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Hurt people hurt people: ostracism and aggression

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Because ostracism hurts, it can trigger aggression. Guided by the theoretical framework of the temporal need-threat model of ostracism, we review the existing research that investigates this ostracism–aggression link over the last two decades. Both correlational and experimental research have provided substantial support for the model’s prediction that ostracism may instigate aggression. Recent research continues to investigate why this occurs, and who is most likely to become aggressive when ostracized. A new and exciting body of literature emerges, which seeks to inform interventions for coping with ostracism and for reducing ostracism-related aggression.

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Humans have a fundamental need to connect socially with others [1]. Ostracism – being ignored and excluded – along with rejection and other forms of social exclusion,⁴ threatens this need, triggers painful feelings, and elicits a wide range of negative effects. The field of social psychology has diligently explored and documented these negative effects. The temporal need-threat model of ostracism [2,3] integrates the substantive body of empirical research on these negative effects and specifically outlines how the effects unfold over time in three stages.

The model, depicted in [Figure 1](#), starts with a *reflexive* stage. In this stage, once individuals detect the cues of ostracism, they experience pain, sadness, anger, and lower satisfaction of four basic psychological needs (*i.e.*,

⁴ Given that the field has yet to articulate the specific theoretical and empirical differences between ostracism and those of social exclusion and rejection, we use the three terms interchangeably in this paper.

belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence). Following this immediate reaction to ostracism, individuals enter a second, *reflective* stage. In this stage individuals try to make sense of the ostracism event, and try to recover from the social injury. Ostracized individuals often respond with one of two behavioral patterns: anti-social behaviors (*lash out*), or pro-social behaviors (*go along to get along*). We recently added a third behavioral response to the model: withdrawal. Sometimes ostracized individuals may simply remove themselves from painful social interactions and seek solitude (*lick one’s wound*; [4,5]). When ostracism persists, victims of ostracism will eventually reach the third stage of *resignation*. Here, individuals suffer from feelings of alienation, depression, helplessness, and worthlessness [3,6].

In the current article, we will focus on one well-studied negative consequence of ostracism that often occurs at the second stage of ostracism: aggression. We will first provide an overview of the existing work investigating ostracism-related aggression, and then turn our attention to ways of reducing this ostracism-related aggression.

