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Plugged in but not connected: Individuals' views of and responses to online and in-person ostracism

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ABSTRACT

We conducted two studies to examine perceptions of, and reactions to, ostracism occurring either in-person or online. In study 1, participants read a vignette describing either in-person or online ostracism, then estimated their psychological and interpersonal responses as if they experienced such ostracism. Participants anticipated experiencing distress, and this was consistent across ostracism method. Ostracism method did predict negative affect (NA), with greater NA increases anticipated for in-person exclusion, compared to online. A significant interaction between gender and ostracism method predicted anticipated belonging. Males anticipated higher belonging in the in-person condition (relative to online); females anticipated more belonging in the online condition. In study 2, participants experienced in-person or online ostracism during a brief interaction with study confederates. Both conditions elicited similar reports of low inclusion, high exclusion, and significant decreases in positive and negative affect. Ostracism method qualified self-esteem (SE) results; chat room participants indicated an increase in SE following ostracism, whereas in-person participants reported a slight decrease. Males and females were similarly affected by both conditions. These studies demonstrate that online experiences of ostracism may be as meaningful as those experienced in person. Whether this finding generalizes to those with less technological familiarity should be examined further.

1. Introduction

Imagine interacting with two acquaintances who suddenly begin interacting only with each other and seem to ignore your presence. This may be considered a rather benign example of everyday ostracism. That is, opposed to being rejected (which more explicitly reflects dislike or non-belonging) a person is ostracized when the excluded individual is simply ignored, as if he or she did not exist (Williams, 2007). How would this situation make you feel at that moment? Moreover, would it make a difference whether this interaction (or, rather, lack of involvement in the interaction) occurred in-person or via more remote communication methods such as the internet? Exploring these questions was the main objective of the current project.

It has been repeatedly suggested that belonging is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and that being excluded impedes the fulfillment of four primary needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (Williams, 1997). There is ample empirical evidence to support such assertions, as exclusion has been shown to lead to immediate unpleasant outcomes more generally. Specifically, exclusion has been related to thwarted needs, lowered self-esteem, lower positive affect, and higher negative affect (Williams, 2007), as well as decreases in cognition/self-regulation, increased aggression, and retaliatory behaviors (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007).

2. Social connections

2.1. Technology and exclusion

Technology has increased our reliance on more remote methods (e.g., internet, chat rooms, email, texting, etc.) by providing opportunities to connect with more people and more varied situations. However, there is evidence to suggest that this type of communication may be different than in-person interactions in some essential ways, particularly in regards to being ostracized (which is rather ambiguous). For instance, it has been suggested that remote communication may promote the disinhibition effect, which prompts people to behave in ways (and in particular, more aggressive ways) than one normally would in-person (Suler, 2004). Thus, whereas in face-to-face encounters people tend to conform to social expectations which may constrain various expressions, remote technology may allow people the ability to actively cope with the threat of exclusion.

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Williams and colleagues (2002) compared in-person and online ostracism through a manipulation where participants discussed a controversial topic (i.e., legalization of euthanasia) with confederates. In all conditions, confederates were to present different opinions than the participants. After 3 min, of inclusive discussion, participants in the inclusion condition continued to remain involved in the discussion (e.g., talked to and acknowledged) and those in the ostracism condition were ignored. They found that included participants had greater feelings of belonging when they experienced face-to-face inclusion compared to online inclusion; however, when ostracized, individuals felt similarly lower levels of belonging regardless of exclusion method (in-person or online chat room). There was an effect of ostracism method on self-esteem and levels of control such that online ostracism appeared to buffer, or protect, both of these outcomes. Whereas included persons experienced similar levels of high self-esteem and control regardless of whether it was via online or in-person interactions, those who were ostracized via face-to-face encounters reported significantly lower self-esteem and levels of control than all other conditions. Thus, in-person interactions appeared to heighten levels of belonging during positive interactions, yet it led to more negative self feelings and lowered control when the interactions involved exclusion.

