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When justice surrenders: The effect of just-world beliefs on aggression following ostracism ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- General just-world beliefs (GJWB) influence aggression after ostracism.
- Ostracized people with weak GJWB behave more aggressively.
- Perceived deservingness mediates the effect of GJWB onaggression after ostracism.

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ABSTRACT

The present research examined the influence of general just-world beliefs on aggression following ostracism. The findings provided converging support for the hypothesis that people with weak general just-world beliefs, either measured (Studies 1 and 4) or primed (Studies 2 and 3), would behave more aggressively following ostracism than people with strong general just-world beliefs. Furthermore, perceived deservingness (Study 3) or attribution (Study 4) mediated the relationship between general just-world beliefs and aggression following ostracism. These findings highlight the significance of general just-world beliefs in understanding the coping responses to negative interpersonal experiences. The implications are discussed.

Introduction

People have a fundamental need to maintain positive and sustainable social relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Ostracism[1], which refers to being excluded and rejected, thwarts such a fundamental need for belonging (see Williams, 2007, 2009 for reviews). The literature has uncovered various detrimental consequences of ostracism. In particular, ostracism-related forms of relational devaluations can lead to aggression (e.g. Dewall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). More recently, researchers have started to examine how motivational and situational factors interact with ostracism to predict aggression (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006; Williams, 2007, 2009). However, few studies have examined how beliefs, which are central to the way in which people package their experiences (Dweck, 2008), moderate the effect of ostracism on aggression.

Given that beliefs are closely linked to behaviors (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), it is reasonable to expect that one's beliefs may help us understand when and why ostracism increases aggressive behavior. In particular, we focused on general just-world beliefs, which are the beliefs that we live in a just world where people deserve what they get and get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). We examined whether general just-world beliefs would moderate the effect of ostracism on aggressive behavior.

Strong general just-world beliefs not only help people cope with stressful situations (Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994), but also inhibit antisocial urges in situations that involve conflicts (Nesbit, Blankenship, & Murray, 2012). Therefore, we predicted that strong general just-world beliefs would weaken the effect of ostracism on aggression. Furthermore, we explored a mechanism for the relationship between just-world beliefs and aggression following ostracism. People with strong just-world beliefs, but not people with weak just-world beliefs, tend to believe that victims deserve misfortunes and negative experiences (see Dalbert, 2009; Furnham, 2003; Hafer & Bègue, 2005 for reviews). Thus, relative to people with strong general just-world beliefs, people with weak general just-world beliefs may be more likely to believe that they do not deserve ostracism, and hence behave more aggressively. Specifically, we predicted that perceived deservingness (or attribution)

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[1] Following the recommendation by Williams (2007), the terms "ostracism," "social exclusion," "social rejection" are largely treated as synonyms and interchangeable in this article.

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would mediate the relationship between general just-world beliefs and aggression following ostracism.

The effect of ostracism on aggression

By definition, aggressive behavior refers to an action with the intention to harm others, who are motivated to avoid the harm (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bushman & Huesmann, 2010). Ostracism may increase the desires to harm and hurt others. For example, a systematic analysis of the cases of school shootings demonstrated that most perpetrators had experienced ostracism and bullying from peers (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003; but see also Weatherby, Strachila, & Mcmahon, 2010 for a counterargument). Moreover, a remarkable amount of experimental studies in laboratory settings have demonstrated that ostracism increases various forms of aggressive behaviors. For example, compared to included or control participants, ostracized participants were more likely to hurt another person by allocating more spicy hot sauce, blasting louder aversive white noise for longer periods of time, giving more negative job evaluations, and assigning longer exposure to painful cold water (e.g., Aydin, Fischer, & Frey, 2010; Chen, Dewall, Poon, & Chen, 2012; Dewall et al., 2009; Twenge et al., 2001; see also Leary et al., 2006 for a review). However, it should be noted that ostracized people would not always behave aggressively, and they can sometime be very pro-social (e.g. Maner, Dewall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007).

The literature has identified some situational and motivational factors, which may weaken the effect of ostracism on aggression (see Leary et al., 2006; Williams, 2007, 2009 for reviews). For example, people who have been ostracized demonstrated a decreased level of aggression after their feelings of belonging were restored by recalling past social activities (Twenge et al., 2007) or experiencing mild social acceptance from others (Dewall, Twenge, Bushman, Im, & Williams, 2010). Furthermore, ostracized participants whose feelings of control were restored behaved less aggressively than those whose feelings of control were further deprived (Warburton et al., 2006).

