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Corresponding Author:

Ayşe K. Uskul

School of Psychology

University of Kent

Canterbury, UK

CT2 7NL

E-mail: [a.k.uskul@kent.ac.uk](mailto:a.k.uskul@kent.ac.uk)

Phone: +44 (0)1277 824071

Fax: +44 (0)1277 827030

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Culture, Social Interdependence, and Ostracism

Ayse K. Uskul<sup>1</sup>

University of Kent

Harriet Over

University of York

### Abstract

Recent research has demonstrated that cultural groups differ in how they experience ostracism and in how they behave in the wake of being ostracized. We review this literature paying particular attention to the role that one key cultural variable, social interdependence, plays in moderating responses to ostracism. Although the data present a complex picture, a growing number of studies have suggested that collectivistic cultures and high levels of social interdependence are associated with less negative responses to ostracism. We review explanations for observed cultural and individual-level differences in responses to ostracism and make a series of suggestions for future research that, we hope, will disambiguate current findings and offer a more nuanced picture of ostracism and the significance of cultural variation inherent within it.

Keywords: culture, social interdependence, ostracism

Word count: 124

Humans attach great importance to belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and this means that ostracism, being excluded or ignored, can be very painful (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Williams, 2007). Indeed, being exposed to even brief periods of ostracism is associated with significant psychological consequences including reductions in self-esteem and a lessened sense that existence is meaningful (Williams, 2007).

Early theorizing argued that immediate reactions to ostracism are not affected by situational factors or individual differences (Williams, 2007). However, a recent meta-analysis challenged this assumption (Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015) and a growing body of research suggests a moderating role of cultural background. We begin by reviewing the literature demonstrating that there are cultural-level group differences in responses to ostracism and then move on to discuss complementary work on the role of individual differences in social interdependence. Following this, we discuss potential mechanisms through which cultural context and social interdependence might shape ostracism responses. We finish by advancing new directions for research on culture, social interdependence and ostracism.

### **Cultural Differences in Responses to Ostracism**

Until recently, ostracism research focused primarily on participants from North America and Western Europe. Ensuring cultural diversity may not have been a priority because it was often assumed that sensitivity to exclusion runs so deep in our evolutionary history that responses to it must be culturally universal (e.g., Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007; Macdonald & Leary, 2005). As a result, research findings reflected the ostracism experiences of individuals who have been socialized in individualistic cultural environments that emphasise personal goals, weaker social interdependence and greater autonomy (Hofstede, 1980;

Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Researchers have now started to investigate whether responses to ostracism show different patterns in collectivistic cultural groups that emphasise collective goals, stronger social interdependence and mutual obligation.

Two competing hypotheses have been put forward in relation to how one of the crucial differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, the extent to which they afford social interdependence, could shape the direction of cultural differences in ostracism responses. One hypothesis is that individuals from cultures that afford high levels of social interdependence will be *more negatively* affected when experiencing ostracism because social bonds are so important to them and thus the risks associated with losing these bonds are paramount (Triandis, 1995). Several studies have provided empirical support for this hypothesis showing that individual-level rejection sensitivity (anxious expectation of being rejected by others) is higher among collectivistic East Asians (Japan and Korea) than individualistic European-Americans (Garris, Ohbuchi, Oikawa, & Harris, 2011; Sato, Yuki, & Norasakkunkit, 2014; Yamaguchi, Kuhlman, & Sugimori, 1995).

A second, less immediately obvious, hypothesis is that individuals within highly interdependent communities will be *less negatively* affected by ostracism because of the nature of their social bonds. A surprising number of studies have supported this latter hypothesis. A series of studies conducted by Pfundmair and colleagues (2015a; see also Graupmann et al., 2016; Pfundmair et al., 2015b) showed that participants from collectivistic cultural groups (Turkey, China, India) were less negatively affected by ostracism than were participants from individualistic cultural groups (Germany, the USA; see also Graupman et al., 2016). This difference was replicated at the physiological level: Chinese participants showed no change in their heart rate following exclusion, whereas German participants showed increased heart rate following social exclusion. Furthermore, German

and American participants showed more negative behavioral intentions to exclusion than inclusion, whereas Turkish and Indian participants did not differ in their behavioral intentions after exclusion and inclusion (Pfundmair et al., 2015b). Finally, German and Austrian participants, but not Chinese participants, reported experiencing lasting feelings of exclusion even once they were reincluded in a group (Pfundmair et al., 2015d). Thus, cultural differences emerged in self-reported well-being and behavioral intentions, as well as in physiological stress experienced immediately following the ostracism incident. Further support comes from developmental research which has shown that children from a highly collectivistic culture (farmers' children) estimate that ostracism would be less painful than do children from a more individualistic culture (herders' children) (Over & Uskul, 2016).

