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Death as a metaphor for ostracism: social invincibility, autopsy, necromancy, and resurrection

Andrew Hales

Psychological Science, Purdue University, Lafayette, IN, USA

ABSTRACT

Metaphors can be powerful tools for theory building in psychological sciences. I entertain death as a theoretical metaphor for ostracism and explore the degree to which they share key properties. Death is universal (we all die), caused (by some things and not others), totally non-functional (the dead cannot do or experience anything) and irreversible (death is permanent). Ostracism, in some of its forms, shares these key properties. If ostracism is social death then it follows that: (1) never being ostracised constitutes *social invincibility,* (2) pondering the reasons why one was ostracised constitutes a *social autopsy*, (3) receiving even trace amounts of acknowledgement, while being otherwise totally ostracised constitutes *social necromancy* and (4) being reincluded constitutes *social resurrection*. These four constructs are discussed along with new research questions and predictions that arise from them.

KEYWORDS

Death; ostracism; metaphor; social invincibility; reinclusion

> The mind is like a computer in the way it processes information (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968). The self is like a totalitarian government in that it rewrites history and biases information in a self-serving way (Greenwald, 1980). Social interaction is like theatrical performance in which people are actors presenting themselves in a particular way. (Goffman, 1959)

Metaphors can be powerful tools for theory building in science. They can provide concrete illustrations of abstract psychological processes, they can organise a set of research findings into a coherent framework, and perhaps most importantly, they can guide the generation of novel predictions of a theory. Theories themselves survive or fail on their own empirical merits, but there is no doubt that metaphors can be powerful tools for theory building. Even outside of science, in the realm of everyday experience metaphors are central to understanding concepts.

In the spirit of using the power of metaphor to provide insight into psychological phenomena, I will critically examine the appropriateness of death as a metaphor for social ostracism. Is it the case that *social ostracism is like death*? To answer this question, I will take the four components of the concept of death that have been identified in the child development literature, and analyse each in relation to social ostracism. We will see that death is an appropriate metaphor for some, but not all instances of ostracism. The death metaphor for ostracism yields four implications. If ostracism is social death, then:

CONTACT Andrew Hales ahales@purdue.edu

- Being someone who is never ostracised is like being *socially invincible*
- Ruminating over the causes of ostracism is like conducting a *social autopsy*
- Receiving minimal attention from others, while otherwise being completely ostracised is like experiencing *social necromancy*
- Being reincluded is like being *socially resurrected*

Obviously, the purpose of this review is not to show that ostracism and death are perfectly similar. Instead it is to examine their similarity on four key properties to see if they are close enough that death can serve as a useful metaphor for ostracism. A second major purpose of this article is to explore the implications that follow when we entertain death as a metaphor for ostracism, even if the parallel is not perfect.

Before considering the appropriateness of death as a metaphor for ostracism, two clarifications are in order. It is necessary to (1) separate the current question of whether death is a metaphor for ostracism from the question of whether experiencing ostracism is reminiscent of death (that is, do people experience ostracism as a metaphor for their own death), and also to (2) conceptualise ostracism in a way that makes manageable the question of whether ostracism is death-like.

Does being ostracised remind people of death?

Previous work has discussed parallels between death and ostracism (Case & Williams, 2004), putting forward that 'because humans have the capacity to consider and reflect on their own mortality, ostracism also presents a powerful and palpable mortality metaphor. In effect, being subjected to ostracism is experiencing what life would be like if one was dead'. According to this approach, ostracism is a metaphor to better understand the concept of death: does ostracism cause people to reflect on their own mortality? This is an intriguing question that I review briefly before turning to the focus of the current paper, which considers the complimentary proposition: can death be used as a metaphor to better understand ostracism?

