Relational Ostracism

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Chapter Summary:

Introduction

"Spiteful words can hurt your feelings but silence breaks your heart"

(Anonymous)

Loving others is a double-edged sword. The ties that bind us to another person can lead us to experience the very peak of pleasure or the very pit of pain. And this pain is never more evident than when we are estranged from our loved ones during the act of ostracism (i.e., when we are excluded and ignored). Ostracism within an intimate relationship may take many forms. Some forms may be subtle or potentially ambiguous (e.g., when our loved one does not acknowledge our greeting when we come home or when they avoid eye contact during a meal), whereas other forms are explicit and leave no doubt that we are the object of their displeasure (e.g., when our loved ones ignore what we are saying, leave the room when we enter, or shun our embrace). Personal experience tells us that irrespective of the form that ostracism may take, exclusion and rejection by a loved one is ultimately emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally depleting, particularly when it continues over days, weeks, or even years. The impact of stranger-ostracism is strong and painful, and has been shown to lead to aversive psychological responses (i.e., a threat to four primary human

needs—belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence; see Williams, 2001), and a range of detrimental behavioral responses such as social susceptibility (e.g., Maner, et al., Carter-Sowell & Williams, 2007), inappropriate mate choice (e.g., Winten et al., 2006), risk-taking behavior (e.g. Dale et al., 2006), and anti-social behavior (e.g., Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006).

Despite the prevalence of ostracism in interpersonal relationships, ostracism research to date has not systematically investigated relational ostracism (i.e., the silent treatment, or ostracism carried out by one partner on another). Instead, ethological and anthropological researchers have focused on documenting the widespread use of ostracism across species (e.g., Gruter & Masters, 1986), age-groups (e.g., Barner-Barry, 1986), and cultures (e.g, Mahdi, 1986). Moreover, in the laboratory, social psychological researchers have largely focused on examining the effects of ostracism by strangers using multiple methods such as ball tossing games conducted both face-to-face (Williams & Sommer, 1997) and over the Internet (e.g., Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000), role play paradigms (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2005), Internet chat rooms (Williams, Govan, Croker, Tynan, Cruickshank & Lam, 2002), and text messaging (Smith & Williams, 2004).

Our focus in the present chapter is on the intensely personal and powerful effects of ostracism by loved ones. We review our work in two distinctly different paradigms. First, we review a rich and qualitative data set emanating from interviews with individuals who have suffered the silent treatment—a form of relational ostracism—from their spouses or family members. Second, we review recent work examining laboratory-induced ostracism, via Cyberball (a triadic Internet ball-tossing game; see Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000), among couples that are participating with a stranger. In this research, one member of the couple is perceived to ostracize their partner, in favor of allying with the stranger. Here, the simple effects of ostracism that are evident even amongst strangers are coupled with thoughts of betrayal.

Relational Ostracism in the Real World—Interviews with Targets and Sources of Long-term Ostracism

To understand relational ostracism in all its complexity and contradictions, it is important to delve into the phenomenological experience of being a target or source of ostracism. Zadro, Richardson, & Williams (2006) sent out a recruitment advertisement in local papers and magazines asking for targets and sources of long-term ostracism in the general community to discuss their experiences with the silent treatment. Over 200 people responded with emails, letters, and faxes, affirming their exposure to ostracism. Of this sample, 40 were interviewed using a structured interview protocol that systematically examined their ostracism experiences so that the responses of targets and sources could be compared, and assumptions of Williams's (1997/2001) model of ostracism (see Figure 1) on the long-term effects of ostracism could be tested.

Most of the targets interviewed stated that they were ostracized by a single source. In the majority of interviews, targets stated that they were ignored by their partner or spouse (60% of cases); mothers (17% of cases) and mother-in-laws (11% of cases) were also common sources. Many targets stated that if the source was merely an acquaintance, they could dismiss the episode with only minor psychological impact. In contrast, if the source was a loved one, especially a relationship partner, the targets were utterly devastated. One target who was ignored by her lover stated:

> *"the loss of a friend or the apparent loss of a friend [through the silent treatment] is not all that great to cope with. But I think you can probably cope because there are lots of other friends around...but the loss of someone extremely important to you—that's different"*

Thus the present chapter will focus on the findings that pertain to ostracism between couples and families rather than workmates, acquaintances, or strangers.

Although all targets had been ignored and rejected by loved ones, the phenomenological experience of being ostracized differed according to the duration of their ostracism experience—that is, whether ostracism was prolonged or episodic. For *prolonged* targets, one single episode of ostracism from a loved one may have stretched anywhere from a couple of months to several years.

The personal experiences described by interviewees left no doubt as to the devastating effects that prolonged ostracism may have on an individual. For instance, one target was ostracized by her husband for two years. The effect of his continual ostracism on her psychological and physical wellbeing was devastating. After enduring 2 years of the silent treatment, the target reported, "I went in six monthly cycles where I couldn't stand it anymore, and I would plead with him to get some help, to talk to me."

