This variability in ostracism is crucial to understanding its wide-ranging effects (Hales et al., 2017). Notably, it has been demonstrated that even brief encounters with ostracism, such as those involving strangers with no expectation of future interactions, may be capable of producing significant negative reactions (Goodwin et al., 2010). As such, this broad approach has been instrumental in examining ostracism in both controlled laboratory settings and naturalistic settings.

Ostracism as an Existential Psychological Threat

The consequences of social threats, such as ostracism, extend beyond immediate social discomfort. Ostracism (and other social threats) appears to lead people to confront major existential concerns of death, isolation, identity, freedom, and meaning (Koole et al., 2006; Yalom, 1980). For instance, ostracism has commonly been referred to as a social death (e.g., Bauman, 1992; Williams, 2007) and may also be equated with death itself (Case & Williams, 2004; Hales, 2018; but see Taggert et al., 2024, for limits on this connection). Further emphasizing the critical role of social connections in human survival, a social death evolutionarily equates to a physical (literal) death. From an evolutionary perspective, the human brain may have evolved to process social exclusion as a threat to survival, triggering responses similar to those evoked by the threat of physical harm or death (MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Spoor & Williams, 2007). As evidence of the connection between ostracism and death, an absence of positive relationships has been shown to be a risk factor in mortality, similar to that of other factors, such as cigarette smoking (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Additionally, ostracism is one reason why people may experience *both* social (interpersonal) isolation (feeling isolated from others; Williams & Nida, 2022) and existential

isolation (feeling isolated in one's experiences or from reality; Pinel et al., 2017). Identity may be threatened by ostracism through inducing feelings of self-uncertainty. Moments of uncertainty, such as concerns for what the future holds as well as ambiguity of one's exclusion, may also invoke a sense of (social) isolation (Hales et al., 2021). Ostracized individuals may also search for the reasons and rationale for *why* they were excluded, which may lead them to invoke negative internal attributions, lowering their self-esteem (e.g., Liu, 2019). The loss of control (autonomy) associated with ostracism may also represent a threat to concerns of free will and freedom. For instance, ostracized individuals (compared to included individuals) reported feeling less autonomous (e.g., feeling *less* like they were free to decide for themselves how to act; Legate et al., 2013). Similarly, research suggests that individuals subjected to ostracism may be linked with a profound sense of insignificance (Park & Pinel, 2020), feeling that their existence lacks meaning to others (Williams, 2009; Williams & Zadro, 2001).

Beyond its analogy to death, ostracism is associated with existential anxiety (Zamperini et al., 2020). For instance, Steele and colleagues (2015) emphasized the role of social connections in keeping existential threats at bay. They found that ostracism induced a state of insignificance and increased mental accessibility to thoughts of death (although findings of the latter have been mixed (Taggart et al., 2024)). In line with this thinking, ostracism can lead to deep reflections on one's meaning, importance, and even existence (e.g., Hales, 2018). In extreme forms of ostracism—such as receiving the silent treatment from loved ones or close others for long periods of time—one experiences a glimpse of what life would be like if one did not exist, watching others carry on as if one were not there (Williams et al., 2000a; Zadro et al., 2008).

Even seemingly minor instances of ostracism elicit transient feelings of invisibility and a painful sense of lacking worth, purpose, or meaning (Williams, 2012), during which ostracized people have pinched themselves in order to test their environment and mere existence. Indicating a decrease in one's relational value (Leary, 2005), this impact goes beyond conventional aversive behaviors, as ostracism uniquely threatens existential needs related to recognition and worthiness of attention. For instance, the consequences of social ostracism

extend to questioning one's purpose, self-worth, value, and the ability to control goals and outcomes (Jiang & Chen, 2020a; Stillman et al., 2009; Zadro et al., 2006). By examining the language individuals use after being ostracized, research has shown that when compared to a control group, ostracized individuals used function words (e.g., pronouns and articles) that indicated greater self-focus and worsened mood (Klauke & Kauffeld, 2020). Additionally, studies have confirmed that ostracism typically leads to feelings of meaninglessness and reminders of mortality (Steele et al., 2015; Stillman et al., 2009).

