



Dial a feeling: Detecting moderation of affect decline during ostracism

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ABSTRACT

Ostracism, being excluded and ignored, is a common and painful experience. Previous research has found ostracism's immediate effects robust to moderation by individual differences. However, this could be the result of using retrospective measures taken after the ostracism occurs, rather than assessing the effects of ostracism *throughout* the episode. Participants completed measures of loneliness and social avoidance and distress before either being ostracized or included in a virtual ball-toss game, Cyberball. During Cyberball, participants recorded second-by-second phenomenological affect using a dial device. Individual differences in loneliness and social avoidance and distress moderated affective reactions throughout ostracism and inclusion. Lonely individuals, compared to less-lonely individuals, had slower affect decrease when ostracized but quicker affective increase when included. Additionally, socially-avoidant individuals recovered more slowly from ostracism than less-avoidant individuals. Replicating previous research, moderation by individual differences was not detected with measures taken only at end of the interaction or with retrospective measures.

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1. Introduction

Ostracism, being excluded and ignored, is a pervasive phenomenon that increases negative affect and threatens basic needs (i.e., belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence; Williams, 2009). Ostracism is experienced neurologically as pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003), and hurts even when being ostracized by a hated outgroup (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007). Williams (2009) argues that humans evolved to detect the slightest cues of ostracism and experience immediate discomfort. Research supports this argument: Individuals felt ostracized after being refused eye-contact by a computer confederate (Wirth, Sacco, Hugenberg, & Williams, 2010). Also, pedestrians who were given an "air-gaze" (i.e., having someone look in their direction, but not giving them direct eye-contact) by a passerby felt decreased social connection (Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater, & Williams, 2012).

Previous research suggests ostracized individuals may "react first and ask questions later." Ostracism's reflexive (immediate) effects appear insensitive to moderation by individual differences (Williams, 2009). For example, gender, introversion–extraversion, loneliness, need for belonging and social anxiety have failed to demonstrate moderation. However, extreme individual differences have shown moderation of ostracism's effects. For example, ostra-

cized participants with higher levels of personality traits symptomatic of Cluster A personality disorders (i.e., discomfort with social interaction, severe interpersonal distrust, and/or detachment) self-reported experiencing a less aversive impact, compared to participants with lower levels of these traits (Wirth, Lynam, & Williams, 2010). Another study demonstrated that elderly participants who were ostracized self-reported experiencing less aversive effects than younger ostracized participants (Hawley, Williams, & Cacioppo, 2011).

The difficulty researchers previously had finding moderation may lead them to conclude that individual differences do not moderate initial reactions to ostracism. Might it be the case that individual differences moderate ostracism's effects *during* the course of the ostracism episode but have little effect on individuals at the *end* of the episode? Without using methods that assess these questions, researchers may erroneously make conclusions that underestimate the dynamic nature of experiencing ostracism. We argue certain individual differences may moderate ostracism's effects over time, and this can be detected by monitoring participants' second-by-second reactions *during* an ostracism episode.

1.1. Examining ostracism while it occurs

The dynamics of the entire experience of ostracism largely has been ignored in previous research. Some researchers have used cardiovascular or fMRI technology to measure physiological distress during ostracism (Eisenberger et al., 2003; Williams & Zadro, 2004). Unfortunately, these methods require expensive

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technology, as well as necessarily averaged data across time intervals that result in approximations. A time-course measure of participants' reactions may allow for nuanced investigations of ostracism's reflexive effects, but without utilizing expensive bio-feedback technology. Time-course measures have elucidated other complicated social and cognitive processes, such as juror perceptions of eyewitness testimony (Brewer, Williams, ForsterLee, & Hargreaves, 2004), relationship conflict (Gottman & Levenson, 1992), social judgment (Vallacher, Nowak, & Kaufman, 1994), and ambivalence to stigmatized individuals (Pryor, Reeder, Yeadon, & Hesson-McInnis, 2004). A time-course approach may also elucidate the complexities of ostracism's effects.

1.2. Individual difference moderators during ostracism

Extreme individual differences (e.g., Cluster A personality disorder characteristics, old age) may represent boundary conditions that attenuate ostracism's overall effects, whereas other less extreme individual differences may moderate ostracism's effects during the episode but have little effect on individuals at the end of the episode. Most ostracism research relies on participants retrospectively reporting their feelings during ostracism (Williams, 2009). This approach may limit researchers from understanding the complex ways in which individual differences moderate ostracism's immediate effects. We revisit two individual differences, loneliness and social avoidance and distress, which failed to moderate ostracism's immediate effects using traditional retrospective measures. These individual differences may moderate the overall magnitude of ostracism's effects, the speed at which participants are affected by ostracism, and the speed of recovery.