For some prolonged targets, the ostracism episode had stretched to the point where the possibility of regaining contact with a loved one was minimal and where silence held the threat of being infinite. One such prolonged target stated:

> *"My father has given me the silent treatment whenever he's been upset with me ever since I was 12 years old. Now I'm 40 years old and my father hasn't talked to me for the last 6 months. Recently, he was in hospital and I was told he might die. I decided I had to go see him, even if he wasn't talking to me. I walked up to him and held his hand and said 'Oh Daddy, please don't leave me.' He looked at me, his eyes were welled-up with tears, then turned his head away from me. He still he wouldn't talk to me...his death would be the final silence."*

In contrast to prolonged targets who receive a single, unremitting period of ostracism, *episodic* targets are repeatedly exposed to multiple instances of ostracism from the source throughout the duration of their relationship. For episodic targets, ostracism is a predictable consequence of any actual or perceived misdemeanor on their part. For instance, one target had been ostracized by her husband for periods of up to 3 months throughout their 15 years of marriage. During the periods of silence, her husband went to extreme lengths to act as though she did not exist, as can be seen from the following incident:

> *"I have a heart condition which required surgery at one point, and during one of these times when he wasn't speaking to me, I actually had the ambulance at my house for the first time ever, with the man giving me oxygen, and [my husband] walks through the house and ignored the fact that it was happening…"*

Episodic targets often reported a sense of "déjà vu" as they recognized signs that the ostracism process was about to begin again. One target who was episodically ignored by her

husband stated that she had become quite proficient at predicting when she was about to be ostracized:

> "*sometimes I can see the warning signs starting. He will sometimes purposefully almost misinterpret something I'm saying… and then I panic and try and head that off as quick as I can.*"

In the interviews, episodic targets also reported somatic responses at the onset of ostracism, with several reporting heart palpitations, nausea, or an upset stomach when they suddenly realized that, yet again, they were being ignored by the source.

Ostracism vs. Other Forms of Interpersonal Conflict.

The interviews suggest that acts of ostracism by loved ones are rarely enacted in isolation from other forms of interpersonal conflict. For many of the participants, ostracism typically was preceded by an argument or some form of altercation. A minority of targets also stated that the silent treatment was interspersed with episodes of physical or verbal abuse. For instance, one target stated that after a particularly heated argument, her husband would ignore her often for up to three months. He would then begin interacting with her again until their next argument where he would again start to ignore her. This cycle of silence has the effect of making targets particularly obsequious to their ostracizing loved one—the knowledge that any argument may lead to potentially months of silence often made targets fearful of objecting to the source's behavior or trying to assert themselves in any way in the relationship. Hence they became virtual prisoners to the whims of their loved ones. For instance, one target stated that her father would use a combination of the silent treatment and verbal abuse to control his family's behavior:

> "*we weren't allowed to make a sound because he'd want to hear the news or he'd want to read the newspaper or he'd want peace. So, whenever he came in everything would go silent. We might be playing and laughing but as soon as he walked in you'd go quiet because even the children knew that if you didn't, if they didn't stop, we'd all be in trouble. So, he was very dictating. And when he was angry, he would totally cut you off. His silence would just go and on and on and we'd be walking on eggshells, trying everything to please him*"

Many targets were quick to compare ostracism to verbal and physical abuse. The majority of targets stated that the silent treatment surpasses other weapons of conflict in terms of its deleterious effects. For example, one female target who received the silent treatment (which she referred to as "mental cruelty") from her third husband for 10 years stated that "…My second husband, who was an alcoholic, used to physically abuse me, but the bruises and scars healed very quickly and I believe that mental cruelty [the silent treatment] is far more damaging than a black eye." Another target who was repeatedly ostracized by her mother throughout childhood confessed that she had often asked for a beating "rather than endure another period of silence and the shocking atmosphere it created."

Although such a confession—that a person would rather be beaten than ignored seems preposterous, it is understandable when viewed in context. An episode of physical abuse lasts for a finite period of time and often leaves visible evidence of the attack (e.g., bruises, wounds) which can be shown to others in order to receive assistance. The silent treatment, however, may last indefinitely and the trauma it causes lies beneath the skin, unobservable to the public. Many targets stated that even when they tried to get assistance they were often not taken particularly seriously. One target who was episodically ostracized by her husband stated:

> *"Nobody believed me. Everyone said 'he's such a wonderful man'...He's just so charming to everybody... I'm being tortured here and nobody knows, nobody can see it."*

Another target who had been episodically ostracized by his wife for weeks at a time was ridiculed by his workmates when he told them about the silences ("they said 'I wish my wife would ignore me for a month'. They thought it was all a joke. They don't know the pain of [being ignored]").

