

Silent rage: When being excluded and ignored leads to acts of aggression, vengeance, and/or self-harm.

Lisa Zadro
University of Sydney

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Contact details:

Lisa Zadro

School of Psychology

University of Sydney

Sydney, 2006

Australia

Email: lisa.z@psych.usyd.edu.au.

Silence hurts: The roles of anger, pain, and shame in eliciting punishing responses to ostracism

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Introduction

“Pain can be alleviated by morphine but the pain of social ostracism cannot be taken away”

(Derek Jarman)

Over the past decade, there has been considerable debate as to whether or not being ostracized (being excluded and ignored; Williams, 2007) leads targets to behave in either a pro-social or anti-social manner toward others. Whereas some researchers have found that being explicitly rejected leads targets to behave in an aggressive manner toward either the source of ostracism or innocent bystanders (e.g., Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco & Bartels, 2007), others have reported that being excluded prompts targets to respond in ways designed to increase their opportunities for re-inclusion (e.g., conforming; see Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). Unraveling these contradictory findings has been the focus of recent research.

This chapter examines □ the possible psychological (i.e., primary need threat), contextual (i.e., relationship type, status) and emotional factors (i.e., negative affect and feelings of anger) that may motivate targets to enact punitive and vengeful behaviors as a consequence of being excluded and ignored. Factors that potentially *moderate* the consequences are discussed in terms of whether or not they ameliorate or exacerbate aggressive responses to exclusion. Finally, the chapter details new experimental research using a novel ostracism paradigm — ‘*O-Cam*’, a simulated web-conference — that specifically investigates the forms of vengeance that targets of ostracism are willing to impose upon sources.

The Functions of Ostracism

Ostracism is often thought to be one of the most innocuous forms of interpersonal conflict and a preferable alternative to verbal or physical abuse (see Williams, 2007). The virtues of silence are preached in proverbs, informing us that ‘silence is golden’ and that ‘if you have nothing nice to say, say nothing at all’. The very act of ostracizing another individual (i.e., the *target* of ostracism) simply involves not speaking to them or acknowledging their presence—there are no raised voices or physical blows. In fact, ostracism can be used in the presence of others with onlookers being none the wiser. The apparent ‘benign’ nature of this tactic is why institutions typically use forms of ostracism as a punishment as opposed to other methods of interpersonal conflict. For instance, schools typically advocate using “time-out” (i.e., physically removing the student from their peers) to discipline students as opposed to corporal punishment. Similarly, solitary confinement—a form of physical ostracism—is used as a means of punishing prisoners for infractions that occur behind bars.

If we examine the ways in which ostracism is used across age-groups, cultures, and species, it is apparent that all forms of ostracism have two broad goals. The first goal is to remove undesirable members of the group, particularly those that may harm or jeopardize the safety and wellbeing of the group. The very term “ostracism” comes from the ancient Athenian (488-487BC) practice of exiling citizens whose dictatorial ambitions posed a threat to the democratic nature of the state (Zippelius, 1986). In modern times, we still remove members of society who harm others by placing them in prison, which is an institutionalized form of exile. Within the animal kingdom, various species have been known to exclude sick, weak, or even exceptionally aggressive members to ensure that the rest of the group is not

vulnerable to outside attack (Gruter & Masters, 1986). A positive byproduct of removing undesirable members is that the remaining members of the group often become more cohesive—they function as a stronger unit which only benefits the group as a whole (Gruter & Masters, 1986; Williams, 2001). Thus, irrespective of whether ostracism is enacted by animal or human species, removing undesirable members ensures that the group (or its values) remains safe and intact.

The second potential goal of ostracism is to ensure that the target of ostracism changes their thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors so that they are aligned to those of the group. In this instance, ostracism is used as a form of discipline or punishment; it gives recalcitrant members a glimpse of what it would be like without the support of the source(s), and hence what is in store for them if they do not comply with the group. There are many examples of ostracism being used as means of disciplining wayward group members. For instance, as previously stated, schools institutionalize ostracism in the form of ‘time-out’ in order to punish students when they do not act in accordance to school rules. Within romantic relationships, individuals may use ‘the silent treatment’ on their partner to punish them for actual or perceived wrongdoing, thereby ensuring that the partner does not act that way in the future. Moreover, ostracism strategies are commonly used amongst primates to ensure that individual members behave in accordance with group laws (Goodall, 1986; Lancaster, 1986). For instance, Nishida, Hosaka, Nakamura and Hamai (1995) document a case whereby a chimpanzee was apparently attacked and then rejected from the group because he did not show the necessary signs of respect (pant-grunting) to the alpha male (or the other males) and had bullied the adult females of the group. He was allowed to rejoin the group three months later by which time his behavior had improved. Overall, excluding and ignoring the target gives them a glimpse of what life would be like without the support and

protection of the source(s), and hence provides incentive to maintain the rules and standards expected by the source(s)/group.

Ultimately, regardless of the reason for being excluded and ignored, ostracism can have devastating consequence for the target. For animals, being ostracized by the group—and thus being removed from the protection of other members—is often the first step toward starvation and death (Goodall, 1986). For humans, the results of being ostracized by a source or by a group may not be quite as dramatic, yet the effect is no less devastating. For instance, there is considerable evidence to suggest that a loss of social support can lead to an adverse impact on health and well-being that is comparable to damaging health factors such as obesity, smoking, and high blood pressure (Kiecolt-Glaser, Cacioppo, Malarkey, & Glaser, 1992). A lack of social support can also hinder recovery from illnesses and surgery and even hinder compliance with prescribed medical regimens (see Cobb, 1976).

