

## Negative Emotions Motivate Terrorism: Ostracism Increases Social Susceptibility and Aggression

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### Overview of Issue

Animals ostracize weaker and burdensome members of their group in order to strengthen their own group. So do humans. But, whereas animals that are ostracized typically die, humans engage in counter-measures aimed at fortifying what ostracism thwarts: belonging, self-esteem, control, and recognition.<sup>8</sup> Being ostracized—ignored and excluded—is initially experienced as pain. The same region of the brain that is activated when experiencing physical pain is activated during ostracism.<sup>1</sup> Ostracism hurts within minutes, regardless of who is doing it how it is done, or why it is happening.<sup>1,2,6,10,13</sup> It increases both sadness, and anger.<sup>5,13</sup>

Ostracized individuals and groups embark on two general routes to rebound from the pain.<sup>6,8</sup> The first route is aimed at fortifying belonging and self-esteem, and reducing sadness. Ostracized individuals are especially attentive to social information, engage in subtle nonconscious behaviors that endear themselves to others, are more likely to conform to others' incorrect perceptions, donate money to compliance professionals, and fall under the spell of authoritative influence, as long as being influenced by others implies acceptance.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Ostracized individuals and groups are easy prey for con artists, extremists groups and cults, or anyone else who lavishes on them attention and praise. They are in need of positive attention, and consequently, will lower their acceptability thresholds of others which whom they choose to associate.<sup>9</sup>

The second route is aimed at fortifying control and recognition, and satisfying anger. Many studies have observed anger and hostility following ostracism, exclusion, and rejection. These acts quickly bestow a sense of power and importance to the individuals and groups who were previously rendered powerless by being ignored and shunned. The more that ostracism thwarts a sense of control, the more likely aggression will follow.<sup>5,7</sup> The diaries of thirteen of fifteen school shooters reveal that they were ostracized and rejected prior to the shooting.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the research on ostracism, social exclusion, and rejection has focused on the individual.<sup>9</sup> But groups are ostracized, too. In high schools, the majority ostracizes stigmatized groups; dominant societal groups ostracize minorities and immigrant groups; the global community ostracizes politically unpopular groups. How do groups, in comparison to individuals, respond to ostracism? Research suggests there is a “discontinuity” between individual-individual expectancies and reactions and group-group expectancies and reactions. Whereas individuals are more likely to trust other individuals and engage in cooperation, groups are more likely to distrust groups, and engage in competition and aggression.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, ostracized group members forge strong bonds among themselves.<sup>14</sup>

### Recommendations and applications

- 1) Individuals who feel ostracized within their social environment are socially susceptible to groups who express interest in them, who elevate their sense of self-worth, and who give them the means to exert social control over others. They may be more likely to join terrorist groups who make them feel important and essential to the cause.
- 2) Individuals who are ostracized to the point of expecting little chance for re-inclusion are more likely to seek opportunities to exert social control and achieve recognition. For them, it is better to be noticed and thought of as a force to be reckoned with than to be liked. A means to exert control and be noticed can often be most quickly accomplished through anti-social, aggressive, or violent acts. These acts command instantaneous attention and fear, if not respect.
- 3) Members of ostracized groups forge strong bonds among themselves, elevating their trust of and obligation to each other. They are more likely than individuals to perceive other groups as unworthy of trust and cooperation, and better dealt with through aggression and violence.

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