The findings of the interviews—that ostracism is perceived to be more aversive than verbal abuse—mirror those of the laboratory. In a series of studies Zadro, Williams, & Richardson (2005) demonstrated that being ostracized during a 5-minute role-play train ride led targets to report a greater threat to four primary needs (belonging, control, self-esteem,

and meaningful existence) than being verbally abused. Although being involved in an

argument is not a pleasant experience, targets are still being acknowledged (albeit negatively)

by the source(s). Moreover, if the target is particularly eloquent or persuasive, they may have

the opportunity to appease the source(s) or to at least have them acknowledge the target's

argument. However, when ostracized, the target receives no acknowledgement (positive or

negative) from sources, nor are they given the opportunity to explain their actions or to

remedy the situation. They are essentially forced to wait, powerless, until the source decides

if and when to resume contact.

Relational Ostracism and Williams's (1997/2001) Model of Ostracism

The rich, descriptive accounts of ostracism gathered in the interviews provided ample support

for Williams's (1997/2001) model of ostracism (see Figure 1). There are four taxonomic dimensions

presented in Williams's model: visibility (social, physical, cyber); motive (punitive, oblivious,

defensive, role-prescribed, and not ostracism); quantity (low to high); and causal clarity (low to high).

In terms of *visibility*, the majority of incidents described in the letters and interviews were of

social ostracism (i.e., when the source ignores the target in their presence). Social ostracism took

several forms, from refusing to look or speak to the target, to not setting a place for them at the

dinner table. There also were several incidents of physical ostracism (i.e., ignoring the target by

physically leaving their presence). For instance, one source chose to completely sever all ties and

communication with his wife and two children by living on the second storey of the marital home

while his family lived downstairs.

Often, physical or social ostracism was supplemented by instances of cyberostracism (e.g.,

being ignored over non face-to-face media, such as the phone, letters, or the Internet). For

instances, many sources stated that once they decided to ostracise a target, they did so over all

mediums—not only did they ignore the target face-to-face, they would also hang up if the target

called on the phone, and would ignore or destroy any letters or email from the target. One target, who was engaged in a purely cyber relationship, was repeatedly ostracised by her cyber boyfriend while in chat rooms. Whenever her boyfriend was angry with her or upset by something she had just written, he would first start to type shorter responses to her questions (i.e., "k" instead of "ok"), then only reply every third or fourth line, until finally he would ignore her completely.

The *motive* for ostracism varied from interview to interview. In the majority of interviews, ostracism was attributed to punitive motives (i.e., to punish the target for some actual or perceived wrongdoing). For instance, one source stated: "I give the silent treatment basically as a punishment for when I feel I'm in the right or I've been hard done by." Sources also used oblivious forms of ostracism (i.e., where the source acts as if the target is unworthy of their attention and ignores them accordingly). For instance, one source explained that when he ostracises a target,"(the target) does not exist any more. They could be a statue…but nothing to me. That person has no existence." Participants also discussed instances of defensive ostracism. Some used defensive ostracism in a protective manner (i.e., to avoid unwelcome attention or dangerous individuals). For instance, one source physically ostracised her husband (i.e., locked herself in the bedroom or bathroom) when he was drunk to avoid being physically assaulted. Others used defensive ostracism to prevent an argument from developing or to prevent the escalation of an argument. For instance, some participants stated that they would refuse to answer the insults of their spouse in order to avoid conflict. Although we think the lack of responsiveness is painful, it is possible that refusing retaliatory insults has a beneficial or effect on the relationship if the refusal is made explicitly and with a constructive tone (see Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, Lipkus, 1991, on "accommodation.")

According to the Williams's model, ostracism also differs in the level of *causal clarity*. For the majority of targets interviewed, causal clarity was low—that is, they could not ascertain why they

were being ignored or perceived that they were being ignored for no reason whatsoever. For instance, one target stated:

> *"I'd think 'oh shitt, what I have I done now?' And then I'd have to go out and think about it...I'd sit in my room thinking, thinking, thinking and I'd be racking my brain and didn't have a clue what was going on."*

In contrast to the targets' perception of low causal clarity, all sources stated that the causal clarity of their ostracism episodes was very high. Despite target perceptions that they were often ignored for no reason whatsoever, sources stated that they always had a reason for ostracising the target, and were often bewildered when targets asked why they were being ignored, particularly if ostracism had been preceded by an argument. One source stated; "I think that if they do something that bad and they don't know what they've done wrong they are really stupid..."

Although the interviews provided substantial evidence for the taxonomic dimensions described in the model, they also revealed another potential dimension of the taxonomy—the *style* of ostracism used by the source. That is, it became apparent from the interviews that sources differed in the way in which they showed targets that they were being ostracised. The style of ostracism could be divided into two broad categories—noisy silence and quiet silence.

Although "noisy silence" seems like an oxymoron, it refers to situations where the source strives, by all possible means, to show the target that they are being ignored. Sources engaging in noisy silence tend to indulge in flamboyant gestures of ostracism (such as slamming doors in the target's presence, stomping about, or theatrically leaving a room when the target enters), and use a veritable arsenal of non-verbal behaviours to accompany such noisy episodes of silence (e.g., glaring, nose in the air, stiff jaw, or turning away). One target interviewed (a mother of three in her fifties) has used noisy silence throughout her life. As soon as a target offends her in some manner, she begins a performance to rival "a Vegas drag show." Her first gesture is to let the target explicitly know that they are in trouble.