Given the negative ramifications of being deprived membership in a group and/or losing the social support of the source(s)—particularly if the source is a partner or loved one—it is not surprising that targets tend to respond by changing their behavior in order to regain favor with the source(s). In a series of interviews with targets and sources of long-term ostracism, Zadro (2004, 2009) found that targets' often behaved in a pro-social/conciliatory fashion toward the source(s) of ostracism. Pro-social/conciliatory responses are designed to rectify or relieve the ostracism situation. Such responses include *forgiveness-seeking* (i.e., apologizing to the source for any action that may have warranted the silent treatment), *discussion* (i.e., trying to elicit a response from sources by speaking to them in a non-confrontational manner), and *ingratiation* (i.e., attempts to elicit a conversation through flattery, pandering to their source's needs or wants, or purchasing items such as flowers or presents). By carrying out pro-social/conciliatory strategies, the target aims to repair their

relationship with the source(s) and thereby put an end to any emotional or physiological pain that they may have experienced during the ostracism episode.

Yet, despite the potentially adverse consequences to the target's health and well-being that may result from being ostracized, Zadro (2004, 2009) found that several targets of long-term ostracism responded in an anti-social/reactionary manner to being excluded and ignored. Specifically, these targets reported acting in a vengeful manner toward the source(s) of ostracism and even recounted instances where they had responded in a anti-social manner toward innocent bystanders.

Thus, there is anecdotal evidence that ostracism can lead to either pro- or anti-social responses. Yet why does ostracism lead to such diverse behavioral responses? Why do some targets try to appease the source whereas others choose to abuse them? In order to answer these questions, it is first necessary to examine the potential psychological and emotional responses to ostracism as these reactions provide an invaluable piece of the puzzle when trying to determine whether targets will respond in an pro- or anti-social manner when they are rejected and ignored.

Psychological Effects of Being Ostracized: The Effects of Ostracism on Primary Needs

Williams's (1997, 2001) model of ostracism predicts that ostracism (compared to other forms of interpersonal conflict) has the potential to threaten four fundamental human needs: belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence—an assertion that has been supported by over a decade of empirical investigation (see Williams, 2007 for review). Although there is considerable debate amongst researchers as to whether one particular need supercedes the others, the model treats each need as equally important to the individual. The need to *belong* has been established as a primary, adaptive motivation that leads us to seek

meaningful interactions with a few important others (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Successfully establishing or maintaining bonds with others allows us to feel positive emotions, such as joy, bliss, or love (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sternberg, 1986). However, the absence of such interactions with others has negative psychological and physical manifestations such as depression, stress, and physical illness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Ostracism directly threatens belongingness as it severs the individual from others, leaving them without social contact and support.

Ostracism is also hypothesized to affect an individual's *self-esteem* (positive self image). According to researchers such as Brown and Mankowski (1993), the maintenance of self-esteem is a "potent motivational force". Specifically, the motivation to maintain high self-esteem tends to be viewed as both adaptive and an important aspect in determining our mental health and well-being (Steele, 1988). Several researchers (for review, see Brown & Mankowski, 1993) have indicated that problems with self-esteem tend to underlie psychological maladjustments and neurosis. Research also suggests that individuals with high self-esteem tend to show greater self-certainty (e.g., Campbell, 1990), less susceptibility to negative mood (Brown & Mankowski, 1993), and higher self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1995), than those with low self-esteem. Ostracism may directly affect self-esteem because it indicates to targets that their personal characteristics or actions are unattractive to others (see Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Exclusion may then lead individuals to alter the positivity of their self-image.

A sense of *control* over ones' social interactions with others, the environment, and ultimately the outcome of events, is also hypothesized to be threatened by ostracism (Williams, 1997). Theorists such as Seligman (e.g., Seligman, 1975), and Bandura (e.g.,

Bandura, 1995) maintain that actual or perceived control over situations and interactions is necessary to one's psychological wellbeing. The act of being ostracized by an individual or a group is an action that greatly reduces the control of the target. Unlike a physical fight, where the target can hit back, or a verbal argument where the target is free to abuse and respond to the abuse of the other individual, ostracism is entirely controlled by the source. As a unilateral tactic, the choice as to whether to continue or terminate the ostracism is made by the source alone.

Finally, ostracism, through the removal of attention, may affect the target's sense of *meaningful existence*—our conception of our own life as worthwhile. Left without social support and the attention of others, there is the possibility that we will begin to realise that our existence is both exquisitely fragile, and utterly futile, without the response and presence of others (Williams, 1997). The need to maintain a sense that life is meaningful has been viewed by some theorists (such as Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) as a means of avoiding contemplation of death. Ostracism is in many ways a premature taste of death—an insight into how the world would be should we suddenly be suddenly struck dead. To be given the silent treatment renders us a virtual ghost in the presence of others who cannot (or will not) acknowledge our existence (Williams, 1997).

According to Williams's model of ostracism, the effects of ostracism on targets' primary needs follow a temporal pattern; immediately after ostracism, targets feel a general ill-feeling, possibly bad mood, and physiological arousal. As the ostracism episode continues, the target is motivated (behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively) to regain these lost or threatened needs. For instance, threats to belonging can be remedied by establishing new bonds with others; self-esteem may be regained by increasing ones' self-importance, or by remembering

past achievements; control may be re-exerted by taking a leadership role in a situation, or exerting control over the lives of others; and threats to meaningful existence may be remedied by reasserting life goals and sense of purpose.

If the ostracism episode is prolonged, or the target is repeatedly excluded and ignored by the source(s), detrimental psychological and health-related consequences are predicted. With long-term exposure to ostracism, Williams hypothesizes that threatened needs will be internalized; a prolonged lack of belongingness may lead to feelings that one does not belong anywhere; the constant threat to self-esteem is likely to assist in the downward spiral of self-belief and affect resulting in chronic low self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995; Nezlek et al., 1997; Williams, 1997); prolonged loss of control over the environment and others is likely to lead to learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975); and a sense of purpose, once irreparably diminished, may force people to question the worth of their existence (Williams, 1997).

