

The Negative Effects of Ostracism on Well-Being

Research Question: To What Extent Does Ostracism Negatively Impact the Emotional and Physical Well-Being of Individuals?

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
OSTRACISM, SOCIAL EXCLUSION, AND REJECTION	3
THE INITIAL SHOCK OF PAIN	5
FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS AND NEED FORTIFICATION.....	7
CHRONIC OSTRACISM.....	15
CONCLUSION.....	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	18

INTRODUCTION

Social Ostracism occurs among groups of most known social animals, from Bison to Bees. It is theorized that animals form social groups because living with a support system helps them to maintain basic physiological needs, such as food, shelter, and mates for reproduction.¹ Excluding certain members of the group came about because it can strengthen the group and protects the majority from burdensome members.² The formation of social groups in humans occurred probably for the same physiological reasons as it did in animals. Over time, however, we have evolved to be dependent upon others not only to fulfill our basic physiological needs, but our psychological needs as well. Ostracism occurs not only to protect the majority from the burdensome members, but also to increase the cohesiveness of the group.³ In the modern day, when the stakes for survival are not so high, ostracism can have devastatingly negative impacts on the emotional and physiological well-being of human individuals.

OSTRACISM, SOCIAL EXCLUSION, AND REJECTION

The most common terms used to describe the phenomena of social groups neglecting to include or acknowledge individuals are *ostracism*, *social exclusion*, and *rejection*. Although there has been much progress in research towards the effects of this phenomena on individuals, little effort has been made towards determining how distinct each of these terms are from each

¹ Riva, P., Wesselmann, E. D., Wirth, J. H., Carter-Sowell, A. R., & Williams, K. D. (2014). When pain does not heal: The common antecedents and consequences of chronic social and physical pain. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 36, 329-346.

² Williams, K. D. (2009). Ostracism: A Temporal Need Threat Model. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 41, 275-314.

³ Ibid

other. All of these terms describe being ignored and/or excluded, though research on their occurrence suggests that there are slight differences.

Ostracism seems to be when an individual is isolated without the group paying them any negative attention or giving them much explanation as to why.⁴ Ostracism is most likely to occur when the group implicitly dislikes or does not care to socialize with the ostracized individual. Perhaps the way they look, how they behave, or something else about them is unappealing to the social group, though not so much so that they are compelled to harass the person. In some cases, the ostracism might occur entirely on accident. An individual might simply fall through the cracks between social groups, their isolation entirely unintentional. It still feels incredibly hurtful to be ostracized, despite the lack of intent to harm, and the loneliness of it can be unbearable.

Rejection is a bit more along the lines of what we imagine when we think of bullying: the marginalized kid on the playground who is barred by other kids from playing games with them. Rejection is usually defined as an individual or group explicitly conveying that they do not want to socialize with an individual.⁵ Rejection tends to be harsher than other kinds of isolation, because not only is an individual left alone, but they are often also left with their self-esteem crushed by the blatant criticism that the rejector has forced upon them. Rejection can occur in one on one relationships, as well as between groups and individuals. It is a more malicious way of isolating a person, in that there is clear intent.

Social exclusion is sort of like the middle ground between ostracism and rejection. It is being isolated or excluded with or without explicit declarations of dislike.⁶ It is simply when a

⁴ Williams, K. D. (2006, August 25). *Ostracism*. Retrieved September 13, 2018.

⁵ Williams, K. D. (2006, August 25). *Ostracism*. Retrieved September 13, 2018.

⁶ Ibid

person is excluded from a social sphere or social activities, without regard to whether the exclusion is deliberate.

Despite these distinctions between the definitions, researchers do not appear to be overly attached to these operationalizations, and often use them interchangeably. Furthermore, no research has established that these distinctions lead to different consequences in social isolation.⁷

THE INITIAL SHOCK OF PAIN

Most people are familiar with the sting that accompanies being rejected or excluded. There is a reason that the saying “stabbed in the back” and “heartache” include painful sensations in the description. When a person experiences a social loss, there is a perceived pain that accompanies it. Evolutionarily, the brief pain would condition us to value our social relationships, because for social animals like humans they are extremely important in the fight for survival.⁸

