Ostracism and extremism: How extreme groups can address threatened needs

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1

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How Extreme Groups Can Address Threatened Needs

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1.1 Introduction

Humans are fundamentally social, so it is not surprising that people are drawn to associating with groups. Typically, the groups people seek out are ordinary organizations or loose associations that serve good ends in reasonable ways. However, some groups are morally questionable, and others may even be extreme. Be it in their beliefs (say, that the Earth is flat), their advocacy (say, overthrowing the government), or the requirements imposed on their members (say, strict dress codes or heavy monetary contribution), some groups are just *out there*. Why, then, would humans want to participate in such non-normative and extreme organizations?

There is, of course, no single answer to this question. However, a number of critically important factors have been identified. One factor that appears to play an important role in motivating people to explore, and perhaps join, extreme groups is the experience of having been recently (or chronically) *ostracized*. The fact that humans are fundamentally social not only drives group affiliation in the first place but may also cause people to feel especially hurt in response to even minor signs of exclusion, which could cause them to entertain participating in groups that would otherwise be unappealing.

In this chapter, we address the relationship between social ostracism and extremism. We first review the temporal need-threat model of ostracism and examine its predictions for why ostracism could stoke in its targets a desire to affiliate with extreme groups. We then review the existing empirical evidence for the effect of ostracism on openness to extremism. This tendency for ostracism to open people up to extremism likely depends on many factors, so we also consider some important potential moderating factors and the theoretical reasons to expect them to affect when and how ostracism leads to extremism. Finally, we switch perspective and consider the possibility – and corresponding evidence – that participating in extremism may, unhelpfully, lead one to encounter yet more ostracism from nonextremists.

7

1.2   Temporal Need-Threat Model of Ostracism

To understand how ostracism can motivate interest in extremism, it is helpful to review a theoretical framework that explains how people respond to ostracism in general. The temporal need-threat model of ostracism provides a complete and coherent framework for understanding how responses to ostracism unfold following ostracism (Williams, 2009). The model defines ostracism as any instance of being ignored and excluded by an individual or group, and outlines how reactions to ostracism unfold over three stages. Ostracism can be thought of as a type of social exclusion, in which people are kept apart from others (Wesselmann et al., 2016). It has similarities to related experiences like being explicitly rejected, but its core feature is that it entails being ignored and excluded. In this chapter we focus specifically on social ostracism, as it is known specifically to threaten a cluster of needs that are relevant to the radicalization process.

First, in the *reflexive stage*, individuals become aware of the ostracism and experience immediate pain, negative emotions, and threats to their fundamental psychological needs, including belonging, self-esteem, control, meaningful existence, and certainty (Hales & Williams, 2021). As the name of the stage suggests, this ostracism-induced pain signal is reflexive and automatic, detected quickly and crudely (Zadro et al., 2004). As such, ostracism is experienced as painful – at least initially – in a variety of situations in which one would logically expect it not to hurt. Being ostracized hurts even when it is delivered by entirely unknown strangers online for a period of just a few minutes (Williams et al., 2000). It hurts even when it is delivered from a despised out-group (Fayant et al., 2014; Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007), when it costs money to be included (van Beest & Williams, 2006), and when the agent of exclusion is nonhuman such as a computer or a pet (Jauch et al., 2022; Richman, 2020; Zadro et al., 2004). And people feel negatively in response to not only everyday forms of ostracism such as being explicitly excluded (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2021) but also subtle ignoring such as not being looked in the eye (Wesselmann, Cardoso, et al., 2012; Wirth et al., 2010), or being ignored while people look at their phones (Hales et al., 2018). This hyperresponsive tendency is understandable from an evolutionary perspective. Being an outcast would have had devastating effects on the survival and reproductive fitness of ancestral humans; it would cut them off from the cooperative benefits of group living and from potential mating partners. So there is adaptive value in a strong and unignorable signal that one is being left out, as it could alert one to the need to repair relations with the ostracizing group, or to find a new group with which to affiliate (Kerr & Levine, 2008; Wesselmann, Nairne, et al., 2012). The cost of under-detecting ostracism by not recognizing when one is being left out could have been ultimately fatal. In contrast, the cost of over-detecting ostracism would have been relatively

minimal. For these reasons, ostracism in the *reflexive* stage is strongly painful and indiscriminate to specific details of the exclusion.