The desire to regain threatened primary needs play an important role in determining whether targets respond in a pro-social/conciliatory or an anti-social/reactionary manner to being ostracized. Regaining a sense of belongingness, for instance, would first entail trying to regain one's membership in the group (or, if the target is being ostracized by a partner or loved one, to regain their place in the partnership). Behaving in an affiliative manner toward sources would pursue this goal best (i.e., by enacting tactics such as ingratiation, discussion, and forgiveness-seeking). If these attempts to repair the relationship are unsuccessful, the target could try to affiliate with new individuals or groups to regain a sense of belongingness.

In contrast, attempts to regain the remaining needs (i.e., control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence) could easily lend themselves to more anti-social/reactionary actions.

For instance, targets may lash out verbally or physically in order to regain control over others and/or their environment; targets whose self-esteem has been adversely affected by being ignored may try to bolster their own feelings of self-worth by denigrating others; if a target feels invisible, as is the case when one's sense of meaningful existence is threatened, acting in an aggressive fashion—picking a fight, yelling an insult—will ensure that they receive attention, even if this attention is essentially negative.

There are several factors that may determine whether or not targets regain their needs using anti-social methods. Although all four primary needs are threatened, there may be individual differences in way in which targets prioritize regaining these needs. For instance, picture an ostracism situation whereby a target is being excluded and ignored at their workplace by a fellow employee. Although the ostracism episode may threaten all four of the target's primary needs, their desire to regain control of the situation (and hence regain their social standing amongst others in the office) may actually be a greater priority to the target than regaining their sense of belonging by repairing their relationship with the source, particularly if their relationship with the source is fairly superficial and they have a strong support network outside of the office. This desire to regain control may possibly lend itself to behaving anti-socially toward the source. The prioritization of needs may also be a product of pre-existing trait differences amongst targets. For instance, those with pre-existing low levels of one or more of the primary needs (e.g., low self-esteem) may try harder to regain that need once it has been further threatened by ostracism.

Gender may also play a role in the extent to whether or not targets regain their needs in an anti-social fashion. For instance, Williams and Sommer (1997) examined gender differences in the extent to which targets tried to regain their sense of belongingness.

Participants were either ostracized or included during a ball-tossing task. They were then asked to generate as many uses for an object as possible within a set time limit. They performed this task in the same room either collectively (in which they were told that only the group effort would be recorded), or coactively (in which their own individual performances would be compared to that of the other group members) with the two confederates. It was hypothesized that targets would try to regain a sense of belonging by working comparatively harder on the collective task, thereby contributing to the group's success. Williams and Sommer found support for this hypothesis, but only for female participants. Males, following inclusion or exclusion, tended to socially loaf—that is, they performed less during the collective task (where they believed their individual effort could not be assessed) than during the coactive task (where their individual effort could be assessed and compared to the other group members). There was also a distinct difference in the non-verbal behavior of males and females in this study. Females demonstrated non-verbal engagement (i.e., leaning forward, smiling) whereas males disengaged faster and tended to employ face-saving techniques such as combing their hair, looking through their wallets, and manipulating objects. It was concluded that being ostracized leads targets to try and regain their threatened needs, however there were gender differences in that ostracized females attempted to regain a sense of belonging whereas males acted to regain self-esteem or possibly a sense of control over their environment; in doing so, they responded in a less than pro-social fashion toward the group (i.e., social loafing).

Given that there are gender differences, and possibly also trait differences, that influence the ways in which targets prioritize regaining their threatened primary needs, it is not surprising that there are a range of possible reactions to ostracism ranging from anti-social to pro-social.

The Role of Emotions in Determining Pro- or Anti-social Responses to Ostracism

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was once quoted as saying: *‘Absolute silence leads to sadness. It is the image of death.* This sentiment is echoed by targets of long-term ostracism who report powerful emotional responses to being ostracized (Zadro, 2004, 2009). In addition to feeling sadness while being socially excluded, targets of long-term ostracism reported feeling a range of negative emotions including despair, loneliness, horror, anguish, helplessness, pain, shame, and anxiety. Almost all targets reported feeling angry. For instance, one target who was repeatedly ignored by her daughter, almost resorted to violence during a family holiday during which the daughter refused to speak or participate in any activities. She stated:

‘I’m not violent, well I avoid violence like the plague, I grabbed her by the waist and I though ‘gee what am I doing?’ I was actually going to throw her across the restaurant, I was that angry. That’s how I was the whole time--I was angry the whole time.’

Experimental ostracism research has also found some support for the anecdotal reports that being excluded and ignored leads to negative affect, including evidence that social exclusion leads to feelings of sadness and hurt feelings (e.g., Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004; Chow et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2002; however, for exceptions, see Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007; Twenge, Cantanese, & Baumeister, 2003).

Yet how does negative affect fuel anti-social behaviors post-ostracism? According to Berkowitz (1990), negative affect has a primary role in the activation of thoughts and memories associated with anger, as well as ‘rudimentary’ feelings of anger. Indeed, targets in experimental studies of ostracism often reported feeling significantly angrier than those who were included in the ostracism paradigm (e.g., Chow, Tiedens, & Govan, 2008; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). Recently, researchers have begun to examine the link between anger and aggression post-ostracism. For instance, Chow, Tiedens, and Govan

(2008) found that participants who reported feeling angrier after being ostracized during Cyberball—an Internet game of ball-toss that participants play with two confederates who are actually computer generated (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000)—were more likely to behave in an anti-social manner toward the sources of ostracism; that is, when asked to choose a snack for the sources of ostracism to consume, targets selected snacks that had been rated as unpalatable/unappealing (i.e., saltine crackers and prunes) rather those that had been rated as palatable/appealing (i.e., potato chips and chocolate chip cookies).

Given the psychological and emotional trauma that targets suffer while being ostracized, it is not surprising that they may express their frustration, anger, and pain by acting out in an anti-social fashion. The question then becomes: *whom do targets choose to be the focus of their anti-social actions?*

‘All are punished’?: Who is the Focus of Post-ostracism Aggression?