An experiment conducted by Naomi Eisenberger in 2003 gives insight into how our brains detect episodes of ostracism, and one of the reasons behind why exclusion can feel so painful. Eisenberger gathered voluntary participants and had them each play a game of Cyberball while lying down in an MRI machine. fMRI was used to capture images of their brain activity at critical points during the experiment.⁹ The participants had been told that they would be taking a mental visualization task in order to distract them from the experiment’s true purpose. Participants played a classic game of Cyberball, which included stages such as baseline, inclusion, exclusion (due to the participants computer not being connected to the other players),

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Raffensperger, L. (2012). Words can never hurt me? *New Scientist*, 216(2893), 36-39.

and ostracism. Baseline images were taken before Cyberball, inclusion occurred when the participant was tossed the ball during the game by the other players, and ostracism occurred when the other players stopped passing the ball to the participant. The participants were led to believe that the other players were real people in a separate room, when in actuality they were a computer simulation. After the game's completion, the participants filled out a questionnaire about the feelings they experienced during Cyberball.¹⁰

Eisenberger found significant Dorsal Anterior Cingulate Cortex (dACC) activation during exclusion and ostracism. dACC activation is associated with surprise, expectation violation, and the detection of physical pain.¹¹ Eisenberger's inclusion of a situation where the participants computer is "disconnected" creates conditions under which the participant expects to be excluded. That levels during this stage in the experiment were just as high as those during ostracism effectively eliminates surprise and expectation violation as reasons for dACC activation among this experiment's participants. The increased activation in this region of the brain also positively correlated with higher levels of self-reported distress among participants.¹² The results of Eisenberger's study lead us to believe that the brain perceives ostracism as pain.

A strength of Eisenberger's study is how well they operationalized the perception of pain. Pain is relative for everyone and using self-reporting techniques may not account for the different ways individuals experience pain. By using fMRI scans, Eisenberger was able to see the brain perceiving pain in action, which is closer to the actual source of perception. This reduces the variability among patients, ensuring that the levels of pain can be measured effectively.

¹⁰ Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams, K. D. (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science*, 302, 290-292.

¹¹ Williams, K. D. (2009). Ostracism: A Temporal Need Threat Model. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 41, 275-314.

¹² Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams, K. D. (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science*, 302, 290-292.

While perhaps not incredibly reliable in itself, self-reported measures do help the to provide some clarity on the brain activity in the scans and how they are being perceived on a conscious level. Another strength of Eisenberger's methods was that she used retrospective self-reported measures of distress to confirm the conscious detection of ostracism in participants. Another strength was including expected exclusion in addition to the unexpected surprise factor, because it effectively eliminated surprise and expectation violation as reasons for the dACC activity and narrowed down what could be causing the increase.

One limitation of Eisenberger's study is that the brain is a very mysterious aspect of human functioning, and the dACC may have additional or different functions than the ones that scientists are already familiar with. Having such an unknown be such a crucial part of the experiment creates much more room for inaccurate conclusions. Additionally, though a nonscientific replication of Eisenberger et al (2003) was conducted by BBC media,¹³ their study lacks scientific replication, and therefore may be less reliable. Finally, the conditions of ostracism that are found in Cyberball are different than those found in the real world. Therefore, the results of the study may not be applicable to real life situations.

FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS AND NEED FORTIFICATION

The real danger of Ostracism begins not with the initial shock of pain that accompanies it's detection, but with the comptonization of various needs that must be fulfilled in order to remain mentally and physically healthy. They qualify as needs because if thwarted, they are directly linked to harmful physical and psychological outcomes. Ostracism mainly threatens four

¹³ Williams, K. D. (2009). Ostracism: A Temporal Need Threat Model. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 41, 275-314.

fundamental needs: a) the need to belong, b) the need to maintain reasonably high self-esteem, c) the need to perceive control over one's social environment, and d) the need to feel recognized for existing and being worthy of attention. Different people will value different needs more and may unconsciously attempt to fortify them according to which feels most threatened.¹⁴ Which needs an individual chooses to fortify can have a great impact on how a person is affected, in the long term, by ostracism. According to Williams, the needs can be divided into two clusters. Belonging and self-esteem make up the inclusionary cluster and control and existence make up the power and provocation cluster.

