Original Article

Extremism Leads to Ostracism

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Abstract: Ostracism has been shown to increase openness to extreme ideologies and groups. We investigated the consequences of this openness-to-extremity from the perspective of potential ostracizers. Does openness-to-extremity increase one's prospects of being ostracized by others who are not affiliated with the extreme group? Participants rated willingness to ostracize 40 targets who belong to activist groups that vary in the *type* of goals/cause they support (prosocial vs. antisocial), and the *extremity* of their actions (moderate vs. extreme). Mixed-effects modeling showed that people are more willing to ostracize targets whose group engages in extreme actions. This effect was unexpectedly stronger for groups pursuing prosocial causes. It appears openness-to-extremity entails interpersonal cost, and could increase reliance on the extreme group for social connection.

Keywords: ostracism, sources of ostracism, extreme groups, radicalization

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Humans are social animals, but not indiscriminately so. The practice of ostracism – ignoring and excluding – has been documented across cultures and is used in daily life (Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler, & Williams, 2015). An important aim for ostracism research and theory is to identify which factors might lead certain people, but not others, to be ostracized. In the current research, we propose that *participation in an extreme group* is an important characteristic that elicits ostracism from others. Prior theory and research have examined the potential for targets of ostracism to become more radical in their views and opinions (e.g., Knapton, 2014; Wesselmann & Williams, 2010). Here we explore the reciprocal causal process and ask whether extremism has the ironic effect of rendering the target all the more *ostracizable.*

Ostracism can be unpleasant not only to experience, but also to deliver (e.g., Legate, DeHaan, Weinstein, & Ryan, 2013), which raises the question, *why do people ostracize?* Theoretical perspectives have treated ostracism, and social exclusion more generally, as a tool for protecting groups from individuals who are likely to pose threats to a group (Hales, Ren, & Williams, 2017; Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Correspondingly, research has shown that people direct ostracism toward others who are burdensome (Wesselmann, Wirth, Pryor, Reeder, & Williams, 2015; Wirth, Bernstein, & LeRoy, 2015), and who are disagreeable (and therefore not trusted to cooperate; Hales, Kassner, Williams, & Graziano, 2016). Informed by this research, we suggest that membership in an extreme group is a factor that could lead someone to become ostracized.

Extremism research finds that adherents to extreme ideologies tend to be psychologically distressed, cognitively simplistic, overconfident, and intolerant (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). These are not particularly attractive qualities, and to the extent that people have a lay understanding of these patterns, extremists should be especially vulnerable to ostracism by those outside of their particular ideology. Indeed, research on people's reactions to extreme groups and social movements offers support. For example, extreme social protest movements tend to alienate potential supporters, resulting in diminished support and, ultimately, counter-productive outcomes (Feinberg, Willer, & Kovacheff, 2017).

Additionally, terrorist organizations elicit unfavorable impressions. Observers of terrorism naturally infer not that civilian destruction is a regrettable means to a desired political goal, but rather that civilian destruction is the actual goal of the terrorist group (Abrahms, 2006). Accordingly, people are not sympathetic to terrorist organizations, which contributes to their tendency to fail to achieve their stated political goals. Similarly, knowing that a person belongs to a group that engages in extreme activities – even at sub-terroristic levels – may well produce negative inferences about their dispositions and goals, leading to willingness to ostracize.

Finally, research in the domain of attitudes also suggests that extremism can elicit ostracism. More extreme attitudes are better predictors of behavior than less extreme attitudes (e.g., van Doorn, Verhoef, & Bijmolt, 2007), meaning that observers might rightly suspect that members of extreme groups not only hold deviant views, but act upon them. Further, extreme attitudes have been shown to be more resistant to change (e.g., Lord, Ross, & Lepper 1979; Pomerantz, Chaiken, & Tordesillas, 1995), and are especially

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important to the individual who holds them (Liu & Latané, 1998). This may cause observers to believe that members of extreme groups not only hold distasteful views, but will continue to do so even if reasoned with. Because ostracism is used not only to reject outsiders, but also to eject insiders who are resistant to change (Hales et al., 2017), it is plausible that the resistance to change associated with attitude extremity will cause members of extreme groups to be especially likely to be ostracized. Indeed, classic and contemporary research finds that a group member who persistently holds an atypical opinion elicits social rejection (Eidelman, Silvia, & Biernat, 2006; Schachter, 1951; Wesselmann et al., 2014).