When targets respond to ostracism in an anti-social/reactionary fashion, they can potentially direct their actions toward three parties: the source of ostracism (i.e., revenge/retaliation), innocent bystanders (i.e., physical and/or verbal aggression), and themselves (i.e., self-harm or self-defeating behaviors).

Aggressing against sources of ostracism. Anti-social/reactionary acts that targets commit against sources of ostracism could be construed as acts of revenge or retaliation for the ostracism episode. According to researchers, there are several reasons as to why targets may be motivated to seek out vengeance against those who ostracized them. Walster, Walster, and Berscheid (1978) state that acts of revenge within interpersonal relationships may be motivated by the desire to restore equity in the relationship. In an ostracism situation, the target is at the complete mercy of the source; the source chooses when to ostracize the

target, how long the ostracism episode will last, and if/when they will stop the episode. By choosing to ostracize the target, the source has achieved complete power over the target and the relationship. Acts of vengeance may be the only way in which the target can topple the source from their position of power and thereby redress the equity imbalance in the relationship.

Revenge may also assist targets to regain lost or threatened primary needs. Specifically, revenge may allow targets to regain their sense of control by throwing off their role of 'passive victim' (see Frijda, 2007) and instrumentally engaging in behaviors that give them control over the situation and others. Retaliatory action may also give the target some level of control over the future of their relationship in the sense that acting in a retaliatory fashion may help to discourage sources from ostracizing the target in subsequent conflict situations (see Pinker, 1997). Vengeful acts are designed to attract the attention of the source, which in turn will make the target feel less invisible and hence help restore a sense of meaningful existence (see Yoshimura, 2007). Revenge researchers have also found that vengeance is often motivated by a desire to regain self-worth, which would be attractive to targets of ostracism whose self-esteem has been thwarted by being socially excluded (e.g., McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). However, while revenge may allow the target to regain a sense of control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence, depending on the nature of the vengeful act, it may further erode the target's relationship with the source—thereby further thwarting the target's sense of belonging—and may even lead to further retaliation on the part of the source.

Interviews with targets of long-term ostracism revealed that targets often engaged in acts of revenge (Zadro, 2004, 2009). These acts tended to vary in terms of their severity. Some targets resorted to acts of verbal denigration or physical violence toward the source as

a means of eliciting a response. Acts of verbal and physical abuse demonstrate the extreme frustration and despair that targets feel when confronted by a source who refuses to acknowledge their very existence. Some targets admitted to verbally abusing the source as a means of venting their own frustrations, whereas others abused the source in order to goad them into an argument. In very few cases, this strategy was effective. For instance, one woman stated that she would often yell at her husband while he was ignoring her to no avail:

“I’d call him every name under the sun. You bastard! You f\$%k! Talk to me! It didn’t do a thing. He never said a word until he was ready to say it.”

Although several targets reported using verbal abuse on sources, acts of physical abuse were (thankfully) rare, however targets may have been reluctant to admit being violent even if it had occurred. Targets who did admit to using physical abuse resorted to this tactic after other tactics (such as forgiveness-seeking or discussion) had failed. For instance, one target, who was repeatedly ostracized by her husband for periods of over a month at a time, resorted to violence in a desperate attempt to have her husband acknowledge her existence.

“I was just beside myself with frustration so I literally poured an entire jug of water right over his head because he was reading a book and he refused to acknowledge that I even existed...it was the only time I ever did anything violent...he just wiped one hand over his face and continued to read...”

The interviews provided a few, mild examples of physical aggression toward sources, however, the media often highlights episodes of ostracism that have serious, and even lethal, consequences. For instance, in Bangkok, a Thai woman mutilated her husband by removing and then boiling his penis before killing him. She then killed herself, her suicide note stating that she killed her husband because he gave her the silent treatment. Schoolyard shootings, such as that conducted at Columbine High School, are often retaliatory strikes by gunmen who have been widely rejected by their peers. In a case-study of school shootings in the US between 1995 and 2001, Leary, Kowalski, Smith, and Phillips (2003) found that individuals

who had rejected the shooter were typically targeted and were often amongst the victims.

Although few targets of long-term ostracism admitted to responding in a physically aggressive manner, it became apparent that targets rarely just sat back and allowed themselves to be repeatedly rejected and ignored without retaliating in some fashion. Some targets actively spoke about ‘getting revenge’ for being subjected to lengthy episodes of silence, particularly when they perceived the episodes to be unwarranted. For some, ‘getting revenge’ amounted to simple acts of reputation defamation (i.e., they spoke badly about the source to others). In contrast, other targets detailed elaborate and potentially harmful, revenge-scenarios. For instance, one target—an Italian woman in her late fifties—said that her husband had rejected her sexually twenty years earlier and had instigated a brief affair with a woman in his workplace. In return, the target punished her husband by adding more and more butter to his meals in the hopes of slowly elevating his cholesterol to painful levels.

Other targets chose to ‘fight fire with fire’ (so to speak) and simply ostracized the source(s), either to give the source a taste of the emotional pain that the target had experienced (“[the silent treatment] is not something that I would usually do, but if [the source] is going to act like that toward you, well I can give as good as I get”), or to simply get the source’s attention. Other targets resorted to ostracism when they no longer cared to pursue a relationship with the source. For instance, one target who was repeatedly ostracized by his father, decided to ostracize his father in return during one ostracism episode. He stated:

“I just didn’t care anymore. I wasn’t interested in playing the silent game anymore. So I thought, ‘hell, I can give as good as I get.’ It was a relief not to speak to him, and as time went on, I really didn’t miss him—he was a lousy father. He had a really cruel streak. So it wasn’t as if I was missing out on anything by not speaking to him. Even when people tried to get me to start speaking to him again, I told them I wouldn’t. I no longer wanted anything to do with him”

There has been considerable experimental research examining the ways in which targets perceive sources of ostracism. Specifically, several early studies of social exclusion demonstrated that targets who had been rejected rated the sources as less likeable (Pepitone & Wilpizeski, 1960), or less favorably (Geller, Goodstein, Silver, & Sternberg, 1974) than those who were not ignored. Moreover, Geller et al. (1974) found that when participants were given the opportunity to reward the least liked confederate (as indicated by the participant's ratings) in an "altruistic performance task," those who had been ignored by the confederate during a conversation tended to reward confederates significantly less than those who were not ignored.