Ostracism's reminiscence of death has been a theme of modern ostracism research since its inception (Williams, 1997, 2001, 2009). There is good reason to think that ostracism, at least in some instances, would trigger deep thoughts about one's meaning, importance and even existence. In extreme forms ostracism consists of individuals carrying on with their daily lives as if the target was not present, giving them a glimpse into what the world would be like if they did not exist. Across cultures, phrases used to describe ostracism often invoke images of coldness (as in to 'freeze-out' or give the 'cold shoulder'), ghost-like transparency (as in the German *wie Luft behandeln* means 'to look at as though air') and death itself (as in the Japanese *Mokusatsu* means 'to kill with silence' and the Dutch *doodzwijgen* means 'silence to death'). This harrowing experience has been captured in works of literature (Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, 1880/2008), and film (*It's a Wonderful Life)*.

Research supports the notion that ostracism is a threat to one's sense of meaning. According to the need-threat model of ostracism (Williams, 2009), ostracism threatens four basic human needs: belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence. As a pillar of the theory, the need for *meaningful existence*, inspired by terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1990), has received considerable attention. Williams (2009) reported anecdotal cases of research participants responding to being unexpectedly ostracised by a pair

of strangers by pinching themselves, apparently testing their own reality and assuring themselves that they are in fact there. Systematic studies of the effect of ostracism on meaningful existence (along with the other needs) consistently find that ostracism leads to feelings of meaninglessness (for example, Wirth & Williams, 2009). A meta-analysis confirmed that experimentally-induced ostracism threatens this need (e.g. Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015). Not only does ostracism lead to feelings of meaninglessness, but also Case and Williams (2004) note that ostracism has also been documented to trigger a number of outcomes that are also triggered by mortality salience, such as prejudice, inflated perceptions of social consensus, decreased self-esteem. More direct evidence for the proposition that ostracism is a small taste of death comes from an experiment showing that being ostracised increases the cognitive accessibility of death related thoughts (Steele, Kidd, & Castano, 2015).

The research is clear that ostracism induces a state of meaninglessness and can remind people of death. These empirical findings are interesting in their own right, but are separate from the primary question of this paper: Does ostracism share key features with the concept of death?

Conceptualising ostracism

To the lay person, *ostracism* is a harsh sounding term, connoting extreme disapproval, scorn and banishment from an entire community. To say that one was ostracised is to convey that they were completely and without exception rejected, ignored, excluded and expelled.

The scientific understanding of ostracism is more nuanced than this. It is defined as 'excluding and ignoring by individuals or groups' (Williams, 2009, p. 276). This is an intentionally broader definition. It encompasses the seemingly (but not necessarily) trivial, such as reduced eye contact (Wirth, Sacco, Hugenberg, & Williams, 2010) and monosyllabic responses to long questions (Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998), all the way up to the dramatic, extreme and borderline unthinkable, such as documented cases of students in college going years without being acknowledged by their classmates (Williams, 1997), religious practices of completely shunning one from a community, being told 'you are no longer my son' by a disappointed father (Williams, 2001), or as some have even suggested, execution (Boehm, 1985). Because ostracism encompasses such a wide range of phenomena and varying levels of severity, it is expedient to make some distinctions before asking whether death and ostracism share key features.

From a theoretical standpoint, this broad definition is a strength. If ostracism were defined narrowly, to only include severe and dramatic instances of ignoring and excluding, a number of theoretical difficulties would arise. First, questions about whether ostracism is harmful would become unnecessary because it would be true by definition, and claims that it is actually harmful would become borderline tautologies. One of the most significant discoveries in ostracism research was that ostracism hurts even when it is arranged to appear trivial to the target (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). To say that something is not ostracism because it is not severe would have made such breakthroughs impossible. Second, a broad definition allows researchers to systematically study variants of a phenomenon to see if each variant produces the same consequences. Questions about the differential effects of dramatic versus apparently trivial instances of ostracism become impossible if only the dramatic instances meet the definition of ostracism.

