Chapter for Herzliya Symposium

**Ostracism: The Impact of Being Rendered Meaningless**

Kipling D. Williams, Purdue University

In what turns out to be a most prescient observation, William James (1890/1950) wrote, “If not one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met ‘cut us dead,’ and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all” (pp. 293-294). In one eloquent sentence, James captured the essence of being ostracized by one’s mates. Being ignored and excluded by others is like being dead, like not existing at all, like having no meaning or value.

In this chapter, I will present my theory of ostracism and the relevant research that pertains particularly to feelings of meaninglessness. I will argue that being ostracized, even in brief and innocuous episodes, quickly and powerfully envelopes an individual in a cloak of invisibility, along with the sick and painful feeling of, at least momentarily, having no purpose, no meaning, no worth. Before presenting the formal aspect of my theory, let me begin with a personal example.

**The Scarlet Letter “O”**

In 1996, I was about to leave the University of Toledo to take a new job at the University of New South Wales, in Sydney, Australia. During the last week of my final semester at Toledo, my colleagues agreed to participate in a 5-day-long immersive role-play study on ostracism (Williams, Bernieri, Faulkner, Grahe, & Gada-Jain, 2000). There were five of us, two professors
and three graduate students, and on each day of the week, one of us would be randomly selected as the target of ostracism by the others. That meant that one of us would arrive in the morning to see a scarlet letter “O” fixed to our office door. The others would see this, too, and would know that their task for the entire day was to ignore and exclude the “O” person. Thus, over a 5-day period, each of us was ostracized for a full day, and each engaged in collaborative ostracism for four days.

We agreed to keep a diary during the week, entering any thoughts, feelings, or behaviors we experienced or engaged in that we believed were relevant to either ostracizing, or being ostracized. Our other colleagues in the department thought our activity was a waste of time; that it would yield nothing because we had all agreed to participate and knew the ostracism was not being delivered because of anger or dislike or disgust. Because we knew why we were being ostracized, they argued, it would have no impact on us. We acknowledged that this was certainly a possibility, but a prior experience suggested otherwise.

We were developing an ostracism paradigm that employed ball tossing among three individuals; two confederates and one participant. In the inclusion condition, the participant received the ball on one-third of the throws (Williams & Sommer, 1997). In the ostracism condition, they were to receive the ball about 3-4 times at the beginning, but then never again for the remainder of the 5-minute period. I had to train our confederates not to throw a ball to a participant, but only to each other, during the 5-minute ball toss game that presumably emerged spontaneously while participants waited for the return of the experimenter. Thus, playing the role of the participant, I instructed the confederates not to throw the ball to me, not to look at me, and to engage in eye gaze and ball tossing only with each other. One would think that being ignored and excluded when one instructed the others to do so would have no impact on me. Yet, for
reasons I could not fathom at the time, I nevertheless felt a sinking feeling that got worse over
the course of the 5 minutes. It was a visceral feeling, certainly not a rational one, and it made me
feel alone, helpless, invisible, and meaningless.

Thus, it did not seem entirely implausible that a collaboratively planned ostracism role-
play exercise could have an important and revealing effect on my colleagues and me. So, what
happened? We got more than we bargained for. It would be an understatement to say that we
were not very productive that week. We were so consumed by the ostracism (both giving and
getting), that none of us were able to do much else. It wasn’t that we weren’t going through the
motions of a typical productive week—we met about research, we presented and discussed ideas
frequently, but in our diary reports, we could not recall the content of our meetings. The
ostracizers appeared to be devoting so much time and effort to ostracizing that they were unable
to remember what they were talking about in their meetings. The ostracized individuals were
consumed with an existential dread such that they were unable to think about much else.

The night before I was ostracized, I actually dreamt about being ostracized by my
colleagues, and even my wife. On the day I was ostracized, we had a group research meeting.
One of the others was presenting a research idea. I frequently contributed, and the fact that I was
apparently invisible (and inaudible) to others did not stop me, at first. I would interject, give my
two cents worth, and wait for the others’ reactions. However, no reaction was forthcoming.
Often, they would talk right over me. Sometimes, one of them would contribute the same idea I
had just offered, and that individual got all the credit and attention. It was a surreal experience,
and incredibly unpleasant. How did I deal with this? I cared nothing about being liked or fitting
in; I cared completely about being noticed, favorably or unfavorably, it didn’t matter. So, I
pasted an “O” on my forehead during the meeting. That was sufficient to irritate one of my
colleagues, and that brief expression of irritation was so rewarding—I did exist! I also honked my horn at one of my colleagues as I drove back to my office. By habit, he waved, but then when he saw it was I who had honked; he quickly pulled his hand down in disgust. Again, I felt vindicated. I was not concerned with his disgust, only with his recognition. Finally, later that day during a departmental colloquium in which my colleague was the presenter, I raised my hand several times during and after his talk. He glanced around the room, pointing to others who raised their hand, but never acknowledged me. Words cannot express the rage, then helplessness I felt being ostracized not only in front of the other four who were in on the plan, but in front of about 100 others in the room.

