



Desiring to connect to nature: The effect of ostracism on ecological behavior



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ABSTRACT

Three experiments tested whether ostracism increases ecological behaviors through increased desires to connect to nature. Compared with non-ostracized participants, ostracized participants reported higher desires to connect to nature (Experiments 1 and 3) and were more willing to behave ecologically (Experiments 2 and 3). Furthermore, increased desires to connect to nature mediated the effect of ostracism on ecological inclinations (Experiment 3). Together, these findings suggest that people try to cope with the pain of ostracism by connecting to the natural environment and behaving ecologically. They also highlight the significance of desires for nature connectedness in explaining why ostracism increases ecological behavior. Implications are discussed.

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“Heaven, Earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one.”

Zhuangzi (369BC–286BC).

1. Introduction

The opening quote from Zhuangzi, an ancient Chinese philosopher, suggests that people are inseparable from nature. Western ecopsychologists share a similar view; they assert that people have a strong innate inclination to connect to nature (the biophilia hypothesis; Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Wilson, 1984). However, in modern societies, people may behave in ways that damage natural environments by over-consuming and under-conserving natural resources (Oskamp, 2000). As the sustainability of natural resources is critical for human well-being, the question of how to achieve such sustainability and promote ecological lifestyles has become a hot social and research issue in most modern societies.

Environmental and social psychologists have attempted to understand the antecedents that can promote ecological inclinations and behaviors, almost exclusively from a perspective that focuses

on people's perceived relationships between their self and nature. In particular, research has found that individuals who dispositionally feel connected to nature are more inclined to behave ecologically (e.g., Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Tam, 2013). However, relatively little research effort has been devoted to examine how interpersonal experiences might influence nature-related and ecological behaviors. Given that social and interpersonal experiences often guide people through events in daily life (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which may provide another useful perspective in understanding who are more inclined towards ecological behavior. The present research aims to fill this knowledge gap by testing a novel prediction that ostracism increases ecological inclinations through increased desires to connect to nature.

Because the need to belong is one of the most fundamental human needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), people should be motivated to restore their thwarted feelings of belonging following ostracism (Williams, 2007, 2009). As natural environments are readily perceived as sources of bonding and connection (Kellert & Wilson, 1993), and exposure to nature can ameliorate life difficulties and work stresses (e.g., Hartig, Evans, Jamner, Davis, & Gärling, 2003; Mayer, Frantz, Bruehlman-Senecal, & Dolliver, 2009), people may seek to connect to nature when they encounter interpersonal setbacks, such as ostracism. In this regard, ostracized people should have increased desires to connect to nature, especially when there are no clear indicators of possible reconnection

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with other individuals. We further predict that increased desires to connect to nature should carry behavioral implications. If ostracized people have increased desires to connect to nature, they should also be more ecologically-oriented to protect natural environments because nature represents an important source that can help them more effectively cope with the pain of ostracism.

To summarize, the present research has two aims. First, it aims to provide the first experimental evidence that ostracism increases people's desires to connect to nature (Experiments 1 and 3) and increases their inclinations to engage in ecological behaviors (Experiments 2 and 3). Second, it aims to show that increased desires to connect to nature mediate the effect of ostracism on ecological inclinations (Experiment 3).

1.1. Ostracism and relationship seeking

People have an evolved need to belong to groups and individuals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Positive and sustainable social relationships are critical to people's physical and psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Ostracism, which is defined as being rejected or ignored, thwarts people's pervasive need for belonging and cuts off people's access to the benefits associated with social connection (Williams, 2007, 2009). Therefore, people often experience intense hurtful feelings when they perceive minimal and ambiguous cues of ostracism (e.g., Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater, & Williams, 2012).

Given that belonging is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), people should also try their best to restore the threatened feelings of belonging following ostracism. Prior research has shown that ostracized people have strong interest in connecting with other individuals, whom they perceive as providing potential sources of renewed affiliation (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). To increase their prospects of reconnections, ostracized people pay more attention to social information (e.g., Hess & Pickett, 2010; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004) and behave more pro-socially (e.g., Carter-Sowell, Chen, & Williams, 2008; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Following a brief episode of ostracism, people also identified smiling faces among an array of faces with different emotional expressions more quickly and also fixated on smiling faces longer (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009). These findings unanimously point out that ostracized people have an increased desire to seek social relationships and prefer stimuli that signal potential future affiliations.

