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To cite this article: James H. Wirth & Eric D. Wesselmann (2018) Investigating how ostracizing others affects one’s self-concept, Self and Identity, 17:4, 394-406, DOI: 10.1080/15298868.2017.1385519

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2017.1385519

Published online: 13 May 2018.
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ABSTRACT
Social relationships are connected with an individual's self-concept, so events that influence one's relationships subsequently influence one's self-concept. Ostracism, being excluded and ignored, is an aversive experience involving both a target (the one being ostracized) and source (the one ostracizing). We will discuss previous limitations of source paradigms and how we addressed them when developing our paradigms. We will also highlight current source research, from a co-edited special issue, and how this research is relevant to an individual's self-concept. Lastly, we will suggest how cognitive dissonance work can ground source research within a larger theoretical framework and inspire future research. We consider how one's self-concept influences cognitive dissonance related to knowingly harming others through ostracism.

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Social category affiliations are important components of individuals’ self-concept (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) and, therefore, affiliations can influence how individuals respond to being ostracized. For example, whether or not the ostracizers are members of one’s ingroup can influence the reflexive (immediate) negative effects (Bernstein, Sacco, Young, Hugenberg, & Cook, 2010; but see Goodwin, Williams, & Carter-Sowell, 2010; Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007; Wirth & Williams, 2009). Social categories can also influence the reflective (delayed) response to ostracism: Individuals may take longer to recover if they attribute their ostracism to a permanent group membership (e.g., gender) rather than a temporarily assigned group membership (Wirth & Williams, 2009).

Beyond basic social category affiliations, cross-cultural differences may also influence the effects of ostracism (Uskul & Over, 2017). Individuals from collectivistic cultures, for example, place a greater emphasis on collective goals, social interdependence, and a mutual obligation to each other (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Individualistic cultures, however, place a greater value on achieving personal goals, have less social interdependence, and emphasize autonomy. Researchers examining cross-cultural differences on ostracism’s outcomes demonstrated that individuals from collectivist cultures (Turkey, China, India) were not as harmed by ostracism compared with individuals from individualist cultures (Germany, the USA). For instance, German participants showed an increased heart rate following ostracism, whereas Chinese participants did not (Pfundmair et al., 2015). Additionally, recovery took longer for individualistic participants (German and Austrian) compared to collectivistic participants (Chinese), even though both groups of participants were reincluded in a subsequent group interaction (Pfundmair, Graupmann, Du, Frey, & Aydin, 2014).

**Studying the sources of ostracism**

Ostracism is a two-sided experience, involving at least one person being ostracized, the target, and at least one person doing the ostracism, the source. The negative effects of ostracism on the targets’ self-concept are well-established (Wesselmann et al., 2016; Williams & Nida, 2011), but how using ostracism influences the sources’ self-concept is less clear. Understanding how ostracism affects the self is an equally weighty area of research given that most people report being a source at least once in their lives, some on a daily basis (Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler, & Williams, 2015; Williams, 2001). Some individuals even experience both sides of the coin—they experience ostracism and then subsequently use it on others, caught in a spiral that can become difficult to escape (Poulsen & Carmon, 2015; Williams, 2001). Individuals can make others feel ostracized using indirect ways, often unintentionally. Individuals can make others feel ostracized by using gender-exclusive language (e.g., “he” rather than “he or she”; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011), temporarily forgetting someone’s name (King & Geise, 2011), using acronyms others are not familiar with (Hales, Rector, & Williams, 2016), breaking the flow of a conversation with an uncomfortable silence (Koudenburg, Postmes, & Gordijn, 2011), providing insufficient eye contact (Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater, & Williams, 2012; Wirth et al., 2010), or by leaving someone out of when sharing information (Jones, Carter-Sowell, Kelly, & Williams, 2009).

There are several ways to study the psychological causes and effects of becoming a source. Early research on sources utilized self-reports (e.g., Faulkner, Williams, Sherman, & Williams, 1997; Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco, & Baumeister, 2001; Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998). Researchers also created *in vivo* laboratory experiments to obtain increased internal validity;
these paradigms involved either explicitly instructing participants to ostracize a target (e.g., Williams, Bernieri, Faulkner, Gada-Jain, & Grahe, 2000; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2005) or simply encouraging participants to ostracize another person (Ciarocco, Sommer, & Baumeister, 2001).

