



## Left out, sluggardly, and blue: Low self-control mediates the relationship between ostracism and depression

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### ABSTRACT

Ostracism strikes at the core of well-being, often increasing depression. Yet, it is unclear whether low self-control may account for the relationship between ostracism and depression. When people experience ostracism, they lose their willingness to control their impulses. This lack of self-control may have negative consequences for ostracized people's mental health, including their level of depressive symptoms. Using two large, independent samples of young adolescents ( $N_s = 918$  and  $487$ ), we examined whether chronic ostracism would relate to lower self-control, which may predict higher levels of depressive symptoms. We found that in both samples, self-control mediated the relationship between ostracism and depressive symptoms. Further, the relationship between self-control and depressive symptoms was moderated by the level of ostracism. Discussion centers on the role of self-control processes in understanding and reducing the negative consequences of ostracism.

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### 1. Introduction

A capacity to form positive, lasting relationships is one defining feature of human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The importance of social relationships is magnified by examining individuals who are ostracized. Indeed, basic neurological and psychological systems constantly monitor against the threat of social ostracism (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). The majority of research to date has focused on the presumed correlates of social ostracism. Comparatively less work has focused on variables that explain the relationship between ostracism and a given outcome (i.e., mediation), or factors that affect the magnitude of that relationship (i.e., moderation). We predict that self-control represents one variable that helps explain the relationship between ostracism and depression.

At first blush, self-control deficits that accompany ostracism may have some benefits, such as mental energy conservation. Nevertheless, poor self-control is itself associated with depression and may impair coping processes aimed at warding off the negative emotional consequences of ostracism (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Therefore, ostracism may relate to higher levels of depression, and this relationship may be mediated by lower

self-control. Moreover, we also contend that the relationship between poor self-control and depression may itself be contingent on the level of perceived ostracism. Our hypotheses will be tested using the conceptual model shown in Fig. 1.

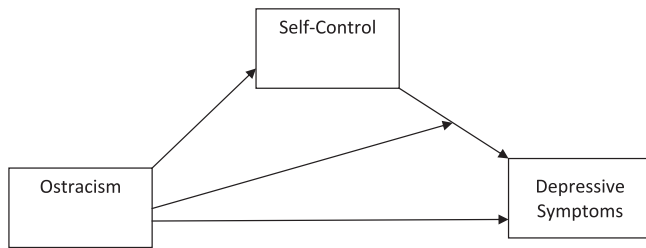
We chose depression as the outcome variable given extant research highlighting the robust relationship between ostracism and higher levels of depression (see Williams & Nida, 2011). The model was based on Coyne's (1976a) interpersonal theory of depression, which argued that ostracized people become depressed, which then cascades into behaviors that cause them to be further ostracized by others, which in turn causes them to become even more depressed. Early support for this perspective showed that depressed people, compared to non-depressed people, experience frequent ostracism (e.g., Burchill & Stiles, 1988; Coyne, 1976b). More recent longitudinal studies have found that ostracism often proceeds higher levels of depression and not vice versa (Nolan, Flynn, & Garber, 2003). Experimentally induced ostracism also produces transient changes in depressive affect (Pharo, Gross, Richardson, & Hayne, 2011).

### 2. Social ostracism and self-control

In spite of the robust relationship between ostracism and depression, underlying processes that may mediate this relationship are largely unknown. One plausible candidate is self-control.

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**Fig. 1.** Proposed path model by which social ostracism moderates the relationship between self-control (the mediator) and depressive symptoms.

Defined as the ability to override one's impulses to remain in line with personal and social standards for appropriate responding (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994), self-control is remarkably advanced in humans. Military officers override their impulses to seek cover and instead go into harm's way, novelists maintain rigid writing schedules despite their occasional desire to skip (or at least skimp on) a writing session, and college students forgo immediate opportunities for employment following high school to spend 4 years (or more) acquiring skills that can earn them more desirable professional careers. Yet, people have numerous opportunities to give into their impulses. Whether it's eating fatty (vs. healthy) foods, responding to insults with vengeance (vs. benevolence), or concentrating (vs. daydreaming) during a professor's lecture, people have continuous opportunities to experience lapses in self-control. The meaning of self-control may differ according to a person's stage of development, from not behaving aggressively on the playground during elementary school to refraining from consuming alcohol before a high school dance. But the definition of self-control, as overriding one response to perform another, remains consistent across stage of development.