"Usually, I will be in the same room as (the target), and if they say something to me, I will just ignore them—not even look at them. They will usually ask me again and again and after about the third or fourth time, I will turn to them and say "I'm not talking to you" then turn away, usually with my nose in the air. If they are in the kitchen with me while I am getting dinner ready, I will start banging the pots and pans together…If I have to sit near them on the couch, I will make a big show of sitting at the far edge as far away from them as possible. Or I'll put something between us, like a cushion or the cat. If they ask me what's wrong, I'll say something like 'nothing' or 'you know what's wrong' in my coldest voice. If they try to talk to me when I'm not ready to listen, I'll put my hands over my ears and say 'I'm not listening.' If they are watching television, I will stomp in and out in of the room front of them, or I'll choose that moment to vacuum the room so that they can't watch their show. That way they are always reminded that I am still mad at them. If they enter the room, I will usually turn around and storm out, slamming the door behind me. Once, the door didn't crash behind me, so I had to bang it open and shut repeatedly till I was satisfied that (the target) knew I was angry."

It is obvious from this account that noisy silence takes an enormous amount of energy and a high degree of theatrical skill to constantly remind the target (in so many novel ways) that they being ignored. Hence, noisy silence tends to be a short-term tactic, probably because of the incredible amount of energy that the source must expend to keep it going. Typically, sources of noisy silence tended to be female, though there are were some men who also favoured this tactic. Noisy silence also tends to be used by those who are fairly outgoing and chatty in temperament—it is almost as if they cannot bear to be quiet, even when using the silent treatment.

For all the slamming doors and banging pots of noisy silence, it is typically quite benign. The source is still communicating with the target (albeit while they are stomping past them or vacuuming during their favourite TV program). By interacting with the target, the source is demonstrating to the target that they are still an important part of their life—otherwise why else would the source be putting on such a show to punish them? Surely, if the source no longer cared about the target, they could save their energy and simply ignore the target's very existence. By doing so, they could show the target that their presence is meaningless, that they are as substantial as a shadow, as ephemeral as a ghost. Tactics such as these that are designed to convince the target that they are not worthy of existence are the hallmarks of *quiet* silence.

Quiet silence is what typically comes to mind when the silent treatment is mentioned. Quiet

silence occurs when the source ceases to acknowledge the target's presence, and thus stops, or greatly reduces, all verbal and non-verbal interaction with the target (i.e., ignoring their questions, refusing to touch them or look at them). From the interviews with targets and sources, quiet silence can be broadly divided into four categories: 1) holding-back, 2) tuning-out, 3) shutting-down, and 4) cutting-off.

One of the most common types of quiet silence occurs when the source is *holding- back*. In such instances, the source is usually incredibly angry at something the target has said or done. Rather than let their anger out, the source remains silent, bottling their rage inside. Sources may also hold back when they literally feel too angry to speak. One target (a woman in her late 20s) admitted to using this tactic on her new boyfriend when he arrived two hours late for a date.

> *"At first I was worried. I pictured him in an accident but when I called his mobile, he answered the phone laughing. Apparently he was catching up with friends! Even though he knew I was waiting! I got ready to leave, but just as I was about to catch a taxi home, he arrived. I was so angry with him that I froze. I literally felt frozen. I could feel all that anger just rushing around inside of me but I could not let it out. I couldn't look at him in the eye—I kept looking at the wall directly behind him or down at my shoes. I couldn't say anything—I was worried that if I said anything, all my anger would come rushing out and I would turn into this she-beast and rip his appendages off. My teeth were clenched so tight that my jaw started to ache. What made me even angrier was that he didn't seem all that apologetic. Worse still, he tried to act as though nothing had happened. He tried to joke around and act really charming. Then he came up and tried to hug me but I pulled away from him. I had this terrible feeling that if he even tried to touch me, I would knee his testicles straight up his nostrils. I just wouldn't be able to control myself. He kept asking me to speak to him, but I just couldn't say a word. Nothing. After a while, I just sat down on a bench and listened to him as he pitifully tried to explain himself. It took about two hours on that bench before I thawed enough to say something. And even then it was just single words—"yes," "no," "asshole," that kind of thing. It took another hour for me to thaw enough to really let him have it, so that he knew in no uncertain terms that if he was even 5 minutes late in future, he had better be prepared to part with his manhood."*

Another form of quiet silence is *tuning-out*. This refers to instances when the source chooses to focus on another thought or activity while the target is speaking, effectively "tuning out" the sound and sight of the target in order to concentrate on something else. Tuning-out seems to be a tactic primarily favoured by men. One target complained that her boyfriend often tuned out when they spoke on the phone so that he could perform another activity.

