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“We’re better friends than ever:” Examining the Paradoxes of Interpersonal Ostracism Messages

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9 **“We’re better friends than ever:” Examining the Paradoxes of Interpersonal**
10 **Ostracism Messages**
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“We’re better friends than ever:” Examining the Paradoxes of Interpersonal Ostracism Messages

Ostracism is an aversive and hurtful experience that can have negative impacts on targets. Despite the overwhelming focus on these deleterious effects of being ostracized, new studies reveal the ways that interpersonal ostracism messages (IOMs) can paradoxically foster positive outcomes such as increasing target’s helping behaviors or pro-social responses. Through a Darkside Communication lens, this exploratory study examined the communication paradoxes of IOM reception to uncover the range of potential benefits and prosocial outcomes of being ostracized. Through a qualitative analysis of interview transcripts, the study found that ostracism can benefit targets relationally by prompting them to start new relationships, end hurtful relationships, or maintain equitable relationships. The study also found that ostracism can foster positive attitudinal changes such as empathy development, ideological and identity changes, and new interaction expectations that improve communication in future interactions. Overall the findings provide further evidence for the positive and pro-social outcomes that IOMs can potentially produce, and for the need for more research on the communication of ostracism.

Keywords: Ostracism, Interpersonal, Communication, Darkside, Paradox

Introduction

People have an inherent need to belong in groups and maintain social connections with others. A wealth of research demonstrates that when people are ostracized from these desired relationships, it is an aversive and hurtful experience (Hartgerink, et al., 2015; Kerr & Levine, 2008). In some cases, ostracism can be so damaging that it can lead targets to self-harm, have suicidal thoughts, or harm others (Albrehi & Pelliccio, 2021; Leary, et al., 2003; Tan, et al., 2025). Despite the overwhelming focus on the deleterious effects of ostracism, other research reveals that after the immediate hurt, interpersonal ostracism messages (IOMs) can paradoxically foster positive outcomes such as increasing helping behaviors (Xu, Huang, & Robinson, 2015), work

engagement (Xu, et al., 2024), or social compensation towards the ostracizing group (Williams & Sommer, 1997). As ostracism is seen as a generally anti-social form of communication, Darkside Communication researchers contend that there are great benefits in studying how such messages can create positive outcomes (i.e. communication paradoxes) (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2009). Therefore, through the theoretical lens of Darkside Communication, this exploratory study examined the communication paradoxes of IOMs to uncover the potential benefits and prosocial outcomes of being ostracized.

Review of literature

Ostracism is commonly defined as the exclusion of an individual or group by an individual or group (Williams & Nida, 2017) and differs from other similar constructs in that it is a form of communication where interactants defy social or cultural norms of acknowledgement, inclusion, or response (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2012). These interpersonal ostracism messages (IOMs) (Pelliccio & Walker, 2021b) come in many forms, such as ignoring someone in a conversation (Williams, 2001), shunning individuals from religious groups (Gruter, 1986), or ghosting someone on a date (Schokkenbroek, et al., 2025). From the message receiver's perspective, an IOM is any unexpected or undesired communication that is perceived as threatening to one's interpersonal inclusion in a desired group or relationship (Pelliccio & Walker, 2021b). Thus, the receiver of the IOM is commonly referred to as the "target" (see Gonsakorale & Williams, 2007; Wesselman, et al., 2023).

Upon recognition of an IOM, the target will have an immediate and acute negative reaction that threatens four psychological needs of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence (Hales et al., 2018; Hartgerink et al., 2015; Williams, 2009). Many studies show that whether a person is ostracized in person, on social media (Wolf et al., 2015), through

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9 text message (Smith & Williams, 2004), or in virtual reality (Kim et al., 2024) they will feel this
10 immediate pain and shock. After this moment they can have further negative effects. For
11 example, ostracism increases the likelihood that people with depression will self-harm (Ding et
12 al., 2022) and that people with substance abuse will relapse (Ali, et al., 2024).
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16 However, other research shows that over time the effects are not always negative. After a
17 period of reflection and coping, targets can potentially respond in positive or pro-social ways
18 (Lin, et al., 2025). For example, when people receive IOMs at work, it can motivate them to
19 engage in more pro-social behaviors to support the team (Balliet & Ferris, 2012; Haldorai et al.,
20 2021), increase helping behaviors (Xu, Huang, & Robinson, 2015), or increase proactive
21 behaviors (Xu et al., 2024). Similarly, other studies show that some people socially compensate
22 after ostracism and will work harder for the ostracizer(s) (Williams & Sommer, 1997; Jamieson
23 et al., 2010). Ostracism can also increase group cooperation (Feinberg et al., 2014), giving
24 behaviors (Kip et al., 2025), and the likelihood that the target will take risks to benefit the group
25 (Dahl, et al., 2018). Furthermore, Tamai and Igarishi (2020), found that ostracizers can use IOMs
26 to intentionally produce positive outcomes. Collectively these studies demonstrate the
27 importance of studying ostracism through new lenses and theoretical approaches to look beyond
28 the initial negative impact of IOMs and uncover novel insights into the phenomenon.
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42 ***Theoretical approach***