Given prior research on the consequences of ostracism, it is important to understand whether extremism can instigate it. Growing research shows that ostracism can provoke extremism (Hales & Williams, 2018; Pfundmair, 2019; Bäck, Bäck, Altermark, & Knapton, 2018). The possibility that extremism itself produces ostracism has important implications; if belonging to an extreme group makes people more likely to be ostracized by third parties, then the target could potentially become more reliant on the extremist social network, thereby accelerating the radicalization process (Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, Dugas, & Webber, 2017).

We tested whether people would be more willing to ostracize targets who belong to groups that engage in extreme versus moderate actions. In addition to extremity, we also consider the nature of the group's aims, probing whether the effect of extremity itself varies as a function of group prosociality. It is possible that people are quite tolerant of extremism, so long as it is in the service of a cause that they support (i.e., ending poverty). If this is the case, we would expect extremism to elicit ostracism only for groups promoting antisocial, but not prosocial goals. Alternatively, for the reasons outlined above, extremity may itself be distasteful, in which case it should elicit ostracism for groups promoting both antisocial and prosocial goals. To probe these alternative possibilities, our design exposed participants to targets who belong to groups that use either extreme or moderate actions in pursuit of goals that are either generally prosocial or antisocial.

Prior research has examined responses to groups that vary in how extreme their actions are, finding that extremity undermines support for the associated goal/cause (Feinberg et al., 2017). In the present experiment we build on this by (1) directly measuring *intention to ostracize a member of the group*, (2) measuring responses to a wide array of groups, causes and actions, and treating these as random factors, and (3) directly manipulating whether the particular groups support prosocial versus antisocial causes.

The current experiment was preceded by two smaller pilot studies (N = 100, N = 73), in which participants responded to a single vignette of a target belonging to a moderate or extreme group (similar to Hales et al., 2016). Results suggested a willingness to ostracize members of extreme groups relative to moderate groups, d = .52, 95% confidence interval (CI) [.12, .92], and d = .41, 95% CI [−.06, .89]. Full reports of these studies are available at https://osf.io/w84ep/. Given the small sample sizes and limited scope of stimulus materials, the current study was undertaken as a more robust, generalizable, and confirmatory test of the focal hypothesis.

We preregistered our hypotheses, stopping rule, and analysis plan (https://osf.io/jnw42). Study materials, data, and analysis code are available online (https://osf.io/s3bdk).

Method

Participants

College students (total N = 157) responded to an online survey about social interactions for partial course credit. Two respondents provided no ratings, leaving a final sample of 155 (M_{age} = 19.43, SD = 2.02; 53.69% women; 70.47% white). Of these, seven only provided partial responses, which are included in the reported analyses.[1] Each participant was asked to respond to 40 groups, producing a total of 6,057 ratings. Our stopping rule – that collection would continue from time of launch (December 3rd) until the end of the semester (December 7th) – was determined a priori, but our sample size was not, as it was not possible to predict how many would sign up (though we had a rough sense that it would be over 100). A sensitivity power analysis was conducted based on the final sample size and observed variance components (Westfall, Kenny, & Judd, 2014). The final collected sample size provided 80% power to detect an extremity main effect of d = .10 or greater. This is a new paradigm to study ostracism intentions; in our view this effect size is not implausibly large.

Design

Each participant responded to 40 different targets in a 2 × 2 within-subject design in which each target was described as belonging to a group that employs certain

[1] Given ambiguity in the preregistered stopping rule, we also report results excluding these responses (see online supplement).