"I can usually pick up when he is ignoring me though he is pretty sneaky about it. For instance, he will ask me a question that he knows will take me a while to answer—like 'tell me about your day,' or 'how is your family?' because he knows that it takes me ages to bitch about my family. At first I thought it was sweet that he wanted to know about my day. But then I realised that while I was rattling on, he was watching TV! Lately, I've learnt to pick up the signs that he is ignoring me. When he isn't listening to me, it takes him a while to ask the next question, or he speaks slower and I can practically hear his brain tick as he tries to think of something appropriate to say. I've caught him out a few times. I've started to hang up on him when he does it so I think he's finally getting the message."

Although some sources tend to completely tune out their target, there are others who selectively tune out items of information that they do not want to deal with (e.g., issues relating to responsibilities around the house, or issues that may lead to further conflict). Although tuning-out is usually a short-term tactic and not as malicious as many of the other forms of quiet ostracism, it nevertheless causes the target distress as they are repeatedly made to feel as though they are low on the source's list of priorities.

One of the most interesting forms of quiet silence is *shutting-down*. It differs from many forms of ostracism because the source is not trying to punish the target. Rather, it occurs because the source is experiencing some form of extreme emotional stress (e.g., pressure at work, financial stress) and lacks the resources to adequately deal with it. Thus, as a defensive mechanism, their body and mind simply shut down—they grow quiet, unresponsive, and inactive. Often, sources who are shutting-down say that they need time alone and, if they can not physically leave the situation, they mentally leave the situation by choosing to be silent with their own thoughts. Unfortunately, this action also leads them to shut out their loved ones. One target was repeatedly ostracised by her husband of fifteen years for periods lasting from a few days to a few weeks. She was particularly distraught as these periods would come and go without warning, and seemingly irrespective of what she would do or say. After years of this behaviour, she made a discovery.

"I finally realised that my husband was not angry with me during these times. He just needed time alone in his head to sort himself out. When I realised that it wasn't my fault, things changed. I

started to communicate with him while he was silent. I would ask him 'Do you want eggs for breakfast?' and then I would imagine what he would usually say in that situation and give him eggs or not give him eggs. Other times I would say 'Come on, we're going out for dinner tonight,' and he would get dressed and we would go out to dinner"

The final form of quiet silence, and potentially the most destructive, is *cutting-off*. It occurs when the source deliberately and completely ignores the target, acting as if they do not exist. What makes cutting-off different from tactics such as holding-back or tuning-out, is that the source is not punishing the target— they simply want nothing more to do with the target. As far as the source is concerned, the target just does not exist—and they act accordingly. For instance, one source interviewed (a woman in her late thirties) typically uses noisy, short-term silent treatment on those she loves. But when it comes to people who truly "disgust" her, or who have acted unforgivably, she "...wipe(s) them completely off the face of the earth. That means that I don't acknowledge them, I don't speak to them. Ever."

In the interviews, there were instances of cutting-off between relatives that lasted for several years, even decades. According to these sources, such episodes of silence were easy to maintain because they rarely saw the target and had no need to communicate with them—years of ostracism would pass with the source barely noticing. More surprising were the years of cutting-off that existed between spouses who still shared the same house. There were several targets interviewed whose husbands had refused to speak to them for periods ranging from one year to five years. Although some ostracising husbands still helped to run the household while giving the silent treatment (e.g., provided financially support, cared for the children), some cut all emotional and financial ties to their family. One target described how she was forced to rely on welfare and the charity of relatives to feed herself and her two children while her husband gave her the silent treatment. She stated: "He dressed in all the latest fashions and ate at all the trendy restaurants, while we were dressing in op shop clothing and eating 2 minute noodles…How could you treat your family that way when you

live under the same roof?" The effects of being cut off are typically psychologically and physiologically devastating, as it suggests to the target that the source holds them in such contempt, that they would rather erase the target from their lives than acknowledge their existence.

The Psychological and Somatic Costs of Relational Ostracism

Regardless of whether ostracism is prolonged or episodic, or conducted by a single or multiple sources, all targets emphasized that being ostracized is an extremely aversive experience. The model predicts that during the ostracism period, the target will experience a threat to their four primary needs—belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. In accordance with this prediction, the interviewed targets did express feelings indicative of threatened primary needs, however, as these targets had experienced prolonged periods of ostracism, or had been repeatedly ignored by multiple sources, the threat to their primary needs had become internalized. That is, targets often expressed sentiments indicative of low self worth ("I'm just no good at anything…failure, failure, failure"), a lack of belonging with others ("You didn't belong. You thought "I'm a mistake, I shouldn't be here, I'm not wanted here." That's what you felt…."), very little control ("…I felt helpless in so many areas of my life…"), and a sense of purposelessness ("…it [the silent treatment] made me question "what's it all for? Why am I still here?" whereas before I never questioned that. I knew why I was there and I knew what it was all for"). As also found in the interviews conducted by Faulkner and Williams (1996), these threatened needs often manifested in self-destructive thoughts and behaviors ("I often think to myself" "when is this going to end?" I've thought of suicide").

