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Empirical research

## Psychological flexibility and ostracism: Experiential avoidance rather than cognitive fusion moderates distress from perceived ostracism over time

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### ABSTRACT

Psychological inflexibility has been found to moderate psychological distress following perceived ostracism. Two component processes of psychological inflexibility, experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion, are considered key in exacerbating general emotional distress. The present study ( $n = 286$ ) examined whether both experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion moderate distress from perceived ostracism or whether one of these processes alone underpins the moderation effect of psychological inflexibility. In a structural equation model analysis, when accounting for both factors, experiential avoidance moderated distress from perceived ostracism alone. Thus, it seems that experiential avoidance is a key driver underlying emotional regulation of psychological distress in the context of perceived ostracism.

### 1. Introduction

Ostracism, primarily characterized by being ignored in social contexts such as within the family or workplace environments (Riva & Eck, 2016), is known to cause psychological distress including painful negative emotions and hurt feelings along with increased anger, frustration, aggression, sadness, and loneliness (e.g., Hawkley, Williams, & Cacioppo, 2011; Williams, 2007, 2009). The distress that follows an experience of ostracism can be so pervasive that it occurs even when a person is ignored by an unwanted or undesirable group (Gorsalkorale & Williams, 2007). Many promising factors may help buffer an individual against the negative effects of emotional distress following ostracism, at least in the short term. For example, self-esteem (Teng & Chen, 2012), attachment styles (Hermann, Skulborstad, & Wirth, 2014), social anxiety (Zadro, Boland, & Richardson, 2006), use of prayer (Hales, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2016), perceived social hierarchy (Schoel, Eck, & Greifender, 2014), and temporal perspective (Garcynski & Brown, 2014), may influence an individual's capacity to cope with their short-term ostracism. While it is apparent that many of these studies examined seemingly theoretically disparate and unrelated constructs, Riva, Wesselmann, Wirth, Carter-Sowell, and Williams (2014) reviewed the literature linking an impaired self-regulation with distress in the context of ostracism or chronic social pain. In general, Baumeister,

Heatherton, and Tice (1994) reported that people typically recover quite quickly (i.e., in terms of ego depletion) from a distressing socially painful event such as ostracism. However, Riva et al. (2014) speculated that chronic social pain may be an exception, representing a long-term lax that constantly undermines a person's capacity to self-regulate as the distress of social pain interferes with domains of executive functioning. Thus, Riva et al. theorized that impaired emotional self-regulation is likely the critical mechanism that determines whether a person will suffer prolonged distress from everyday experiences of ostracism. Although there may be little agreement as to how impaired self-regulatory function develops (Gross & Feldman Barrett, 2011; Riva et al., 2014; Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005), one relatively recent construct, *psychological flexibility* (Hayes & Strosahl, 2012; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) might be a key factor in influencing emotional self-regulation following ostracism, and is the focus of the current study.

According to Williams (2009) Temporal Need Threat Model (TNTM), there are three stages of response to an ostracism event: (i) reflexive, (ii) reflective, and (iii) resignation. The TNTM proposes that in the *reflexive* stage, the experiences of ostracism immediately deplete four fundamental psychological needs: self-esteem, self-control, need for belonging, and meaningful existence (Williams, 2009; see also Stillman et al., 2009; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000; Zadro, Williams,

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& Richardson, 2004). After the initial sting of ostracism, individuals enter the *reflective* stage in which they focus their efforts on recovering their thwarted need satisfaction. Much research suggests that this is typically the stage in which individuals' reactions are moderated by either individual differences or situational factors (e.g., Knowles & Gardner, 2008; Kuehn, Chen, & Gordon, 2015; Onoda et al., 2010; Rudert & Greifender, 2016; Zadro et al., 2006).

Despite the utility of the TNTM, it is somewhat lacking in guidance as to how to incorporate and reconcile the effects of such different moderating constructs on coping with ostracism. The psychological flexibility model (Hayes et al., 1999; Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006; Hayes, Pistorello et al., 2012) might help provide some much needed theoretical unity or grounding to the widely diverse literature on potential constructs to help cope with distress following ostracism. The final stage of the TNTM, the *resignation* stage, is characterized by chronic ostracism and feelings of alienation, worthlessness, and hopelessness (see Riva, Montali, Wirth, Curioni, & Williams, 2016). However, little research has examined the dispositional factors that can lead people to enter the resignation stage following everyday experiences of ostracism. To fill this gap, the current study focused on coping with distress following general everyday experiences of self-reported perceived ostracism.