### **The Role of Social Interdependence in Responses to Social Exclusion**

Recent research has also started paying attention to how the ways in which individuals within a given culture construe themselves as connected to others (socially interdependently) versus or as bounded and separate from others (socially independently) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) may be linked to responses to ostracism. For example, in a Chinese sample, more socially interdependent participants showed a better recovery after exclusion than did socially less interdependent participants (Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2013). In two studies on behavioral intentions following ostracism involving different designs, Pfundmair and colleagues (2015b) showed that individuals with a more socially independent orientation showed a more pronounced antisocial reaction to exclusion than inclusion, whereas individuals with a more socially interdependent orientation did not differ in their behavioral intentions after exclusion and inclusion. Finally, in studies examining the effect of social gadgets in the face of ostracism, Pfundmair and colleagues (2015c) found

that without access to a social gadget, participants strongly endorsing social independence showed higher negative affect when excluded than when included, whereas individuals who strongly endorsed social interdependence did not respond differently to exclusion and inclusion. Moreover, for participants who endorsed low levels of social interdependence, a social gadget helped them cope with ostracism; but individuals who endorsed high levels of social interdependence did not benefit from this external boost of social support.

These findings are consistent with the observation made in related literature that having strong social connections has protective effects against ostracism (e.g., Eisenberger, Taylor, Gable, Hilmert, & Lieberman, 2007; Karremans, Heslenfeld, van Dillen, & Van Lange, 2011; Masten, Telzer, Fuligni, Lieberman, & Eisenberger, 2010) and negative experiences more generally (e.g., Kim, Sherman, & Updegraff, 2016). For example, high access to social support reduces neurocognitive activity to social exclusion which in turn is linked with reduced neuroendocrine stress responses (Eisenberger et al., 2007) and collectivism may serve as psychological protection against the threat of disease (Kim et al., 2016).

### **Potential Mechanisms Underlying the Role of Culture and Social Interdependence in Responses to Ostracism**

Why is it that members of collectivistic cultures and those who strongly endorse social interdependence might sometimes be less susceptible to the negative consequences of ostracism? A number of (potentially complementary) explanations have been put forward.

One explanation is based on previous findings showing that individuals tend to activate the social self in the wake of ostracism either through seeking actual social interaction or by thinking of family members or close friends (e.g., Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005; Maner, De Wall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). Because individuals who

strongly endorse social interdependence define themselves primarily through their social connections, it may be that these individuals have more chronic cognitive accessibility to positive social representations which works as a buffer against the negative consequences associated with ostracism (Gardner et al., 2005; Knowles, 2013). Over and Uskul (2016) found indirect support for this explanation: children from a highly collectivistic culture (farmers' children) were more likely to think that an ostracized child would seek social support when faced with ostracism than were children from a less collectivistic culture (herders' children). They also found that the extent to which children anticipated social support seeking mediated the relationship between cultural group and the perceived pain of ostracism.

A second explanation posits that individuals with a strong sense of social interdependence might not perceive ostracism as especially threatening. Incidents that target the self as separate from others are expected to be of lower relevance, making socially interdependent individuals less vulnerable to negative experiences such as ostracism directed to themselves alone. Closely related to this, Fiske and Yamamoto (2005) have suggested that members of collectivistic cultures tend to focus on belonging securely and trust more narrowly (primarily ingroup members, see Yamagishi, 1988) and as a result may show more caution in their responses when ostracized by outgroup members. Support for this explanation was provided by Pfundmair and colleagues (2015a, 2015b) who observed that Indian (collectivistic) participants reported lower threat activation than did German and American (individualistic) participants following exclusion and that threat activation mediated the effect of ostracism (versus inclusion) on need fulfillment and negative behavior. Activation of social content following an exclusion experience did not differ as a function of cultural group. This explanation would also suggest that the

*immediate* reactions to ostracism, that are for example less likely to be subject to reporting biases, by individuals who define themselves in socially interdependent terms should be less negative compared with those who define themselves in socially independent terms.

Pfundmair et al.'s (2015a) observation of no change in heart rate in the Chinese sample following social exclusion also provides supportive evidence that it is likely that this group experienced ostracism as a less stressful incident compared to the German sample who showed increased heart rate following ostracism.

Finally, normative differences in how ostracism is culturally understood may also underlie the differences observed in responses to ostracism across cultural groups. Rudert and Greifeneder (2016) demonstrated that if being ostracized is understood as a violation of an inclusion norm, individuals react negatively. In contrast, if being ostracized is consistent with the prevailing norm, the ostracism situation is interpreted as less threatening and negative reactions are reduced. Thus, the question relevant to the current discussion is whether norms surrounding ostracism in individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ and if so whether these differences might account for the observed cultural variation in responses to ostracism. Future research is needed to investigate this possibility.

