

How long does it last? The persistence of the effects of ostracism in the socially anxious [☆]

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Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that ostracism (to be excluded and ignored) leads to detrimental effects on four human needs (belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence; Williams, 2001). These detrimental effects, however, may be more pronounced, or more prolonged, in particular individuals (see Williams & Zadro, 2001). In the present study, we examined the persistence of the detrimental effects of ostracism in high and low socially anxious participants. The results show that being ostracized affected both groups at the immediate test, and that the high socially anxious participants recovered their primary needs more slowly. The results also show that being ostracized affects personality/attractiveness ratings of sources of ostracism, and increases the likelihood of interpreting ambiguous situations in a threatening manner. Overall, the study illustrates that a comprehensive understanding of ostracism, and the effects of moderating factors such as social anxiety, requires assessing the effects across time rather than only focusing on immediate reactions. © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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In our day-to-day lives, ostracism (the act of being excluded and ignored; Williams, 2001) exists in many guises, ranging from socially sanctioned forms of ostracism used by institutions (e.g., solitary confinement, exile, and banishment), to more subtle signs of silence and rejection used in interpersonal relationships (e.g., withdrawal of eye contact, no response to greeting; Williams & Zadro, 2001). The response to ostracism can also vary—ranging from increased pro-social behavior (in order to re-connect; Williams, 2001) to increased aggression (e.g., the Columbine shootings; Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). The

complexity of ostracism, with its multiplicity of forms and potential effects on *targets* (i.e., those who are ostracized), is captured in Williams (1997, 2001) theoretical model. The core of this model is the assertion that being ostracized poses a threat to four fundamental human needs: belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. This assertion has been supported by a series of laboratory studies showing that just 5-min of ostracism, either face-to-face or over the Internet, reduced targets' feelings of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence compared to subjects who were socially included (for review, see Williams, 2001).

Although we may all experience a threat to our primary needs after ostracism, there are undoubtedly some individuals who are more sensitive or susceptible to the effects of being excluded and ignored. This sensitivity to ostracism may manifest in two ways. First, these individuals may have a reduced threshold to all forms of ostracism—that is, they may perceive rejection and exclusion to be present in social situations, even if these situations are in fact benign (see

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Downey & Romero-Canyas, 2005). Second, for these individuals, the effects of ostracism may be more persistent, that is, the effects of ostracism on their primary needs may continue over a longer period of time than those who are less sensitive or susceptible to the effects of ostracism.

One particular group that may be a candidate for such pronounced or prolonged effects of ostracism are the socially anxious. Social anxiety is directly related to a fear of social rejection (of which ostracism is a form). Clark and Wells's (1995) cognitive model of social phobia implicates the fear of negative evaluation and (negative) self-focused attention as its core components. This model suggests that socially anxious individuals typically encode more threatening cues during social interactions, and hence are likely to interpret mild or ambiguous forms of exclusion as threatening. Thus, the impact of ostracism may be larger in socially anxious people than in non-anxious individuals. Additionally, the Clark and Wells model asserts that post-event processing may exacerbate social anxiety because socially anxious people are liable to ruminate about their performance during social interactions. In the context of ostracism therefore, socially anxious participants would be more likely to conduct a post-mortem of the event and ruminate about their role in causing the ostracism than non-anxious participants. This would then lead to the effects of ostracism persisting in socially anxious participants.

Despite the relation between ostracism and social anxiety, the role of social anxiety as a moderator of the effects of ostracism has not been examined to date. Thus, in the present study we examined whether social anxiety moderated the effects of ostracism on primary needs. Unlike previous studies that have investigated the moderating effect of individual differences on the effect of ostracism (see Williams & Zadro, 2005), the present study examined the moderating influence of social anxiety not only on the *immediate* effects of ostracism (on the primary needs), but also on the *delayed* effects of ostracism (i.e., after 45-min). By introducing a delay, it was possible to assess the persistence of the effects of ostracism. In addition to the four primary needs, the present study also examined the moderating influence of social anxiety on several constructs that may be adversely affected by ostracism, specifically, social perception (i.e., judgments of the personality and physical attractiveness of sources of ostracism; see Williams et al., 2002), cognitive processes (i.e., memory for faces), and interpretation of ambiguous situations (that may be perceived as socially or physically threatening).

Methods

Participants

Four hundred and thirty-eight students enrolled in first-year psychology at the University of New South Wales were administered The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE; Watson & Friend, 1969) in a prior testing session. From this pool, 56 students (age range from 17 to 59, $M = 22.1$, $SD = 8.0$) agreed to participate in the present

project in return for course credit, and were randomly assigned to either the inclusion or ostracism condition.

Procedure

Participants arrived at the laboratory and were seated in front of a computer. The experimenter explained that the study was a collaborative venture between three local universities and was designed to examine the effects of mental visualization. Participants were informed that to practice their visualization skills, they would be playing an Internet game—"Cyberball" (see Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000)—with students from the other two universities (these students were actually computer generated). The participant was told to mentally visualize (as vividly as possible) throughout the game, and that after finishing the game, their performance on a number of tasks, such as memory tests and questionnaires, would be assessed to determine if mental visualization had an effect. Shortly after obtaining consent, the experimenter received a staged phone call informing them that the other players were ready to start; the game then began.

The game began with one of the players throwing the ball to the participant. The participant was then required to indicate to whom they would like to throw the ball to by clicking on the appropriate player icon. In the ostracism condition, the participant received the ball twice and then was completely excluded from the game (i.e., they did not receive the ball ever again). In the inclusion condition, the participant randomly received the ball approximately 33% of the time. In both conditions, the game lasted 30 trials (approximately 5 min).

Dependent measures

Ostracism measures

After finishing the game, participants completed a standard post-experimental questionnaire that has been used in previous cyberostracism research (see Williams et al., 2002). The questionnaire consisted of 12 items assessing the effect of the Cyberball game on: Belonging (e.g., "I felt like an outsider"), Self-Esteem (e.g., "I felt good about myself"), Control (e.g., "I felt like I had control over the course of the interaction"), and Meaningful Existence (e.g., "I felt non-existent"). Participants were asked to answer the questions according to how they felt "while playing the game" (rated on a 5-point scale, with 1 = not at all and 5 = very much).

There were three manipulation checks to confirm participants' perception of their inclusionary status (i.e., "I was ignored," and "I was excluded," both answered on the same 5-point scale described above, and an open question: "Assuming that 33% of the time you would receive the ball if everyone received it equally, what percent of the throws did you receive?").

The participants completed the ostracism questionnaire a second time about 45 min after the initial game of Cyberball (but without the manipulation check and personality

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