

Ostracism: How It Influences Life: An Overview

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Abstract

Ostracism, a construct which has gained widespread attention, has been described by researchers with various names such as “isolation, social exclusion, rejection, abandonment, and being out of the loop”. Most episodes of ostracism were observed among persons who belong to equal status, and participants who experience ostracism report lower levels of acceptance by loved ones.

The intensity of experiences were profound when got ostracised by kinfolks than when they encounter ostracism by unknowns. Existence of ostracism no matter which the setting is social or organisational but it adversely silhouettes the lifestyle of an individual. The term has been talked a lot since eons still few researches are available which divulge the strategies and coping mechanism to combat and confront the phenomenon, which has also been stated as, “kiss of social death” The present review is an effort in this direction moreover it also highlights the sources, motives, reactions, effects, and coping mechanism to make the comprehension of the construct not only more easier and effortless but concrete and practical. The future research suggestions have also been discussed.

Keywords: Ostracism, lifestyle, social exclusion, isolation, coping mechanism, pandemic.

1. Introduction

Man is a social animal. Since millions and millions of years we are living in groups, these groups eventually transformed into societies. One can't imagine living and surviving without family, groups (formal and informal) and society. It is a need which determines ones existence. Researches have substantially supported that even in crucial life endangering situations people combat and survive if they are part of a group, less pain is experienced and survival hopes are comparatively high when an individual is part of the group as compared to when he is alone and has to confront the ‘odds’.

Being attached (with people) and cared (by people) explicates an individual's need for belongingness which ensures him security and safety and eventually enhances his mental health, his peace of mind and ultimately helps him in achieving goals in all the walks of life. Human beings always aspire to be belonged but at times they get excluded and rejected by society, peers and in extreme instances by their loved ones. This typical behaviour is not merely confined to humans but found in animals too, where they exclude the weakest animal for survival of the fittest in the group. Presence of ostracism among human race and other creatures living in groups is since eons and is still prevailing and flourishing.

Williams (2007) stated that “Ostracism is often operationalized as a process of unveiling chain of unending events which the target individual had tolerated while being excluded or ignored.”

This continuous denunciation by others and loved ones lead to circumstances where rejection upheaves to a high level of disgust, aggression and loneliness in humans. And a state comes where a person being

rejected and denounced by the group feels socially boycotted because of which either he harms himself or becomes aggressive and decides to harm others.

1.1 Types of Ostracism

Ostracism is the feeling of being rejected, secluded and ignored by the individual or group of individuals. On the basis of form and intensity of ostracism, the different types of ostracism have been identified.

- **Physical and Social ostracism**

Physical ostracism is the state where an individual is placed in conditions or settings like, solitude, exile and time-out (Williams, 1997). Whereas in social ostracism the target individual is not secluded but is ignored in the social settings that is in physical presence of others (Williams & Sommer, 1997).

- **Full and partial ostracism**

On the basis of intensity ostracism can be full or partial. In full ostracism, an individual is ignored by all members of the group and is not chosen to participate in any activity of the group (Williams & Sommer, 1997), while the partial ostracism is the setting where an individual is neglected by some members of the groups and excluded from some activities of the group. Such type of ostracism is generally found in workplace settings (Jones, Carter-Sowell, Kelley & Williams, 2009; in Williams, 2007) and some societal settings.

1.2 Definition

Understanding the construct begins with defining the term, and ostracism has been defined as “being ignored, overlooked and left out, and it often occurs without excessive explanation or explicit negative attention” (William, 2007). It is a process, which divulges the reaction of others, an individual tolerated and suffered when he was expelled and left unnoticed. The term is often treated as identical to concepts such as rejection and social exclusion, which too need a little explanation to avoid the confusion.

Social exclusion is defined as “being discounted, left alone, or isolated, with explicit assertions of aversion, in some cases which is missing in rest” (Twenge et al., 2001). Silver, et al. (1974) explained the construct at individual as well as on social level, according to which, it reflects incapacity of an individual to build effective and meaningful social relations as well as inadequacy in maintaining social cohesion or integration.

While Rejection has been explained by (Leary et al., 2005) as “a declaration been made by a group or an individual that they no longer want to intermingle, communicate or continue camaraderie with the target individual” (cited in William, 2007). Or stated as a situation in which a particular person is denounced by the an individual or a group as the presence of his is of no more interest, either in terms of communication or in terms of sharing benefits. Such situations are more harmful than those which involve physical pain as rejection inflicts psychological harm to an individual which decides well- being of an individual and hampers ones need for belongingness and acceptance. (William, 2007) states that though the demarcated differences sustains between the terms still the researchers use them as interchangeably.