How We Study Ostracism

The most commonly used experimental paradigm to study ostracism is Cyberball, in which participants play an online ball-tossing game with preprogrammed avatars who they are led to believe are other participants (Williams et al., 2000b; Williams & Jarvis, 2006). In a typical game, people in the inclusion (comparison) condition receive the ball about an equal number of times as the other players. Participants in the ostracism condition receive the ball twice at the beginning of the game but never again and, instead, have to watch the ball being passed between the other players. A meta-analysis of 120 Cyberball studies shows that—despite the deliberately minimal features of the game—ostracism has a large effect on basic psychological needs, and this effect decreases over time, supporting the notion that people begin to recover quickly (Hartgerink et al., 2015). A benefit of Cyberball is that aspects of the game can be altered, including the number of players, the names of the players and what they look like, and the presence of an audience. A newly developed Social Ball paradigm seems to be a promising avenue to vary yet more features of the game, and do so in a more immersive virtual setting (Meral et al., 2022).

There are many other ways to measure and manipulate ostracism: autobiographical reliving paradigm (e.g., Hales et al., 2018; Pickett et al., 2004), self-reported chronic ostracism with the Ostracism Experiences Scale (Carter-Sowell, 2010), or momentary assessments of real-world experiences of exclusion (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2021; Nezlek et al., 2012). But we expand upon two additional commonly used experimental paradigms: the Future Life paradigm

and the Ostracism Online paradigm. In the Future Life paradigm (Twenge et al., 2001), participants first complete a personality assessment. They are then told false feedback about their future social network that is supposedly based on the results of the assessment: They will have rewarding relationships throughout life (included condition), they will end up alone later in life (excluded condition), or they will be accident-prone later in life (control condition). Interestingly, while Cyberball leads to *pain hypersensitivity*, the Future Life paradigm leads to a *numbing* effect, potentially because Cyberball is relatively less severe (Bernstein & Claypool, 2012).

In an increasingly digital age, online platforms offer an environment for individuals to also be ostracized. To investigate dynamics in this setting, researchers developed the Ostracism Online paradigm, whereby participants interact with other avatars (believed to be real people but actually preprogrammed) in a social media-like website (Wolf et al., 2015). After creating a “profile” with an avatar and personal bio introducing themselves to the rest of the group, participants can like/dislike other people’s profiles and receive attention (in the form of likes or dislikes) from others. In the inclusion condition, participants typically receive six likes (and no dislikes). In the ostracism condition, participants receive one like and one dislike at the beginning of the task and then are ignored for the remainder of the time. This paradigm has also been further developed to include a dislike button and an explicit rejection condition whereby participants receive no likes and six dislikes (Lutz & Schneider, 2020). Ostracism Online similarly threatens basic psychological needs (ostracism vs. inclusion) compared to Cyberball (Wolf et al., 2015), and it may be particularly useful when studying online phenomenon, such as the spread of misinformation (e.g., Wicks et al., 2023) or certain extremist groups (e.g., incels).

The Hurt of Ostracism

In line with theories such as pain-overlap theory (Eisenberger, 2012), research has established that social exclusion not only emotionally hurts but also activates brain areas associated with physical pain (Eisenberger et al., 2003). This pain can be more serious and long-lasting than physical pain, potentially suggesting a deep-rooted evolutionary basis for this response (Chen et al.,

2008). The severe impact of the social pain of ostracism is likely due to the ease of it being reexperienced compared to that of physical pain (Meyer et al., 2015). The human species, dependent on social relationships for survival, has likely evolved to be particularly sensitive to any cues of social exclusion, with some researchers referring to this as an ostracism detection system (Kerr & Levine, 2008; Spoor & Williams, 2007; Wesselmann et al., 2012).