What had I learned from this experience? First, even though we planned the exercise, it had a powerful effect on all of us. Second, and most pertinent to the theme of this conference and book, is that I felt meaningless and unimportant. I really was not at all concerned about not feeling liked; I was only concerned about feeling invisible to others. I felt nonexistent and meaningless. If I could feel such strong existential threat when I was one of the chief planners of the role-play exercise, imagine the impact that being ostracized has on someone who is not asking for it!

**Ostracism Theory**

My theory of ostracism, first presented in 1997, and revised most recently in 2009, asserts the following temporal sequence: (1) we detect any hint of ostracism quickly, yet crudely; (2) our first reaction to ostracism, no matter how irrational, is to feel pain and a threat to desires for belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence; (3) we then reflect and appraise the ostracism episode to determine its importance and accuracy; (4) we attempt to cope with the pain and threat by either diminishing the episode’s importance, or by engaging in thoughts or
behaviors that elevate belonging, self-esteem, control, and/or meaningful existence; if the
ostracism persists over time, our ability and resources to cope will diminish, resulting in (5) an
internalization and passive acceptance of our plight, the consequences of which are feelings of
alienation, depression, helplessness, and worthlessness (Williams, 1997, 2009).

Athenians coined the term “ostracism” (from the word, *ostraca*, which were shards of
clay on which the names of individuals to be exiled could be written), but the phenomenon itself
appears to have evolved along with the development of social animals, including humans (for a
review of the animal literature, see Gruter & Masters, 1987; for humans, see Fry, 2007). Being
ostracized is to be excluded and ignored. In some ways of thinking, this is a “non-behavior” –
being defined as the absence of attention and inclusion, but signaled often by lack of eye contact,
responsiveness, and recognition by others. Perhaps because we overestimate the consequences of
actions and underestimate the consequences of inactions (Kahneman & Miller, 1986), ostracism
was virtually ignored by social scientists until the end of the 20th century.

The experience of long-term ostracism is strong and devastating. Structured interviews
with individuals who were ostracized by their church, workmates, classmates, or family
members indicate a breakdown of psychological motivation and functioning, including suicidal
ideation or attempts, eating disorders, depression, and helplessness (Zadro, 2004). Books written
by individuals who were ostracized (e.g., Davis, 1991) reveal dark, cold, and painful periods that
required superhuman efforts to recover from.

The evolutionary position is that ostracism, for groups who employ it, is adaptive: It is a
means to strengthen the group by either removing or rehabilitating burdensome members
(Goodall, 1986; Gruter & Masters, 1986). I (and others) have argued that detection of ostracism
is also adaptive and that it is signaled quickly as pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams,
2003) so as to alert the individual to the dangers of social exclusion (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Kerr & Levine, 2008; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Spore & Williams, 2007).

Without the ability to quickly detect signs of ostracism, individuals could lose their social bonds and become vulnerable to psychological and physical dysfunction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Thus, even brief and seemingly innocuous episodes of ostracism are painful and distressing, and threaten psychological needs. Because detection is quick, it is necessarily crude. The trade-off for quick detection of ostracism is a false alarm bias: Ostracism is initially distressing even when individuals are playing a virtual ball toss game with strangers (Williams et al., 2000), computer players (Zadro, et al, 2004), despised others (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2004), and rules that makes ostracism financially advantageous (Van Beest & Williams, 2007).

Perhaps because people are particularly sensitive to minimal signs of ostracism, they are often able to adjust their interpersonal behavior in order to be re-included in the group or attractive to other groups. Thus, most people are unlikely to experience prolonged or long-term ostracism and instead learn to cope effectively with a variety of relatively brief ostracism episodes that occur in everyday life. Daily event-contingent diary research indicates, in fact, that people experience about one ostracism episode a day (Nezlek, Williams, & Wheeler, 2010). Despite the seeming triviality of some of these episodes (e.g., being ignored by one’s seatmate on a bus), research shows that being ignored by an elevator rider causes a momentary downturn in mood (Zuckerman et al., 1983).

