OSTRACISM IS LOST IN TRANSLATION

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Abstract

How do you feel when people around you start conversing in a language you do not understand? In addition to feeling ostracized, you may also wonder if they are talking about you. Participants were either talked to or not talked to in three different language conditions: English, English-Chinese, and Chinese. Participants experienced more distress when being ostracized than included by English, but they found inclusion more distressing than ostracism by English-Chinese. Additionally, more paranoid attributions were made by participants who were included, rather than ostracized by those speaking an unfamiliar language. This study is the first to show that, under some exceptional circumstances, it is worse to be included than ostracized.

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Mentor

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OSTRACISM IS LOST IN TRANSLATION:

When Being Ignored and Excluded Does Not Matter

Han Kang, Psychological Sciences

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a group of lions, a pride, living together as a big family. A lion kicked out by its pride will soon suffer from food deprivation and loneliness. The only way to survive is to find another pride, either by joining one that existed previously, or building a brand new one. Human beings often feel rejected when remaining unnoticed not only by strangers we know nothing about, but also by friends and family members we know so well. Social butterflies are not always the center of attention. Teenagers may be left out by their friends who attend an interesting event without them. A couple dealing with a disagreement might ignore and not speak to each other for a few months. Ostracism is everywhere.

Ostracism—being ignored and excluded—is a phenomenon that occurs among all social animals (Figure 1). Until the mid-1990s, it had not received much attention from social psychologists (Williams, 2001). Since then, over one hundred research publications have examined many facets of ostracism (also called exclusion and rejection), resulting in a better understanding of its effects on human physiology, emotion, cognition, and behavior (Williams, 2007). Regardless of how ostracism is manipulated or in what context, to date all studies indicate that ostracism causes more distress than inclusion (Williams, 2009).

Williams (1997; 2009) developed a Temporal Need-Threat Model which argues that ostracism is first detected quickly and crudely. It takes the slightest representation of ostracism allowing for frequent over-detection. Whether or not it is rational to feel distressed by ostracism, it nevertheless causes pain. Williams's model asserts that

being ostracized threatens four fundamental human needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. Short-term effects of ostracism include fortifying saliently threatened needs and reestablishing inclusionary status. Ostracism over a long period of time deprives individuals of the resources necessary for fortifying threatened needs, resulting in alienation, depression, and helplessness.

Ostracism by language (or linguistic ostracism) is relatively a new paradigm of ostracism. As defined by Dotan-Eliaz, Sommer, and Rubin (2009), linguistic ostracism is a situation in which two or more people converse in a language that others around them cannot understand. In the few studies examining linguistic ostracism, it has been found that ostracized targets

Figure 1. Humans are not the only animals to live profound social lives.

experienced more negative emotions, less competence, and formed negative impressions of the ostracizers (Dotan-Eliasz et al., 2009). In a similar study, linguistically included participants reported higher levels of organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors than excluded participants. In addition, participants who had been excluded linguistically expressed higher levels of threat and prejudice against immigrants than those who had been included (Hitlan, Kelly, Schepman, Schneider, & Zárate, 2006).

The purpose of the current research is to examine the effects of linguistic ostracism and inclusion on individuals' fundamental needs, moods, antisocial thoughts, paranoid attributions, and cognitive performance. I hypothesized that being ostracized by people speaking a foreign language would result in greater psychological distress than being ostracized by people speaking in one's own language, because the target (the individual who had been ostracized) could still have some amount of explanatory control over the situation by understanding the content of others' conversations. Contrary to other published studies on ostracism, however, I also hypothesized that being included by people speaking a foreign language would result in higher levels of distress, desired aggression, and paranoia than being ostracized by people speaking a foreign language. The target may assume that others were saying something derogatory and perceive the inclusion as extremely offensive. Participants' memory performance was tested without specific predictions, but with the general expectation that with distress, performance would suffer (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008).

METHOD

Participants and Design

One hundred twenty-two Purdue University undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology participated in the study as part of a course requirement and were assigned to a 2 (inclusion/ostracism) $\times$ 3 (English/English-Chinese/Chinese) between-S design. There were two factors (independent variables) in this design, the ostracism condition and the language condition. The combination of each level of one factor to each level of the other factor produced six different situations. Each participant was only assigned to one of the six scenarios, and no one was ever allowed to participate in this experiment more than once.