Although the interviews provided support for the detrimental effect of ostracism on targets' primary needs, they also suggested a range of effects or responses occurring during the concurrent phase that are not described in the model. One particularly noticeable theme was the effect of ostracism on one's health. During the free recall section of the interview, many targets

spontaneously asserted that they experienced a wide variety of somatic effects as a result of ostracism (e.g., "I know that the ostracism with my mother is affecting me because I start to feel really fatigued," "I started having migraines," "frequent colds, sore throats, general lack of energy," "it makes me sick to my stomach that she doesn't say hello to me"). These health-related effects of ostracism seem primarily to arise from prolonged stress responses (e.g., chronic high blood pressure, heart palpitations), with many indicative of suppressed immune functioning (e.g., constant colds, fatigue, inability to recover from illnesses). The targets also suggested that ostracism exacerbated already existing medical conditions, increasing the severity of symptoms, or inducing attacks or seizures.

Although Williams's model of ostracism focuses on the effects of ostracism on targets, the interviews provided evidence that sources also experienced changes to their primary needs during the ostracism period. Unlike targets, however, sources did not report uniform changes (whether threat or fortification) to the primary needs. The most consistent finding was an increased sense of control sources experienced when giving the silent treatment ("I suppose it gives me a sense of power, immense control because I'm the one dishing out the silent treatment," "it made me more powerful…I think to myself 'you've pissed me off and now you're going to pay because now I'm not going to speak to you for the whole week and you can suffer in silence' "). Changes to the remaining needs tended to be less predictable. For instance, some sources reported higher levels of self-esteem when ostracising ("when I'm giving the silent treatment, I feel good"), whereas others reported no change or even a decline as they thought less of themselves for resorting to ostracism tactics with a loved one ("I felt pretty low"). Sources typically reported no change in meaningful existence ("it doesn't affect my sense of purpose"), or a slight decline ("at other times [ostracising] really gets you down, really down, and you think 'well, what's it all about?' "), whereas several sources experienced lower levels of belonging while ostracising a loved one ("You feel like

crap…you don't feel that you belong...").

The lack of consistent changes to source's primary needs during ostracism extended to the effects of ostracising on physical health. Unlike targets who often discussed the aversive health effects of ostracism unprompted by the interviewer, sources rarely discussed how ostracism affected their health. When questioned about the somatic effects of ostracising, sources typically stated that they felt "fine." Others noted stress-type symptoms, most likely indicative of suppressed emotion. One source stated:

> *"Well I wish I could just blow my top when people hurt me. But I can't that's what its all about. The left side of my chest closes off like a door shutting and I can't talk. If it's a real bad hurt my whole chest closes off and it's impossible to talk about it. And very often it doesn't seem to affect me but it goes straight to my chest and I have to stop and think what did that idiot say to affect me this way just as though there is someone greater than me taking offence at what's said"*

The Corrosive Effects of Ostracism on Interpersonal Relationships

It was apparent from the interviews that the effects of ostracism on targets were not only somatic or psychological—many targets also paid a high interpersonal price. Not surprisingly, ostracism tended to have a corrosive effect on their relationship with the source. This was particularly the case for targets who were ostracized by their partner. Many such targets were incredibly bitter that their partner, the one person who was supposed to support and care for them beyond all others, could continually subject them to such psychological and physiological distress. The combined effects of being ignored and (for episodic targets) trying to appease the source to avoid being ignored, typically eroded any positive feelings that the target had toward the source, often to the point where they dissolved their relationship—in fact, 67% of targets interviewed formally left their partner (i.e., separation or divorce) as a result of ongoing ostracism. This finding supports research conducted by Gottman and Krokoff (1989) on the interaction patterns of married couples. Specifically, they found that the silent treatment (which the researchers characterized as withdrawal) is symptomatic of deteriorating relationships. Several other targets

interviewed wanted to leave their partner but could not do so for various reasons, typically because they were financially dependant on their partner, or they had young children and felt that they could not further disrupt the family unit through divorce. Also, in some cases, targets often lacked the self-confidence to leave their abusive partner after many years of ostracism. One such target stated that after years of ostracism from her partner, "I'm a very weak person, I'm not strong. If I was strong, I would've left…I'm so weak that I think I can't do anything on my own."

The effects of prolonged or episodic ostracism also tended to reverberate through the target's interpersonal relationships. This occurred primarily in two ways. First, in many instances, targets who were ignored by their partner found that ostracism put a strain on their social circle. Few friends would be able to withstand the tense atmosphere of households where ostracism is taking place. One target stated "we lost a lot of friends or acquaintances…cause naturally nobody wants to come into a house where you can cut the air with a knife." Hence, many friends would stay away, leaving the target with no discernable outside assistance.

Second, not only were targets deprived of existing friendships during the ostracism period, some were also unable to form new bonds. Their experiences with repeated social exclusion and rejection made many targets, particularly episodic targets, keenly attuned to signs of rejection from others ("I am overly receptive to any sign of rejection by others and I tend to be a little withdrawn unless I'm very sure of my footing"). Unfortunately, in new friendships and social situations, repartee is rarely free flowing. For targets of long term silence, however, the innocent pauses in conversation as a new acquaintance scrambles to think of a new topic of conversation or a witty response, are easily misinterpreted. They bring to mind the greater silences that the target has experienced in their relationships, and hence these small silences herald the potential for further rejection. As a result, the target retreats from forming a new acquaintance, even though a new friend would help them to regain the primary needs that have been threatened through long term rejection.