Second, in the *reflective stage*, individuals consider the causes and implications of the ostracism and are motivated to restore their threatened psychological needs. In this stage, people tend to seek out attributions for why the ostracism occurred and engage in the process of recovering their threatened psychological needs (Williams, 2009). In contrast to the immediate reflexive stage – in which responses to ostracism tend to be indiscriminately strong – people's speed of recovery in the reflective stage may be more variable and depend on individual difference variables (e.g., dispositional anxiety; Zadro et al., 2006), situational variables (e.g., whether an audience witnesses the exclusion; Hales et al., 2021), and behavioral variables (e.g., rumination, self-affirmation; Hales et al., 2016; Wesselmann et al., 2013). A key element of the reflective stage is that individuals are *motivated* to restore their basic needs. This may take the form of engaging in behaviors that restore liking and belonging from others (i.e., behaving prosocially to be reincluded; e.g., Riva et al., 2014) or engaging in behaviors that bestow a sense of power, significance, and control (i.e., behaving provocatively even if antisocially; e.g., Maner et al., 2007; Ren et al., 2018). We will see that this motivated state induced by ostracism can have the potential to leave people more open to extremism.

Third, in the final *resignation stage*, if ostracism persists, and if individuals are unable to restore their basic psychological needs, they are theorized to experience alienation, unworthiness, helplessness, and depression. Correlational evidence indicates that people who are chronically ostracized report higher levels of these negative outcomes (Riva et al., 2017). Longitudinal studies further indicate that experiencing ostracism predicts subsequent diagnoses of depression (Rudert et al., 2021) and also more lasting feelings of alienation, unworthiness, and helplessness (Marinucci & Riva, 2021).

1.3   Ostracism and Extremism

To address the question of whether ostracism can leave people more susceptible to extremism, we first address the theoretical rationale for such a connection, and then the empirical evidence for such a link. In this chapter, we refer to extremism as a belief, attitude, intention, or behavior that is rare (i.e., numerically uncommon) and nonnormative (i.e., the opposite of moderation). Furthermore, extremism is motivational, suggesting that there is an end goal to the belief, attitude, intention, or behavior.

1.3.1   Theoretical Rationale

As outlined earlier, the temporal need-threat model posits a *motivational* response to ostracism. When people experience the threat to basic needs that

is caused by ostracism, they are then motivated to restore those needs. It follows that if extreme groups offer a pathway to restore these needs, they will be especially attractive to those who have been ostracized. And indeed, theorists have reasoned this is the case (Knapton, 2014; Pfundmair et al., 2022; Wesselmann & Williams, 2010; Williams et al., 2019).

Just as a state of food deprivation (hunger) could cause someone to be open to a wider range of foods than they would ordinarily find appetizing, so could a state of social deprivation (ostracism) lead people to be open to a wider range of social connections than they would ordinarily entertain (an analogy that is helpfully suggested by the concept of *social snacking*; Gardner et al., 2005). From this perspective, being ostracized may induce a sort of social indiscrimination, in which people affiliate with any group that will have them, even if it is an extreme group (Williams et al., 2019).

However, there are also reasons to think that extreme groups are not just sufficient to people who have been ostracized but perhaps even especially appealing. Extreme groups have many properties that could make them especially well suited to address each of the basic needs threatened by ostracism.

1.3.1.1   Belonging

Extreme groups may be an especially powerful source of belonging for a variety of reasons. They may be seen as more selective, such that when one is included, the sense of belonging is felt more powerfully (and cognitive dissonance processes may cause greater loyalty to the group, justifying the effort one had to endure to be accepted). This dynamic may operate in groups such as small extreme religious organizations that shower members with positive affection when they conform to norms but harshly punish them when they deviate, producing a cycle where the group serves as a powerful, but monopolistic, source of belonging (Parsons, 1986; Venter, 1998). Basic research has experimentally documented an analogous effect: When individuals initially experience ostracism by a group before being welcomed into it, they ultimately identified more strongly with the group and were more willing to take risks on its behalf than those who were initially included (i.e., without the selective ordeal at the beginning; Dahl et al., 2019). Moreover, because extreme groups are often more entitative (i.e., seen as more cohesive and uniform; see Section 1.3.1.5), they may offer an especially powerful sense of belonging. In sum, extreme groups can be seen as a potent source of belonging – at least provided the individual is able to gain inclusion.