2. Objective

Every human wants to be accepted and belonged but what happens when this doesn't happen and he is rejected. Many research works have tried to answer this question, the present review thus has an objective to not merely understand the construct itself but other facets also which bear a close connection with it. Moreover the review tries to find new avenues of research which have yet not attended but needs attention to comprehend the construct and its consequences better.

3. Review of Literature

As the presence of ostracism is found in all cultures and society, hence it becomes necessary to study the evolutionary viewpoints on the operation and subsistence of the construct. Ostracism hurts and is difficult to cope with it, it is no less than a traumatic experience as it endangers the basic needs of humans for “membership of a particular group, belongingness, self-augmentation, control, and substantial subsistence and acknowledgement by others” (Williams, 2007; Gomez, et al., 2011).

3.1 Sources of ostracism

Nezleck et al. (2012) in their research explicated an important aspect of ostracism that people get ignored more likely by “acquaintances, associates, colleagues or outsiders, in comparison to kin-folks”. The research further illuminates the fact that little experimental research on ostracism has been done explaining its presence in close relationships, but extensive pool of survey data advocates ostracism does transpire in warm comradeships. The research specifies that the reports of ostracism taking place in close personal relationships are less as the ‘silent treatment’ of this tactic for long period of time somehow deteriorates the relationship. People even report that being ostracised by close ones is a worst feeling which leads to greater need threats. Hence people use this less often which succours the rationale of the study been done by (Nezleck et al., 2012) that customarily people are more often ostracised by strangers than close relationships. Thus, with allusion to the fact the a person can be ostracised by close ones as well as strangers the sources of ostracism can be described as both close or distant and known or unknown.

3.2 Why people ostracise others and get ostracised?

Williams's model, 2007 stated five possible motives which expound the possible reason behind ostracising someone and getting ostracised by someone.

The first motive is quite interesting to understand it is, not ostracism, meaning that on first instance, the target feels that he has been neglected but the reality is starkly different as for example inability to exchange words or greeting does not confirm ostracism but also suggests that the source is either introvert or is busy and concentrating on something more needed (which is usually noticed later). But it can't be denied that the agony been experienced on the first stage due to ostracism is instinctive, but is brief and it comes down precipitously because one comes to believe that, ostracism was not done deliberately but it happened erroneously and was only perceived by the target.

Secondly, role-prescribed ostracism, the ostracism which can be accredited to requirement of the role been played in a given situation. Here ostracism is attributed to the type of profession, and as it is part of source's duty thus, it does not lead to any psychological snags. For example, this might happen when a server at a restaurant is ignored while pouring water to customers. But due to role expectations, behaviour of the customers is justified and attendants tacitly approve such instances of ostracism. Hence,

the role of an individual sometimes makes him the target of ostracism but is not ostracised by the others in reality.

Defensive ostracism refers to “situations wherein individuals ostracise a target to shield themselves from being punished”. Like anticipating an argument for unpolished task performance, an individual may take a preventative shift and thus, ostracise the other person so that issues related to incomplete task may not raise or in other words can be avoided. Moreover, for example employees of a company may ostracise the whistle blower, not because they want to punish him but because they get petrified that getting along with him would land them also in troubles, adhered with ostracism. Here an individual (target) is ostracised to prevent situation that may lead to ostracism to oneself (source).

Punitive ostracism “describes instances in which targets are ostracised because they themselves or something been done by them is disliked and meets condemnation”. For example, any step against the norms of society, or against a societal taboo is most of the times is not accepted initially hence the individual is ostracised but later it is not only accepted but appreciated because ultimately it head towards upliftment of the society (parda pratha). While if the nature of the act is crime based than the person involved is universally ostracised and is not accepted in any of the circumstances. A target is thus ostracised as any action of his is not liked by the source.

Finally, oblivious ostracism refers to a “lack of significance been given by the source while attending or recognizing the individual. Often this occurs when there exist difference in status that portray few people as not good enough to be given attention (or so it is felt)” (Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler, Williams, 2012).

