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FlashReport

“I Feel Your Pain”: The effects of observing ostracism on the ostracism detection system

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ABSTRACT

Ostracism—being ignored and excluded—is a painful experience with negative psychological consequences. Social psychologists (Kerr & Levine, 2008; Spoor & Williams, 2007) argue humans have an evolved system for automatically detecting cues of ostracism and exclusion. Detection elicits pain and threats to fundamental needs. We hypothesize simply observing ostracism will cause negative affect and need threat in the observer. Participants observed a three-player Cyberball game; a target player was included or ostracized, and participants were either instructed to take the perspective of this player or given no such instructions. Participants observing ostracism reported negative affect and need threat. Our results indicate that ostracism detection is even more powerful than previously suggested, because vicariously, we feel the pain of others' ostracism as our own.

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Introduction

Ostracism, being ignored and excluded (Williams, 2001, 2009), is a painful phenomenon that individuals experience on a daily basis (Nezlek, Wheeler, Williams, & Govan, 2004). Many ostracism episodes appear trivial, but research suggests that any episode detected as ostracism is distressing (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Williams, 2007). For example, failing to receive the nod of recognition in an elevator from strangers deflates mood momentarily (Zuckerman, Miserandino, & Bernieri, 1983), and being left out of a computer ball toss game induces negative affect and perceptions of less belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004).

Current theories (Kerr & Levine, 2008; Spoor & Williams, 2007) argue that humans are equipped with an ostracism detection system that is quick and crude. At the slightest cue of ostracism, a pain alarm directs the individual's attention to the source and context of the ostracism, so that pre-emptive coping can forestall or avoid permanent expulsion. Such a system is necessarily crude in that it is biased in favor of over-detection (i.e., “detect first; ask questions later”; see error management theory, Haselton & Buss, 2000). Thus, individuals feel the pain of ostracism even when they are being ostracized by a computer (Zadro et al., 2004), despised others (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007), or are benefited financially by ostracism (van Beest & Williams, 2006).

Little research has examined the effects on individuals observing another person experience ostracism. We often see others being ostracized in various social contexts. If detection and response to ostracism cues are as quick and crude as the detection system theories argue, then perhaps observing another person being ostracized is sufficient to cause personal distress to observers. This distress should move beyond feeling sadness or guilt for observing the target suffering ostracism (cf. *negative state relief model*; Cialdini et al., 1987). Because this distress comes from the observer's detection system, observers of ostracism should have an empathetic response and experience similar effects as the target experiencing ostracism. Empathy involves taking another person's perspective emotionally and cognitively (Feshback, 1975). Traditional conceptions of empathy suggest more conscious processes; we argue the ostracism detection system provides a crude automatic empathic response (cf. Decety & Jackson, 2004). This response could be supplemented with a controlled empathic response if observers are consciously trying to take the perspective of the ostracized target. We argue observers who are consciously identifying with an ostracized target should feel the effects more intensely than observers who are not consciously identifying with the target.

The current research

We examined whether an individual observing ostracism would not only recognize the negative effects on the individual being ostracized, but also feel similar effects on him or herself. We hypothesized that, compared to watching a normative game of ball toss, participants observing ostracism within the game will: (1) recognize the negative effects of ostracism on others and report

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lower need satisfaction for the target of ostracism than participants who observed the target's inclusion, (2) self-report lower levels of need satisfaction, and (3) that their personal distress be moderated by conscious perspective-taking, such that if they are encouraged to take the perspective of a target of ostracism, their need threat would be greater.

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course. Participants ($N = 86$; 39 males, 47 females) volunteered for the study to earn course credit. Four participants were removed because of computer problems or reporting they had skipped over directions.

Procedure and design

Participants were seated in individual cubicles and were informed they would be observing an online ball-tossing game called Cyberball (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). Participants were told Cyberball involved three other people playing over the researchers' network (these players were virtual confederates). Unlike the traditional Cyberball paradigm, this game replaced the hand at the bottom of the screen with a full-bodied figure (Wirth & Williams, 2009). Participants were asked to exercise mental visualization skills while observing the game; they were to imagine the context of the game and what the other players were like. Participants were told the players' performance was unimportant except to provide participants with a context to visualize mentally. The game involved 30 throws and lasted approximately 5 min. Participants were randomly assigned to a game in a 2 (game type: ostracism vs. inclusion) \times 2 (perspective taking: perspective taking vs. no perspective taking) between-S design. In the inclusion condition, participants watched a game in which all three Cyberball players included each other equally (approximately 33% of the time). In the ostracism conditions, participants observed a game in which one of the Cyberball players (always the player closest to the participant) was tossed to twice by the other two players, and then never thrown to again during the game. Participants in the perspective taking conditions read additional instructions to take the perspective of Player 2 in the Cyberball game. They were asked to "imagine being in their shoes" while observing the game. Participants assigned the two non-perspective taking conditions were not given these additional instructions.