Ostracism also has severe mental health consequences that are especially relevant to its role as a—sometimes literal—existential threat, including increasing suicidal thoughts (Chen et al., 2020). Similarly, belongingness theory suggests that social exclusion triggers anxiety due to the perceived loss of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Notably, ostracism directly impacts self-worth and identity, posing a threat to one's sense of meaningful existence (Chen et al., 2020; Steele et al., 2015).

Finally, even minimal ostracism experiences, such as not receiving the ball in a brief Cyberball game, can cause significant emotional distress and perceived threats to fundamental needs like belonging and self-esteem (Wesselmann et al., 2012). In fact, even when the game is arranged so that being *included* increases one's chances of a sort of symbolic death—through a version called “Cyberbomb” in which the ball is replaced with a virtual bomb set to detonate—ostracism still hurts (van Beest et al., 2011). This underscores the potent psychological impact of ostracism, regardless of its form or duration.

The notion that ostracism is painful, regardless of its form, is supported by a range of research. Studies have shown that participants in Cyberball experiments feel ostracized and experience lower levels on psychological needs, even under conditions where they are told that the exclusion is not personal, such as being informed that their computer is not connected to others (Eisenberger et al., 2003; Jauch et al., 2022; Zadro et al., 2004). Additionally, research shows that even when inclusion is financially costly, being ostracized still hurts (van Beest & Williams, 2006). This suggests that the pain of ostracism is not mitigated by knowing the intentionality of the ostracism or knowing that it offers other benefits.

THE TEMPORAL NEED-THREAT MODEL OF OSTRACISM

The *temporal need-threat model* outlines how responses to ostracism unfold in three distinct stages upon detection: the reflexive, reflective, and resignation stages (Williams, 2009).

Stage 1: Reflexive Stage

First, individuals very quickly detect that they are being ostracized. Immediately upon detection, they enter the *reflexive* stage, in which they experience social pain, negative emotions, and harmful consequences of having their fundamental psychological needs threatened. These needs include belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams & Zadro, 2001). These psychological needs map onto the existential concerns previously mentioned, such as a loss (even if temporarily) of control in social interactions also threatening concerns of free will and freedom. In addition to threatening these four needs, research has shown the detrimental effect of ostracism on one's need for certainty (both for themselves and their surroundings; Hales & Williams, 2018), and the theory has been updated to include this need (Hales & Williams, 2021). Upon experiencing ostracism, individuals often report a range of negative outcomes that may also include physiological reactions typical of perceived threats, such as increased secretion of cortisol stress hormones (Bernstein, 2016; McDonald & Brent Donnellan, 2012; Williams, 2009). Additionally, individuals may also experience emotional responses, such as distress, anger, sadness, even in response to minimal ostracizing experiences (Carter-Sowell et al., 2008).

Because these immediate negative effects are theorized to be *reflexive* (i.e., automatic and nondeliberate), they should occur even in situations where one would expect ostracism to logically have no effect. This is the case in the original minimal Cyberball game where the players are strangers one will never meet, and yet needs are still thwarted (Williams et al., 2000b). Beyond this, efforts to identify situations where ostracism is not hurtful have been surprisingly difficult to identify. Ostracism still hurts even when one would logically expect it not to. For example, even when ostracism is known to be from a despised group (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan), the immediate reactions are still distressful (Fayant et al., 2014; Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007). As mentioned earlier, financial incentives

have been shown to be ineffective in alleviating ostracism-induced distress. For instance, participants who were charged money for each ball thrown to them in a variant of Cyberball, called €yberball, still felt as badly ostracized as in a nonmonetary version of the game (van Beest & Williams, 2006).