The self-report and in vivo paradigms provided starting points for source research, yet they are not without limitations (Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014). Specifically, asking participants to recall instances of ostracizing others suffers from a lack of standardization (varied idiosyncratic aspects of participants’ chosen instances) and general biases and flaws associated with memory (e.g., Schwarz, Groves, & Schuman, 1998). In terms of the extant laboratory studies that induced ostracism, these findings likely have limited generalizability. There are many reasons to ostracize someone which do not necessarily involve compliance (or obedience) to an experimenter (Nezlek et al., 2015; Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014).

When do individuals choose to ostracize?

We focused our research over the past few years on studying situations in which people actively choose to ostracize others—autonomous ostracism. Individuals may choose to ostracize others of their own volition for many reasons (Williams, 2001), but we focused on situations in which one uses ostracism punitively—to motivate the target to change undesirable, harmful, or otherwise burdensome behaviors (Williams, 1997). We chose to focus on punitive motives because research on ostracism among tribal humans and non-human social animals suggests one of the primary functions of ostracism in groups is to ensure that all members contribute to group goals; members that could not (or would not) contribute to the collective risked being ostracized punitively as a way to ensure group harmony and survival (Gruter & Masters, 1986; Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Thus, ostracism can serve as a social influence tactic that can both encourage group members to work towards the group’s goal and ultimately protect the group from wayward members (Williams, 2009).

To examine punitive ostracism, we first needed to establish a paradigm in which participants would be motivated to ostracize willingly and without explicit instructions or requests, limitations in previous source paradigms (Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014). We adapted Cyberball (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000), a computer-based paradigm in which participants believed they were playing with other individuals (actually computer agents) over the Internet. To demonstrate punitive ostracism, we programmed the target player to either take 4- (normal speed) or 16-s (slow speed) between each throw. We gave no explicit instructions on how to throw the ball to the other players or made any requests. Participants perceived a slow player as more burdensome than a normal speed player and ostracized the slow player regardless of the other group members’ behavior toward the target (Wesselmann, Wirth, Pryor, Reeder, & Williams, 2013; see also Wesselmann, Williams, & Wirth, 2014; Wesselmann, Wirth, Pryor, Reeder, & Williams, 2015).

Researchers established other ways of studying punitive ostracism. For instance, the first author (Wirth, Bernstein, & LeRoy, 2015) developed an additional group interaction paradigm called Atimia (Wirth, Turchan, Zimmerman, & Bernstein, 2014), in which participants take turns with two computer-controlled agents solving remote associate word items (i.e., finding a common word that links three disparate words together). The researchers found participants were more likely to perceive an under-performing player as burdensome and ostracize the player, compared to a player performing equally as well as the group. Researchers further
found participants ostracized individuals autonomously who taxed participants’ cognitive resources by being obnoxious (labeled as motivated ostracism; Gooley, Zadro, Williams, Svetieva, & Gonsalkorale, 2015) or were dispositionally disagreeable (Hales et al., 2016).

Forging new directions for understanding the sources of ostracism

Researchers now have an established toolbox of correlational and experimental paradigms to study the different contexts that motivate individuals to ostracize others. The time has come to advance this research area by utilizing these diverse methods to test novel questions derived from various theoretical perspectives (e.g., Grahe, 2015; Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014). To aid in the advancements of research on sources of ostracism, we (Wesselmann & Wirth, 2015) co-edited a special issue of The Journal of Social Psychology (Volume 155, Number 5), focused on collecting a representation of the theoretically and methodologically diverse research on sources. We also strove to create a platform for which researchers could share materials and inspire future collaborative projects focused on sources (Wesselmann, Wirth, & Grahe, 2015; https://osf.io/env5w/). We will now summarize the findings of these articles, highlighting connections to theory and research on the self.

