When destiny hurts: Implicit theories of relationships moderate aggressive responses to ostracism ☆

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ABSTRACT

The current research investigates the role of implicit theories of relationships in modulating aggressive responses to ostracism. Three studies tested whether destiny beliefs (that potential relationships are either fundamentally compatible or not) predispose people to behave aggressively in the wake of ostracism. In Study 1, individual differences in destiny beliefs moderated the relationship between ostracism and aggressive affect. Two additional studies showed that manipulated destiny beliefs (vs. growth beliefs) caused ostracized participants to blast a provocateur with aversive noise (Study 2) and to give a destructive job candidate evaluation to a stranger (Study 3). These results highlight the significance of implicit theories in understanding risk factors for ostracism-related aggression.

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Introduction

Why do setbacks trouble some people, leaving others unscathed? Cognitive factors, such as personal beliefs, offer a key to understanding how people respond when they cope with negative events (Dweck, 1999; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999). These mindsets help people navigate through their world, showing them what to approach, what to avoid, and how to respond when things go well and when things go badly. Yet, it is unclear how mindsets about relationships – commonly referred to as implicit theories of relationships (ITR; Knee, 1998; Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003) – influence behavior when those bonds dissolve. The current investigation fills this gap in the literature by testing the hypothesis that destiny beliefs, defined as believing potential relationship partners are either compatible or they are not, have a negative effect on responses to ostracism.

People who have a fixed mindset in domains unrelated to relationships experience difficulty in coping with setbacks; they become defensive and engage in behaviors meant to boost their feelings of self-worth (Molden & Dweck, 2006). Within the context of relationships, destiny beliefs may produce a similar defensive response to ostracism.

Destiny theorists tend to attribute frustrating experiences to stable factors, whereas growth theorists attribute them to controllable factors (Hong et al., 1999; Knee et al., 2003). Among people who hold strong destiny beliefs, ostracism represents a harsh and unchangeable judgment to their relationship well-being. As a result, they perceive lower levels of control following ostracism, compared to those who hold strong growth beliefs. A deprived sense of control magnifies aggression among ostracized individuals (Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006). Therefore, relative to growth theorists, destiny theorists would be more likely to engage in aggressive responses, including aggressive affect and behavior, to restore their threatened sense of control following ostracism.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted three experiments. In each study, participants were exposed to an ostracism manipulation. Participants also had their destiny beliefs measured (Study 1) or manipulated (Studies 2 and 3). Next, participants reported their aggressive affect (Study 1), could blast a provocateur with loud and prolonged white noise (Study 2), or received an opportunity to give a damagingly negative job candidate evaluation to a stranger (Study 3). We predicted that people with destiny beliefs, relative to those with growth beliefs, would respond to ostracism with higher levels of aggression.

Implicit theories of relationships

People have many beliefs that steer them to pursue some goals more than others, to view others and themselves in rigid or dynamic ways, and to worry or learn from life's inevitable setbacks, failures, and relationship conflicts. The beliefs are codified into working theories about oneself and the world—an implicit theory, or mindset.

People possess differing levels of two implicit theories, making them so-called theorists (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck et al., 1995). Entity theorists believe that personal attributes (e.g., intelligence, personality, morality, etc.) are fixed and unchangeable. They form rapid and rigid judgments of others (Dweck & Ehrlinger, 2006). When faced with setbacks, entity theorists use defensive, self-esteem boosting behavior at the expense of problem solving (Molden & Dweck, 2006). Incremental theorists, in contrast, believe that personal attributes are malleable and can be improved, make tentative and flexible assessments of others that are conducive to effective negotiation and agreement, and respond to setbacks as opportunities for more dynamic, learning-oriented behaviors that are typically necessary to confront and resolve difficult challenges effectively (Dweck et al., 1995; Hong et al., 1999).

Implicit theories are domain-specific, such that theories within a particular domain most strongly predict behavior within the same domain (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997). Consequently, previous research has developed separate instruments to capture people's implicit theories in domains such as intelligence, morality, personality, and so on. Most relevant to the current investigation, people have implicit theories of relationships, commonly referred to as destiny or growth beliefs (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2003).

Destiny theorists believe that potential relationship partners are either compatible or they are not, whereas growth theorists believe that relationships become cultivated through effective problem-solving. Destiny theorists quickly diagnose the status and potential success of a relationship to determine the compatibility of relationship partners and the viability of relationship based on limited information gained through specific events. In contrast, growth theorists believe that "relationship challenges can be overcome" (Knee et al., 2003, p. 41). Growth theorists express interest in maintaining the relationship, and they work on developing relationship when facing obstacles.