For instance, one target stated:

> *"If there are people around me talking to each other, I won't. I just sort of go into a little shell and I don't want to talk in case I'm not there. It's as if I'm not there. I listen to what they're saying and trying to take it in, but I feel as if I'm a ghost."*

As a result of years of silence from loved ones, some targets developed a sensitivity to silence such that even pauses in a phone conversation or the stillness that accompanies lying alone in bed at night was enough to induce severe anxiety. One perpetual target who received the silent treatment for 4 years by her stepfather stated: "I think one of the worst things in life would be to be deaf. I cannot bear silence...I have to sleep with the radio on at night..."

Sources are often aware of the aversive effects of ostracism on their relationship though many are actually powerless to stop using the silent treatment once they begin. Several sources states that a potential side effect of ostracizing was losing control over the ostracism process—that is, they are unable to stop giving the silent treatment, even once they decided to reconcile with the target. Many sources stated that after a period of ostracism (even as short as a day), they found it almost impossible to break their silence and start speaking to the target once again. For instance, one source ostracised his son after an argument for over two weeks. After he observed the aversive effect that ostracism was having on his son, he decided to break his silence—only to find that it was close to impossible. He stated:

> *"To terminate the ostracism, however, was an extremely difficult process. I could only begin with grudging monosyllabic responses to his indirect overtures. I was only able to expand on these responses with the passing of time and it is only now, about six weeks since the ostracism ceased that our relationship appears to be getting back to pre-row normality…if it had lasted much longer, I might not have been able to stop and that not only would our relationship have been destroyed but also my son himself might have been permanently emotionally and physiologically disfigured. Further…it may have led to illness and perhaps, ultimately, to his premature death….ostracism can be like a whirlpool, or quicksand if you, the user, don't extract yourself from it as soon as possible, it is likely to become impossible to terminate regardless of the emergence of any subsequent will to do so."*

There are several possible reasons why sources find themselves in a position where they lose

control of the ostracism episode. First, sources may find it difficult to terminate the ostracism episode and forgive the target for fear of "losing face." In many instances, the initial cause of ostracism is something trivial (i.e., the target has not paid attention to the source, or has forgotten to perform a household chore, etc). The source may feel that the act does not warrant days of silence yet they continue to ostracise the target in order to make the cause of the ostracism seem more legitimate. One source stated: "if you're being quiet then you don't have to put into words what is upsetting you and sometimes what is upsetting you is a pretty piddley thing and by being silent about it, it makes it look more important."

Second, it may also be difficult to stop the silent treatment because of the target's response to ostracism. Targets reported that they would do anything to elicit a response from sources, such as buying them presents, performing chores, or literally getting down on their hands and knees to beg forgiveness. Such actions may be incredibly gratifying to the source, particularly in those instances where the source is punishing the target for not paying sufficient attention to them. In order to maintain this subservient behaviour from the target, sources may continue to ignore the target long after they have forgiven them.

Finally, many sources seem to become habituated to ignoring the target. After a few days of monitoring their behavior in front of the target, this pattern of rejection soon replaces previous behavioral patterns as the normal mode of behavior. Just as it was once hard to ignore the target in the initial stages of ostracism, so it becomes hard to acknowledge the target in the later stages of ostracism. The inability to stop the ostracism episode will no doubt have an ongoing effect on the source's relationship with the target.

New Directions for Examining Relational Ostracism

The research described above was an initial empirical examination into the dynamics of ostracism in ongoing relationships. The interviews are rich with information and varied in what they

suggest about relational ostracism. Together they clearly convey that ostracism occurs among loved ones, and they expand our knowledge of how and when relational ostracism might occur.

Having established that ostracism does indeed occur between loved ones, we are currently doing research that examines the effects of unexpectedly being ostracized by a dating partner versus by a complete stranger. Our primary aim has been to examine how the effects of being ostracized by a relationship partner might compare to the effects of being ostracized by a stranger, and we have pursued this line of research using Cyberball in an experimental setting (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000; Williams & Jarvis, 2006). Cyberball is an online computer game in which participants are told the experimenters are interested in the effects of mental visualization on performance. In actuality, participants are randomly assigned to being included equally in the ball toss game, or after a few tosses, to never receive the ball again. The Cyberball research to date has examined ostracism by a stranger. Across studies, the results consistently show that being ostracized by a stranger, versus included in the game, causes people to feel less belonging, less perceived control, lowered self-esteem, and less of a meaningful existence (*cite relevant references)*. Moreover, being partially ostracized causes some reduction in these needs but not as much as full ostracism *(cite relevant references)*.