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44 Darkside communication researchers study “the dysfunctional, distorted, distressing, and
45 destructive aspects of human behavior” but they also study communication paradoxes where
46 seemingly positive communication produces negative outcomes, and seemingly negative
47 communication produces positive outcomes. (Spitzberg & Cupach, p. 5, 2009). For example,
48 bullying is hurtful but it can also have short term benefits for the bully by helping them reinforce
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their social status (Reijntjes et al, 2013). Similarly, hurtful messages can foster anti-social responses (Young et al., 2005) but they can also be used to maintain and repair close relationships when communicated effectively (Sun, 2018). By employing the theoretical lens of Darkside Communication paradoxes in the study of ostracism, we can develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of ostracism communication and the possible ways that it can produce seemingly positive outcomes for targets.

RQ1: What are the positive and pro-social outcomes of receiving an interpersonal ostracism message?

Method

Procedure

To study the paradoxes of IOMs, transcript data was compiled from three previous interview studies on ostracism that were conducted by the primary researcher. Interview transcriptions totaled 736 single spaced pages. The data was analyzed through the current research question and utilized a Ground Theory approach to allow the interesting and dominant themes to inductively emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through multiple readings of the data and memoing, the initial themes were condensed into 6 dominant themes (Gynnild, 2025). Specific excerpts were taken from the transcripts to use as exemplars for each theme and participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Participants

Across three different studies, participants were recruited using extra credit, snow ball sampling, and word of mouth. The total number of interviews was N=85 (56 females, 27 males) (Age 18-62, M = 24.5). Participants self-identified as white/Caucasian (N=36), Black/African-American

(N=30), Asian/Indian (N=6), biracial/multiracial (N =5), Arab (N=3), Latino/Hispanic (N=2), and other (N=1). Interviews lasted between 18- 115 minutes (M= 39 minutes).

Results

Starting new and improved relationships

Analysis of interview data revealed instances where participants were ostracized by an individual or group and they felt an aversive initial reaction, but after reflection and coping, they started new and improved interpersonal relationships with other people. For example, Erica was ostracized by a large organization that consisted of many family and friends. It took her years to make sense of the experience, but eventually it led her to an entirely new social network.

Around the fall I decided I wanted to be more actively involved...and I met new friends, some of whom became my best and closest friends. This is my existing social network right now and it's exciting. I am very happy and I feel like I am where I'm supposed to be.

This example shows how ostracism from one group can help spawn new and better interpersonal relationships for the target.

Terminating inequitable or hurtful relationships

In order for new relationships to start, old relationships may need to end. Several participants reported being in toxic, hurtful, or inequitable relationships and that being ostracized was the key event that finally pushed them to terminate the relationship with the ostracizer(s).

I was angry at myself for being friends with them for a long time. It was just hard to leave them. That's what I thought at that time. But I left them. I don't talk to them now. I just show them that I'm busy.

Shawna reinforced this sentiment by stating: "I took them out of my circle. . . I have limitations on that. You gotta respect yourself." For others, the ostracism experience propelled them into entirely new social spaces. Mark noted: "I feel like my life is just on a completely different chapter. I have nothing that relates to them anymore." Similarly, ostracism compelled Tim to further distance himself from the ostracizer: "People grow up. They have their own lives. They do their own things. They go their own way. I'm thinking that we may be at that point in our lives." Together these responses demonstrate the ways in which ostracism can be the primary impetus for terminating hurtful or inequitable relationships.

Enacting relational maintenance behaviors

Some participants reported that after being ostracized, rather than seeking new partners or terminating the relationship, they communicated directly with the ostracizer(s) in an effort to maintain the relationship. In some cases, this act would help strengthen the connection between communicators. For example, Tony was ostracized by a close friend from a religious event and overcame the hurt after actively reaffirming his friendship with ostracizer.

To me my relationship with the one guy, that was the main part of it. We're better friends than ever. Our relationship keeps getting better. It's just me sitting there and having respect for different peoples' cultures.

This theme demonstrates that even though ostracism creates hurt, it can also promote relational maintenance behaviors that increase closeness and openness.