1.3.1.2   Self-Esteem

People want to belong to groups. But they also often want to belong to not just any group, but ones that allow them to identify as having a sense of optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991; Leonardelli et al., 2010). One way

this can be achieved is by identifying with groups that are numerically distinct, or that are "strongly differentiated from the mainstream" (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004, p. 251). By definition, extreme groups are distinctive and separate from the mainstream, so they could be a powerful source of feeling positively distinctive. And, indeed, political extremists tend to endorse a form of high self-esteem: the belief that their political views are *superior* to the views of others (Toner et al., 2013). Likewise, extreme groups may project a sense that they are superior to more moderate counterparts, and such superiority could be an attractive source of self-esteem. Extreme groups could thus induce in people a sense of positive distinctiveness, relative to more moderate groups that hold similar views, but in less extreme ways.

1.3.1.3 Control

Extreme groups tend to be not just numerically distinct but also are often willing to engage in a wider range of actions to achieve their goals. Thus, they might be seen as more capable of realizing the changes that they would like to see, making them especially well suited to providing a sense of control. In short, extreme groups may be seen as more likely to make a difference. This may be especially operative in a political context – if people sense the prior, more moderate methods of social engagement have not produced the desired outcome, they could be drawn to groups that endorse more extreme methods, even if these methods are ultimately counterproductive (Simpson et al., 2018). Recent research attests to the operative role of *control* specifically in understanding the appeal of extremism, as it was found to mediate the link between ostracism and endorsement of the use of violence to support a cause (Pfundmair, 2019).

1.3.1.4 Meaningful Existence

One reason ostracism is so distressing is that it causes one to experience a moment of invisibility, a glimpse of what the world would be like if they did not exist at all, as if they were socially dead (Hales, 2018). This is a surreal feeling of nonexistence, and it motivates people to feel as if they matter to the world, and that things are different because they are here. In short, it makes people feel insignificant and provokes the need to matter. The significance quest theory (Ellenberg & Kruglanski, this volume; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber & Kruglanski, 2018) articulates that this can be a driving factor in what motivates extremism: people become extreme to realize a more significant impact on the world around them, and to have this significance recognized in the eyes of others. Compared to moderate groups, extreme groups are more likely to engage in the sort of provocative and impactful actions that bestow a sense of significance (in the sense of being noticed by others).

1.3.1.5   Certainty

Ostracism has been shown to make people feel uncertain about the situation and themselves (Hales & Williams, 2018; Williams et al., 2019). Extreme groups are theorized to be especially effective at helping people restore a sense of certainty. According to uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007), people are motivated to identify with groups not only for a sense of belonging and esteem but also to provide a sense of certainty. Groups, in general, can provide a prototypical template of what is normal and expected. Extreme groups, in particular, tend to be especially well suited for this, at least in part because they are highly *entitative*. That is, they are perceived as an entity, and one that has clear boundaries and behavior prescriptions for its members. Because of this, extreme groups may be especially capable of providing a sense of certainty (Gaffney et al., 2014; Hogg, 2014; Wagoner & Hogg, this volume) and thus especially attractive following ostracism.

1.3.2   Empirical Evidence

Experimental investigations of ostracism and its effects often use a paradigm known as Cyberball (Williams et al., 2000; Williams & Jarvis, 2006). In Cyberball, participants are led to believe that they are playing an online ball tossing game with (typically) two other real players; however, in reality they are virtual confederates programmed to behave in a certain way. For participants randomly assigned to an inclusion condition, the other two players include the participant in the game evenly. In the ostracism condition, the other two players throw the ball to the participant a few times early on but then, without explanation, leave the participant out of the rest of the game. Cyberball reliably induces feelings of ostracism, pain, negative affect, and threats to the fundamental needs (Hartgerink et al., 2015).

Research using Cyberball has shown that being ostracized can increase interest in extreme groups. In one direct test of this hypothesis, researchers first experimentally manipulated ostracism using Cyberball and then measured participants' openness to an extreme group on campus: an advocacy group pushing for reducing tuition (Hales & Williams, 2018). This group used legal but extreme means to pursue its cause (e.g., blockading campus). Participants who had been ostracized indicated greater openness to attending a meeting of this group. A second study – again manipulating ostracism with Cyberball – measured participants' openness to joining a gang, which was defined for them as "A group of people who spend a lot of time together, normally engaged in delinquent acts. They have a strong sense of identity and are affiliated with a specific cause." Again, participants who had been ostracized indicated a greater openness to the idea of participating in a gang (Hales & Williams, 2018).