Attempts to improve one’s social inclusion in response to ostracism seem to be the rule, but there are exceptions. Certain circumstances and individual differences pave a more antisocial path in response to ostracism. When ostracism seems inevitable and unalterable, attempts to reconnect give way to aggression (Twenge et al., 2001; Warburton et al., 2006). Similarly, highly
angered individuals or those with narcissistic traits may be predisposed toward aggressive responses (Chow et al., 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2003).

The findings to date are consistent with the predictions derived from my theory (Williams, 2009). As shown below, there are three stages of response to ostracism: Stage 1—Reflexive; Stage 2—Reflective, and Stage 3—Resigned.

*Stage 1.* The reflexive response is triggered by pain (Eisenberger et al., 2003), psychological threat to four fundamental needs (Williams, 2008), and negative affect (see Figure 2 below). This alarm serves to direct the individual’s attention to the episode in order to interpret and appraise its meaning and importance.

![Figure 1. Temporal Need-Threat Model of Ostracism](image)
Figure 2. The feelings dial (left) and the speed of detecting ostracism in the Cyberball paradigm (right).

Emotional responses to a brief ostracism episode are dynamic. Within the time course of only 100 seconds, an array of emotions is aroused (see Figure 3 below, for nonverbal display of emotions over a 100-sec Cyberball ostracism experience).

Figure 3. Emotional displays across 100-second experience with Cyberball ostracism (from humored as if being teased, to anger, to sadness and dejection).
This cluster of immediate reactions has been shown to be resistant to moderation by either individual differences or situational factors (Williams, 2009).

**Stage 2.** The reflection stage involves directing one’s attention to and appraisal of the meaning, cause, and reasons for the ostracism, and motivates cognitions and actions aimed at fortifying the threatened need(s) (see Jamieson et al., 2010). Studies show that individuals are more likely to conform, comply, obey, mimic, work harder collectively, detect genuine smiles, remember social information, and show more emotional intelligence following ostracism (this research is reviewed in Williams, 2009). All of these behaviors serve to fortify belonging and self-esteem. Thwarting control and meaningful existence, however, especially when social reconnection seems difficult or impossible, can lead to need-fortifying behaviors that reclaim control or force others toward the ostracized individual. Thus, research shows that when control is strongly threatened, ostracized individuals are more likely to be provocative, anti-social, and aggressive (see for example, Warburton et al., 2006).

**Stage 3.** The resignation stage applies to individuals who experience long-term ostracism. These individuals eventually exhaust their coping resources and experience alienation, depression, helplessness, and existential angst. My laboratory work has provided substantial support for the first two stages, while our qualitative interviews with long-term targets of ostracism (work conducted with Lisa Zadro) provides anecdotal support for Stage 3 (see Williams, 2000; Zadro & Williams, 2003). As one example, a young woman in her 20s told us, “In high school, the other students thought me weird and never spoke to me. I tell you in all honesty that at one stage they refused to speak to me for 153 days, not one word at all doctor. That was a very low point for me in my life and on the 153rd day, I swallowed 29 Valium pills. My brother found me and called an ambulance. When I returned to school, the kids had heard the
whole story and for a few days they were falling over themselves to be my friend. Sadly, it didn’t last. They stopped talking to me again and I was devastated. I stopped talking myself then. I figured that it was useless to have a voice if no-one listened.” Over the past few years, I have received about two emails a month that illustrate the devastating effects of long-term ostracism. Yesterday’s email was similar to most: “Hello Kip, I am an outcast. My family has forbidden me access to my grandchildren. I am finding it very difficult to ‘hang on.’ This isn't the first time I have experienced being shun [sic], rejected, excluded etc., etc. Different yet similar situations in the past made me a depressive from an early age. This is the worst ostracism I have endured and I need help. I will go anywhere in order to get the help I need.”

The impact of ostracism on meaninglessness, therefore, is likely to be most pronounced for those who experience ostracism repeatedly over a relatively long period of time. For these individuals, meaningless is internalized; they have no more regard for their own worth than they perceive that others have for them. If they are able to consider coping, it is only in the form of asking for help; they seem unwilling or unable to do things on their own that will substantiate their purpose and significance in daily life. Although these effects stem from long-term ostracism, recent experiments suggest that even brief episodes of ostracism may result in a temporary loss of meaning. I will now review these studies.

**Research Focused on Meaninglessness**

Let me begin again with an anecdote from one of our early studies in which we used a conversation paradigm to manipulate ostracism. Participants were asked to have a discussion about a topic in groups of three. Two of the participants were instructed to totally disregard, exclude, and ignore the third participant after one minute of discussion. I vividly recall one participant standing, looking around as if she were in a *Twilight Zone* episode, and then pinching
her arm. Apparently, she was trying to assure herself that she existed. She then sat down, and said nothing further. It was clear to me that at least for some, a few minutes of ostracism was sufficient to induce a sense of invisibility and, possibly, loss of meaning.