Williams and colleagues (2002) were the first to investigate a comparison between online and in-person methods and have provided some important information regarding the responses following exclusion. The design used in their experiment, however, was to explore a different question than the one this study proposed. In particular, prior research has utilized inclusion as a comparison group. In some sense, although inclusion may be opposite of exclusion, it may not always be an appropriate control condition. Namely, it is not a neutral condition (and thus pulls for differences between two "poles" of inclusion/exclusion), and the goal of the current research was to directly compare two ostracizing methods. Thus, rather than compare ostracism to inclusion within each ostracism condition (e.g., in-person vs. online), this study proposed directly comparing these methods. Furthermore, the nature of the ostracism experienced by the participants in our study was potentially different. The participants in Williams' and colleagues (2002) study were in the position of discussing the legalization of euthanasia, which is a controversial and potentially emotional topic. Furthermore, irrespective of their opinion, confederates were instructed to take the opposite opinion and then either include or ignore the participant (depending on condition). Thus, it was assumed that the participants experienced a relatively uncomfortable and oppositional situation. Our two studies, however, attempted to create a more ambiguous ostracizing situation during more ordinary, affiliative interactions with others. That is, our participants were involved in situations where the goal was to "get to know" other persons by exchanging mundane information. We assumed that affiliation behaviors would be perceived by the participants as much less uncomfortable and oppositional than discussing controversial topics. Furthermore, the ostracism may have been perceived in this context as more ambiguous because it was unclear if they were really being ignored and, if so, why they were being ignored. During oppositional discussions it is plausible that certain attributions were more salient to the participants as to why they were being ignored (e.g., "I have a very different opinion than the others do"). Lastly, our study systematically assessed potential gender differences, which has not been done in prior research that investigated the different methods of ostracism.

2.2. Gender and exclusion

Understanding whether gender plays a role in the exclusion experience is a complicated issue. Across the exclusion literature, gender appears to play virtually no differentiating role in at least some aspects of exclusion, namely immediate reactions. It is suggested that there is a universal necessity to be able to detect, and even feel bad about exclusion as it is a signal of our inclusion status, which can ultimately affect our survival status (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Thus, these immediate reactions are expected to be similar across both genders, and evidence does support this. Yet, there seems to be an important caveat, as gender may play a much larger role in other features of exclusion, such as how it affects the self after these immediate reactions occur. For instance, females have been shown to be more affected by interpersonal stressors (e.g., rejection) than males, whereas males are more negatively affected by achievement stressors (Stroud, Salovey, & Epel, 2002). Thus, males and females may place different value on the exclusion and, once the initial sting of exclusion subsides, may cope with it differently. For example, research has shown that males and females generally rate themselves in a similarly positive way when they are included; however, whereas males rate themselves with an almost equivalent rating following exclusion, females tend to rate themselves more harshly (Leary et al., 1995). Therefore, although men and women may both produce similar responses immediately following exclusion, women may perceive exclusion as being a larger stressor, or being more personally relevant, than men do. Furthermore, most of the evidence of gender-specific findings may be qualified by methodology. Collectively, the literature demonstrates that when exclusion occurs *after* the interaction (broadly defined), males and females share similar experiences on a wide variety of outcomes; it is specifically face-to-face, ongoing exclusion that may affect females more negatively than males (Filipkowski & Smyth, 2009). For instance, when faced with in-person ostracism females have been more likely to attribute it to themselves (Williams & Sommer, 1997). During online ostracism, however, they were just as likely as males to blame the ostracism on the other parties (Bozin & Yoder, 2008). Females have also reported lower self-esteem (Baldwin, Granzberg, Pippus, & Pritchard, 2003; Gaertner, Iuzzini, & O'Mara, 2008), and exhibited both higher Cortisol levels (Stroud et al., 2002) and systolic blood pressure (Stroud, Tanofsky-Kraff, Wilfley, & Salovey, 2000) than males following in-person rejection.

3. Purpose of the project

As mentioned, the primary focus was to directly compare individuals ostracized via different mediums during a relatively benign interaction (an informal get-to-know-you conversation). In addition, the current study aimed to measure any gender differences in responses, as they occurred across these two ostracism methods. Therefore, two studies were developed to assess individuals' perceptions of and reactions to ostracism experienced either in-person or in a chat room setting, and focused on whether the medium influenced anticipated and/or actual responses.

4. Study 1: perceptions of ostracism

Research has investigated perceptions of imagined rejection (e.g., overhearing friends speak poorly of them, break-up of a relationship, etc.), and has generally found anticipated decreases in positive affect and increases in negative emotional outcomes (Allen, de la Horne, & Trinder, 1996; Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009; Craighead, Kimball, & Rehak, 1979). Few, if any, published studies have utilized imagined ostracism. This may be especially important during ostracism which lends itself to be vague or ambiguous, and could leave the individual unsure how to interpret self and others (Williams, 1997). This can be