Recovering from social exclusion: The interplay of subtle Facebook reminders and collectivistic orientation

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A B S T R A C T

The sense of being connected with others through Social Networking Sites (SNS) can counteract feelings of loneliness. We examined whether subtle reminders of Facebook, the largest SNS, mitigate people's responses to ostracism (i.e., being ignored and excluded), taking into account individual differences in collectivistic orientation. We examined two typical responses to ostracism: interest in social contact (Study 1) and the need to belong (Study 2). After being included or ostracized in Cyberball, a Facebook (vs. Word) icon was displayed on the margin of a computer screen while participants focused on a primary task. We found three-way interactions between icon presentation, ostracism, and participants' horizontal collectivism. In the Facebook-icon (vs. Word-icon) condition, ostracized (vs. included) participants with higher (vs. lower) collectivistic orientation exhibited less compensatory interest in social contact (Study 1) and a greater recovery of their need to belong (Study 2). A meta-analytical synthesis of the effect sizes from the two studies suggests a significant, medium-sized effect of the moderation by collectivistic orientation. The findings suggest that thoughts about being connected through SNS can help people cope with threats to belonging, especially those who cherish relationships with equal others.

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1. Introduction

More than a billion people use Facebook daily, making it the world's largest social networking site (Facebook, 2016). A common reason to use Facebook is to connect with friends (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010), and people can compensate feelings of loneliness by actively using Facebook (Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011). We reasoned that Facebook may help people cope with adverse social experiences that threaten their sense of belonging (Chiou, Lee, & Liao, 2015; Knausenberger, Hellmann, & Echterhoff, 2015). More precisely, we hypothesized that reminding people of Facebook can attenuate typical responses to ostracism, that is, interest in social contact and the threat of the fundamental psychological need to belong (Williams & Nida, 2011; Williams, 2009).

Ostracism (i.e., being ignored and excluded) is a common adverse experience, which imperils fundamental needs (Williams, 2009). According to Williams' temporal need-threat model, ostracism thus threatens the need for self-esteem, meaningful existence, control, and the need to belong. Responses to ostracism can occur at either of three stages: an immediate, reflexive stage; a delayed, reflective stage; and a resignation stage, which encompasses responses to long-term, repeated ostracism. Here we focus on the reflexive and the reflective stage. Right after being ostracized, that is, in the reflexive stage, victims experience an immediate painful reaction. With the passage of time, that is, in the reflective stage, victims can muster resources for coping with the exclusion experience, such as thoughts of existing friendships (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011). To the extent that victims of exclusion invoke such resources, the negative effects of ostracism are attenuated. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis suggests that attenuating factors, such as reminders of existing friendships, affect fundamental needs to a greater extent at the reflective (vs. reflexive) stage (Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015).

During the reflective stage, targets of ostracism can replenish their threatened needs mainly by exhibiting aggression (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006) or reaffiliative behavior (Derfler-Rozin, Pillutla, & Thau, 2010; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007; Warburton et al., 2006). Aggression can restore the feeling of power and control, whereas reaffiliation can primarily restore the need to belong (Williams & Nida, 2011). Compensatory reaffiliation becomes less necessary when ostracized people recall existing social

connections. Common social connections are those with a close-relationship partner, family members, or friends (Kaplan et al., 1988). Indeed, it has been found that rejected participants experienced a reduced threat to need fulfillment when they wrote about their best friend (McConnell et al., 2011).

Nowadays, social connectedness can be experienced via Facebook (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013), and the Facebook icon has come to represent social networks of friends. The icon is ubiquitous in today's digitalized world, for instance in commercial ads, in contact information of professionals and companies, and on tablet and phone screens. Initial evidence suggests that the impact of ostracism can be alleviated by the incidental or subtle activation of thoughts about Facebook. Chiou et al. (2015) found that participants who were primed with the briefly flashed words "Facebook" and "Google+" (vs. control words) reported lower social distress after ostracism. Furthermore, a study by Knausenberger et al. (2015) suggests that subtle reminders of Facebook may temper ostracized participants' compensatory interest in social contact restoration.

However, these studies provide limited evidence because they did not assess a crucial process, that is, restoration of threatened needs.[1] Ostracism threatens the need to belong (Williams, 2009), and a high need to belong increases affiliative behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We argue that the presentation of a Facebook icon should fulfill the need to belong, which leads to a reduced interest in social contact. In our research, we assessed the need to belong to examine whether Facebook reminders can help victims of ostracism restore this need.

Another purpose of our studies was to remedy the shortcomings of previous research regarding control conditions. The study by Chiou et al. (2015) lacked a standard control condition (i.e., inclusion), and the reminder manipulation by Knausenberger et al. (2015) faced potential confounds (i.e., color effects). To examine the Facebook-reminder hypothesis more rigorously, we included a control condition for the icon presentation that eliminated these possible confounds. In so doing, we could also check the robustness of the initial findings by Knausenberger et al.