As reviewed by Case and Williams (2004), ostracism can be considered a “metaphor for death”—that is, being ostracized evokes a feeling that this is what others would act like if the ostracized individual were, in fact, dead or nonexistent. A few examples suggest that some people can use this sense of invisibility to their advantage. In Ralph Ellison’s (1952) *Invisible Man*, the Black male protagonist (whose name we never learn) uses his invisibility to infiltrate and disrupt those who persecute him. Similarly, Muzafir Sherif posed as a janitor in the famous "Robbers Cave" experiments, so that he could be in the social presence of the boys under study while not inhibiting their conversations and behaviors. He reasoned that as a janitor, he would be ignored.

For most individuals who are ostracized, however, it is likely that the perception of invisibility and meaninglessness is extremely unpleasant. As suggested by the James quotation that leads this chapter, feeling unworthy of attention at all is worse than bodily tortures. Do we have empirical evidence that ostracism leads to loss of meaning?

The first study I will summarize hints at this possibility, if we allow that loss of meaning is related to feelings of disconnection with others. Certainly, Baumeister and Leary (1995) and more recently Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) have made this argument. Loss of a feeling of connection with others is physically and psychologically debilitating. It not only leads to depression and suicidal ideation, but also to eating and sexual disorders, and to vulnerability to disease and illness. How much is needed to feel disconnected from others?
We tested this idea this last summer in a field study (Cardoso, Slater, & Williams, 2011). One experimenter would walk past a pedestrian on campus. She would either glance quickly at the passerby, giving a nominal nod and minimal smile that signaled acknowledgment of the other person, or she would look in the same direction, but not at the passerby, as though the individual was not there. A trailing experimenter would stop the pedestrian and ask if he or she would be willing to answer a quick question for a class project: To what extent do they feel disconnected from others? The results showed that despite noting in a pilot study that over half of all passersby were observed not to look at other passersby, not receiving that brief glance of acknowledgement from a stranger was sufficient to significantly lower a person’s perception of being socially connected with others.

If not receiving that glance of acknowledgement from a stranger who is walking by is sufficient to reduce one’s feeling of social connection, how does a 2-minute episode of ostracism affect the individual in a laboratory setting?

In a study conducted a few years ago by Schefske for her honors thesis, we examined whether being ostracized in a Cyberball game by three others was worse than by two others, and whether having a co-target of ostracism diffused the distress experienced when one was the sole target (Wirth, Schefske, & Williams, 2011). Contrary to predictions based on Latané’s (1981) social impact theory, the immediate pain and distress of ostracism did not increase with more sources of ostracism, nor did having a co-target diffuse it. One of our measures was a “Life is Meaningless” scale (Kunzendorf & McGuire, 1994), which consisted of 25 items such as, “The likelihood that I shall be remembered by no one in two hundred years makes my current life seem unimportant,” and “There is no sense in feeling hopeful about the future because, in the end, death robs life of all meaning.” Clearly, these are more easily viewed as enduring
philosophical beliefs that are unlikely to be affected by a 2-minute experience with an online ball game. Nevertheless, just two minutes of ostracism, with or without a co-target, was sufficient to significantly increase participants’ endorsement of these items. Apparently, even a brief episode of ostracism is enough to make individuals ponder and consider views espoused by existentialists and nihilists.

Additionally, in a nice set of four studies by Stillman et al. (2009), participants were excluded either by a confederate who refused to work with them, or with Cyberball. Compared to those who were included, ostracized individuals perceived life to be less meaningful as measured either by Kunzendorf and McGuire’s scale, or by a subscale of the Daily Meaning Scale (DMS; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2007). Loss of meaning was also highly related to self-reported loneliness, and the authors contend, as do Cacioppo and Patrick (2008), that loneliness is virtually synonymous with social exclusion. Finally, in their fourth study, they found that the mediator between ostracism and feelings of meaninglessness was moderated by self-reports of purpose, value, and positive self-worth.

These two separate investigations provide converging evidence that brief episodes of ostracism (or exclusion) are sufficient for individuals to doubt life’s meaning. This is particularly impressive (although disconcerting), given that such views are considered to be enduring beliefs rather than views easily subject to situational manipulation.