Sources’ psychological outcomes

Several of the articles highlighted the impact of being a source on one’s psychological outcomes—specifically psychological need satisfaction (i.e., belonging, control, meaningful existence, and self-esteem). Gooley et al. (2015) conducted a laboratory study and found that sources, who were either encouraged to ostracize or were motivated (i.e., motivated ostracism), experienced a boost in their feelings of control compared to participants who were socially included or ostracized themselves during Cyberball. Nezlek et al. (2015) used an event-contingent diary approach and also found that sources generally reported increased feelings of control, but they also experienced decreases in belonging. These studies all utilized Williams’ (2009) measure of need satisfaction common to ostracism research. Legate, DeHaan, and Ryan (2015) however, used a different theoretical model of psychological need satisfaction, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and found sources instructed to ostracize felt less satisfaction of their autonomy and relatedness needs than those who equally included all group members in a conversation. Compared to Williams’ (2009) model, autonomy is conceptually similar to control and relatedness to belonging. Thus, these three studies suggest that using ostracism (whether at an experimenter’s request or autonomously) threatens a source’s feelings of agency and social connection, both of which influence an individuals’ overall sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

Sources’ compensatory responses

Researchers in the special issue also identified a sources’ tendency for subsequent prosocial responses towards the target. Gooley et al., (2015) found that sources encouraged to ostracize reported feeling more guilt and shame than motivated sources. Guilt and shame are both self-focused moral emotions, which are often evoked when people recognize they have violated their moral standards (Janoff-Bulman, 2012; Tangney, 2003); these moral standards often serve as core components of individual’s self-concepts (Monin & Jordan, 2009; Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009). Further, these moral emotions often motivate people to make restitution in order to reestablish their perceived morality (Janoff-Bulman, 2012;
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Tangney, 2003). This moral standards perspective helps contextualize why sources encouraged to ostracize (relative to motivated sources) behaved more prosocially by giving more of a desired treat to one of the other confederates in the experiment (Gooley et al., 2015).

Other experiments provided converging evidence; sources instructed to ostracize reported their compensatory behavior was motivated by atonement (Legate et al., 2015), especially when the ostracism occurred without sufficient justification (Van Tongeren, Root Luna, & VanOyen Witvliet, 2015). Additionally, sources who only had little knowledge about the target were more likely to compensate the target afterwards than sources who had more knowledge about the target; less knowledge about a target led sources to feel less justification for ostracizing the target (Van Tongeren et al., 2015). Lastly, participants who recalled an autobiographical event in which they were a source of ostracism (as opposed to a source of acceptance) showed a reduced tendency to engage in victim blaming when reading a hypothetical scenario about a person who was being bullied (Poon & Chen, 2015). The authors of these papers each offered different explanations for the mechanisms behind sources’ prosocial behaviors after engaging in ostracism, but all converged on a general theme of the sources attempting to make amends for behaving in a way that violated some aspect of their moral self-concept.

Future directions: Implications for being a source of ostracism on one’s self-concept

When individuals choose to ostracize another person, they likely know that this behavior will hurt that person. Most people experienced ostracism at least once in their lives (Williams, 2001) and even just watching someone be ostracized is enough to know the harm that is caused (for review see Wesselmann, Williams, & Hales, 2013). Thus, sources intentionally ostracizing others have to accept that they are purposely inflicting pain on another person; this knowledge may account for the psychological distress found in some of the source research (e.g., Ciarocco et al., 2001; Gooley et al., 2015; Legate, DeHaan, Weinstein, & Ryan, 2013; Legate et al., 2015). However, this distress does not seem to occur when sources have sufficient justification (Gooley et al., 2015; Sommer & Yoon, 2013; Van Tongeren et al., 2015). What does this distress (or lack thereof) tell us about how sources reconcile their ostracizing actions knowing that they are purposely hurting someone else? How can these findings be embedded within a larger theoretical framework that will afford avenues for future research?

Cognitive dissonance following becoming a source of ostracism

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962) provides a larger theoretical framework for future research to investigate the distress that sources experience. Cognitive dissonance is the unpleasant experience that occurs when someone behaves in a way that conflicts with their attitudes or self-concept. Dissonance represents a threat to one’s need for psychological coherence in their self-concept (Festinger, 1962; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985; Swann & Bosson, 2010). Individuals are subsequently motivated to reduce their dissonance either through changing one’s behaviors or through changing their self-relevant attitudes (Festinger, 1962). Individuals may need to compensate by behaving morally in some other domain in order to address their self-inconsistency (Swann & Hill, 1982; Swann, Wenzlaff, & Tafarodi, 1992). This theoretical perspective is consistent with research we discussed previously which demonstrated sources instructed or encourage to
ostracize respond more prosocially (Gooley et al., 2015; Legate et al., 2015; Van Tongeren et al., 2015) and are less likely to blame a victim of school bullying in a scenario (Poon & Chen, 2015) compared to punitively motivated sources or individuals who include a target.