Stage 2: Reflective Stage

In the *reflective* stage, ostracized individuals focus their attention on improving these needs and regaining some sense of connection—be it from the sources of the ostracism or from entirely new individuals. Recovery is suggested to begin soon after the initial effects of ostracism (Goodwin et al., 2010). Within this reflective stage, there are numerous factors that may impact the extent in which individuals recover, such as attributions ostracized individuals make about their exclusion and the tools they have available to help cope with the experience. It is during the reflective stage when people attend to, appraise, and make attributions for their exclusion, as well as attempt to replenish their previously lost needs. Because needs can be replenished in a variety of ways (e.g., Paravati et al., 2021), reactions to ostracism generally begin to vary, particularly in terms of the rate in which they recover from the experience and behavioral responses (e.g., Zadro et al., 2006).

Recovery from Ostracism

According to the need-threat model, while ostracism may reflexively hurt most people the same, people vary in the rate at which they recover. It is during this stage where people try to make sense of their exclusion and aim to replenish their previously lost needs. Just as meaning-making may be helpful in response to disasters in life (e.g., Park, 2016), attributions made about reasons for one's exclusion can change the rate at which one recovers from the experience. For instance, Wirth and Williams (2009) showed that ostracized individuals who attributed their exclusion to permanent group identities (e.g., gender) recovered slower than those who attributed their exclusion to more temporary identities (e.g., random group assignment). Similarly, when individuals interpreted their exclusion to be racially motivated, ostracized individuals recovered at a slower rate (Goodwin et al., 2010). Along the same lines, the impact of ostracism on

identity may be seen in the way experiences of ostracism distort perceptions of the self, such as interrupting self-continuity (Jiang et al., 2021) and increasing self-malleability (Richman et al., 2015). Furthermore, feeling uncertain of one's identity has been shown to motivate people to increase ingroup behaviors (Hohman et al., 2017) and even be more open to groups they were not previously a part of, with a preference for highly entitative groups (e.g., extreme groups; Hales & Williams, 2018; Hogg & Adelman, 2013) as attempts to appease this existential threat.

To help recover from experiences of social exclusion, individuals may explore various types of strategies. For example, the social surrogacy hypothesis suggests that individuals can transform common technologies into temporary substitutes (referred to as surrogates) for social connection, thus providing an experience of belonging (Derrick et al., 2009; Gabriel & Valenti, 2017). Examples of social surrogates have ranged from one's pets (McConnell et al., 2011), to favorite fictional characters, (Gabriel & Young, 2011), and even comfort foods (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011). In addition to obtaining benefits from familiar surrogates (e.g., one's favorite TV character), there is growing evidence that even unfamiliar surrogates (such as being presented with preselected consumer products or music) may also be effective in helping people feel better after exclusion (Mourey et al., 2017; Wicks & Hales, 2023). According to a systematic review of 119 studies, using media tools to cope with social exclusion was found to be more effective than ineffective (Lutz et al., 2022). In addition to those previously mentioned, strategies such as prayer (Hales et al., 2016) and viewing pictures of nature (Poon et al., 2016) can also aid in exclusion recovery. Contrastingly, one strategy that has been shown to be counterproductive is ruminating about one's experience. As such, strategies that reduce rumination may, in turn, improve recovery (e.g., Hales et al., 2016; Wesselmann et al., 2013a).

Behavioral Responses

Exclusion may also lead people to be more sensitive to social cues and have a stronger craving for social interaction (Pickett et al., 2004). After being excluded, people may act prosocially as a means of being desirable to others and reincluded. This behavior may help them restore all threatened needs, but

particularly belonging and self-esteem, referred to as the *inclusionary* need cluster (Williams, 2009). Excluded people contribute more to a group (Williams & Sommer, 1997), are more compliant to social influence (Carter-Sowell et al., 2008), and obey an authority figure even when the request is undesirable (Riva et al., 2014). More specifically, prosocial behavior is more likely if the potential target is innocent (i.e., not the exclusion source; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009).