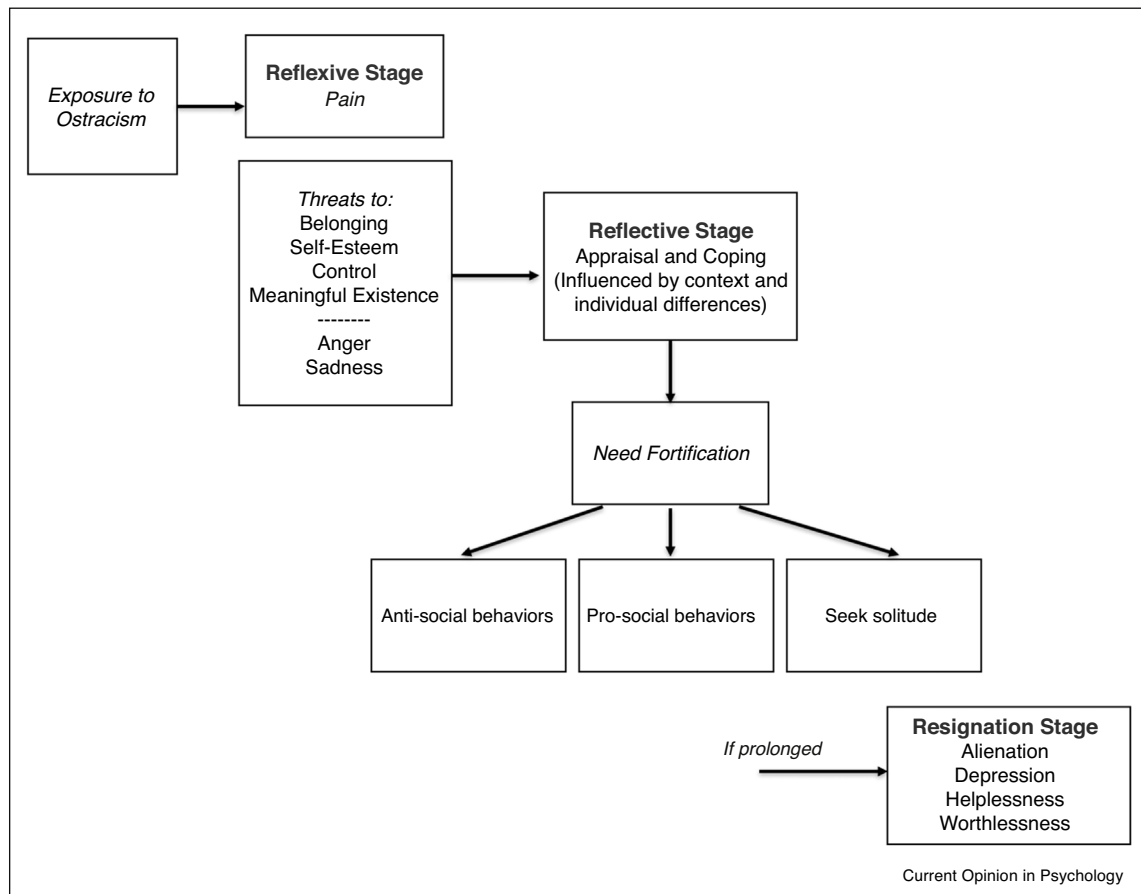
Ostracism triggers aggression

The ostracism–aggression link has been consistently demonstrated in many well-controlled experiments. Many programs of research have provided converging evidence that ostracized individuals become aggressive towards the source of ostracism, bystanders, and even innocent others. For example, ostracized participants give more negative evaluations to job candidates [7^{••}], choose more unappealing snacks for their interaction partners [8[•]], give louder blasts of white noise to their interaction partners [9^{••}], and allocate more hot sauce to a partner who dislikes spicy food [10^{••}] than do included participants.

Aside from laboratory experiments, correlational studies support the ostracism–aggression link and suggest that ostracism, among other factors, may facilitate mass violence (*e.g.*, school shooting events; see [11] for a review). In a systematic content analysis [12^{••}], researchers studied 15 school shootings in the United States and found clear evidence for either acute or chronic rejection in 12 cases (80%). Other researchers systematically analyzed 126 school shooting cases from 13 countries and focused on the role of social dynamics before the attack. Overall, they found evidence for some form of peer rejection or exclusion in about 70% of the cases [13].

Why do ostracized individuals aggress when it increases the likelihood that they will experience further

Figure 1



The temporal need-threat model of ostracism.

ostracism for their anti-social behavior [3]? One reason could be that ostracism stings, and individuals believe aggressing will make them feel better [14]. Indeed, anger is a key mediator in the ostracism–aggression link [8^{*}], and other research demonstrates that, following ostracism, participants acted aggressively when they expected aggression would improve their aversive affective state [15].

Additionally, ostracized individuals may believe that the ostracizers are intentionally trying to harm them, and thus aggressive retaliation would be a normative response. For example, researchers examined the role of perceived hostility in producing aggressive responses to ostracism. Compared to included participants, ostracized participants perceived more hostility in the social environment, and this hostile cognitive bias, in turn, increased aggressive behavior [16^{*}]. In other research, participants attributed more hostile intent to their peers who rejected them, and this perceived intent subsequently led to more aggressive behavior against the peers [17^{**}].

Ostracized individuals may engage in aggression because they become recruited by violent groups. Research has shown that ostracized individuals, who are motivated to be liked and included, are susceptible to social influence. Specifically, ostracized or marginalized individuals are more likely to conform with a norm [18], comply with a request [19], and obey an order from an authority figure [20]. This susceptibility to social influence renders ostracized individuals likely targets of recruitment of extreme groups such as terrorists and cults [21,22]. This theorizing has received initial empirical evidence. In a recently published study, members who did not feel they fit in with a group indicated they would engage in aggression on behalf of their group when they believed this would help them fit in [23].

Although the ostracism–aggression link is well-established, other studies demonstrate that ostracism may increase pro-social behaviors (see Ref. [24] for a review). Despite the fact that the empirical literature has yet to provide a clear answer, theorists have tried to reconcile

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