The Inclusionary Cluster

When belonging needs are thwarted, the excluded individual is no longer being attended to, looked at, or considered by their excluders. They often feel isolated and lonely, as they no longer feel that they share a social connection with the others.¹⁵

Ostracism is typically abrupt and often occurs without explanation. This leaves the ostracized individual to decide for themselves why they were excluded from the group. This often compromises their self-esteem needs, in that they may blame themselves for being excluded, assuming that they have done something to deserve it. They often attribute the exclusion to flaws and behaviors on their part, such as inappropriateness, meanness, selfishness, ugliness, and a whole host of other shortcomings. Dwelling on their own faults tends to cause lowered self-esteem, which can be detrimental to their physical and psychological well-being over time.¹⁶

¹⁴ Williams, K. D. (2009). Ostracism: A Temporal Need Threat Model. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 41, 275-314.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

Belonging and self-esteem needs are combined into the inclusionary cluster because the ways in which individuals attempt to fortify each is very similar. In fortifying belonging and self-esteem, there is an increased likelihood of that person once again becoming connected with others and accepted back into the group, because they are more inclined to display prosocial behaviors. Those who feel their inclusionary cluster is most threatened usually become hypersensitive and attentive to social information. For example, those who score higher in loneliness are more likely to show improvements in remembering social information.¹⁷ Furthermore, those with threatened belonging needs tend to be more sensitive to non-verbal cues.¹⁸

Those fortifying the inclusionary cluster tend to have better outcomes because the ostracism creates pressure to eradicate inappropriate and unhelpful behaviors. However, if they go too far in trying to be reincluded, there is a risk of them becoming socially servile and overly susceptible to social influence like peer pressure. According to Williams, Social Servility is “an individual’s proclivity to be overly concerned with fitting in and being liked to the point of being especially malleable and obsequious.”¹⁹

Firstly, an ostracized person is more likely to mimic the mannerisms of others, especially if the other is an ingroup member.²⁰ The risk associated with this is that they may be more likely to imitate not only the mannerisms but the actions of others as well. If an individual's peers are engaging in destructive behaviors, the individual may be more likely to engage as well.

¹⁷ Gardner, L., Pickett, C. L., & Brewer, M. B. (2000). Social exclusion and selective memory: How the need to belong influences memory for social events. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 486-496.

¹⁸ Pickett, C. L., Gardner, W. L., & Knowles, M. (2004). Getting a cue: The need to belong and enhanced sensitivity to social cues. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 1095-1107.

¹⁹ Williams, K. D. (2009). Ostracism: A Temporal Need Threat Model. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 41, 275-314.

²⁰ Lakin, J. L., Chartrand, T. L., & Arkin, R. M. (2008). I am too just like you: Nonconscious mimicry as an automatic behavioral response to social exclusion. *Psychological Science*, 19, 816-822.

Secondly, victims in the inclusionary cluster may be more compliant and malleable. In a study by Carter-Sowell et al (2008) participants played a game of Cyberball in which they were either included or ostracized. They were then taken to a waiting room for phase two of the experiment. A confederate posing as another participant arrived in the waiting room and mentioned to the participant that they are a Purdue band member and that they are collecting money for a fundraiser. They used either the door-in-face, foot-in-door, or direct request tactic to ask for pledge money from the participant. Regardless of the tactic used, those who were ostracized during Cyberball were more likely to make a pledge and give more money than those who were included.²¹ A strength of this study was that using Cyberball as the ostracism/inclusion variable eliminated some of the other variables that can be associated with face-to-face ostracism. Furthermore, the experimenters used money to measure the dependent variable, which was beneficial in that money is often an excellent measure sacrifice and generosity. A limitation of the Carter-Sowell study was that having the confederate mention that they are affiliated with the band may have skewed the results by creating more opportunity for the participant to act on bias. In conclusion, this way of fortifying needs is harmful to the extent that it can be damaging to an individual's finances and resources and may leave them vulnerable to be taken advantage of by others.

However, fortifying the inclusionary cluster does not always have negative effects. In a study by Maner et al (2006), researchers tested whether ostracism caused its victims to become more extraverted and prosocial. Their study included 34 undergraduate participants, 28 of whom were female and the other six of whom were male. At the beginning of the study the participants were told that the aim of the researchers was to understand the different aspects of personality.

²¹ Carter-Sowell, A. R., Chen, Z., & Williams, K. D. (2008). Ostracism Increases Social Susceptibility. *Social Influence*, 3, 143-153.