Haslam (2016) recently observed that definitions of negative concepts in psychology have gradually become more broad over time. He refers to this as *concept creep*: 'many of the concepts [psychology] employs to make sense of undesirable forms of experience and behaviour have extended their meanings, encroaching on phenomena that would once have been seen as unremarkable' (p. 1). For example, in the past, bullying applied narrowly to physical assaults, but now it also encompasses social aggression perpetrated online. Haslam notes that concept creep has both positive and negative outcomes; it sensitises psychologists and the public to the legitimate distress of previously unnoticed victims, but it also compromises the perceived seriousness of severely harmful phenomena (such as, post-traumatic stress disorder caused by seeing close friends die in warfare) by applying the same term to more mundane versions of the phenomena (such as, post-traumatic stress disorder caused by workplace sexual harassment).

Some might see ostracism's broad definition as an instance of concept creep, because relatively minor/everyday social behaviours can be classified as ostracism. It seems that there is a trade-off between defining ostracism broadly to enjoy theoretical flexibility in testing hypotheses, and defining ostracism narrowly to preserve the gravity of the concept. A sensible resolution to this trade-off, and similar trade-offs for any other concept that might creep, is to permit a broad conceptual definition, but couple it with liberal *intra-conceptual* subtyping. In this way, researchers are free to study any variation of a broadly defined construct, while also acknowledging that some variations are more serious than others.

Williams's (1997) taxonomy of ostracism is a step in this direction. According to this approach, ostracism varies on at least four dimensions, allowing researchers to consider different variations, some of which may be more severe than others. First, ostracism can vary in quantity from partial (for example, a source is less talkative than usual and appears to end a conversation early) to complete (a source gives absolutely no notice of a target, literally treating them as if they are invisible). Second, ostracism can vary in its visibility as either physical (being spatially removed from the presence of others, as in time-out) or social (being ignored and excluded, while remaining in the presence of others). Third, ostracism can vary in the actual or perceived motive for its use, with some motives more hurtful than others (for example, not being invited to an event because one is disliked will hurt more than not being invited because circumstances prohibit an additional person attending the event). Fourth, ostracism can vary in the degree of causal certainty surrounding the reasons for being ostracised from uncertain (the target has no idea why they are being ostracised) to certain (the target knows exactly why they are being ostracised).

We can draw a rough distinction between mundane ostracism and severe ostracism. Mundane ostracism is generally characterised as partial, social and motivated by the situation. Severe ostracism is generally characterised as complete, physical and motivated by dislike of the target. The role of certainty is less clear. On the one hand, uncertainty can be a highly aversive experience (Hogg, 2007). On the other hand, if one is highly certain of the reason they were ostracised, and that reason is particularly threatening, certainty removes the opportunity to make more self-forgiving attributions. In addition to the dimensions from Williams's taxonomy, I will also add that severe ostracism tends to come from close others (rather than strangers), and lasts an appreciable amount of time.

With this conceptual distinction in place, we can proceed to the main question of this paper: does ostracism (either mundane or severe) have important properties in common with death?

Components of death

Death is not a unitary concept that people come to understand in a single moment of insight; instead, to understand the concept of death is to understand a set of facts concerning who dies, and what it means to die (Koocher, 1974; Speece & Brent, 1992). Some of these facts may be apprehended before others. In order to more clearly understand how children acquire an understanding of death, developmental psychologists have broken the concept down into four key features (Speece & Brent, 1996):

- Universality: All living things die. Without exception.
- Causality: Death is caused by some things but not others.
- Total non-functionality: All bodily and mental functions are completely terminated at death.
- Irreversibility: Death is final and cannot be undone.

These characteristics of death were enumerated by developmental psychologists for the purpose of gaining a clearer understanding of how and when children come to understand the concept of death (Speece & Brent, 1984). Supernatural beliefs, such as an afterlife or reincarnation have also been acknowledged as part of some peoples' understanding of death (Speece & Brent, 1996; since this component of death is not unambiguously true like the others, it is not considered further).