Positive change through empathy development

Several participants explained that after being ostracized and coping, they developed empathy for others and decided to change their behaviors or communication in future interactions. For

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9 example, John worked at a large company and entered a management position at a young age. He
10 was ostracized during meetings by older coworkers and stated:

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13 I try not to do that to other people who are coming up who are new in the business and I
14 try not to do that in general...Business is tough because it's super competitive and it is
15 winner-take-all but at the same time especially in [my field] it's in a transition... I'm trying
16 to become more thoughtful myself and a lot of that is because of the situation.
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19 In this case, IOMs helped John have empathy for others and it prompted him to change his
20 communication at work so that he was more inclusive and welcoming.
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23 In another example, Lamar was ostracized by a group of close friends for making
24 offensive remarks to the women in the group. Upon reflection, the experience allowed him to
25 empathize with his friends and make changes to his behaviors.
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30 At that time I was learning how to talk among both genders because I went to single gender
31 high school... So yeah it took a little thinking to be like, 'Okay I was out of control with my
32 words that time. Like it's not just men anymore. It's men and women.
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35 IOMs may have initially shocked Lamar but it caused him to make changes and eventually
36 become better friends with the ostracizers.
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39 Similarly, Carter discussed an instance where his friends drove to a party together and did
40 not invite him to come.
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43 It was a key point...it just adjusted my mindset on a lot of things... It made me realize how I
44 treat others..I know how I felt in the moment. And I know it wasn't a good feeling. So I
45 always try my best to make sure that nobody feels excluded, even if it's in like the smallest,
46 simplest ways.
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50 Each of these instances demonstrate the ways in which ostracism can foster a targets' sense of
51 empathy which can increase pro-social behaviors and communication.
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Identity and ideological development

Some participants were ostracized by people who shared similar racial, ethnic, or religious identities and the experience led them to reflect on and reshape their worldviews. For example, Ricky was a college student who attended an HBCU (Historically Black College or University) and was ostracized by other students, which led to a new and more nuanced perspective of his identity.

I feel like with Black people, just because they're Black doesn't mean they're going to help you. Just because you have a seat at the table doesn't mean you're open to bring other people to the table. Because of that event, I felt like I learned this the hard way and to not just make assumptions because we all look the same.

In another instance, Eve was ostracized by an entire religious organization that they had been a part of her entire life. After the experience, she developed new ideologies and worldviews that differed from the religion.

I used to be a conservative [religion] and certain activities were contrary to what I would have been doing before when I was really practicing. So, when I started distancing myself from the community, I feel like I was personally undergoing an identity kind of shift where I was going through a spiritual crisis. I had so many questions.

These examples show how ostracism can help targets develop new and positive understandings of their own identities and beliefs that better serve their needs.

Interpersonal boundary and expectation development

The final theme indicates that after experiencing ostracism, participants created new interpersonal boundaries and altered their *prescriptive* and *descriptive* interaction expectations (Burgoon, 1993) to better protect themselves from receiving future IOMs. For example,

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9 Cameron was ostracized by his roommates for his religious beliefs and developed new
10 expectations.
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13 I learned that I can't trust people and I have to look into people more before I even let them
14 completely be my friend because after a while people do show their true colors.
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17 Similarly, Mary was a new mother that was not invited to several events by her friends and had
18 to change her expectations and boundaries for future interactions. "I think that I had to accept
19 that now I have the baby [and] that my role has definitely changed socially in groups of friends
20 especially because they are not having babies." These examples demonstrate how being
21 ostracized can help targets develop new boundaries and interaction expectations that ultimately
22 benefit their well being and interpersonal relationships.
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29 **Discussion**

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31 Through the lens of Darkside Communication paradoxes, this study revealed six themes that
32 describe positive or pro-social outcomes from receiving IOMs. First, analysis revealed that
33 ostracism can serve as the primary impetus for targets to assess the equity of their relationship
34 with the ostracizer(s) and to terminate hurtful relationships, start new positive relationships, or
35 enact relational maintenance behaviors to preserve existing relationships (Canary & Stafford,
36 1992; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). Studies show there are a variety of factors that can contribute
37 to whether communicators decide to engage in relational maintenance behaviors or to terminate a
38 relationship (Forsythe & Ledbetter, 2015). Future research should consider IOM communication
39 as a contributing factor as well.
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49 Second, analysis revealed beneficial attitudinal changes that resulted from IOM
50 reception. Participants explained that ostracism gave them a more nuanced perspective of their
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own identities and ideologies. Similarly, others reported increases in empathy and changes in interaction expectations as a result of being ostracized. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that IOMs can change our attitudes and indirectly improve our future interactions with others. Research suggests that communication expectations impact targets' experiences, interpretations of messages, and coping strategies (Pelliccio & Walker, 2021; Weschke & Niedeggen, 2015; Wirth, et al., 2025). We can further develop our expectations by seeing others being ostracized and increasing our empathy towards targets (Zou, et al., 2022; Wesselman, et al., 2013). In this sense, the initial negative experience of ostracism can be paradoxical in that it can prompt attitude changes and improve one's preparedness for future interpersonal interactions.

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