They then had participants complete a brief demographic questionnaire and a personality questionnaire. Their results were evaluated, and accurate extraversion scale feedback was given to participants, along with bogus feedback on how their extraversion score impacted their future social relationships. They were randomly assigned to different groups. A third were given a future alone prognosis, in which they were told that they would end up alone later in life, and that their social connections and abilities would deteriorate over time. A third were given a future belonging prognosis, in which they were told that they would have many rewarding relationships throughout their life. The remaining third were given a misfortune prognosis, in which they were told that they were likely to be accident prone later in life and would suffer many injuries. They included the misfortune group to determine whether the results were caused by ostracism in itself or were just the effects of being given negative news. After they were given their prognosis, participants were asked if they would complete an additional task with a different experimenter down the hall who needed more subjects. The next experimenter informed the participant that they could either complete the task alone or with partners. They were given a sheet of paper that said, "To what extent would you prefer to complete the experiment with other social partners" and were then asked to rate their answer on a scale of 0 to 11, 0 being not at all and 11 being extremely. Once participants gave their answer, they were thoroughly debriefed. Researchers took extra care in making sure that participants who were given a negative prognosis knew that they had been deceived and that the results they were given did not have any real bearing on their future social relationships.²² The results of this study showed that future alone participants desired to work with other partners significantly more than those in the other groups. There was no significant difference between the belonging and misfortune groups, which means that

²² Maner, J. K., DeWall, C. N., Baumeister, R. F., & Schaller, M. (2006, June 10). *Does Social Exclusion Motivate Interpersonal Reconnection*. Retrieved January 13, 2019.

ostracized participants become more socially extraverted not just because they were given negative news, but because of the prospect of exclusion and loneliness.²³ A strength of this study was that they gave accurate feedback on the extraversion scores of participants to increase the authenticity of the bogus feedback that they would later receive. This increased the trust that the participants put in what the researchers told them and increased the accuracy of the results of the study. A limitation of this study was that far more of the subjects were women than men, which may have skewed the results if the gender's respond to ostracism uniquely. In future studies, it would be beneficial to test the genders separately and see if there is any variation between them. The outcome of Maner et al (2006) supports the hypothesis that ostracism can cause individuals to become more extraverted and prosocial towards others. This response to ostracism would positively affect the individual, in that it would increase their chances of being welcomed back into a social group.

Much of the consequences of ostracism depend on the actions of the individual, and how they go about trying to fortify threatened needs. Ostracism could be beneficial in that they adjust their behavior to be more prosocial, which would increase their likability and chances of having successful social relationships in the future. However, there is also much potential for negative effects in trying to fortify the inclusionary cluster, such as allowing oneself to be taken advantage of by others. In this way, ostracism can negatively impact the psychological and physical well-being of humans to a great extent, depending on how the individual responds to the ostracism.

²³ Ibid

The Power and Provocation cluster

Control needs are threatened during an episode of ostracism because the victim has no control over the situation. They are unable to engage with the source of the ostracism because they are being ignored, and they are unable to negotiate with the excluders to be included back into the group.²⁴ Those who ostracize hold all of the power.

Death is commonly used as a metaphor for ostracism. The saying “you’re dead to me” sometimes precedes a period of time in which one person is ostracized by another, the speaker. This saying speaks volumes as to what is actually happening during an episode of ostracism. The victim often feels that their existence is no longer meaningful or worthy of attention. In this way, ostracism thwarts meaningful existence/recognition needs.²⁵

Those who feel that control and meaningful existence needs are most threatened make up the power and provocation cluster. They are more likely to behave antisocially and aggressively in order to fortify these needs. Their antisocial behavior makes it far more likely that they will not be allowed to rejoin the group they are being ostracized by. Fortifying needs in this way tends to be much more damaging because not only do they continue to be excluded from that group, but their behavior often worsens, which may make it difficult for them to be accepted into other groups as well.

Aggression is often exhibited by those trying to reinforce control and meaningful existence needs. In Warburton et al (2006), researchers conducted a study to test whether aggression reestablishes power and control. In their experiment, they led participants to believe

²⁴ Williams, K. D. (2009). Ostracism: A Temporal Need Threat Model. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 41, 275-314.