Furthermore, we wanted to examine the role of an individual-difference factor that is related to social connectedness with close others, namely collectivism (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Collectivism is relevant to the present research because people scoring high (vs. low) on collectivism are more likely to activate knowledge of social relationships (Pfundmair, Aydin, Frey, & Echterhoff, 2014; Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2013). Consistent with this notion, a recent study by Over and Uskul (2016) shows that children from an interdependent (vs. independent) culture found it more likely that an ostracized person would interact with a friend to cope with the ostracism experience. We focused on the horizontal (vs. vertical) type of collectivism. Whereas vertical collectivism reflects social obligations from hierarchies and traditional roles, horizontal collectivism encompasses interpersonal connectedness and cooperation among equals (Triandis & Gelfand, 2012). Thus, the horizontal type of collectivism is more pertinent to the present rationale. According to previous research (Pfundmair et al., 2014; Ren et al., 2013), reminders of Facebook should more easily activate a sense of social connectedness in people with a greater (vs. lower) collectivistic orientation. Put differently, a high (vs. low) collectivistic orientation should allow ostracized people to profit to a greater extent from Facebook reminders in coping with the ostracism experience.

In this respect, we need to consider a potential caveat suggested by cross-cultural research. It has been argued that people from a collectivistic (vs. individualistic) culture perceive ostracism as less threatening *without* the need for social reminders. Indeed, in the absence of social reminders, participants from a collectivistic (vs. individualistic) culture have been found to respond with less negative emotions (Pfundmair, Graupmann, Frey, & Aydin, 2015b) and less need threat (Pfundmair, Aydin, Du, Yeung, Frey, & Graupmann, 2015a). Also, children from an interdependent (vs. independent) culture experience less negative emotions after ostracism (Over & Uskul, 2016). All of these findings were obtained with *cross-cultural* comparisons.

However, there are reasons to suspect that individual differences in collectivism play a different role in a *culturally homogeneous* setting. Specifically, for people from a generally individualistic culture a more (vs. less) collectivistic orientation per se may not be sufficient to reduce the effects of ostracism. Thus, we assume that within an individualistic culture, people with a relatively more collectivistic orientation still need to recruit *additional* resources to cope with ostracism. Consistent with this view, a study by Pfundmair et al. (2014), conducted with participants from Germany, found that a collectivistic orientation shielded against negative ostracism effects only in conjunction with the administration of oxytocin, a neuropeptide that is known to mitigate social distress. Germany is located at the individualistic end of a cross-cultural comparison scale (Hofstede, 2001). Consistent with our rationale, Pfundmair et al. found that responses to ostracism were less negative in participants with a horizontal collectivistic (vs. individualistic) orientation only under oxytocin (vs. placebo).

Similar to Pfundmair et al. (2014), we examined the influence of individual differences in horizontal collectivism with participants from the same, individualistic culture, that is, Germany. The above considerations suggest that reminders of one's social connectedness facilitate the activation of resources for coping with ostracism to a greater extent among participants with a higher (vs. lower) collectivistic orientation. We thus predicted that the subtle presentation of the Facebook (vs. a control) icon is more likely to mitigate responses to ostracism in participants with a greater (vs. lower) collectivistic orientation. Two typical responses to ostracism were assessed: seeking new contact (Study 1), and the recovery of need fulfillment from the reflexive (immediate) stage to the reflective (delayed) stage (Study 2).

2. Study 1

The purpose of Study 1was to examine whether Facebook reminders mitigate interest in social contact after ostracism (vs. inclusion), especially in participants with a higher (vs. lower) collectivistic orientation. We extended the experiment by Knausenberger et al. (2015) in two important ways. First, we included an established individual-difference measure of individualism-collectivism (INDCOL, Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). We expected that the mitigating effect of Facebook reminders would be stronger for participants with a higher (vs. lower) collectivistic orientation. Second, we eliminated a possible confound in the experiment by Knausenberger et al. In this earlier study, the control icon (Flash Player) was red, and exposure to the color red may impact motivation and cognition (Tanaka & Tokuno, 2011). Hence, we used an icon of the same color (Microsoft Word) as the Facebook icon.

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[1] We note that Knowles et al. (2015, Study 3) examined need satisfaction as a function of an adverse social experience (gaze aversion by an imagined interaction partner) and exposure to photos of Facebook friends (vs. images of trees on Flickr). However, the study authors did not assess the *restoration* of fundamental needs. Also, the empirical evidence was inconclusive due to a small, non-significant effect, and the manipulations are open to various alternative explanations (e.g., familiarity of the stimuli or the presence of faces on the Facebook photos).