Moreover, many of the early studies also examined whether ostracism affected the desire of targets to affiliate with their ostracizers. However, the findings on this point are somewhat contradictory. In some studies, targets preferred to avoid, or not work with, the ostracisers in the future (e.g., Mettee, Taylor, & Fisher, 1971; Pepitone & Wilpizeski, 1960) whereas in other studies, targets expressed a desire to be with, or work with, those who had ostracized them. Snoek (1962) found that when males were rejected for impersonal reasons (i.e., because the group was too large), their desire to remain with the group decreased. However, when the target was rejected for personal reasons (i.e., they were deemed unworthy of group membership) their desire to continue their membership in the group remained.

Recent studies have focused on examining whether being ostracized leads to anti-social responses toward ostracizers. For instance, Bourgeois and Leary (2001) found that participants who were rejected tended to derogate their ostracizers, which supports anecdotal evidence of reputation defamation post-ostracism. Specifically, participants who

were chosen last to join a team by two team captains tended to derogate the captains' leadership abilities and their personal qualities (i.e., rating them less likeable, less pleasant), relative to participants who had been chosen first to join a team. According to Bourgeois and Leary, derogation of ostracizers can serve an adaptive function because it diminishes the desire to be accepted by the source, and hence reduces the potential impact of ostracism on the target's psychological wellbeing.

Aggressing against bystanders/observers. Targets of ostracism do not always take out their anger and frustration on the source of ostracism. Instead, there is anecdotal evidence that targets will often lash out at innocent bystanders. This may seem counter-productive; after all, affiliating with a new person provides targets with the opportunity to regain primary needs, particularly their sense of belonging. However, according to the interviews, targets of long-term ostracism often direct their ire toward non-sources. Behaving in an anti-social manner towards others rather than the source may occur for a variety of reasons. For instance, if the target does not want to further jeopardize their relationship with the target then they may act out their frustration at others. Similarly, targets may abuse innocent third parties if there is a power disparity between the target and the source, which makes the costs of direct retaliation far too high. For instance, one target reported that his employer had ignored him for several weeks, refusing to speak to him directly and excluding him from memos and inter-office emails. Although the target was angry and frustrated by his employer's behavior, he could not act upon his feelings because he was terrified that he would lose his job. Instead, his family bore the brunt of his anger; he was verbally abusive and short-tempered to his wife and children.

Behaving in an anti-social/reactionary manner towards third parties may not only allow the target to vent negative emotions such as anger, but also to regain thwarted primary

needs. For instance, the target may regain a sense of control over others and their environment by taking out their anger on those around them. They may also increase their feelings of self-worth by focusing on the short-comings of others. Acting out towards others will also get them attention, which will help them to regain their sense of meaningful existence.

Despite the possibility of regaining primary needs, there are also drawbacks to acting out against a third party. If we return to the example of the businessman who took out his frustration and helplessness over being ostracized on his wife and family, it is clear that the target is jeopardizing his relationship with his wife and children by mistreating them. He is also further weakening his sense of belonging and his social support network in general by eroding his ties to his loved ones. One target who chose to take out her anger over being ostracized on others said:

“Being mean, or cruel, or short with someone [after being ostracized] made me feel good in the short-term because I was getting my own back, in a way. I was back on top after feeling so low. But then, later, I’d feel disappointed in myself for being so petty and small. And then I’d feel even worse than I did before.”

There are several experimental studies that have examined the ways in which targets respond to novel strangers post-ostracism. For the most part, these studies indicate that targets of exclusion tend to exhibit pro-social or cooperative behaviors towards neutral or novel individuals (e.g., conforming to incorrect group judgments so as to better fit with the group; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000) suggesting that they are behaving in a manner that will promote inclusion and subsequent social connection (see Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Scheller, 2006). However, in these studies, targets were not given the opportunity to act in an aggressive fashion.

Recent ostracism research has focused on experimentally examining whether targets will act in an anti-social/reactionary manner toward innocent bystanders. In these studies, targets are ostracized, rejected, or socially excluded by two or more sources and then asked to perform a new task with a completely novel person (who is usually a confederate). This task typically involves performing an activity that holds the potential for aggression (i.e., allocating hot sauce for the novel bystander to consume while knowing that the bystander dislikes hot sauce, Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2005; subjecting the bystander to bursts of white noise; Twenge et al., 2001). Typically, these studies have revealed that the link between ostracism and aggression is not clear-cut. For instance, Warburton, Williams, and Cairns (2006) found that targets of ostracism only aggressed toward an innocent third party when the targets' sense of control had been further thwarted in a previous task. Targets whose sense of control had been restored were not more likely to aggress. These findings suggest that ostracism per se may not be sufficient to cause targets to aggress, particularly against someone who is not the source of ostracism. Instead, a trigger is needed—in this instance, a further loss of control—in order to elicit an anti-social/reactionary response.

In other studies assessing anti-social behavior post-ostracism, the “innocent bystander” is not all that innocent—that is, the bystander often provokes the target in some way in order to elicit an anti-social/reactionary response. In a series of studies, Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, and Stucke (2001) examined whether social exclusion leads to forms of aggressive behavior. They found that participants who had been rejected in one form or another (i.e., either by being informed that their future would be devoid of social relationships, or by being rejected by potential partners for a subsequent group task), acted aggressively toward another participant who had insulted or provoked them (i.e., they hindered the other participant's chances of getting a job by giving them a poor job

evaluation, or blasted the other participant with white noise during a competitive video game, respectively). In only one study did the researchers find that the targets also acted aggressively toward a bystander who had not provoked or insulted them. Yet, tellingly, targets of social exclusion were not more aggressive to a bystander who praised them.