Procedure

Participants were ostracized or included by two confederates (student assistants pretending to participate in the same study session) who either conversed

(following a general script about what classes they were taking, their schedules for a coming vacation, and their families and hometowns) only with each other or also with the participant. Language condition was manipulated by whether the confederates spoke English (the language of the participants) or Chinese. In the two foreign language conditions, confederates either only spoke Chinese, or else they first spoke English, and then shifted to Chinese.

Manipulation checks were used to confirm the validity of present paradigm. We wanted to make sure that the manipulation of the ostracism condition (by being talked to or not being talked to) and the manipulation of the language condition (by confederates' speaking language) worked the way they were supposed to work. For one thing, participants should be aware of whether or not they were ostracized. For another, the speaking language of confederates should be noticed by participants.

The dependent variables (e.g., the effects of the inclusion or ostracism that we measured) were participants' distress, antisocial thoughts, and paranoid attributions, all assessed on a computer. Manipulation checks (e.g., "To what extent do you remember other people looking at you while you were waiting"; "To what extent do you remember other people speaking English to you while you were waiting"; "I felt ignored"; "I felt excluded"), distress (e.g., "I felt disconnected to the group"; "My self-esteem was high"; "I had control over the course of the conversation"; "I felt invisible"), antisocial thoughts (e.g., "Shouting or yelling at another person"; "Throwing something at another person that could hurt him or her"; "Slapping another person"), and paranoid attributions (e.g., "To what extent were you suspicious that others were talking about you"; "To what extent were you suspicious that others were laughing at/speaking ill of you"; "To what extent do you agree that other people had the conversation because they are mean-spirited") were all assessed using 5-point scales from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

In each experimental session, one participant who did not speak Chinese was in a room with two Chinese confederates. Participants were told that we were interested in examining the effects of emotion on memory but needed another 5 minutes to set up. They were asked to wait quietly in the room. Depending upon the condition to which each participant had been assigned, our confederates began to chat either with each other or with the participant in English only, English at first and then switched to Chinese, or just Chinese. The experimenter returned to the room after 5 minutes and delivered a brief instruction for the experiment coming next. The two confederates then followed her out, pretending to go to a different lab. Participants were left alone to complete

follow-up questionnaires. The questionnaires were always presented in a fixed order. Items within each questionnaire were presented in a randomized order. A hidden camera was used to videotape each session. Participants were fully debriefed after finishing all questions.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Participants better remembered others speaking English when confederates spoke English only than when they shifted from English to Chinese, and when confederates spoke English to Chinese compared to Chinese only. They better remembered confederates looking at them under the condition of inclusion rather than ostracism. Participants also reported greater perceptions of being ignored and excluded when they were ostracized rather than when included.

Psychological Distress

Distress was measured by the extent to which participants' fundamental needs were satisfied after the conversations. Less satisfaction of the needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence served as our measure of distress. By examining only the effects of language condition, regardless of whether people were ostracized or included, we found no overall effects. As with prior studies, participants experienced more distress when being ostracized than included by English only. But, contrary to existing literature, participants reported less distress when being ostracized than included when the confederates first spoke English, then shifted to Chinese. See Figure 2.

Antisocial Thoughts

Analyses revealed both the language condition and the ostracism condition had a significant effect on antisocial thoughts. Participants reported being more tempted to behave antisocially toward the confederates when Chinese was the only language spoken, and also when they were included rather than ostracized. However, the interaction between the language and ostracism conditions was not significant. See Figure 3.

Paranoid Attributions

Paranoid attributions were an integration of three individual scales—"I was suspicious that others were talking about me"; "I was suspicious that others were laughing at/speaking ill of me"; and "I agree that others had the conversation because they are mean-spirited." The language condition particularly affected paranoid attributions. Participants were more likely to make paranoid attributions both in the English-Chinese condition and the Chinese-only condition, compared to

the English-only condition. The ostracism condition also significantly affected paranoid attributions. Unexpectedly, more paranoid attributions were made when participants were included than when ostracized, and there was no interaction found between the language and ostracism conditions on paranoid attributions. See Figure 4.