In addition to actively seeking to reconnect with humans, ostracized people are interested in forming parasocial relationships with non-humans. For example, Epley, Akalis, Waytz, and Cacioppo (2008) found that compared with their non-ostracized counterparts, ostracized participants were more likely to believe in supernatural agents (e.g., God and angels) and to anthropomorphize pets to make them become more humanlike. In a related vein, Aydin, Fischer, and Frey (2010) found that ostracized individuals had higher intentions to engage in religious behavior and that a religious prime can weaken the devastating impacts of ostracism.

Moreover, researchers have found that animals can also provide feelings of belonging. In particular, pet owners tend to have better well-being and fulfillment of their social needs than non-pet owners (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011; Study 1 and 2). Moreover, following an ostracism prime, people who thought about their pets restored their feelings of belonging more than their counterparts who thought about a control activity (McConnell et al., 2011; Study 3). Similarly, the mere presence of a dog during an ostracism episode can offset the negative impacts of ostracism on well-being (Aydin et al., 2012). These findings clearly

indicate that ostracized people have a strong desire to restore their feelings of belonging and may even perceive nonhuman objects as potential sources of affiliation.

Having increased sensitivity to stimuli and situations that signal social connections and affiliations may imply that ostracized people may have increased desire to connect to nature, which should also have implications on subsequent ecological behaviors. The next section offers additional justifications for why ostracism may increase people's desires to connect to nature, which is followed by a section that discusses why ostracism may increase ecological behaviors.

1.2. Ostracism and the desire to connect to nature

Nature connectedness refers to the degree to which one feels connected to nature (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). It is often construed as a personality trait (Mayer & Frantz, 2004), but recent research suggests that it can be experimentally induced. For example, a recent study finds that anthropomorphizing nature promotes one's perceived connection with natural environments (Tam, Lee, & Chao, 2013). The present research tests whether ostracism increases people's desires to connect to nature, which in turn motivates them to behave ecologically.

One defining aspect of ostracism is reduced feelings of belonging (Williams, 2007, 2009). Therefore, people should also try to restore the threatened feelings of belonging following ostracism. According to basic motivation principles, people generally seek convenient ways to satisfy their desires when they are deprived (Geen, 1995; Shah & Gardner, 2007). Natural environments provide an ideal avenue for restoration and coping because people need not worry whether they (or their request) will be rejected by nature. Research has shown that exposure to nature helps people cope with life difficulties and work stresses (e.g., Hartig et al., 2003; Mayer et al., 2009). Feeling connected to nature also promotes well-being (Howell, Dopko, Passmore, & Buro, 2011). As nature represents an importance source of bonding and connection (see Kellert & Wilson, 1993), ostracized people should have an increased desire to connect to nature in order to restore their threatened feelings of belonging. The next section fleshes out the conceptual framework for why increased desires to connect to nature may increase ostracized people's inclinations towards ecological behaviors.

1.3. Ostracism and ecological behavior

To engage in ecological behavior, people may need to override their own benefits and advantages for the sake of the environment's well-being. For example, people who decide not to drive to work may lower air pollution, but the use of public transportation may likely reduce people's comfort level and increase their transit time. People who use environmentally friendly or recycled products may reduce pollution, but these products are likely more expensive.

Because ecological behaviors may sometimes bring inconveniences and disadvantages to one's self, people may need to view nature as an entity to which they belong before they engage in behaviors to protect the environment (c.f. Leopold, 1949). Modern ecopsychologists have further suggested that a sense of connection and belonging to nature is a critical antecedent to ecological behaviors. In particular, they theorized that people with high nature connectedness expand their self by including natural environments (Leary, Tipsord, & Tate, 2008; Roszak, 1995). The inclusion of nature into their self-concept should promote ecological behaviors because such people will be regarded as self-destructive if they refuse to protect natural environments (Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Roszak, 1995).

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