After Cyberball, participants were asked questions about the game, including manipulation checks and the dependent measures. The main dependent measure was need satisfaction measured using the Four Basic Needs questionnaire ($\alpha_s \geq .88$; Zadro et al., 2004). This measure indexes participants' mood and levels of need satisfaction for four categories of human needs diminished by ostracism: belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence, and control. Each question was presented on a 5-point scale (1 = does not describe me well, to 5 = describes me very well). Participants first answered each of these questions involving how they felt while watching the game. Participants then answered the basic needs questions based on how they thought the target player felt during the game ($\alpha_s \geq .93$). They were then thanked, debriefed, and excused.

Results

Manipulation checks

Participants correctly perceived which game type they were observing. Participants who observed ostracism perceived the tar-

get player as feeling more ignored and excluded ($M_s > 4.00$, $SD_s < .55$) than participants who viewed the target player being included ($M_s < 2.60$, $SD_s < 1.45$), $t_s < -9.50$, $p_s < .01$, $d_s > 2.00$.

Manipulation effects on need satisfaction and mood

Need satisfaction levels for both the target player and the participants were created by averaging the need scale items together. Lower scores indicated lower need satisfaction. We analyzed the effects of our manipulations on perceptions of target need satisfaction/mood, and participant need satisfaction/mood using a 2 (game type: inclusion/ostracism) \times 2 (perspective taking: instructions/no instructions) ANOVA.

Supporting our hypothesis that participants who observed ostracism would recognize the distress of ostracism on another individual who was experiencing ostracism, we found a significant main effect for game type: participants who observed ostracism perceived the target player as having lower overall need satisfaction than participants who observed an inclusion game, $F(1, 82) = 85.62$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .51$ (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). There was no significant main effect of or interaction with perspective taking, $F_s < 2.70$, $p_s > .11$, partial $\eta^2 < .04$.

Supporting our hypothesis that observing another person being ostracized would be powerful enough to cause personal distress for the observer, we found a significant main effect for game type: participants who observed an ostracism game reported lower overall need satisfaction than participants who observed an inclusion game, $F(1, 82) = 42.39$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .34$ (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Participants' mood levels showed the same pattern of results: participants who observed an ostracism game reported lower overall positive mood than participants who observed an inclusion game, $F(1, 82) = 44.18$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .35$. There was no main effect for perspective-taking on need level or moods, $F_s < .65$, $p_s > .40$, partial $\eta^2_s < .01$.

Finally, supporting our hypothesis that the distress of ostracism on the observers would be moderated by conscious perspective taking, we found a significant interaction of game type and perspective taking, $F(1, 82) = 9.15$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$ (see Fig. 1). Results indicate our perspective-taking manipulation moderated the effects of observing ostracism (or inclusion) on the participants' levels need satisfaction: participants felt even worse when instructed to take the perspective of an ostracized player, $t(39) = 1.72$, $p = .09$, $d = .54$, than when not given these instructions. Participants instructed to take the perspective of an included player received a boost in need satisfaction, $t(43) = -2.60$, $p = .01$, $d = .77$. Participants' mood levels showed a similar pattern of results: there was a significant interaction of game type and perspective taking, $F(1, 82) = 4.58$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. Encouraging

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for mean levels of need satisfaction for self and target.

	No instructions	Instructions	Overall
<i>Inclusion</i>			
Participant needs	2.86 (.71)	3.39 (.64)	3.13 (.72)
Participant moods	3.48 (.74)	3.98 (.62)	3.74 (.72)
Target needs	2.87 (.94)	3.24 (1.05)	3.06 (1.00)
<i>Ostracism</i>			
Participant needs	2.34 (.72)	1.95 (.73)	2.16 (.74)
Participant moods	2.72 (.80)	2.49 (.97)	2.62 (.88)
Target needs	1.33 (.47)	1.54 (.59)	1.43 (.54)
<i>Overall</i>			
Participant needs	2.60 (.76)	2.74 (.99)	2.67 (.87)
Participant moods	3.10 (.85)	3.31 (1.09)	3.20 (.97)
Target needs	2.10 (1.07)	2.47 (1.22)	2.28 (1.15)

Note. The numbers in each cell represents means and standard deviations in parentheses.

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