The appraisal of the experience of ostracism can also influence an individual's corresponding responses. For instance, Wesselmann, Butler, Williams, and Pickett (2010) found that ostracized people would behave more aggressively when the ostracism experience was unexpected than when it was expected. Also, Chow, Tiedens, and Govan (2008) found that ostracized individuals who were given an unfair reason for their ostracism experience felt angrier and behaved more antisocially than those who were given a fair reason. Furthermore, ostracized people were more likely to retaliate against the source of ostracism when the ostracism experience was framed as representing financial losses than when it was framed as representing financial gains (Van Beest & Williams, 2006).

Most relevant to the current investigation, past research has suggested that specific beliefs may moderate the relationship between ostracism and aggression. For example, ostracized participants with destiny beliefs that relationships were fixed and unchangeable behaved more aggressively than ostracized participants with growth beliefs that relationships were changeable through effort (Chen et al., 2012). Moreover, in a simulated game of Russian roulette (Cyberbomb), ostracized people who were first primed with the belief that there is an afterlife behaved less aggressively than ostracized people who were primed with the belief that there is not an afterlife (Van Beest, Williams, & Van Dijk, 2011). The researchers explained the results by suggesting that a belief in the existence of an afterlife ensured feelings of belonging because it implied permanent companionship and acceptance from potential sources of affiliation such as family and friends.

Extending past research on how specific beliefs about relationship (Chen et al., 2012) and afterlife (Van Beest et al., 2011) influenced the effect of ostracism on aggression, the current investigation further examined whether general beliefs that the world is just would influence the relationship between ostracism and aggression. In the next section, we briefly review evidence regarding the general adaptive functions of general just-world beliefs. Then, we discuss the potential interactive relationship between general just-world beliefs, ostracism, and aggressive behavior.

Just-world beliefs, ostracism, and aggression

People need to believe that they live in a just world (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Lerner & Simmons, 1966); this is critical for people to be able to maintain their well-being and to navigate events in their social world. Research on just-world beliefs has proliferated since the 1960s. More recently, the literature has differentiated general and personal just-world beliefs. Specifically, general just-world beliefs refer to the beliefs that the world is generally fair; whereas personal just-world beliefs refer to the beliefs that one's life events are fair (Dalbert, 1999, 2009). The present research examines the role of general just-world beliefs on the effect of ostracism on aggression.

Why might strong just-world believers behave less aggressively following ostracism than weak just-world believers? When just-world beliefs are threatened, people usually experience discomfort and engage in defensive behavior (see Dalbert, 2009; Furnham, 2003; Hafer & Bègue, 2005 for reviews). For instance, people react angrily when they receive unfair treatment (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Solomon, 1990). Similarly, classroom procedural justice is negatively correlated with aggressive tendency toward the instructor (Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004).

General just-world beliefs are adaptive because they help people cope with negative and stressful events. For example, Hafer and Olson (1989) found that people with strong general just-world beliefs perceived negative outcomes as less unfair and reported less resentment than those with weak general just-world beliefs. When confronted with a stressful laboratory task, people with strong general just-world beliefs reported a lower level of stress and performed better than people with weak general just-world beliefs (Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994). Moreover, McParland and Knusson (2010) found that general just-world beliefs can buffer the psychological distress experienced by elderly people with chronic pain.

The literature has further shown that general just-world beliefs are negatively related to antisocial responses following frustrations and interpersonal conflicts. For example, general just-world beliefs were negatively correlated with an array of antisocial responses, such as problematic expressions of anger, history of aggressive driving behavior, and delinquency (Hafer, 2000; Nesbit et al., 2012). In addition, Dalbert (2002) found that participants with strong general just-world beliefs, compared to those with weak general just-world beliefs, reported less feelings of anger (Study 2) and were better able to control their feelings of anger when describing an anger-provoking situation (Study 1). Moreover, relative to those with weak general just-world beliefs, people with strong general just-world beliefs have lower levels of hostile cognition when experiencing potentially injustice situations. In particular, drivers with strong general just-world beliefs, compared to drivers with weak general just-world beliefs, have fewer hostile/angry thoughts and lower aggressive urges when they experience justice violation in a driving context (Nesbit et al., 2012).

It should be noted that past studies that examine the relationship between general just-world beliefs and antisocial tendency usually do not consider the role of personal just-world beliefs (e.g. Nesbit et al., 2012). The relationship between general just-world beliefs and antisocial urges may be weakened or even become positive when personal just-world beliefs are controlled (e.g. Sutton & Winnard, 2007). The role of personal just-world beliefs on the ostracism-aggression link is beyond the scope of the current investigation. However, correlational research also suggests that personal just-world beliefs may be negatively related to antisocial responses to frustrations and interpersonal conflicts. For instance, Dalbert (2002) found that participants with strong personal just-world