Although implicit theories of relationship were originally developed to understand the different beliefs that people have in approaching romantic relationships, these destiny and growth beliefs can be expanded to understand how people deal with other types of relationships (e.g., peer relationships; Knee, 1998; Rudolph, 2010). Working beliefs about relationships influence responses in both established and 'potential' relationships (DeWall et al., 2012; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008) Thus, we predicted that implicit theories of relationships would influence how people respond to setbacks arisen from social interactions with people who represent potential relationship partners.

More specifically, having a strong belief in destiny may prove detrimental for how people respond to ostracism. Because ostracism represents a specific event that signals an unwavering negative evaluation to destiny theorists, destiny theorists may experience elevated levels of aggressive affect and behavior. The next section briefly reviews evidence regarding a relationship between ostracism and aggression, which is followed by a section that discusses a possible interactive relationship between ostracism and destiny beliefs on aggressive affect and behavior.

Ostracism increases aggressive responses

Ostracism thwarts the human need for positive and lasting relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Although ostracized people yearn for social connection (DeWall & Richman, 2011; Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007), they often behave aggressively. Over the past 10 years, several studies have shown that various threats of exclusion cause people to behave aggressively in an assortment of different ways, such as reporting increased anger, blasting strangers with aversive noise, allocating hot sauce to strangers who dislike spicy foods, and thwarting people's opportunities to gain competitive employment

(Ayduk, Gyurak, & Luerssen, 2008; Baumeister, DeWall, Gitter, & Twenge, 2009; Bushman, DeWall, Im, & Williams, Twenge, 2010; Gaertner, Iuzzini, & O'Mara, 2008; Baumeister, Stucke, Tice, & Twenge 2001; Warburton et al., 2006; see Leary, Twegne, & Quinlivan, 2006; Williams, 2009 for reviews).

Further investigations have shown that individual difference variables, such as narcissism (Twenge & Campbell, 2003) and rejection sensitivity (Ayduk et al., 2008) can moderate the link between ostracism and aggression. For example, ostracized people high in rejection sensitivity allocated more hot sauce to a perpetrator who disliked spicy food compared to ostracized people low in rejection sensitivity (Ayduk et al., 2008). Situational factors also moderate the effect of ostracism on aggression. A brief social connection with another person or reliving past social activities also reduced aggression after ostracism (Twenge et al., 2007), and acceptance by others following ostracism decreased aggression (DeWall et al., 2010). In addition, Warburton et al. (2006) found that ostracized people who were not given the chance to fortify their thwarted feeling of control behaved more aggressively than ostracized people who were given such a chance. Wesselmann, Butler, Williams, and Pickett (2010) further showed that participants who were treated friendly but subsequently excluded behaved more aggressively than participants who were treated unfriendly before being excluded.

Whereas prior work has shown that ostracized narcissists and rejection sensitive people lash out at others particularly strongly (Ayduk et al., 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2003), these individual risk factors focus on how people judge themselves and their reactions instead of their general beliefs about relationships. It is still unclear how cognitive systems, such as people's belief about how relationships work might moderate the association between ostracism and aggression, to which we turn next.

Destiny beliefs and the ostracism–aggression link

Thus far, the evidence suggests that destiny beliefs may relate to destructive responses to ostracism. Indirect evidence for this prediction comes from several sources. In one study, college students were confronted with a situation in which a professor arbitrarily changed the grading scheme to be more stringent, with the result that many students received a lower grade than they had anticipated (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997). Whereas incremental theorists suggested trying to talk to the professor and explain reasonably that they felt what he did was wrong, entity theorists suggested reporting him to a higher authority or finding other ways to harm or retaliate against him. In another study examining conflicts in close relationships (Kammrath & Dweck, 2006), incremental theorists spoke up and worked through the issues constructively, whereas entity theorists became angrier but were less likely to voice their feelings. Entity theorists also showed less motivation to work towards a solution to the conflict and were more likely to entertain thoughts of leaving the relationship altogether. Rudolph (2010) recently extended the finding to how elementary school children respond to peer victimization experiences (including ostracism-type experiences such as being left out by other children during playtime). Specifically, children who held an entity theory of peer relationships, compared to those who held an incremental theory, reported more aggressive thoughts and feelings toward the people who left them out and were less likely to focus on developing positive peer relationships.

Together, these and other studies (e.g., Burnette & Franiuk, 2010a, 2010b; Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008) suggest that when faced with interpersonal conflict, entity theorists use retaliatory strategies, whereas incremental theorists adopt more remedial approaches and attempt to work through the problem constructively. Therefore, we predicted that destiny beliefs would interact with ostracism to produce elevated levels of aggression.