Further when asked from respondents directly to expound which of the five motives do they think would lead to instigate ostracism, the response unearthed to be quite contrary to researchers, as researchers anticipated, that “not ostracism and role-prescribed ostracism” would turn out to be most inconsequential, ensued by “defensive ostracism, punitive ostracism, and then oblivious ostracism”.

But in reality it was discerned that role-prescribed ostracism and not ostracism could effortlessly be deferred as being unintentional or justifiable. Same was the case with defensive ostracism this too holds some excuse for the “source’s behaviour”.

But ‘punitive’ ostracism was found to be quite distasteful, and Oblivious ostracism right away imperils one’s sense of continuance and significance.

After understanding why people get ostracised and why they ostracise others, the need to understand is how people react when they get ostracised. The succeeding literature uncovers the question.

3.3 Reactions after being ostracised

After encountering ostracism individual react in varied manner. The wide spread reactions exhibited by people on being ostracised have been cited by (Gomez, 2011) in his study. He cites various research contributions which state that immediate reaction towards ostracism involves “vigorous steps to accomplish the admiration in group (Leary & Baumeister, 1995; Jamieson, et al., 2010; Maner, et al., 2007; Choi, et al., 2000; Sommer & Williams, 1997). Yet some adopt distinctive ways to counter ostracism i.e. they dissociate themselves from the group that led to, or prompted, the act of cold shoulder. In such cases source of the rejection is sometimes belittled (Leary & Bourgeois, 2001), few demonstrate insouciance while working with the rejecters’. (Pepitone & Wilpizeski, 1960), while others reflect belligerence or ferociousness towards the one who represents the source of the rejection (Leary, et al., 2003; Springer, Leary, Evans, Ansell & Negel 1998; Cairns, et al., 2006) (cited in Gomez, 2011).

“Moreover studies have suggested that participants who are socially inept recover slowly, whenever they counter ostracism with respect to need threat (Zadro et al., 2006) and a successful self-control (Oaten, et al., 2008)”. Williams, 2009 in his study explains that the amount of time between the ostracizing event, and the time they take to illustrate their feedbacks or pointers after being ostracized helps in understanding reactions towards ostracism. He further elucidates that the reactions which are most immediate are known as reflexive while the delayed ones can be attributed as reflective.

To understand the reactions afterwards ostracism, (Nezlek, 2011) conducted a study and used diary method to record each and every reaction after a person has been ostracised. The study also suggested that neuroticism (one important dimension of Five Factor model of Personality) is an important dimension in analysing the person’s reaction after getting ostracised. As neuroticism is related to emotional stability and being ostracised is stressful and painful both which challenges one’s emotional stability hence, neuroticism was found to be positively related to intensity of reaction been exhibited by the target on getting ostracised. They found that a person who is high on neuroticism is highly distressed when ostracised as compared to those who score low on this dimension. Expounding the reactions after being ostracised the research also revealed that being ostracised for longer period of time can lead to resentment and stepping back from the relationship which often results into martial turmoil. (Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco, & Baumeister, 2001; cited in Nezlek et al., 2012)

3.4 Effects of ostracism

Ostracism effect an individual on psychological, behavioural and biological grounds. No matter what the ground is but the effect of ostracism is not positive in nature. On all the grounds biological, emotional and psychological; ostracism deteriorates the health of an individual.

Ostracism leads to isolation and rejection which is both dreadful and painful which affects the neurobiology of an individual to great extent. The pain experienced on getting ostracised is somewhat alike the physical pain. In one of the studies by (Williams et al., 2003) divulged that research participants who while playing Cyberball were ostracised, in their magnetic resonance image (MRI) reflected that their dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) got activated, (area which in general gets activated when a person encounters physical pain). This activation of dACC was substantially associated with “self -reported distress”.

Along with this during ‘intentional ostracism’ the right ventral prefrontal cortex also showed the activation, the area which moderated the pain responses and its activation is negatively related to self- reported distress. In later studies (Eisenberger, 2006; MacDonald & Leary 2005), also reported that “periaqueductal gray activity, dACC, and amygdala during Cyberball-induced ostracism” associated significantly with diary reports of social disengagements. Similarly (Gunnar et al., 2003) found higher levels of cortisol among youngsters who reported peer rejection on a sociometric measure.