Additional research also finds evidence for an effect of ostracism on openness to extremism in general (Pfundmair, 2019). For example, following

Cyberball, when asked directly which actions participants would support in favor of an endorsed cause, ostracism elicited greater endorsements of more extreme actions (e.g., threats of violence). In a second study (using a different, but related, ostracism paradigm in which participants are ostracized via video call), ostracism led to greater willingness to commit property damage on behalf of animal rights advocacy – an effect that was mediated by ostracized participants' threatened sense of control (Pfundmair, 2019).

Other studies have also found evidence for such a connection between ostracism and extremism, though looking specifically at attitudes and beliefs. When participants were ostracized in Cyberball, they subsequently reported attitudes more consistent with those of a radical left-wing group they had read about (Bäck et al., 2018), and this effect was especially strong for those who are highly sensitive to rejection. Ostracism also caused religious participants to endorse more fundamentalist beliefs (Schaafsma & Williams, 2012), but only when they were ostracized specifically by religious in-group members (not out-group members who presumably would not have shared those beliefs). These findings emphasize the importance of moderators in understanding the ostracism extremism link, which we turn to now.

1.4   Unexplored Moderators

As discussed throughout this chapter so far, there is evidence that ostracism can elicit extremism *on average* (i.e., as an overall main effect). Recently, researchers have begun to explore moderators effecting this effect, such as rejection sensitivity (Knapton et al., 2015; Renström et al., 2020; Renström & Bäck, this volume). However, there are many potential individual and contextual factors that could influence the effect of ostracism on extremism that have yet to be investigated. One unresearched variable that we finding particularly interesting is the identity of the ostracism source, specifically their relationship to the target. This section explores the potential of this moderator and gives examples of how it may play out in ostracism/extremism research.

Ostracism research suggests that the identity of the source of the ostracism and its relationship with the target matters, particularly when examining ostracism recovery/coping (Williams, 2009). For example, while ostracism is still painful when the source is an out-group member – even a despised out-group (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007) – the experience hurts more when being ostracized by an in-group member (Bernstein et al., 2010). Past empirical work suggests that while nearly all experiences of ostracism hurt, relationship dynamics between the source and target could further influence this effect.

Furthermore, this factor may be influential when examining how ostracism can lead to aggression in general. After experiencing ostracism, people who need to continue interacting with the ostracism source in the future are more likely to act antisocially, whereas those who will interact with someone who is

not the ostracism source may choose to act prosocially in order to be included (Ren et al., 2018). Ostracism may elicit aggression only toward the source, usually through experimental aggression paradigms like administering a loud noise blast (e.g., Chen et al., 2012) or giving hot sauce to their interaction partner (e.g., Warburton et al., 2006). However, a more extreme reaction of ostracism would be to view the source as a prototype and to react aggressively toward those whom the target sees as a representation of the source. School shootings are an example of this occurrence. In an examination of school shootings between 1995 and 2001, Leary and colleagues (2003) found that most of the perpetrators were teased/bullied (e.g., ostracized; also see Kowalski & Leary, this volume). While the bullies were often targeted victims in the shootings, sometimes the victims were other students, maybe those who reminded the shooter of the bullies.

But would this factor influence the effect of ostracism on extremism? Theorizing about extremism suggests this would be the case. For example, people may radicalize due to grievances, such as personal victimization or victimization from a group (e.g., ostracism; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Furthermore, Borum (2014) highlights how people may over-detect grievous intent (i.e., hostile attribution bias), which may lead them to react more antisocially and perhaps even extremely so. Extreme narratives may justify grievances and provide a road map for how they should be avenged. Indeed, believing that terrorists have valid grievances is associated with support for violence (Cherney & Murphy, 2019).

Thus, we could hypothesize that the source identity and relationship to the target could influence the effect of ostracism on extremism. Perhaps the type of source could affect the dimension of one's radicalization or affect the extent to which one radicalizes. In the following subsections we consider a couple of examples of this unexplored moderator that we find most promising.