²⁵ Ibid

that the study they were participating in was testing cross modality perception. While in a waiting room, a participant would engage in a face-to-face ball tossing game with a group of confederates. Half of the participants were included and the other half were ostracized. When taking the “actual experiment”, participants had to listen to ten extremely obnoxious noise blasts of sound. Half of the participants could control the onset of the noise and the other half could not.²⁶ In the next stage, there was a rigged drawing which determined that the participant was assigned the role of doling out portions of food for the “ostensible food perception” phase of the experiment. Their job was to give as little or as much food to their partner, who had to eat the entire amount. The food was hot sauce, and the participant had been informed that their partner strongly disliked spicy foods. In this experiment, control fortification was assessed by the amount of hot sauce each person gave to their partner. The more hot sauce that they allocated, the more aggression they displayed.²⁷ The results of the study supported the ostracism-control-aggression link. Only ostracized and control deprived participants showed significantly higher levels of aggression. They gave about five times more hot sauce to their partners than those from the other groups did.²⁸ One strength of this study was that they used a prior study in order to conclude that hot sauce allocation could in fact be linked to aggression.²⁹ Another strength was that the face-to-face ball tossing game that they employed was fairly close to how episodes of ostracism can feel in real life, whereas Cyberball may put some distance between the participant and the excluders. This makes the study’s results more applicable to the real world. A limitation

²⁶ Warburton, W. A., Williams, K. D., & Cairns, D. R. (2006). When ostracism leads to aggression: The moderating effects of control deprivation. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 42, 213-220.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Lieberman, J. D., Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & McGregor, H. A. (1999). A new way to measure aggression: Hot sauce allocation. *Aggressive Behavior*, 25, 331-348.

of this study was that there are so many variables that it may be difficult to determine which variables are causing the aggressive outcomes, and which variables have the greater influence. In future experiments, it may be beneficial to test each individually.

There are many harmful consequences to consider if a person ends up fortifying control/meaningful existence needs. If the victim becomes aggressive and antisocial, they may not be able to return to the rhythm of their normal life. They may become even more isolated, which could significantly worsen their physical and mental state. If a person goes down this path, ostracism has the potential to negatively impact their life to a great extent.

CHRONIC OSTRACISM

Chronic episodes of ostracism tend to be far more devastating. After long and repeated episodes of ostracism, it appears that a person's ability to continue to attempt to fortify needs becomes diminished, and hopelessness sets in.³⁰ A person's coping mechanisms become depleted, and they accept their alienation and despair.

In a study done by Zadro et al (2004), qualitative interviews from over 50 participants who had suffered chronic ostracism were analyzed. They found that in the face of long-term exclusion and rejection caused people to abandon their attempts to fortify needs and become resigned to their exclusion. Attempts to reinforce control needs are replaced with the adoption of a helplessness mindset, self-esteem enhancement attempts are replaced by the acceptance of low self-worth, attempts to fortify belonging needs are abandoned in favor of resignation to their alienation and isolation, and fortification of recognition/meaningful existence needs is

³⁰ Williams, K. D. (2006, August 25). *Ostracism*. Retrieved September 13, 2018.

disregarded and instead the victim becomes depressed and withdraws further from others in an attempt to avoid experiencing more pain from rejection.³¹ These long-term effects of ostracism can be extremely devastating to a person's physical and psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

Ostracism has the potential to have an extremely negative impact on the emotional and physiological well-being of individuals. The way that a person responds to the initial “sting” of ostracism greatly influences how they are affected by it. If a person's relational needs are most threatened, then they are more likely to adapt prosaically, which may help them be accepted by the excluders. If efficacy/existence needs are most threatened, however, they are more likely to behave more anti-socially, perhaps even aggressively. If a person does act aggressively towards others, this can be detrimental to both their physical and emotional well-being by bringing harm to themselves and others. Furthermore, if the ostracism persists over time, a victim may enter a state of cognitive deconstruction, which is characterized by a lack of emotion or any sense of future. This is the flat stage that often occurs before suicide attempts.³² Chronic ostracism causes the victim to fall into a state of perceived helplessness, low self-worth, isolation, and depression, all of which are harmful to the emotional and physiological well-being of humans. In the future, more resources should go towards researching new ways to help ostracized individuals avoid

³¹ Riva, P., Wesselmann, E. D., Wirth, J. H., Carter-Sowell, A. R., & Williams, K. D. (2014). When pain does not heal: The common antecedents and consequence of chronic social and physical pain. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 36, 329-346.

³² Cognitive Deconstruction. (n.d.). Retrieved November 1, 2018, from APA Dictionary of Psychology website

entering a state of cognitive deconstruction. This might include providing funding to spread awareness for the phenomena of ostracism and encouraging people to be inclusive towards those who are on the fringes of a social group, or who lack one entirely. No one should have to endure a life alone.

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