DISCUSSION

As with past research, when ostracized during a conversation, participants felt more negative reactions than when they were included. However, if the other people are speaking a foreign language, in this case Chinese, then inclusion resulted in more distress than ostracism. These results point to an important boundary condition for the general view that inclusion is better than ostracism. Apparently, being talked to and "included" by foreign language speakers is more distressing than being ignored by those foreign language speakers. Previous research on linguistic ostracism failed to include this condition, leading to the general conclusion that all forms of inclusion are less distressing than any form of ostracism.

The other prediction made was that being included by people speaking an unfamiliar language would result in higher levels of desired aggression and paranoid attributions than being ostracized by people speaking in an unfamiliar language. This prediction was firmly supported by present findings. When being included by Chinese only rather than by English only, participants were more tempted to hurt the others and make the others uncomfortable. Speaking an unfamiliar language to someone apparently violates a social norm, which in turn evoked antisocial impulses.

More paranoid attributions were made under the conditions of English-Chinese and Chinese only than English only. As participants had no idea what the two confederates were saying, they appeared to have assumed that the others were talking about or even speaking ill of them. Things turned worse when Chinese was spoken given the condition of inclusion instead of ostracism. Participants' suspicion that the other two students were discussing a topic closely relevant to them was confirmed this time because they were directly talked to. Perhaps they felt that others were teasing them in a foreign language. Further research needs to assess their thought processes during this condition.

General Discussion

Language is a new domain of ostracism research that occurs in everyday life and has special relevance to immigrants. To our surprise, the present findings neither show similar effects to previous research that also uses a

Figure 2. Participants experienced more distress when being ostracized by English only, but less distress when being ostracized than included by English-Chinese.

Figure 3. Participants were more tempted to behave antisocially toward the others when being included than ostracized, and when Chinese was the only language spoken.

Figure 4. More paranoid attributions were made by participants who were included, rather than ostracized by those speaking English-Chinese and Chinese only.

language paradigm nor are they exactly consistent with our hypotheses. Nevertheless, the current study expands ostracism theory to areas such as inclusion by a foreign language and paranoid attributions. In this case, ostracism by an unfamiliar language does not appear to be more hurtful than ostracism by an understandable language. But inclusion by an unfamiliar language is definitely more distressing than ostracism by an unfamiliar language.

While distressing, responses to ostracism are not severe. In today's modern global climate, the possibility of meeting foreigners who have no knowledge of one language or another is growing at a fantastic speed. This study demonstrates that it is better to leave an individual alone if we cannot speak his or her native language or a language he or she is able to understand. The individual will not feel particularly distressed when being ostracized by us speaking a language foreign to them, but they may have antisocial thoughts against us and question our motivation and personality if we try to speak to them first, even though all we mean to do is to show our respect and concern.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has three major limitations. First of all, confederates were not blind to condition. Four international undergraduates were recruited as research assistants to work in dyads. Their job was either to ostracize participants from or to include participants in conversations by either English or Chinese, according to the condition each participant was assigned. After receiving quick training and practicing for a week, our confederates became quite familiar with their scripts as well as all six conditions. Although all conversations between confederates and their interactions with participants were based on formulated scripts, previously knowing which condition a participant was in could influence confederates' verbal and nonverbal behaviors, such as tones, accents, gestures, and facial expressions. Furthermore, confederates were not given training in looking at each participant for the same amount of time. Future research may consider using a video-chat paradigm instead.

Second, attributions and other variables could have been affected specifically by United States stereotypes of Chinese people. Thus, generalizations to other forms of foreign speakers should be made with caution.

Third, a hidden camera was used, but there were no signals showing whether the camera was on or off. Researchers were unable to tell if an experiment had been properly videotaped until connecting it to the computer afterward. Although many successfully videotaped

sessions showed a rich array of nonverbal, paraverbal, and verbal responses to the various conditions, too many sessions were unsuccessful to warrant analysis. Follow-up research would benefit from these analyses, so better control over the hardware is suggested.

CONCLUSIONS

Although follow-up research is needed, the present research establishes that people can feel ostracized through conversations, but that the language used in the conversation can alter their feelings of distress. Apparently, and for the first time, this research indicates an exception to the rule that ostracism is always worse than inclusion. If others are speaking a foreign language, individuals unfamiliar with that language may wish to be ignored and excluded from those conversations rather than being subjected to awkward and ambiguous inclusion.

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