What helps explain whether people will or will not engage in effective self-control? Baumeister and colleagues (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciaracco, & Twenge, 2005; DeWall, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2008) suggested that an implicit bargain exists between the individual and standards imposed by society. Self-control requires immense effort and sacrificing one's comfort to fall in line with personal and societal standards for the most appropriate response at a given moment. Normally, people are willing to incur the costs of effective self-control because they are offset by the rewards that social acceptance provides (e.g., selecting a mate; Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008). However, when people experience ostracism, the implicit bargain breaks down. Society and its members no longer dangle social acceptance in the face of its ostracized citizens as a reward for controlling their impulses, and as a result those ostracized people lose their motivation to exert self-control. Numerous experiments support this perspective, showing that excluded (vs. non-excluded) people persist less on frustrating tasks, eat more unhealthy foods, drink less of a bad-tasting but healthy beverage, and show poor attentional control (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2005).

### 3. Why might low self-control help explain the ostracism–depression relationship?

People who have poor self-control also tend to have higher rates of psychopathology, including depression (Carver, Johnson, & Joormann, 2008). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association., 2000) catalogues a litany of disorders (including mood disorders) whose hallmark feature centers on poor self-control. Our contention, based on previous findings (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2005), is that self-control is a coping mechanism that helps prevent ostracism from damaging an individual's mental health. Inadequate self-control

not only removes this buffering effect but, by virtue of behaviors exhibited by the individual, may also lead to more ostracism experiences, thereby increasing the risk of depression. In this regard, highly ostracized people may be less likely to exert the necessary effort to down-regulate their negative emotions that frequently accompany chronic ostracism (see Leary, 2010). Therefore, low self-control may mediate the relationship between ostracism and depression.

Our conceptual framework also contends that the relationship between self-control and depressive symptoms may be influenced by the level of ostracism. In other words, ostracism may function not only as an independent variable but also as a moderator. At low levels of ostracism, the negative relationship between self-control and depression may appear somewhat weak because ostracism poses relatively little threat to mental health. In contrast, the negative relationship between self-control and depression may appear somewhat strong at high levels of ostracism because it is at this level that ostracism poses a relatively large threat to mental health. Several methodologists have described the conceptual underpinnings of such a model (e.g., Judd, Kenny, & McClelland, 2001; Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). This model will enable us to determine not only whether self-control accounts for the direct relationship between ostracism and depression, but it will also help us to identify for whom the relationship between self-control and depression is strongest and weakest.

## 4. Current research

Using two large, independent samples of young adolescents, the current investigation examined the role of self-control in helping to explain the relationship between ostracism and depression. Participants completed measures of chronic ostracism, self-control, and depressive symptoms. We predicted that the more ostracism participants experienced, the poorer self-control and greater depressive symptoms they would report. Moreover, we predicted that low self-control would account for the relationship between ostracism and higher depression. We also examined whether the relationship between self-control and depression would depend on the level of ostracism.

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Participants

Data were collected from two different age groups. Data from the first group were collected in late Spring, 2010 and consisted of 965 high school seniors from three schools located in separate school districts in one Southeastern state in the US. School 1 was located in an urban setting, with a total enrollment of 466 senior students (participation rate = 80%). School 2 was located in a suburban setting, with a total enrollment of 482 senior students (participation rate = 83%), whereas school 3 was located in a rural setting, with an enrollment of 229 seniors (participation rate = 84%). Females comprised 53% of the sample. The total sample had 766 Caucasian adolescents (81%), with the remainder being African–American (11%), Hispanic–American (3%), Asian–American (4%) and “Other” (1%). Study sample demographics aligned with census data for this region. Twenty-seven percent of the sample reported being eligible for free/reduced school lunch status, which is an indicator of low socioeconomic status (SES) because these students cannot afford to offer full payment for their own lunch. Of the participants, 47 were rendered unusable due to their not completing any of the test instruments. Analyses from group 1 were based on 918 students.

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