When someone harms another person by ostracizing them, they likely consider if this action aligns with their self-concept. This perspective may help researchers understand the negative psychological effects sources can experience. For example, studies of sources either asked or encouraged to ostracize demonstrate that these individuals experience negative self-focused emotions (Gooley et al., 2015), decreases in self-regulatory resources (Ciarocco et al., 2001; Sommer & Yoon, 2013), and perceive themselves as less human (Bastian et al., 2013). Within the perspective of cognitive dissonance theory, these participants likely experienced dissonance and a general threat to their self-concepts because they had to wrestle with hurting someone simply because they were complying with an experimenter’s request (or obeying in certain paradigms; Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014). When provided sufficient justification (i.e., the target was interpersonally unpleasant), the sources did not experience these negative outcomes (Gooley et al., 2015; Sommer & Yoon, 2013); in this case, sources could have easily reduced the dissonance by convincing themselves that they were teaching the target a lesson (e.g., punitive ostracism; Wesselmann, Wirth et al., 2013). Sources could also reduce dissonance by convincing themselves that the ostracism is not too painful for the target (e.g., Brock & Buss, 1962); the extant source studies do not directly assess the perceived pain the targets experience, but it is a reasonable hypothesis for future research.

Sources of ostracism may also reduce dissonance by convincing themselves that the target deserved the ostracism, even if the target could not change his or her behavior. Sources may simply engage in victim-blaming (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978) as post hoc rationalizations for their behavior. For example, researchers (Wesselmann et al., 2014) found that individuals punitively ostracized a burdensome group member regardless of whether or not that member could control being burdensome. The researchers manipulated whether or not participants played with a slow (i.e., burdensome) player during Cyberball and provided attributional information for the player’s speed (i.e., good or poor Internet connection). Even though most participants correctly identified the target’s Internet connection status, participants ostracized a slow player regardless. Thus, they purposely ostracized someone whom presumably had no control over being burdensome. Interestingly, several participants described the target using terms that could be interpreted as victim-blaming, such as “lazy,” “indecisive,” and “stupid” (Wesselmann et al., 2014). If any participants experienced dissonance for ostracizing someone for something they could not control, victim-blaming would allow an external attribution to help participants cope (e.g., “It’s not me, it’s them!”). This study utilized an autonomous ostracism source paradigm; it is unclear if victim-blaming would also occur if sources were instructed or asked to ostracize, but it is a reasonable hypothesis that participants in these paradigms may blame the target, if given the opportunity, in order to reduce any dissonance and maintain consistency in their self-concept.

**Resolving cognitive dissonance and becoming a source of ostracism**

Can cognitive dissonance theory also offer potential explanations for why someone might become a source of ostracism? Dissonance causes psychological discomfort (Elliot & Devine, 1994) and previous research demonstrates that reducing dissonance can help mitigate
negative mood (Jonas, Graupmann, & Frey, 2006) and the subjective experience of physical pain (Zimbardo, Cohen, Weisenberg, Dworkin, & Firestone, 1966). Thus, if interacting with another person is somehow perceived as painful, this pain may serve sufficient justification for ostracizing someone without experiencing much dissonance. Research conducted by the first author (Okdie & Wirth, 2017; Wirth, LeRoy, & Bernstein, 2017) demonstrated that simply interacting with burdensome group members can elicit feelings of pain; this pain may then motivate punitive ostracism. Pain (whether physical or mental) is a response mechanism that communicates to an individual that there is a threat (either physical or social) to which he or she needs to pay attention to and avoid (Dickerson, Gruenewald, & Kemeny, 2009; Eccleston & Crombez, 1999; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1989). Wirth and colleagues found participants’ self-reported pain partially explained the relationship between their perception of the target’s burdensomeness and their tendency to ostracize the target, even when accounting for negative affect and general dislike of the target. It seems the experience of pain when interacting with a burdensome target may be sufficient justification for reducing any dissonance a source may experience afterwards.