Although it seems counterintuitive to the goal of reinclusion, people may also act antisocially after being excluded in order to help them restore their thwarted needs of control and meaningful existence, or the *power and provocation* need cluster (Williams, 2009). In other words, exclusion can lead to aggression (Leary et al., 2006; Ren et al., 2018), particularly when prioritizing restoring a need for control (Warburton et al., 2006). In the lab, aggressive behavioral responses to exclusion manifest as greater likelihood to administer a painful noise (e.g., Twenge et al., 2001) and give other people more hot sauce (e.g., Warburton et al., 2006). People may choose to act aggressively because they feel less constrained by social norms after being excluded (Poon & Teng, 2017; Twenge et al., 2001); have fewer perceived costs of aggression (Poon & Wong, 2019); or as a result of negative emotion, such as relative deprivation (Jiang & Chen, 2020b), malicious envy (Poon et al., 2023), or anger (Chow et al., 2008).

Finally, a third and more recently identified behavioral response to ostracism is *withdrawal*. Research suggests that people are more willing to seek solitude after being excluded (Ren, 2016). After the painful experience of being excluded, people may wish to avoid it happening again by withdrawing from social interactions during which others could have the opportunity to exclude them again (Sunami et al., 2019). Indeed, ostracism leads to greater desire for solitude (Ren et al., 2016, 2021). Interestingly, people are more willing to ostracize those with higher dispositional preference for solitude (Ren & Evans, 2021), suggesting that the relationship between exclusion and solitude may be cyclical. Thus, exclusion is capable of driving individuals toward and away from both human and nonhuman agents (e.g., Epley et al., 2008). Attributions as well as the perceived possibility of being (re-)included influence whether individuals will

have more prevention-focused (e.g., solitude-seeking) or promotion-focused (e.g., reengagement) responses to exclusion (Maner et al., 2007; Molden et al., 2009).

Stage 3: Resignation Stage

If social connection cannot be (re-)established, ostracized individuals may give up and further alienate themselves (Williams, 2009). This may take the form of separating from others and deciding to no longer seek connection, serving as the final stage of the need-threat model: *resignation*. Continuous experiences of ostracism may accumulate and lead to a state of insecurity, whereby the prolonged loss of each type of need is suggested to result in a severe negative outcome specific to that need: alienation (belonging need), depression (self-esteem need), learned helplessness (control need), and unworthiness (meaningful existence need). These hypotheses cannot be tested experimentally for ethical and logistical reasons, but existing correlational and longitudinal research is consistent with these predictions (Riva et al., 2017; Rudert et al., 2021). Similarly, although research has shown that ostracism may also induce feelings of uncertainty, the equivalent outcome associated with prolonged, exclusion-induced uncertainty is currently unknown, thus offering an avenue for future research.

THE USE OF OSTRACISM AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Recognized as a universally applied tactic of social control, ostracism can play an important role in influencing individual behavior and fostering group conformity (e.g., Hales et al., 2017; Riva et al., 2014). Conforming to group norms and expectations can help people feel accepted and maintain a sense of belonging. This conformity can be seen as a defensive mechanism against the existential threat of ostracism—helping people feel connected and meaningful in their social groups. Extensive research spanning over two decades underscores the effectiveness of ostracism in exerting social influence (e.g., Hales et al., 2017). Individuals, upon perceiving ostracism, tend to adjust their behaviors to regain acceptance into the group, often becoming highly susceptible to social influence (Carter-Sowell et al., 2008).

Even the mere threat of ostracism can have a profound impact, suppressing deviant behaviors that pose a threat to group cohesion and survival (Ouwerkerk et al., 2005). The need to belong and maintain self-esteem compels ostracized individuals to conform to group norms (Williams et al., 2000b).

