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Minding the interpersonal gap: Mindfulness-based interventions in the prevention of ostracism



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ABSTRACT

Ostracism is a ubiquitous phenomenon, occurring across a broad range of social contexts and detrimentally impacting personal outcomes. Through enhanced present-moment attention and awareness, mindfulness-based interventions may help prevent this harmful behavior. The current research examined the role of state mindfulness in reducing the propensity to commit ostracism. This relationship was investigated in two studies: a field-based quasi-experiment (Study 1, $n = 51$) and a laboratory-based experiment (Study 2, $n = 100$). Both studies supported the utility of brief mindfulness-based interventions in reducing the propensity to ostracize others. The current studies support the relevance of mindfulness in addressing the substantial problem of ostracism. Among other benefits, fostering mindfulness in a variety of contexts may help reduce personal and social costs associated with this type of incivility. This research represents the first known attempt to utilize a personal resource (mindfulness) to decrease the degree to which individuals ostracize others.

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1. Introduction

For many, interacting with teammates, coworkers, and other group members is a rewarding experience that fulfills many human needs, enabling us to obtain optimal happiness, well-being, and functioning. Unfortunately for some, these interpersonal experiences may not be a satisfying experience, and may instead be a truly unpleasant and stressful ordeal. Ostracism, which involves “ignoring and excluding individuals or groups by individuals or groups” (Williams, 2007: p. 427), is a subtle, yet insidious form of incivility that can ruin these interactions. Research has demonstrated the damaging effects of prolonged exposure to social exclusion, including decreased self-regulation, heightened aggression, and suppressed immune and cardiovascular functioning (Baumeister, Dwall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; Dickerson, 2011). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that ostracism is a substantial contributor to violence among students at school (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Research indicates that these detrimental consequences stem in a large part from a set of core needs that are left unfulfilled as a result of social ostracism: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (Williams, 1997, 2001). Over time, long-term targets of ostracism may suffer from a variety of psychological symptoms, such as feelings of resignation, hopelessness, and depression.

Ostracism is a ubiquitous phenomenon, frequently occurring in a variety of social contexts (Gruter & Masters, 1986; Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2013; Williams, 1997). As an example, one study of 262 full-time employees revealed that, in

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the past five years, 66% had been deliberately shunned by co-workers or supervisors (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Interestingly, ostracism is often unintentional (the instigator is not aware that he or she is ignoring or excluding another individual). Unfortunately, this lack of awareness or intent does not preclude the social pain felt by the target (Williams, 2007). Recent findings suggest that interventions can aid in the recovery of distress for targets of ostracism (Molet, Macquet, Lefebvre, & Williams, 2013); however, little research has explored mechanisms that may mitigate the incidence or degree to which this exclusion occurs. Accordingly, the current research taps into the personal resource of state mindfulness and its potential effect on individuals' tendency to exclude others.

1.1. Mindfulness

1.1.1. The concept of mindfulness

The concept of mindfulness has been described as a heightened state of involvement and wakefulness in the present moment. Mindful behavior is achieved by considering context and multiple perspectives in order to make novel distinctions that keep one focused on the present moment—the only time that can be directly experienced (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Mindfulness is often conceptualized as the presentation of two psychological characteristics—(1) attention to the present moment and (2) awareness of one's surroundings (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). These resources represent the cornerstone of mindfulness, and as later discussed, may together play a vital role in the incidence (and prevention) of ostracism.

While mindfulness can be thought of as both a trait-related and a state-related characteristic of the individual, a growing body of research has focused on mindfulness as a state construct, in which the environment is largely responsible for fostering one's human capacity to be mindful. In fact, numerous studies point to significant enhancements in mindfulness following daily exercises or interventions (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Shapiro, Brown, Thoresen, & Plante, 2011; Williams, 2006).

The concept of mindfulness is of both theoretical and practical concern within virtually any social context. In experimental research, Molet et al. (2013) found that a focused attention intervention reduced long-term distress from experiences of ostracism. Previously, the mechanisms of focused attention and awareness have primarily been used to explain coping responses following incidences of ostracism. However, the current research contends that these mechanisms of mindfulness may influence one's predisposition to more closely consider the presence and perspectives of other individuals, which has direct implications for the prevention of ostracism.

Mindfulness has also yielded fruitful results in organizational research (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000), and has been used to address interpersonal factors related to ostracism through mindfulness-based stress management interventions (Hunter & McCormick, 2008). Studies in this area, however, have not directly assessed the influence of mindfulness-based interventions on the propensity to ostracize others. Through in-depth interviewing, Hunter and McCormick (2008) have identified a variety of positive effects stemming from the practice of mindfulness in the workplace, including enhanced selflessness and awareness of others' perspectives. In a worksite wellness program (Williams, 2006), a mindfulness-based stress reduction intervention decreased emotional reactivity, giving participants an opportunity to respond more calmly and appropriately to workplace stressors. Mindfulness-based interventions also led to reductions in perceived stress (Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008) and increased empathy for others (Shapiro et al., 2011). Together, these findings suggest that mindfulness-based interventions may be a particularly effective method for preventing instigators from engaging in ostracizing behaviors, even in the face of daily stressors. However, virtually no research to date has investigated the utility of such interventions in targeting the incidence of ostracism.

1.1.2. Addressing the incidence of ostracism

There is evidence to suggest that a lack of attention to and awareness of the present situation may promote ostracizing behaviors (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). Essentially, ostracism represents the absence of attention and awareness concerning the social needs of another individual. This lack of regard for others is likely one contributing factor that leads to perpetrations of ostracism, whether intentionally or unintentionally. A variety of factors may lead to intentional ostracism, including interpersonal hostility or the inability of a target to contribute positively to group goals (Gruter & Masters, 1986). However, these antecedents do not satisfactorily explain the commission of unintentional forms of ostracism, of which mindfulness may play a critical role. Presumably, those who are unaware and inattentive to the needs of others are more likely to engage in oblivious ostracism (Williams, 1997, 2001), which represents an unintentional, but blatant disregard, indifference, or neglect of others. Oftentimes we become stuck in a mindless state of "auto-pilot", in which we are not aware of or actively attentive to important aspects of our surrounding environment, such as the needs or even presence of others (Brown & Ryan, 2003). As a result, ostracism often occurs outside of the awareness of the instigator, and it may not be until later that the instigator learns about the oversight. Therefore, enhancing mindfulness may help tune one to interpersonal relationships with others. The effects of mindfulness on reduced ostracism may come about indirectly as well. Research indicates that increasing one's current state of attention and awareness through a brief "raisin-eating" exercise—a mindfulness-based activity in which individuals are guided step-by-step through the experiential and sensory process of consuming each raisin rather than "mindlessly" eating an entire handful of raisins—leads to lower levels of ego-involvement, aggression, and hostility (Heppner et al., 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). As ostracism is a form of relational aggression that can be derived from hostility or an over-involvement with the self, boosting one's present awareness and attention may serve to inhibit relational aggression such as ostracism. In light of these findings, bolstering mindfulness should reduce the tendency to engage in ostracizing behaviors.

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