One’s social identity may also influence when, how, and why a source uses ostracism on others. Individuals may use punitive ostracism on a burdensome group member, but the specific goal for ostracism may be different depending upon the individuals’ self-concept and how it would influence any cognitive dissonance. Individuals who emphasize an individualistic (or independent) self-concept often focus on defining themselves by aspects that make them unique, whereas individuals with a collectivistic (or interdependent) self-concept focus on the mutual interdependence they have with others (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011; Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994; Triandis, 1995). Those who are higher in collectivism may favor a rehabilitative use of ostracism as a way to strengthen the group for all members, whereas those who are higher in individualism may be less concerned about rehabilitating a group member. Alternatively, it is possible that collectivists may use ostracism to focus on protecting the group entity from the burdensome member and individualists may focus primarily on protecting themselves. Considering the role of cognitive dissonance for both scenarios, individuals high in collectivism may use ostracism to rehabilitate because they can justify the ostracism as a form of improving the target, whereas those high in individualism may not feel cognitive dissonance due to ostracizing because the source is only focused on his or her own well-being.

Additionally, individuals' social identity often consist of multiple group identities (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). These group-based identities help individuals distinguish who they are similar to and can connect with, as well as provide clear boundaries to distinguish their in-group from other groups they consider outsiders (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Individuals have a strong in-group bias—they favor their own in-group over an out-group member (e.g., Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). This in-group love can transform into out-group hate when various conditions are present, such as when the out-group is perceived as a threat (Brewer, 1999). Individuals who are burdensome represent a threat to the group’s well-being (Gruter & Masters, 1986). These threats are often tangible, such as when out-group members are perceived as competition for jobs, social status, economic resources (Esses, Brochu, & Dickson, 2012; Morrison, Fast, & Ybarra, 2009; Quillian, 1995), or even to the safety of one’s in-group (e.g., perceived threat of increased crime or terrorism; Canetti-Nisim, Halperin, Sharvit, & Hobfoll, 2009; Esses, Dovidio, & Hodson, 2002; Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013; Van de Vyver,
Houston, Abrams, & Vasiljevic, 2016). These threats may also be symbolic, such as when the presence of out-groups present a perceived threat to one’s worldview (Cook, Cohen, & Solomon, 2015; Esses et al., 2012; Goplen & Plant, 2015; Morrison, Plaut, & Ybarra, 2010). Given the strong in-group bias, especially when an individual is a threat, sources may experience reduced levels of cognitive dissonance (or perhaps none at all) in response to ostracizing an out-group member.

Additionally, perceiving someone as an out-group member may make it easier on sources asked or encouraged to ostracize—potentially because of less dissonance in response to the request to ostracize an out-group member. In one study, sources asked to ostracize a socially unpleasant target not only showed less negative outcomes than sources who ostracized a pleasant target, but they experienced more positive outcomes than those sources induced to include an unpleasant target (Sommer & Yoon, 2013). This study did not manipulate group identity per se, but given that individuals often prefer to avoid associating with others who are dispositionally unpleasant (Hales et al., 2016) or otherwise stigmatized (Goffman, 1963; Kurzban & Leary, 2001) it is reasonable to hypothesize that being induced to ostracize (or include) someone from a despised out-group would have similar effects. Sources may also be motivated to ostracize an out-group member because the source will perceive an out-group member as more inclined to be a poor exchange partner (Kurzban & Leary, 2001). This finding may mean sources are willing to experience the unpleasantness associated with cognitive dissonance to ward of burdensome out-group members.

One’s social identity may reduce or remove any cognitive dissonance that might be evoked by ostracizing a burdensome out-group member. It is likely that perceiving an out-group member as burdensome (whether the member/group provides a tangible burden or simply provides a symbolic threat) would motivate a source to use punitive ostracism as a way to protect themselves and their in-group from the perceived burden of the out-group. Individuals may also choose to use ostracism defensively as a pre-emptive measure if they anticipate being ostracized or otherwise discriminated against by an out-group member (Williams, 2001). Lastly, individuals may ostracize a burdensome out-group member to a greater extent than an in-group member because burden provides the source with justification other than prejudice for discriminating against the target, allowing the sources to save face (i.e., “I ostracized them because they are burdensome, not because they belong to Group X;” e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Ultimately, group membership may play an important role in the processes that sources go through in order to reduce dissonance caused by ostracizing a burdensome out-group member compared with an in-group member.

**Note**

1. We used the term ostracism throughout the manuscript given that the majority of the research we discussed used this term. However, some research we referenced may have used the terms rejection or social exclusion, which can have different theoretical and empirical implications (see Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Williams, 2009).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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