## 2. Psychological flexibility

Psychological flexibility is the central tenet of the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) model of behavior change. Within ACT, there are six core overlapping and inter-related processes that are purported to contribute to this broad higher level construct of psychological flexibility: *contacting the present moment*, *acceptance*, *cognitive defusion*, *self-as-context*, *values*, and *committed action* (Hayes et al., 2006). Psychological flexibility is characterized as a person's capacity to remain in contact with psychological pain (e.g., emotional distress following an experience of ostracism) and allow it to pass by without defence or emotional struggle, while persisting with or changing behavior in line with one's own chosen values (Hayes, Pistorello et al., 2012). In other words, psychological flexibility is “the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends” (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 7). Emotional struggle, in the context of ostracism, typically manifests in maladaptive internalizing (e.g., solitude seeking or social withdrawal following ostracism, Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2016; excessive rumination, Wesselmann, Ren, Swim, & Williams, 2013) or externalizing (e.g., increased aggression, Gaertner, Iuzzini, & O'Mara, 2008; reduced prosocial behavior, Twenge, Baumeister, De Wall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007) behavioral responses. Research has demonstrated that increasing an individual's psychological flexibility can reduce psychological distress (e.g., Powers, Zum Vörde Sive Vörding, & Emmelkamp, 2009), and is considered a cardinal aspect of overall good psychological health and functioning (Gloster, Klotzshe, Chaker, Hummel, & Hoyer, 2011; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010).

Psychological inflexibility is characterized by *experiential avoidance*, *cognitive fusion*, *self-as-content*, *lack of contact with the present moment*, *lack of values*, and *lack of commitment to action*. While all six components of psychological inflexibility model are considered to be pertinent and inter-connected, two processes are deemed particularly important in the context of emotion regulation and coping with negative thoughts, feelings, and emotions: (i) experiential avoidance, and (ii) cognitive fusion (Hayes, Pistorello et al., 2012). Indeed, Hayes, Pistorello et al. (2012) suggested that these constructs could be usefully conceptualised as a ‘pair’, on a spectrum from a stance of openness to or acceptance of, or being closed or resistant to, negative thoughts and feelings (see Frances, Dawson, & Golijani-Moghaddam, 2016, for a detailed discussion). The theoretical underpinning of ACT suggests that the combination of experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion exacerbates psychological distress (see Bardeen & Fergus, 2016). Research to date has

typically focused primarily on one or other one of these components with regard to a specific psychological disorder. For example, Gouveia-Pinto, Dinis, Gregorio, and Pinto (2018) examined cognitive fusion with respect to depression, while Kashdan et al. (2013) explored the role of experiential avoidance in social anxiety disorder. With respect to ostracism research, however, it remains unknown whether these two dimensions weight equally or, by contrast, one of the two plays a primary and dominant role in accounting for the association between everyday experiences of ostracism and psychological distress.

## 3. Experiential avoidance

We will firstly discuss the concept of experiential avoidance, which is behavior that attempts to “alter the frequency or form of unwanted private events, including thoughts, memories, and bodily sensations, even when doing so causes personal harm” (Hayes, Pistorello et al., 2012, p. 981). As a construct it is somewhat related to the well-known surprising and contradictory effects of thought suppression and thought control (Wegner, 1994; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000), in that efforts to suppress or control unwanted thoughts ironically tend to result in increased frequency and affect intensity of such thoughts. As noted by Vaughan-Johnson, Quickert, and MacDonald (2017), however, the “conceptual uniqueness of [experiential avoidance] is its consideration of how people feel about their feelings (similar to ‘thoughts about thoughts’ in the literature on metacognition)” (p. 335). The use of experiential avoidance has been implicated in the development and perpetuation of psychopathology (Chawla & Ostafin, 2007; Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). Indeed, the key role that experiential avoidance plays in psychological health has been explored in numerous studies, both from moderator (e.g., Bardeen, Fergus, & Orcutt, 2013; Bardeen, Fergus, & Orcutt, 2014; Gerhart, Baker, Hoerger, & Ronan, 2014; Kashdan, Breen, Afram, & Terhar, 2010; Kashdan & Kane, 2011) and mediator (e.g., Fledderus, Bohlmeijer, & Pieterse, 2010) perspectives. Moreover, Karekla and Panayiotou (2011) found that experiential avoidance adds more explanatory value than traditional concepts of coping with distress. More specifically, Karekla and Panayiotou compared the brief COPE (Carver, 1997) measure with the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011) as a measure of experiential avoidance and found that experiential avoidance (EA) accounted for unique variance in that “higher EA was associated with utilizing self-destruction, denial, emotional support, behavioral disengagement, venting, and self-blame to a greater degree” (p. 168). In a somewhat similar vein, Gloster et al. (2011) found that psychological flexibility, of which experiential avoidance is a core component process, “adds to the explanation of functioning and impairment, beyond well validated measures of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as anxiety sensitivity and neuroticism” (p. 976), in clinical (i.e., social phobia; panic disorder with agoraphobia) and non-clinical samples (see also Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth, & Steger, 2006).

It should be acknowledged at this point, however, that some researchers have argued that employing avoidance as a strategy to reduce distress is not necessarily a maladaptive response (e.g., Bonnano & Burton, 2013), at least in the short term. Indeed, attempts to resolve perceived ostracism (e.g., compliance) are purported to be critical to survival, particularly within humans ancestral past (Williams, 2009). Compliance could conceivably be considered a form of experiential avoidance in this context as it may lead a person complying to a social group's set of values that are quite different to their own. As the ACT model emphasises behavior that is values-led and workable, behaving in a values-inconsistent way (which may have been the cause for the ostracism experience in the first place) might potentially lead to some psychological discomfort further down the line once the initial relief brought about by group re-admittance subsides.

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