When examining real-life instances of violence that are precipitated by rejection, both bystanders and sources may be subjected to anti-social acts. For instance, the journal entries of the Columbine High School massacre gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold revealed that being continually ostracized and rejected by fellow classmates was a key causal factor in their decision to open-fire on students and staff, many of which were probably innocent of any wrong-doing (see Leary et al., 2003).

Recent studies have aimed to compare the response of targets to both sources and innocent bystanders. For instance, in a study by Zadro et al. (2009), participants were either ostracized, included, or ostracized then re-included during a game of Cyberball. They then participated in a Resource Dilemma task (Hardy & van Vugt, 2006), whereby participants were asked to indicate how much of a 100-cent resource they would allocate to the other players and to themselves. This task allowed participants to behave ingratiatingly, cooperatively, or anti-socially to either the individuals they had just played Cyberball with or two new players. When compared to being included in the Cyberball task, being ostracized made participants behaved more anti-socially when playing with the sources of ostracism (i.e., they allocated almost two-third of the resource to themselves, leaving little in the resource to split amongst the sources) but in an ingratiating manner when playing with new players (i.e., they took less than a third of the resource for themselves, leaving a lot more of the resource to split amongst the new players). Neither of these behaviors was observed in

those targets who had been re-included, as their thwarted needs were somewhat fortified when sources re-included them in the game.

Aggression against the target: Self-harm post-ostracism. The literature often fails to acknowledge that targets of ostracism can turn their negative feelings, their frustrations, and their thwarted needs *inwards*, internalizing the cause of ostracism and effectively punishing themselves for the ostracism incident. This reaction is common amongst targets who have experienced prolonged periods of ostracism, or had been repeatedly ignored by multiple sources (Zadro, 2004, 2009). For these targets, the threat to their primary needs becomes internalized; that is, they begin to express 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”). These threatened needs often manifested in self-destructive thoughts (“I often think to myself “when is this going to end?” I’ve thought of suicide”). Unfortunately, many targets often act on these self-destructive thoughts, leading to a host of self-harm behaviors including promiscuity, alcoholism and drug addiction, self-mutilation, and even suicide attempts (Zadro, 2004).

The negative, self-defeating behaviors demonstrated by long-term targets of ostracism are also evident—in lesser form—in laboratory manipulations of ostracism and rejection. For instance, in a series of studies, Twenge, Cantanese, and Baumeister (2002) found that participants who were told that they would have a future devoid of social bonds were more likely to engage in various forms of self-defeating behavior, such as risk taking

(e.g., betting on a long shot rather than a safer option), engaging in fewer health-enhancing behaviors (e.g., choosing to eat a candy bar rather than a muesli bar), and procrastinating rather than practice for an important test, than participants who were informed that they would have a future filled with social bonds or one filled with physical misfortune. Thus, the threat of social exclusion led to the pursuit of activities that have pleasurable short-term effects, but ultimately, aversive long-term consequences. Twenge et al. concluded that: “a strong feeling of social inclusion is important for enabling the individual to use the human capacity for self-regulation in ways that will preserve and protect the self and promote the self’s best long-term wishes for health and wellbeing” (p.614).

The Moderators Of Ostracism: Factors That May Precipitate Or Curtail The Desire To Act Aggressively.

There is considerable evidence that being ostracized has an adverse affect on primary needs and affect. According to Berkowitz (1990), once negative affect has activated the cognitive constructs associated with anger and aggression, individuals begin to think about possible “attributions, appraisals, and schematic conceptions that can then intensify, suppress, enrich, or differentiate the initial reaction” (p. 494). This second phase—whereby targets go through the ‘suppression’ or ‘enrichment’ of the negative/aggressive affect that has arisen from the ostracism incident—is essential in understanding why some targets choose to act in an anti-social/reactionary manner post; specifically, it is at this stage that various moderating factors come into play, whether singularly or in combination.

There are numerous factors that may act either singularly or in combination, to moderate the effects of ostracism. First, specific aspects of the ostracism episode may determine whether or not targets responds in an anti-socially/reactionary fashion. For instance, the actual location of the episode may facilitate or inhibit anti-social responses.

Unlike physical or verbal abuse, ostracism can be used by sources in public, often without observers being none the wiser. If an ostracism episode happens in public, however, it would be difficult for a target to respond in an anti-social fashion (particularly in a physically aggressive fashion) without attracting the attention of onlookers—that is, unless the target is so desperate for attention that they believe that even negative attention is preferable to being ignored.

Second, the identity of the source may also be an important moderating variable. Many targets stated that it was ‘easier’, and far less aversive, to be ignored by a stranger than a loved one (Zadro, 2004). When ostracized by a loved one, targets typically expressed a desire to preserve their relationship with the source. Hence they typically tried to act in an affiliative manner to ensure that the episode ended as quickly as possible and the relationship remained intact. Targets were typically less mindful of their relationship with an ostracizing stranger or acquaintance; thus, if given a sufficient trigger, targets may be more likely to act in an anti-social fashion when ostracized by strangers rather than loved ones. Laboratory studies have found that the identity of the source typically does not moderate the immediate consequences of ostracism; that is, being ignored by a computer versus a human (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004), or by a despised outgroup (i.e., the KKK; Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007) does not moderate the deleterious effects of ostracism on the four primary needs. There is, however, some evidence that the identity of the source may moderate affective responses. For instance, Zadro, Williams, and Richardson (2004) found that targets who were ostracized during Cyberball by a computer-generated player reported feeling significantly angrier than those who had been ostracized by a human player. If targets feel angrier when ostracized by specific sources, then it is possible that this anger may lead to

anti-social reactions, particularly if there are further environmental triggers. For instance, Vavilova and Zadro (2009) examined whether being ostracized by those of a different ethnic background would lead to anti-social/reactionary responses. They found that when targets were ostracized by sources who were part of a threatening ethnic outgroup (i.e., Muslims), they were more likely to defame the sources than those who were ostracized by members of their ethnic ingroup (i.e., rate the sources as being more likely to commit anti-social behaviors such as lie, steal, and cheat).