1.4.1 Potential Romantic versus Platonic Ostracism Source

People approach social interactions expecting to be included (Wesselmann et al., 2017). And when one is included, relationship partners help satisfy our psychological needs and achieve our goals (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Orehek & Forest, 2016). However, ostracism is a painful experience even when the source is a stranger – and most ostracism experiences are by acquaintances or strangers (Nezlek et al., 2015). Furthermore, the majority of the ostracism literature involves ostracism by strangers whom the target will never see again – perhaps because it is easy to study in a lab – and little research has investigated the effect of being ostracized by current close others, although the results of research examining exclusion by a close other versus stranger are mixed (Blackhart et al., 2009; Snapp & Leary, 2001). Some lines of research suggest that ostracism hurts more when the source and target are close (Nezlek

et al., 2012), maybe because they do not have the defense of uncertainty as they would with a stranger. Others suggest that being ostracized by a stranger hurts just as much as being ostracized by a romantic partner, though being ostracized by a romantic partner causes people to feel less close, less satisfied, and to perceive better alternatives (Arriaga et al., 2014). Others suggest that being ostracized by a stranger threatens needs more than being ostracized by a current friend (Iannone et al., 2014), maybe because there is not an existing relationship available to be a buffer and allow people to devalue rejection because of established good feelings within the relationship.

Research has yet to examine the effect of being ostracized by a *potential* new close other – either a new potential romantic partner or friend. Because being ostracized by friends is more common than being ostracized by a romantic partner (Nezlek et al., 2012), people may expect to be ostracized by acquaintances more so than romantic partners. Similarly, people have more to lose when rejected by a potential romantic partner because a romantic partner typically fulfills more goals and needs than friends or acquaintances (Orehek et al., 2018). Thus, we would hypothesize that being excluded by a potential romantic partner has more negative effects than being excluded by a potential platonic partner, such as reacting with greater aggression/extremism.

This possibility could be extended to examine how being excluded by a potential romantic or platonic partner influences extremism, especially if the exclusion is experienced chronically. In a recent study that used a simulated online dating paradigm, men who were rejected reported greater aggressive tendencies against the potential romantic partners who rejected them (Andrighetto et al., 2019). They also reported greater rape myth beliefs and positive attitudes toward dating violence. Furthermore, people who are high in rejection sensitivity react hostilely after being romantically rejected (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010), and men who are high in rejection sensitivity are more likely to use violence against dating partners (Downey et al., 2000). Thus, being rejected by potential romantic partners (particularly men being rejected by women) could manifest as interest in or support of male supremacy groups (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.) or similar groups such as incels (see Rousis & Swann, this volume). Romantic rejection can also result in extreme violence, like school shootings (Farr, 2019), though peer/platonic rejection is also common among school shooters (Kowalski et al., 2021; Leary et al., 2003). In a study that examined the presence of significance loss in a sample of people who committed ideological crimes, 22 percent of perpetrators had experienced romantic troubles (e.g., rejection) and 12 percent had experienced platonic troubles (Jasko et al., 2017). Both romantic and platonic troubles were significantly associated with extreme violence. Therefore, being excluded by a potential close other – particularly a potential romantic partner – may lead people to radicalize against that ostracizing identity and potentially commit extreme violence.

1.4.2   Higher versus Lower Status Ostracism Source

People have a fundamental need for status – holding respect and good reputation from others (Anderson et al., 2015). Ostracism, as a threatening social experience, may thwart a target's status. In most ostracism experiences, the source and target are of equal social status (Nezlek et al., 2012, 2015), although, anecdotally, ostracizing someone of lower (versus equal or higher) status is easier (Williams et al., 2000). There are many reasons as to why someone may use ostracism as a tool against someone of a different status. Ostracism can be used as a tactic to maintain/protect one's status (e.g., control over the target; Zadro et al., 2014) or to reduce someone else's – even to the point of being less human (Bastian & Haslam, 2010). It can also be used obliviously, in which a high-status person ostracizes someone with lower status because they do not deem that person worthy of their attention (Williams, 2009). Furthermore, ostracism can be used as a means to feeling more powerful, both when a higher status person ostracizes a lower status person (Zadro et al., 2008) and vice versa (Williams et al., 2000). Past research suggests that when people experience socially threatening experiences, those with low or high status are more likely to act aggressively than those with average status (Åslund et al., 2009).

To our knowledge, no research has thoroughly examined the antisocial responses of being ostracized by someone with a lower status. It is thus difficult to establish the effect of this occurrence on extremism. Therefore, we will focus on the experience of being ostracized by a source with a higher status than the target. There is mixed theorizing about the result of a low-status person being ostracized. Perhaps they may act prosocially in order to be reincluded, particularly by those who have higher status (Robinson et al., 2013), or they may be worried about potential repercussions if they enacted revenge (Aquino et al., 2001). On the other hand, research shows that when someone is ostracized by someone of a higher status than their own, they support deviance toward others (Fiset et al., 2017). In general, people often react aggressively when they experience a threat to their social status (e.g., Bosson & Vandello, 2011), which could be further exacerbated by the status of the ostracism source. Perhaps the target acts aggressively in order to restore their threatened status, or as a means of justice/retaliation/revenge for the perceived wrongdoing (Aquino & Douglas, 2003). Furthermore, when people display anger (such as in response to ostracism), they are seen as more competent and given greater social status (Tiedens, 2001), suggesting that this effect may be cyclical.