The perception of coldness is often semantically linked with loneliness and social exclusion. Either being left “out in the cold” or receiving the “cold shoulder,” an ostracised individual not only experiences pain and a threat to fundamental needs, but also experiences an embodied perception of coldness. Zhong and Leonardelli (2008) found, in two studies, that either recalling exclusion or being ostracized in Cyberball caused individuals to estimate colder
ambient temperature or to prefer a warm drink. Whereas the authors contend that this perception is based on a metaphor, we have recently found that ostracized participants’ finger temperature dropped significantly compared to included participants’ finger temperature (Ijzerman et al., 2011). Apparently, the subjective feeling of coldness is based on an objective perception. This research, although not directly involving meaninglessness, does suggest a powerful link between coldness, exclusion, and perhaps even death (e.g., a cold body signifies death). Because death and meaninglessness are both associated with primary fears that result in terror (see terror management theory, this volume), it seems that research into temperature (both perceived and actual) may prove fruitful.

Finally, two recent lines of research examined other links between death and ostracism. First, if ostracism triggers automatic pain responses because of its adaptive value, suppose an individual was ostracized from an activity that related to death. At a literal level, suppose two friends who were playing Russian roulette ostracized you? Would you feel relieved because you avoided death, or would you still feel the pain of ostracism? Van Beest, Williams, and van Dijk (2011) manipulated whether participants played either Cyberball or Cyberbomb. In Cyberbomb, their online characters were throwing a bomb with a lit fuse, and were told it could blow up at any time and would kill the character that was holding it. The results indicated that when these two adaptive fears, death and ostracism, were pitted against each other, participants still felt the pain and psychological threats associated with ostracism, but to a lesser extent than those simply playing Cyberball. Furthermore, in Study 2, participants first read evidence in favor of or against the existence of an afterlife before playing either Cyberball or Cyberbomb. Additionally, they could be over-included in these games, receiving the ball (or bomb) more often than their fair share. Although the afterlife manipulation did not affect the “reflexive” measures of discomfort
and threat, it did affect coping: Those who read evidence against an afterlife were most aggressive (using hot sauce allocation), and reading about an afterlife reduced aggression.

Finally, being over-included in Cyberbomb (a form of bullying, perhaps?) was more distressing than being included in Cyberbomb, but it was less distressing than being ostracized in Cyberball. All in all, this research “speaks to the intimate relation between ostracism and survival that has been proposed in theories of belonging” (p. 14).

Finally, some have argued that believing there is no afterlife, or no entry to heaven, is the ultimate form of meaninglessness. For some, the only reason life has meaning is because of what it means after one has died. Given this, how would individuals who had especially strong beliefs in God and heaven react when primed with Bible passages that espoused exclusion rather than inclusion? Across two studies, Van Beest and Williams (2011) found that the prospect of being excluded by God threatened satisfaction with the fundamental needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence; it also decreased well-being and prosocial behavior. This was especially true for individuals who were most intrinsically involved in their faith. Finally, this difference in prosocial behavior was mediated by a loss of perceived control and not by other indices of well-being.

**Summary**

This review of qualitative and empirical research provides evidence that ostracism—being ignored and excluded—has important consequences for individuals’ feelings of meaning, and is associated with perceptions of death. My Temporal Need-Threat Model describes three stages of responses to the detection of the onset of ostracism. In the first stage, individuals appear to respond reflexively to minimal cues of ostracism with pain, threats to belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence, and increased negative affect. In the second stage, individuals
reflect on the context and significance of the ostracism episode to assess its importance and meaning, and to direct coping responses that are aimed at satisfying thwarted needs. For those who experience long-term or prolonged ostracism, fortification efforts become depleted and give way to resignation, alienation, helplessness, depression, and feelings of worthlessness. Unlike other aversive interpersonal behaviors, ostracism can uniquely threaten existential needs related to being recognized as existing and being worthy of attention. Feelings of invisibility and meaninglessness prompt the individual to demote desires to be liked in favor of provoking others to attend to, recognize, and reckon with the individual as an individual worthy of attention and consideration.

These findings converge with other theories and research in this volume, particularly terror management theory proposed by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (see several chapters in this volume) and Kruglanski’s analysis of the quest for significance (this volume). If people feel ostracized by important others, whether from their family, church, work group, or society at large, then the loss of personal meaning and worth can be so devastating as to push some toward extreme worldviews or to accept the overtures of extreme groups that promise to provide a sense of meaning (Hogg, 2007, in press) or personal significance (Kruglanski, this volume). Research on groups that are ostracized suggests that they are even more inclined to react with aggressive responses (van Beest, Carter-Sowell, van Dijk, & Williams, 2011), making this a very important focus for future investigation.
References


Van Beest, I., Carter-Sowell, A. R., van Dijk, E., & Williams, K. D. (2011). *Groups being ostracized by groups: Is the pain shared, is recovery quicker, and are groups more likely to be aggressive?* Manuscript under review.