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Table 1. Descriptions of group goal/causes that were displayed to participants (each participant saw all 40 descriptions, randomly paired with one of the 40 targets and one of the 40 descriptions of actions)

Prosocial	Antisocial
"[Target] belongs to a group that promotes…"	
racial equality	white supremacy
women's rights	men's rights
helping the needy	reducing welfare for the needy
gun-control reform	opposition of gun-control reform
decreasing tuition	increasing tuition
ending fracking and other practices that are bad for the environment	fracking and other practices that are bad for the environment
scientific literacy	the belief that the earth is flat
medical literacy and access	anti-vaccination
pro-gay marriage information	anti-gay marriage information
taking pennies out of circulation in the united states	adding more pennies into circulation in the united states.
greater leniency for marijuana crimes	harsher punishment for marijuana crimes
the responsible consumption of alcohol	prohibition of alcohol
protecting endangered species	large-game poaching
protecting of online data privacy	online data piracy
journalists who share the truth with the public	the end of freedom-of-the press
anti-conspiracy theories	conspiracy theories about the September 11th attacks.
women's equality in the developing world.	limiting women's rights in the developing world.
environmental-protection groups	big oil companies.
holding the tobacco industry accountable	more relaxed standards for the tobacco industry
funding education in the US	defunding education in the United States

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means (either moderate or extreme) to pursue a certain cause (either antisocial or prosocial).

We created 40 different target "shell" descriptions, into which group membership information would be randomly inserted. Each description contained the target's name, personality, interests, and age (randomly 18–22). Target descriptions were designed to include a variety of personalities and interests.

We also created a set of 40 different group causes, each of which was either prosocial or antisocial (see Table 1 for all cause descriptions). To emphasize internal validity, each antisocial cause had a counterpart prosocial cause on the same topic (sharing a row on Table 1). Prosocial and antisocial causes were generated to be face-valid, informed by the political climate, and the views likely to be consensually held among this population.

Finally, we created a set of 40 group actions, each of which was either moderate or extreme (Table 2). Again, to emphasize internal validity, each moderate description had a counterpart that was similar in topic/structure, but more extreme in nature.

Each target description was displayed with one of the 40 group actions, and one of the 40 group causes. Causes and actions were *independently* randomly assigned without replacement, such that participants responded to each target, each cause, and each action once and only once (see Figure 1 for an example trial).

Procedure

Participants were instructed to read the target descriptions, form an overall impression, and rate how likely they would be to ignore/exclude them. They were also told to "please keep in mind, that you are not being asked to judge the morality of each person, only how likely it is that you would ignore/exclude them."

They then responded to all of the 40 targets in random order, each randomly paired with a group-cause and a group-action. On each trial they were asked, "Suppose that [target] has been asking to hang out with you and your friends. How likely is it that you would find yourself ignoring [target]?" and "How likely is it that you would find yourself excluding [target]?" Responses ranged from 1 (= *I would definitely NOT ignore/exclude [target]*) to 10 (= *I would definitely ignore/exclude [target]*). For each trial these two items were averaged into a single index of willingness to ostracize (overall correlation, $r = .84$), with an average overall mean rating near the scale midpoint ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 2.92$).

Analysis

To account for the multiple sources of non-independence, results were analyzed with linear mixed-effect models using the lme4 package in R (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015). We fit an overall model with fixed effects of cause, actions, and their interaction, and random effects of (1) by-participant random intercepts and random slopes of

Table 2. Descriptions of group actions that were displayed to participants (each participant saw all 40 descriptions, randomly paired with one of the 40 targets and one of the 40 descriptions of goals/cause)