This shows that ostracism leads to immediate reactions and compels an individual to pay attention to it. In some grave conditions it may also lead to death also (Gruter & Masters, 1986) (cited in Williams, 2007; Ball, 2016). The immune system of an individual who faces social exclusion is harmed to great extent (on the basis of research done on HIV positive patients; Cole, Kemeny, & Taylor, 1997). Researchers have found that it influences the systolic and diastolic blood pressure (Sommer, Kirkland, Newman, Estrella, & Andreassi, 2009), increases likelihood of tuberculosis and suicidal tendencies (Cassel, 1976) and pain after operation (Besser, & Priel, 2009).

Whereas on psychological grounds, it leads to experience of deleterious feelings including angst, despair, seclusion, exasperation and vulnerability (Leary, 1990; Geller et al., 1974; Sommer et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2000; Williams, 2007, 2009; Williams & Zadro, 2001). In grave consequences it leads an individual to a gloomy path of pessimism, where he starts evaluating himself in negative manner. The negative self-assessments of oneself increase risk of mental ailments and lifespan gets abridged. (Rehak, Craighead & Kimball, 1979; Williams & Zadro, 1998; Landis, House & Umberson, 1988) Even in instances which are reported to be subdued, such as the “Cyberball paradigm” such effects do impose effects but to a smaller degree (Williams, 2007b; Zadro, Richardson & Williams, 2004).

The psychological aftermaths of ostracism can be comprehended when the need to belong (prominent model of ostracism) of an individual is hampered which is a significant facet of human welfare. Need to belong if is thwarted or attention is not paid to it, it leads to distress both biologically and psychologically (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pickett & Gardener, 2005). Not only this it leads to violation of four elementary human prerequisites i.e. belongingness, meaningful subsistence, self-worth, loss of control and social ties (Williams, 2007b; Williams & Zadro, 2005) which eventually develops the feeling of helplessness and self-levied/inflicted isolation, if the needs remain unfulfilled (cited in Ball, 2016).

Consistent to this explanation, there are evidences which show that social marginalization impairs the calibre of an individual to self-restraint; an ability which helps in inhibiting the use of cognitive and motivational resources in impulsive acts and implies the use of these resources in hedonic sacrifices. Like in one of the study (Salvy, 2012) it was found that social connection-related activities trailed by ostracism may eventually drain out the self-governing reserves, thereby ensuing to augmented insane eating patterns. This depicts that ostracism debilitates the cognitive behavioural capabilities to a great extent.

The behavioural consequences of ostracism can be understood in the form of thinking, feeling and relative pro social behaviour by the target, if the interpersonal needs are impeded. Whereas if, need for survival and personal worth are obstructed, marginalised individuals safeguard these needs, by exhibiting tyrannical, rousing, and even get enmeshed into criminal offenses .

Ostracism instigates such a passionate yearning to be with someone, or loved by someone that one’s competence to make discrimination between good and bad may get afflicted enormously and any group, cults and (extremist) troops which allow them (target) to be part of their group easily magnetise them (the targets), (Williams, 2007) for their (group) sake but the target considers it as their own satisfaction of need to belong.

Antisocial behavioural responses are therefore the potential results of rejection and social exclusion. Researchers (Twenge, et al., 2001) have suggested that the reason behind the shootout incidences at school is the apparent rejection which elicited the violent reactions. They in one of their experimental setting found that even towards the people who treated the ostracized and rejected person well the reciprocation of kindness was limited. Apart from it, in one of the experiment (Sebastian, et al 2010) reported that adolescents encounter more incidences of social rejection on affective than adults.

3.5 Coping Strategies of Ostracism

Coping ostracism, social exclusion or rejection is not an easy task for the target individual. Even after that an individual moderates the difficult situation. The presence of individual differences can easily be observed. The four important strategies suggested by Williams, 2007 have been discussed below.

- **Fight**

The common strategy used by ostracized individual is fight. Research by (Downey & Feldman, 1996) suggests that individual who scored high on rejection sensitivity (RS), expect rejection on almost all the situation hence responds in a hostile manner. A rejected person with low self-esteem even opts for a negative self-description for himself which is unlike the one who is adorned with high self-esteem (Sommer & Baumeister, 2002). Not only this person low on self-esteem apparently gets entangled in a “downward spiral of perceiving rejection” even when it is not present which thereby weakens the attachments. This type of behaviour characterised by loneliness, rejection and seclusion has been termed as ‘silent treatment in most of the studies. This silent treatment eventually drags the individual towards heightened anger on side while attenuation in feelings of “belonging, self-confidence, control, and meaningful existence” on the other side (Williams et al. 1998). The person while using ‘fight’ as a coping mechanism in close relationships sometimes exhibit jealous response towards partner (De Steno et al., 2006), while those who reject or exclude them socially are derogated (Fiske & Yamamoto 2005; cited in Williams, 2007).