### **General Discussion and Future Directions**

The current state of evidence suggests that responses to ostracism differ between individuals from highly socially interdependent groups compared to those from less socially interdependent groups. The nature of the relationship between culture and responses to ostracism is, however, less clear and seems to depend on how ostracism is operationalized and studied. The crucial next step is to identify key moderating variables that determine under which conditions the competing pattern of findings is more likely to occur.

In order to take up this challenge, future research must investigate the following theoretically-guided areas. First, it is important to extend research to more elaborated and extended situations. All research to date has focused on single ostracism events. Way and Lieberman (2010) have suggested that individuals who strongly endorse social interdependence might be protected against one-off negative social experiences due to being part of close-knit social networks, but may be particularly vulnerable to being absolutely disconnected from relationships. This possibility would explain why collectivists show higher rejection sensitivity in general (Garris et al., 2011; Sato et al., 2014; Yamaguchi et al., 1995), as this would help detect instances of ostracism, but this sensitivity might not translate into being threatened by single ostracism events.

Second, it is important to investigate how ostracism is experienced when it originates from close others vs. strangers. In the majority of studies to date, the ostracizers have been individuals unknown to participants or people who did not constitute a well-defined group (for an exception see Uskul & Over, 2014). Because members of collectivistic societies tend to make more clear-cut distinctions between ingroup and outgroup members, feel more concerned about how others treat their social groups, and have lower levels of relational mobility making social bonds more stable and exclusive (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Yuki & Schug, 2012), the heavy reliance of research on unknown others as ostracizers so far may have obscured important cultural differences. Future research should examine whether socially interdependent individuals might be more negatively affected when ostracism comes from ingroup members or close others that matter to them (versus from outgroup members), or when it comes from the entire community (versus a subgroup of individuals within that community).

Third, it will be important to investigate the differences between interpersonal

exclusion and group-level exclusion. In research to date, the target of ostracism has typically been the participant as an individual rather than his or social group (for an exception see Graupmann et al., 2016). Being ostracized as part of a group might be perceived more threatening by individuals who define themselves as socially interdependent. Given these relevant cultural differences, we cannot extrapolate from the current state of the literature to gain insight into how differences in responses to ostracism across cultural groups or levels of social interdependence would appear if studied under different conditions.

Another important consideration is that so far ostracism research designed to examine cultural differences has centered on the role of social interdependence. Although social interdependence is a theoretically relevant aspect of what differentiates cultural groups, it is not the only one. Cultures vary along multiple dimensions and responses to ostracism are likely to be influenced by different social factors including power relations (Hofstede, 1980), social norms (Gelfand, 2012; Park & Killen, 2010) and level of residential (Oishi & Talhelm, 2012) and relational mobility (Yuki & Schug, 2012) in a given culture. A wider approach will assist researchers in understanding the dynamic interplay between the different cultural aspects that shape interpersonal relationships.

Finally, how individuals respond to ostracism when it targets them is one particular aspect of the ostracism process. So far we know very little about how cultures shape how individuals in different cultural groups engage in ostracism (also see Freedman, Williams, & Beer, 2016), which ostracism strategies individuals find most effective and painful (see Kerr & Levine, 2008), how they react when other individuals are ostracized (see Over & Uskul, 2016), and how individuals react to different types of ostracism (e.g., ignoring someone versus actively excluding them, see Molden et al., 2009). Thus, examining ostracism across different cultural groups focusing on different aspects of the ostracism experience from the

target, the source and witness perspective will provide a more comprehensive understanding into the culture-ostracism link.

Overall, the insight gained into cultural differences in responses to ostracism so far and the role social interdependence plays therein gives us a fractional picture of cultural variation in ostracism-related processes and more research is needed to understand how, when, and why cultural differences or similarities emerge.

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### **End Note**

Here we use social exclusion and ostracism interchangeably.

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### Recommended Readings

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- Kitayama, S. & Uskul, A. K. (2011). Culture, mind, and the brain: Current evidence and future directions. *Annual Review of Psychology, 62*, 419-449. (A comprehensive review of culture as collective reality and how it shapes neural processes)
- Williams, K. D. (2007). Ostracism. *Annual Review of Psychology, 58*, 425-452. (A comprehensive review of the social psychological research on ostracism, social exclusion, and rejection.)

**Notes Page**

<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to:

Ayse K. Uskul

School of Psychology

University of Kent

Canterbury, UK

CT2 7NL

E-mail: [a.k.uskul@kent.ac.uk](mailto:a.k.uskul@kent.ac.uk)

Phone: +44 (0)1277 824071

Fax: +44 (0)1277 827030