Moderate	Extreme
"This group ..."	
requests members to volunteer 5 hours per week	requires members to volunteer 50 hours per week
asks that members visit the headquarters occasionally	insists that members live at the group headquarters
organizes moderate and peaceful rallies	organizes extreme and disruptive rallies
posts advertisements near freeways	blockades freeways
passes out literature at the supermarket	passes out literature at supermarket and shuts it down with protests
writes letters to senators and other lawmakers	writes menacing letters to senators and other lawmakers
sometimes organizes small boycotts	organizes major boycotts, and harassing people who don't comply
asks members to pay $5 every month to remain in good standing	requires members to pay $150 every month to remain in good standing
sends in moderate and well-reasoned letters-to-the-editor at major newspapers	sends in passionate and aggressive letters-to-the-editor at major newspapers
places small advertisements in major newspapers	places full-page advertisements in major newspapers
requests members to wear pins with small logos promoting the cause	requires members to wear clothes with large logos promoting the cause
quietly stops people on the street to spread the message	loudly interrupts public events, like plays and movies, to spread the message
requests members to check in with updates and progress multiple times a year	requires members to check in with updates and progress multiple times a day
requests members to update their contact info	requires members to wear a location tracking monitor
equips members with pamphlets with extra information in case it is necessary during a conversation	equips members with pepper spray in case it is necessary during a rally
request members to put small bumper stickers on cars promoting their cause	requires members to put large graphic window wrap on their cars promoting their cause
requests every member to email 10 friends and family for a go-fund-me campaign	requires every member to email 100 friends and family for a go-fund-me campaign
spreads the message through word of mouth	spreads the message through an aggressive street-marketing campaign
advertises during breaks at major sporting events to promote their message	interrupts major sporting events to promote their message
works with state and local government to promote their cause	rises against state and local government to promote their cause

actions, (2) by-target random intercepts and random slopes of actions, (3) by-cause random intercepts and random slopes of actions, and (4) by-action random intercepts and random slopes of cause. Fixed effects were tested using the Kenward-Roger method for degrees of freedom. As preregistered, we also fit two models testing simple effects of extremity within prosocial groups, and within antisocial groups, each with a fixed effect of actions, and with random effects of (1) by-participant random intercepts and random slopes of actions, (2) by-target random intercepts and random slopes of actions, (3) by-cause random intercepts and random slopes of actions.

Results

Confirmatory Results

Figure 2 displays the results. Overall, targets who belonged to groups that engage in extreme actions elicited greater ostracism intentions than those belonging to more moderate groups, $b = .54$, 95% CI [.33, .75], $F(1, 39.34) = 25.17$, $p < .001$, $d = .18$. There was also a main effect of group cause, with members of antisocial groups eliciting greater ostracism intentions than members of prosocial groups, $b = 2.49$, 95% CI [2.09, 2.88], $F(1, 37.98) = 152.78$, $p < .001$, $d = .85$.

Exploratory Results

The effect of extremity on willingness to ostracize depended on whether the group is prosocial versus antisocial, interaction, $b = -.44$, 95% CI [−.68, −.20], $F(1, 20.73) = 13.16$, $p = .002$, with the effect being significant within groups that promote prosocial causes, $b = .75$, 95% CI [.56, .94], $F(1, 30.36) = 61.04$, $p < .001$, $d = .26$, and also – to a lesser extent – within groups that promote antisocial causes, $b = .34$, 95% CI [.17, .52], $F(1, 12.87) = 15.45$, $p = .002$, $d = .12$.

Exploratory analyses of demographic variables did not find that the effects of extremity depend on age,

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Name: Janessa

Age: 22

Personality: Janessa is very secure, self-confident, and happy with her life.

Group: Janessa belongs to a group that promotes the belief that the earth is flat. This group organizes extreme and disruptive rallies.

Interests: Interior design, and Feng shui.

Cause Information (prosocial or antisocial)

Actions Information (moderate or extreme)

Suppose that Janessa has been asking to hang out with you and your friends.

How likely is it that you would find yourself **ignoring** Janessa?

I would definitely NOT ignore Janessa — I would definitely ignore Janessa

How likely is it that you would find yourself **excluding** Janessa?

I would definitely NOT exclude Janessa — I would definitely exclude Janessa

Figure 1. Example trial (antisocial and extreme group). Note that cause and action information were independently randomly inserted into the description of each of the 40 targets.