Lower social status is associated with greater extremism, even extreme violence (Jasko et al., 2017). People may radicalize to see extremism as a means to increase one's social status. Thus, if someone is ostracized by a source that is of a higher status, their own status may be threatened, particularly if status was made salient as the reason for the ostracism. For example, a jihadist may feel that that they are being excluded by Western

society, perhaps via Americans' cruel treatment of Muslim immigrants post-9/11. In turn, the target may see they have nothing to lose and view extremism as a way to restore their status needs (i.e., gain status). In this example, this may look like the jihadist committing an anti-West terrorist attack to gain status from other jihadists. Extremism theories would recognize this type of radicalization as a "status-seeker" (Venhaus, 2010). The target may also radicalize to a worldview in which the enemy is the identity of the ostracism source. For example, a low-income person may feel that they are being excluded from opportunities and institutions because they do not make enough money to be included (e.g., college, loans). If so, they could become radically anti-capitalist and hold extreme beliefs – maybe even commit extreme action – against the people/groups from which they were excluded. Furthermore, someone may join an extremist group as a protective factor against future experiences of being ostracized by a higher status source. Sometimes, extremist groups hold great power within a community, and being a member of the group can not only increase the lower status person's social status but also make them figuratively untouchable within the community (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Overall, the social status of the ostracizer, specifically in reference to the target's social status, may influence one's radicalization. It does seem likely that ostracism can motivate extremism, to some degree, regardless of the status of the ostracizer, but future research should examine whether the strength of this effect depends on status.

1.5   The Reverse Effect: Can Extremism Lead to Ostracism?

Throughout this chapter, we have explored the possibility that ostracism can lead people to engage with extremist and radical ideologies. It is important to note, however, that an effect of ostracism on extremism in no way rules out the possibility of the reverse causal path: perhaps people who engage in extremism are more likely to be ostracized (at least by outsiders who are not associated with the extremist group).

From the perspective of potential ostracizers – or sources – ostracism can be used for a variety of reasons (Hales, Ren, et al., 2016), including motivating individuals to conform to group norms and potentially removing individuals who are both deviant and resistant to conforming. Classic and contemporary research indicates that people with stubbornly atypical opinions are more likely to encounter social rejection (Eidelman et al., 2006; Schachter, 1951; Wesselmann et al., 2014). It is reasonable to expect, then, that becoming known as someone who engages with extreme groups and ideologies could lead one to become ostracized.

Recent research finds direct evidence for this effect (Hales & Williams, 2020). In this research, participants read descriptions of forty different individuals, and for each one learned that the person belongs to a group that either

does or does not engage in extreme actions. Participants reported that they were substantially more willing to ignore and exclude people who were affiliated with groups engaged in extreme actions. Interestingly, this was the case even when the group engaged in extreme actions in support of a prosocial goal such as increasing funding for education (this is because when the group is antisocial, people are more willing to ostracize the target regardless of how the group pursues its goals).

Together with what we have seen in the rest of the chapter, this finding hints at the possibility of a negative spiral in which people may engage with extremism because they are ostracized but, having become more extreme, encounter more ostracism. This could create a negative situation where people become increasingly dependent on extremist groups for their social needs. To our knowledge, no evidence exists showing this process directly. And it is possible that in most cases intervening forces step in before a negative cascade is realized (e.g., close family members notice alarming signals and provide social support). However, given the consequences of this possibility, it is important to understand empirically. Future research should address this question dynamically by studying ostracism and extremist tendencies both over time (to measure downward cascades) and also in networks (to corroborate that ostracism is occurring from the perspective of both sources and targets).

1.6   Conclusion

Ostracism is a painful experience that threatens several fundamental human needs. It is not entirely surprising that it can produce severe outcomes, such as engagement with extremism. In this chapter, we investigated the theoretical and empirical bases for this connection and suggested looking at types of relationships and status as important potential factors influencing ostracism and extremism. Finally, we considered whether extremism can lead to ostracism. Together, the existing research suggests that ostracism is an important factor in extremism dynamics and continues to require further research.

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