1.2.1. Loneliness

Lonely individuals perceive that their current social relationships are inadequate, and they chronically experience feelings of isolation (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Lonely individuals hunger for increased social connection and sometimes even anthropomorphize non-social agents as a way to satisfy their need (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008). Lonely individuals often experience a double-bind; they desperately want to be included, but tend to feel anxious and distressed about social situations (Leary, 1990). Because of this bind, lonely people may become hyper-sensitive to social information, particularly exclusion-relevant cues (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Carter-Sowell, Chen, & Williams, 2006; Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005). These studies suggest that lonely individuals should show more affective decline to ostracism over time than non-lonely participants because of their hypersensitivity to exclusion-relevant cues. Lonely participants should also respond more positively to inclusion over time than non-lonely participants because their hunger for human connection is being satisfied.

1.2.2. Social avoidance and distress

Social avoidance and distress is the experience of distress in and deliberate avoidance of social situations (La Greca & Stone, 1993; Watson & Friend, 1969).¹ Past research suggests two potential directions for moderation by social avoidance/distress. One possibility is that individuals high in this construct, compared with those who are low, would be affected less negatively by ostracism because they already have a preference for avoiding others (similar to Cluster A personality disorder, see Wirth, Lynam, et al., 2010). Alternatively, those individuals high in social avoidance and distress may have stronger reactions to ostracism over time because they are already

going to be uncomfortable in a social situation – ostracism may compound their discomfort. Participants high in social avoidance/distress should also have less positive affect when being included than participants who are low in social avoidance and distress because these individuals are distressed more by social interactions (Watson & Friend, 1969).

1.3. Current research

We measure participants' second-by-second affective reactions during both ostracism and inclusion. This approach permits a time-course investigation of ostracism that is more sensitive for detecting moderation than using measures taken solely at the end of the interaction. We expect to replicate previous research by demonstrating an overall main effect of ostracism, such that ostracized participants' affect will decrease over time, whereas included participants' affect will remain relatively stable. We also hypothesize that when ostracized, more-lonely participants will show more affect decrease over time than less-lonely participants, and more-lonely participants will also have more affect increase to inclusion over time than less-lonely participants. We also hypothesize that participants high in social avoidance and distress will have less affect increase over time in response to inclusion than participants low in social avoidance and distress. Past research suggests two potential competing hypotheses for how social avoidance and distress may moderate reactions to ostracism: Participants high in social avoidance and distress will either have more affect decline to ostracism over time, or alternatively they may have less affect decline over time than individuals who are low in social avoidance and distress. Finally, we will use this time-course approach to explore the possibility that individual differences may influence the speed of affect decline in addition to overall change, as well as any effects on recovery.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and design

Ninety-one undergraduate students (33 females; 74% Caucasian; $M_{age} = 19.19$ years, $SD_{age} = 1.13$) participated in the study for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to be included ($N = 41$) or ostracized ($N = 50$).

2.2. Procedure

2.2.1. Individual difference measures

Participants completed the 3-item UCLA Loneliness scale (e.g., "How often do you feel isolated from others?"; Hughes, Waite, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2004; $\alpha = .71$) on the scale of 1 (*Not at all*), 2 (*Some of the time*), or 3 (*Often*). These items were averaged, such that higher numbers represented more loneliness.

Participants also completed the Social Avoidance and Distress scale (e.g., "I usually feel uncomfortable when I am in a group of people I don't know"; Hofmann, DiBartolo, Holaway, & Heimberg, 2004; Watson & Friend, 1969; $\alpha = .88$) by answering either True or False. Items were recoded as 0 or 1 and summed, such that higher numbers represented more social avoidance and distress (minimum = 0, maximum = 28).

2.2.2. Dial practice tasks

Participants then engaged in four tasks ostensibly to study how mental visualization influenced affect. The first three tasks focused on helping participants practice using the dial as a continuous indicator of their current affect, and were presented in random order. One task instructed participants to register their feelings as they

¹ Zadro et al. (2006) found no evidence that Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE), another component of social anxiety, moderated the immediate effects of ostracism. We ran additional analyses with FNE, and did not find significant moderation either.

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