In our current research, dating couple members play a Cyberball game, presumably with each other and with a stranger. In reality, they play in isolation of each other and are randomly assigned to one of four conditions: no ostracism, ostracism by the stranger but not one's partner, ostracism by one's partner but not the stranger, and ostracism by both. For example, in the no ostracism condition the stranger and partner each direct 50% of their respective throws to the participant, whereas in the partner ostracism condition, the stranger directs 50% of the throws and the partner only 25% of his/her throws to the participant.

Based on our current research, we hope to learn several things. First, this design allows for a direct comparison of being ostracized in a Cyberball context by a partner versus a stranger (i.e., a

comparison of the two partial ostracism conditions). This comparison will indicate whether the source of ostracism matters, or instead whether ostracism by anyone equally undermines needs. The comparison also suggests whether there are unique effects to being ostracized by a relationship partner. In short, this comparison may afford inferences about specific circumstances that might influence whether one's needs are threatened when ostracized, which would expand our understanding of ostracism more generally.

Second, and of equal interest, is the comparison between no ostracism versus ostracism by a partner (but not a stranger) in that the partner ostracism condition suggests how participants react to relationship threats. Compared to a situation in which a partner is being inclusive, a situation in which a partner opts to play with a complete stranger and ignores the participant is likely to be experienced as a threat (and indeed our manipulation check indicates that participants feel much more ignored by the partner in the partner ostracism condition, relative to the no ostracism condition).

What is likely to be the reaction to a relationship threat such as ostracism? There is mounting evidence that one's attachment style – generally, one's sense of a close and comfortable bond with a partner, or absence thereof (see Simpson & Rholes, 1998) – is an individual characteristic that influences reactions to relationship threats in general; insecurely-attached individuals have relationships that are more vulnerable to such threats than securely attached individuals (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Collins & Feeney, 2004; Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999). This research suggests that insecurely attached versus securely attached individuals will differ in their reactions to being ostracized by the partner, possibly more so than in their reactions to be being ostracized by a stranger (i.e., attachment might moderate the effect of the ostracism manipulation).

Also, the extent of satisfaction and commitment one feels toward the partner might influence reactions to partner ostracism. Highly satisfied and highly committed individuals have

been shown to be less reactive to relationship threats than less satisfied and/or committed individuals (Arriaga, Slaughterbeck, Capezza, & Hmurovic, 2007; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Murray & Holmes, 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). This research suggests that less satisfied and/or committed couple members will feel their needs threatened when the partner ostracizes them, more so than when there is no ostracism, but more satisfied or committed couple members should show no such effect (i.e., satisfaction and/or commitment might moderate the effect of the ostracism manipulation). Alternatively, it is possible that more satisfied/committed partners are more affected by partner ostracism because they perceive that they have more to lose if the partner ignores them. Finally, it is also possible that partner ostracism will be so profound that participants will show consistent reactions irrespective of their level of satisfaction and/or commitment. In short, the comparison between the no ostracism and partner ostracism conditions, and analyses of relationship variables that might moderate the results of this comparison, may afford inferences about reactions to relationship threats, a fundamental relationship process.

Although examining relational ostracism in a laboratory, experimental paradigm is likely to yield novel and meaningful inference, we do not presume that being ostracized by a relationship partner while playing Cyberball is comparable to the relational ostracism accounts in everyday life described in previous sections. These experiences are likely to differ for many reasons. First, relational ostracism that occurs in everyday life is likely experienced as more genuine and real than ostracism in a Cyberball setting. Second, everyday ostracism often is more foreseeable and predictable than that experienced in Cyberball; indeed, many Cyberball participants may be surprised by their partner's acts of exclusion, and may recognize that interactions with their partner in a lab setting may be not representative of their typical interactions. Third, because ostracism in everyday life may be more expected and seem more genuine than cyberball ostracism, the everyday ostracism events may have negative effects that are more profound and/or long-lasting, an issue that remains

may be examined in future research. In short, both approaches – assessing accounts of ostracism in everyday life and examining exclusion in a laboratory setting – add important and unique information to our understanding of ostracism.

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Figure 1: Williams 's (1997/2001) Model of Ostracism

Taxonomic Dimensions

Visibility
(Physical, Social, Cyber)

Motive
(Not ostracism, Role-Prescribed, Defensive Punitive, Oblivious)

Quantity
(low to high)

Clarity
(Low to high)

Antecedents
(*Why sources choose to ostracize*)

Target differences
(Non confrontational, avoidant)

Source differences
(Stubborn, ambivalent attachment)

Social Pressures
(Social desirability)

Moderators

Attributions
Taking or abdicating responsibility/control, self or other blame

Individual Differences
Attachment styles, needs for belonging, control, self-esteem, terror management

Threatened Needs

Belonging
Control
Self-esteem
Meaningful Existence

Reactions

Immediate
Aversive impact, pain, hurt feelings, bad mood, physiological arousal

Short-term
Attempts to regain needs (e.g., strengthening bonds with others, making self-affirmations, taking control, maintaining cultural buffers)

Long-term
Internalization of needs (e.g., self-imposed isolation, learned helplessness, low-self-esteem, suicidal thoughts)