- **Flight**

Another coping response exhibited in response to ostracism, social exclusion or rejection is ‘flight’. People who tend to score high on social rejection also outdo for social avoidance. They are less interested in continuing the job/task forward with the ones who rejected them and better prefers to work alone (Predmore & Williams, 1983). The chief coping behavioural strategies used by the rejected individual are choosing to quit, using belittling terminologies or remarks against the source of ostracism and eventually curtailing to work with them (Pepitone & Wilpeski, 1960), are not interested in waiting to help others rather choose to leave the situation (Tice, et al., 2003) and in the worst case scenario as a coping mechanism they avoid looking into the mirror also. (Twenge, 2003) (cited in Williams, 2007)

- **Freeze**

Ample number of reactions and responses characterises the human being. But one distinct reaction displayed by the one who gets ostracised is ‘freezing’. It is similar to that of one showcased by animal when they either come across or fell prey to a predator. In a similar fashion rather than reacting aggressively or avoiding the situation the excluded or ostracised individual are more willing to exhibit a “complex cognitive thought” (Twenge et al. 2003; Baumeister et al. 2002), perceive time standing still, report meaninglessness, lethargy, and flat emotions, shows high thresholds for pain and tolerances (DeWall & Baumeister 2006), neither reacts in joyful manner nor is sad, are not or are less empathetic towards who are suffering, and prefers to exhibit as a self-defeated person (Oikawa et al. 2004). (cited in Williams, 2007)

- **Tend- and –befriend**

It is not always does an ostracised individual reacts in a hostile manner or leaves the situation in between and walks away. In many other situations the rejected person thinks, feel and behaves in a manner that helps in inclusion and makes him more acceptable to others. That is they use a prosocial behaviour (helping as well as interpersonal bond strengthening behaviour). The behavioural choices vary between genders as females when ostracised are more likely to make self-demeaning or belittling attributions while male opts for making ‘others blame attributions. In this type of coping mechanism females tend to

work hard to get included while males choose social loafing. Followed by ostracism participants even have a tendency to engulf in non-conscious impersonation, to increase affiliation and affinity with the group members (Lakin & Chartrand, 2003; cited in Williams, 2007).

Thus, in a nutshell it can be stated that literature suggests any of the four mechanisms which are employed by an individual to deal with ostracism. It helps us in understanding that why in some situations for instance ostracism leads to antisocial behaviour while in the other case a very subtle and submissive reaction is observed where an individual copes with the situation by working hard and displaying prosocial behaviour.

4. Pandemic and Ostracism

Ostracism is perilous in nature but pandemic has made it more hazardous. Social ostracism after pandemic upsurged greatly. Researches reported that although government in India tried to build an inclusive environment for the society i.e. for all pandemic survivors, patients and warriors but unfortunately in many instance it was surfaced that “they” all faced the social ostracism and discrimination despite the fact they needed the support and inclusion the most in order to regain and maintain their psychological and physiological well-being.

Similar stories transpired in the global scenario also where pandemic warriors especially health care workers were stigmatised, alienated or were even assaulted or intimidated (Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya, 2020).

This unravels the fact that countries may be different, frequency and intensity of events could vary but stories were more or less same and require ardent attention of social, psychological researchers to not only understand the sequence of events but also to lay a societal foundation where occurrence of such events are undeniably interdicted.

5. Future research & Conclusion

The research work related to ostracism in past decades has proved to be of great benefit for us. It answers most of the research questions related to why people ostracise and its impact on lives on the well-being, but this opens a window to new research related queries, which are yet to be explored and answered.

Though research related to psychological and physiological factors has been done, but personality and psychological capital requires more attention. Apart from it, as an observation it is generally been found that ostracism no matter what the platform is but it eventually hurts and breaks the confidence of an individual or a group to larger extent. But though no research has explained or discussed, we think that individual who scores high on self- efficacy and resilience will tend to confront the situations related to ostracism in a better way than who score less on these measures.

Moreover the role of yoga and meditation in combating the grave consequences of ostracism could be a new area of experimental research. The implication of yoga and meditation can prove to be fruitful in making a comeback from distress and depression caused due to ostracism. In addition to it can also help in controlling the death tally increasing due to ostracism.

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