Third, the number of sources may also be a moderating factor. When ostracized by a single source, the target has the opportunity to regain threatened needs by affiliating with others in their social support network. When ostracized by multiple sources, or sources in different environments (e.g., if the target is given the silent treatment by their partner at home as well as by their colleagues at work) there may be fewer opportunities to regain thwarted needs, and hence a greater danger that lost needs will be internalized. Long-term targets who were ostracized by multiple targets were more likely to make internal attributions for the ostracism episodes (“it’s all my fault!”). This prompted some targets to respond in an anti-social and destructive fashion; that is, they attempted to restore lost social bonds by aligning themselves with unsavory or unscrupulous others (e.g., joining gangs). In some instances, targets of multiple sources feel sufficiently angry and disenfranchised to turn against their ostracizers (e.g., in the case of the various US schoolyard shootings where shooters felt rejected and excluded by their peers; see Leary et al., 2003). Targets may also turn their aggression inward and commit acts of self-harm; for instance, engaging in promiscuous behavior as a means of feeling wanted and loved, and/or indulged in alcohol and recreational drugs as a means of escaping the problem. The devastation of being

ignored by so many is clearly evident in the letter below sent by a young woman in her 20s who was ignored by her school peers:

"In high school, the other students thought me weird and never spoke to me. I tell you in all honesty that at one stage they refused to speak to me for 153 days, not one word at all... That was a very low point for me in my life and on the 153rd day, I swallowed 29 Valium pills." (Zadro, 2004).

Fourth, the causal clarity of the ostracism episode may also fuel anti-social responses. For instance, if the target knows why they are being ignored, they can focus their attention on pursuing tactics that rectify the situation and that are more likely to lead to reacceptance (e.g., ingratiation or discussion that focuses on apologizing). However, if the target is unaware of why they are being ignored, then the helplessness and frustration that they are feeling may fuel an aggressive response, particularly if there is a further trigger to elicit aggressive behavior toward the sources or innocent bystanders (e.g., they experience a further loss of control).

Finally, the length of the ostracism episode may also contribute to anti-social responses post-ostracism. According to the social reconnection hypothesis, exclusion motivates targets to forge social bonds with others only to the extent that they can realistically provide social reconnection (Maner et al., 2006). At the onset of ostracism, targets typically use strategies that they believe will appease the source (i.e., discussion or ingratiation). If these are unsuccessful and the ostracism episode stretches indefinitely, targets may view the prospect of future interaction as increasingly hopeless and may thus act in a vengeful fashion in a desperate attempt to have their existence acknowledged.

Just as there are a host of situational factors that may moderate anti-social/reactionary responses to ostracism, individual differences are sure to play a role in post-ostracism responses. Although there has been little research to date which has

specifically examined the role of individual differences in moderating anti-social responses to ostracism (for an exception, see Buckley et al., 2004), researchers have found that individual differences such as social anxiety (e.g., Oaten, Jones, Williams, & Zadro, 2008; Zadro, Boland, & Richardson, 2004), self-esteem (e.g., Nezelek et al., 1997), and rejection sensitivity do moderate targets' responses to being socially excluded and rejected. Future research needs to explore the extent to which individual differences, coupled with situational changes, moderate responses to ostracism. By understanding the role of moderating factors (singularly and in combination) in determining post-ostracism aggression, we can begin to develop strategies that will not only curtail the effects of ostracism, but potentially veer targets away from responding anti-socially.

Ostracism and Revenge: A New Program of Research

When reviewing the interviews with long-term targets of ostracism, one aspect that was particularly intriguing was the inventive ways in which targets retaliated against sources. Their acts of vengeance, no matter how small, allowed targets to rebel not only against their poor treatment but also against their status as a passive victim (even if the source was not always aware of the fact that they were being retaliated against!).

Recently, we have begun to conduct a series of studies that examine the range of vengeful/retaliatory behaviors that targets are willing to conduct against sources of ostracism (see Goodacre, 2007; Goodacre & Zadro, in press). Unlike previous studies, we do not focus solely on physical aggression but rather see it as only one aspect of the possible arsenal of anti-social/retaliatory behaviors at the target's disposal.

In order to assess the effects of ostracism on revenge and retaliation, we created a

new paradigm—*O-Cam*—a simulated webcam conference that takes place between the target and two students from a local university. During this web-conference, the target is informed that each student will give a brief, pre-written speech about university life. Although the paradigm has the appearance of a real web-based interaction, the ‘students’ are actually actors whose actions have been pre-recorded. Two *O-Cam* conditions are pre-recorded; one where the students appear to listen to the target as the target makes a speech (the inclusion condition) and another where the students appear to listen to the target’s speech for thirty seconds and then turn to each other and begin having a conversation, completely ignoring the target (the ostracism condition). A demonstration of the paradigm can be seen here: <http://www.psych.usyd.edu.au/research/ostracism/> (Username: guest; Password: Bach). Unlike other social exclusion and ostracism paradigms, *O-Cam* allows participants to be ostracized in the physical presence of the sources of ostracism, yet requires no confederates to participate during the task. We hypothesized that being able to watch the sources of ostracism as they interact together during the ostracism episode (all the while ignoring the target) would elicit strong, emotional responses in the target.