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interaction $b = -.08$, 95% CI [−.20, .03], $F(1, 144.10) = 1.97$, $p = .162$, gender, interaction $b = -.03$, 95% CI [−.29, .23], $F(1, 147.80) = .05$, $p = .830$, or self-reported degree of conservatism, interaction $b = -.06$, 95% CI [−.15, .04], $F(1, 147.10) = 1.34$, $p = .249$. However, the willingness to ostracize members of antisocial versus prosocial causes was greater for women than for men, interaction, $b = -.73$, 95% CI [−.96, −.51], $F(1, 5{,}665.00) = 40.73$, $p < .001$, and also greater for relative liberals than relative conservatives, interaction, $b = -.56$, 95% CI [−.64, .48], $F(1, 5{,}666.10) = 180.70$, $p < .001$. Finally, we conducted a series of exploratory robustness checks, all of which continued to show support for key findings (see online description at https://osf.io/jk9cm/).

Discussion

These findings suggest that belonging to an extreme group may increase one's vulnerability to future ostracism. This raises the possibility of a negatively perpetuating cycle in which ostracism drives people to join extreme groups, and once in the extreme group, encounter further ostracism by non-members of the group, which in turn, could motivate deeper reliance on the extreme group. In other words, ostracism experiences could have the potential to ignite a cyclical decline into the depths of dubious groups.

It has been theorized that extremism is caused by an imbalance in which one psychological need (e.g., for