Ostracized individuals are also more likely to comply with requests, such as for financial donations, under different compliance tactics (Carter-Sowell et al., 2008). For instance, women who experienced ostracism during a ball-tossing game displayed heightened efforts in a subsequent collective task, showcasing a form of social compensation (Williams & Sommer, 1997). As a social (rather than physical) death, instances of ostracism can be reversed, thus allowing for a “social resurrection” as individuals are reintegrated into a group (Hales, 2018; Zamperini et al., 2020). After being ostracized, individuals often engage in more behaviors aimed at readmission to the group, demonstrating an increased susceptibility to social influence and a tendency to conform to group norms (DeWall, 2010; Nezlek et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2000b). For instance, ostracism has been shown to increase interest in extreme groups. Indeed, Hales and Williams (2018) found that ostracized (vs. included) individuals were more willing to attend a meeting of an activist campus organization and expressed greater openness toward gang membership, suggesting that social exclusion increases susceptibility to new—even deviant—groups.

Ostracism is not only a tool used against individuals deviating from group norms; it also serves as a means to prompt corrective behaviors and motivate prosocial actions for regaining standing within the group (Hales et al., 2017). As a corrective measure, ostracism signals that a member’s behavior requires modification, leading to a heightened desire to belong among individuals who experience ostracism. This desire enhances these individuals’ adaptability and openness to social influence, making them more susceptible to conformity, a key aspect of social influence.

SOURCES OF OSTRACISM

In addition to ostracism being a powerful tool for social influence, there are different ways in which one may feel ostracized by others. From being excommunicated from a church to receiving the silent treatment from a loved

one, ostracism may be enacted by a variety of sources (Williams, 2001). Because people can feel ostracized from a variety of sources, these same sources also pose a threat to one's existence. Particularly, we focus on sources at the institution-level, those at the individual-level, and those that are nonhuman agents.

Feeling Ostracized from Groups, Institutions, and Systems

Institutional ostracism occurs when someone feels excluded through policies and structures (Sherman et al., 2022). For example, someone in the United States who does not have children might feel they are being excluded by their work or government through policies such as time off for maternity leave (there is not a child-free alternative) or the Child Tax Credit (receiving additional tax benefit if one has children age 17 or younger; there is not a child-free alternative). A public figure being “canceled” (i.e., losing fame, credibility, or power) due to unfavorable behavior is also an example of institutional ostracism. Empirical work has yet to directly investigate the effects of institutional ostracism, but it is theorized to be similar to institutional prejudice/discrimination (Murphy et al., 2018), though differs by not always being based on group membership. Systems are usually concrete and enduring, suggesting that it most closely resembles the resignation stage of interpersonal ostracism. Thus, it not only thwarts basic psychological needs, but also leads to hopelessness, depression, and overall lower well-being. Overall, this creates dysfunction and imbalance in one's life, further threatening existential well-being (Galanaki et al., 2023).

In addition to the behavioral responses to interpersonal exclusion, when being ostracized by an institution, people might try to leave the system. This is often possible on a small scale, such as someone quitting a job if they feel excluded by their employer. However, this response may be difficult on a large scale, such as feeling excluded by the legal system in one's country. While someone can attempt to disengage from the system, it may be difficult (e.g., financially) or undesirable (e.g., due to losing close others still in the system). Additionally, people might try to change the system from which they are being excluded, such

as through protesting or organizing counter movements. In turn, thwarted psychological needs might be bolstered (e.g., finding a new group to belong with).

Feeling Ostracized from Individuals and Close Others

Severe forms of ostracism often originate from close relationships and endure for a significant period, making them particularly harmful (Hales et al., 2017).

Studies indicate that participants feel worse and experience greater threats to their psychological needs when ostracized by closer others compared to strangers (Nezlek et al., 2012). One reason for this may be due to having higher expectations of the partner. Contrastingly, some research suggests that ostracism from strangers is more painful than when ostracized by close others, because the preexisting relationship may act as a buffer (Iannone et al., 2014). Although ostracism is more commonly reported in the context of acquaintances or strangers, ostracizers report feeling increased control in these situations, unlike when ostracizing close friends (Nezlek et al., 2015).