Unlike previous studies, which typically use a single indicator of anti-social behavior (e.g., the ‘hot sauce allocation’ measure of physical aggression used by Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006), the current study examined several aspects of revenge and retaliation. The construct of revenge and retaliation was assessed using a new measure that was based on research by Yoshimura (2007) on the different categories of vengeance behaviors. Specifically, the questionnaire examined participants’ desire to engage in four common revenge and retaliation type behaviors; active distancing, reputation defamation, physical

aggressiveness, and resource removal (for psychometric properties of the questionnaire, see Goodacre, 2007).

Active distancing refers to withdrawal of one's availability to another (e.g., "I would be willing to take part in another discussion with the two students from today's conference" and "I would be willing to participate in another discussion, but ONLY if it were with a DIFFERENT group of students").

Reputation defamation refers to attempts to reduce the target's positive public image. Participants were asked to rate eight adjectives—4 positive (e.g., friendly, attractive) and 4 negative (e.g., ugly, cold)—as accurate descriptions of the UNSW students. Participants were also asked to rate whether they believed the other students would be likely to engage in eight activities—4 positive (e.g., do volunteer community work) and 4 negative (e.g., lie, steal).

Physical aggressiveness refers to attempts to cause the target physical discomfort, emotional distress or pain. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they wished to nominate the students from the conference to participate in six experiments which involved exposure to three positive experiences (e.g., an experiment looking at increasing self-esteem through positive feedback) and three negative experiences (e.g., an experiment looking at sleep deprivation).

Overall, the findings suggest that ostracized participants endorsed acts of active distancing, reputation defamation and resources removal significantly more than their included counterparts. Thus, targets of ostracism were willing, when presented with the opportunity, to engage in mild revenge and retaliation-type behaviors. Whether or not one decides to seek revenge may be determined by what Björkqvist, Osterman, and Lagerspetz (1994) have defined as an effect/danger ratio where the individual weighs up their desire to enhance the impact of the revenge while simultaneously minimizing the potential costs of

carrying out this act. In this study, there was very little cost in endorsing retaliatory or vengeful acts. We plan on conducting a series of studies that will examine whether targets still wish to engage in these acts of revenge and retaliation if the personal costs to do so are varied (e.g., when the personal risks are higher).

Although ostracized participants were far more willing to endorse acts of revenge and retaliation than their included counterparts, they did not wish to behave in a more physical aggressive manner toward those who excluded them. This supports previous research that has found that ostracism alone is not sufficient to elicit physical aggression; rather, it requires a further trigger, such as a further loss of control, in order to elicit responses that induce a desire to cause bodily harm (e.g., Warburton et al., 2006). We intend to conduct a series of follow-up studies that examine potential aggression triggers to assess whether these elicit aggressive responses (i.e., diminished control, further threats to self-esteem and meaningful existence, and provocation). It is also possible that a more prolonged exposure to ostracism or multiple exposures may promote a desire to become physically aggressive toward sources.

One of the most interesting and insightful aspects of the study was the observation of targets' verbal and non-verbal behavior during the *O-Cam* task. Participants were filmed during the ostracism episode and their verbal and non-verbal behaviors were coded. These tapes provided a wealth of information about the range of emotional responses that targets experience while they are excluded and ignored. At the beginning of the interaction, all targets appeared interested and engaged in the "web-conference"; they nodded and smiled as the two confederates gave their speeches. However, at the onset of the ostracism episode (i.e., when the two confederates began to talk to each other, ignoring the participant), the facial expressions of ostracized participants changed dramatically. Targets of ostracism

initially appeared astonished (59.26% of all targets of ostracism) or displayed nervous smiles (approximately 60-85% of ostracized participants). They then sat and stared at the other students, seemingly trying to work out what was actually happening to them. As they began to realize they were being ignored, their facial expressions progressed to discomfort, self-consciousness, and towards the end of the ostracism phase, sadness, dejection, and shame (displayed by approximately 70% of ostracized targets). This pattern was similar for both males and females. During the ostracism episode, some female targets continued to display engagement behaviors such as smiling, laughing and/or nodding simultaneously with the students in the *O-Cam*. This desire to still be 'included' even though they are clearly being ignored was also seen by Williams and Sommer (1997). In their study, female targets continued to try and engage non-verbally with the sources (i.e., smiling, nodding, leaning toward the sources), even while being excluded from a game of ball-toss. In the *O-Cam* study, males also displayed engagement behaviors, though more infrequently, and these tended to be interspersed with face-saving behaviors, which included looking around, reading the *O-Cam* poster, yawning, rocking in their chair or playing with facial hair.

Overall, these findings indicated that even a single brief exposure to ostracism, instigated by previously unknown peers, is powerful enough to elicit antisocial behavior without provocation. This result has considerable implications outside the laboratory setting. Specifically, in a real life situation, anti-social behaviors such as reputation defamation are likely to create additional conflict between the target and source(s). This may result in the target being further ostracized, compounding the psychological effects of the initial experience and thus creating the potential for further and possibly more extreme anti-social behavior on the part of the target (Williams, 2001). It should be noted, however, that

although ostracized targets sought to distance themselves from the sources of their rejection, they also expressed an interest in connecting with a new group of people, indicating that ostracized targets are responding in a more complex fashion than previously expected, simultaneously acting in a pro- and anti-social manner as a means of attaining short-term benefits (i.e., vengeful acts that may give them a sense of temporary satisfaction) and long-term gains (i.e., seeking out new affiliative ties).

Our future studies will continue the search for triggers and moderators of aggression post-ostracism. Moreover, we also hope to refine our behavioral measures; often, the aggression measures used in social exclusion studies could be viewed as measures of *condoned* aggression—that is, participants are given permission to aggress by being told that they can give as much hot sauce or as many noise blasts (at whatever volume) that they wish. The target can rationalize that if the experimenter is allowing them to perform these actions, then no real harm can come to the target. The aim is to find new ways of assessing anti-social and aggressive responses that are less contrived and that parallel real-world scenarios in order to attain a richer understanding of the motivations behind post-ostracism aggression.

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