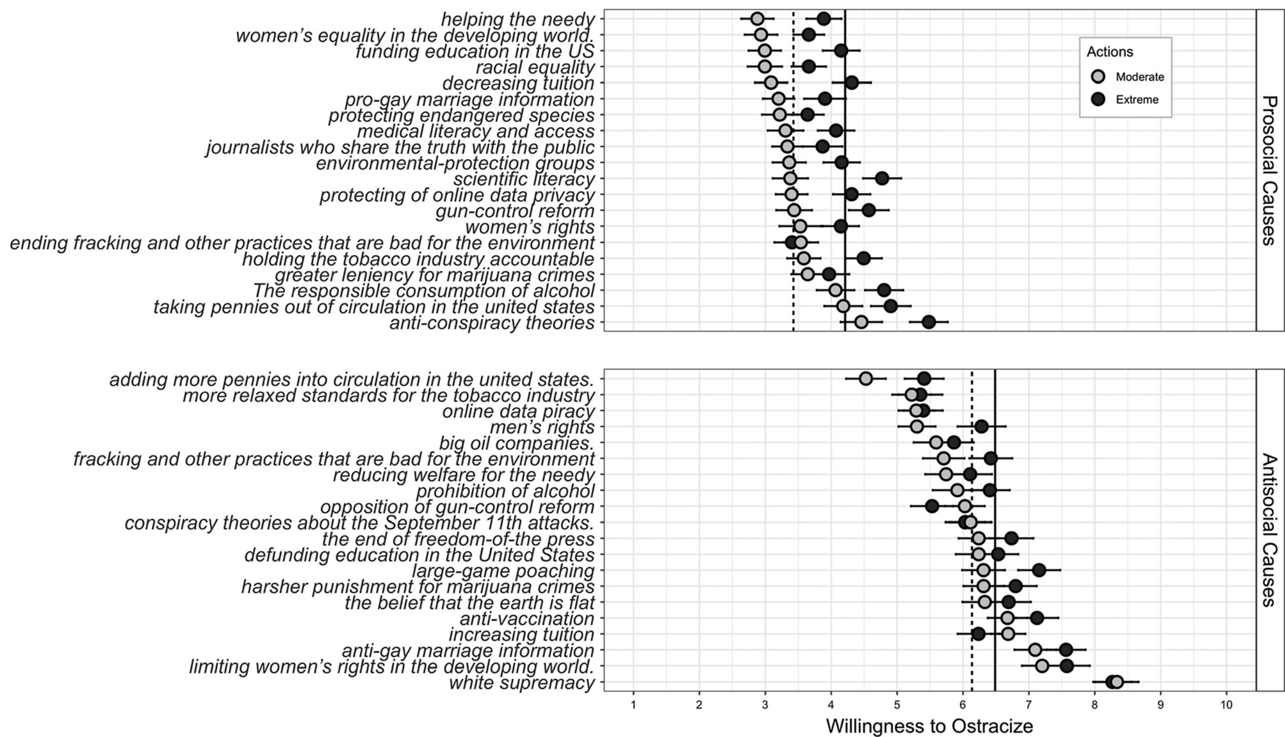

Figure 2. Average ratings of willingness to ostracize targets belonging to groups pursuing each cause, by the extremity of their actions. Error bars represent ± standard error of the mean.

personal significance or belonging) becomes dominant, to the exclusion of other needs (Kruglanski et al., 2017). From this perspective, third-party ostracism that is triggered by virtue of one's membership in extreme groups is likely to further disrupt the one's needs balance (e.g., exacerbating an obsessive need for meaning, personal significance, or belonging).

The effect of extremity on ostracism intentions depended on the nature of the groups' cause, and did so in a surprising way; not only was extremism in support of prosocial causes not tolerated, it was actually met with a greater increase in ostracism than extremism in support of antisocial causes. Although speculative, it is possible that this reflects a tendency for people to first weigh information about *what* a group supports, and then secondarily consider information about *how* the group enacts this support (e.g., Feinberg et al., 2017). If a group supports a highly objectionable cause (e. g., white supremacy), then the manner in which it pursues the cause is irrelevant; ostracism is the favored response. In contrast, if a group promotes a legitimate cause, then people appear to give more weight to the manner in which it is pursued. This interaction may also be due to the tendency for negatively valenced information to produce greater psychological impact than positive (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001); perhaps judgments of antisocial targets were dominated by the negative information, while judgments of prosocial targets remained sensitive to extremity manipulation.

It is important to note that the present research provides a theoretical basis for these possibilities, but is necessarily limited. This an initial investigation relying on self-report and a student sample, future research is necessary to examine whether and how these behavioral intentions translate into actual real-life decisions to ostracize, for example, using behavioral methods such as tracking ball-throws in Cyberball (e.g., Wesselmann, Wirth, Pryor, Reeder, & Williams, 2013), or measuring which targets team leaders choose to include in work-groups (e.g., Rudert, Keller, Hales, Walker, & Greifeneder, 2019). Because there is a general norm to be inclusive, and people generally negatively evaluate those who use ostracism without sufficient justification (Rudert, Sutter, Corrodi, & Greifeneder, 2018), it is possible that extremists are only met with ostracism when the extremism is particularly egregious, or when there are actual stakes to the interaction (in which case this effect would not emerge in a traditional Cyberball study). Another important constraint on the generality of this effect is that members of extreme groups themselves are unlikely to ostracize those who engage in the same extreme actions – though they may hold especially high thresholds for

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what exactly constitutes an extreme action. The current experiment did not address the question of whether targets were ingroup versus outgroup members. It is possible that people are especially likely to ostracize extremists who belong to outgroups rather than ingroups. Finally, it is also noteworthy that participants reported a relative, but not necessarily absolute, willingness to ostracize targets of extreme groups. Simply belonging to an extreme group did not guarantee that a target would be ostracized. This aligns with theorizing that people do not use ostracism lightly (e.g., Rudert et al., 2018).

Because ostracism is both common, and often a useful social tool (e.g., Hales et al., 2017), it is important for future work to identify methods for reducing its impact, or otherwise avoiding the resulting extremism. Additionally, future research should more directly explore the possible feedback loop between ostracism and extremism that is suggested by the current findings.

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Open Data
We preregistered our hypotheses, stopping rule, and analysis plan (https://osf.io/jnw42). Study materials, data, and analysis code are available online (https://osf.io/s3bdk).

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