A prevalent form of ostracism in close relationships is the “silent treatment,” which poses significant psychological consequences. Targets of this form of ostracism experience heightened threats to their sense of belonging and self-esteem, particularly when they cannot attribute the ostracism to a specific cause (Sommer et al., 2001). Qualitative interviews reveal that targets of ostracism in close relationships express feelings indicative of threatened primary needs, which become internalized due to prolonged or repeated experiences (Zadro et al., 2008). The involvement of a partner in the act of exclusion significantly affects need satisfaction and relationship evaluations, more so than when ostracism involves only strangers, due to people having greater relational expectations (Arriaga et al., 2014). Furthermore, a study investigating the impact of ostracism on children revealed that both complete and partial ostracism have strong negative effects, with the presence of a single ally reducing distress (Sandstrom et al., 2017). This underscores the importance of understanding ostracism in various contexts, including its impact on vulnerable populations such as children.

Feeling Ostracized from Nonhuman Agents

Just as nonhuman agents may be able to offer social connection, they may also be capable of inducing social exclusion. Individuals can feel excluded from agents without a physical shape (e.g., nonhuman or supernatural agents), particularly by those with whom they share a symbolic (i.e., parasocial) relationship. For instance, while prayer may be effective in helping people recover from social ostracism (e.g., Hales et al., 2016; Wesselmann & Williams, 2010), exposure to Bible passages of God's exclusion (e.g., that God would abandon them) may have negative impacts on one's well-being (George et al., 2021; van Beest & Williams, 2011). Likewise, research has shown that divine struggle—feeling anger toward or punished/abandoned by God (e.g., questioning God's love)—is linked with decreased life satisfaction, poor psychological functioning, and greater emotional distress (e.g., higher anxiety rating, greater depressive symptoms; Exline et al., 2014; Wilt et al., 2016). Additionally, one's perceptions of God influence the type of divine struggle one may experience: Viewing God as cruel has been associated with greater anger toward God while viewing God as distant has been related with greater feelings of abandonment and doubts of God's existence (Exline et al., 2015). Thus, similar to how individuals may feel hurt when excluded by human agents, exclusion from nonhuman, supernatural agents such as God may also yield detrimental consequences.

As evidence of technological advancement, human-robot interactions provide another opportunity for individuals to feel ostracized by nonhuman agents. Even when people know they are interacting with a computer programmed to exclude them, the experience of this exclusion still hurts (Zadro et al., 2004). One reason for this robust finding may lie in people's tendency to anthropomorphize nonhuman agents, imbuing these agents with human-like qualities (Jauch et al., 2022). These experiences are becoming more common and intense as technology continues to advance. For instance, in a physical adaptation of Cyberball where participants played a ball-tossing game with two nonhumanoid robots, people still felt excluded when they did not receive the ball even when knowing that the other players were robots (Erel et al., 2021). Similarly, this (over-)sensitivity to detect ostracism is also present when people observed two

robots interact while believing the robots were communicating through robotic language (e.g., beeps and clicks) rather than natural language (i.e., that which can be understood by humans). Indeed, Rosenthal-von Der Pütten and Bock (2023) found that when hearing robots transmit information through robotic language, people felt ostracized by being out of the loop. Due to the associations between ostracism and mortality, even slight experiences of ostracism, regardless of source, may serve as an existential threat and a reminder of one's mortality.

SUMMARY

Ostracism is an event capable of causing pain, negative affect, and thwarted basic psychological needs. The experience of ostracism serves as an existential threat, exacerbating existential concerns of death, isolation, freedom, identity, and meaninglessness. There are three distinct stages that unfold in the need-threat model of ostracism. The reflexive stage consists of immediate reactions to ostracism. The reflective stage involves the attribution and appraisal of ostracism as well as the restoration of needs. Lastly, following chronic experiences of ostracism, people may enter the resignation stage. Although research has primarily focused on the reflexive and reflective stages of the model, research is continuing to grow surrounding the consequences of chronic ostracism. While being a negative experience, ostracism is an extremely powerful tool of conformity, capable of being enacted by various sources.

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