An understanding of each component is acquired at different times in development and can be affected by a number of factors (Kenyon, 2001). Although they may seem obvious to an adult, children at various ages struggle to comprehend some of these truths. To illustrate, consider some beliefs often held by children that violate these principles. Young children often believe that although some people die, admired adults, such as parents and teachers never will (non-universality; Speece & Brent, 1996). Adults understand that death is biologically caused (proximally) by organ failure, but children sometimes believe that death can have supernatural causes, such as bad behaviour or angry thoughts and feelings (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2015). Children do have a relatively easier time understanding that death means the end of all externally observable activities (such as, speaking or moving), but they are slower to comprehend that death also means the end of mental activities, such as thinking and feeling (functionality; Nagy, 1948). Finally, children often believe that the dead can be reanimated through magic or medicine (non-irreversibility; Speece & Brent, 1992).

The original utility of this list was to break down the death concept into pieces to track how its subcomponents are acquired in children of different ages and developmental stages. Conveniently, this list summarises death's most critical features. Do these features apply to ostracism? Is ostracism universal? Is it irreversible? Does it render a person non-functional? Does it have specific causes? And perhaps most importantly, if the answer to any of these questions is *yes*, what insights might we gain regarding ostracism?

Universality

Everyone dies, without exception. Does everyone also experience ostracism?

It is certainly not rare. Ostracism has been documented in numerous cultures (Gruter & Masters, 1986), and even across the animal kingdom in species, such as lions, wolves, non-human primates, buffalo, coyotes, dogs, even bees (Lancaster, 1986). About 2/3 of Americans

report having used the silent treatment on a loved one (Faulkner, Williams, Sherman, & Williams, 1997). Research in which people are asked to track and record any time they experience an instance of ostracism find that the typical person experiences ostracism roughly once per day (Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler, & Williams, 2012).

Severe ostracism is also common across cultures. For example, virtually all societies have a penal system for locking up criminals and potentially threatening or dangerous individuals (Zippelius, 1986). Also, ostracism appears linguistically across cultures with different expressions for the idea of leaving people out of a group (recall the Japanese phrase for 'kill with silence' and the Dutch 'silence to death'). Even if one has not directly experienced severe ostracism they would still see it occurring around them given its ubiquity.

Ostracism is universal, at least in the sense that it occurs across cultures, species and age groups. Based on the available evidence, it is likely that any given person will have at least one mundane ostracism experience, and most likely will experience ostracism frequently across the course of their life. In this respect, ostracism is inevitable.

If ostracism is so common that it is essentially inevitable, it follows that people who somehow evade ostracism are essentially *socially invincible*. Social invincibility can occur when people are either (1) highly unlikely to experience mundane ostracism, or experience it at much lower rates than the general population or (2) continuously avoid severe ostracism, despite committing social wrongdoings that would ordinarily lead to severe ostracism.

New research directions and predictions

Research has documented characteristics that leave people vulnerable to ostracism, such as burdensomeness (Wesselmann, Wirth, Pryor, Reeder, & Williams, 2013) deviance (Schachter, 1951; Wesselmann et al., 2014) and dispositional disagreeableness (Hales, Kassner, Williams, & Graziano, 2016). However, less attention has been directed towards the complimentary question: what, if anything, can make somebody socially invincible. It can be predicted that certain people are immune, or at least protected from ostracism, even after committing otherwise damning social infractions. Most likely, these are people with characteristics, such as extraordinary physical attractiveness, charm, talent or status.

Consider how celebrities and wealthy individuals are often able to evade criminal prosecution and prison sentences by capitalising on their likable persona or by hiring teams of lawyers to win a case. Less fortunate defendants do not have the same resources at their disposal to avoid social ostracism in the form of a prison sentence. Not only can money and power afford social invincibility, but so too may talent. One who makes him or herself indispensable to an organisation may find that they can commit a wider range of infractions without being fired.

Ostracism research has focused almost exclusively on the experience of targets, with growing research interest in the sources (Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014), and the factors that lead to ostracism. Exploring why some people seem to enjoy an aura of protection from ostracism is a fertile area for future research that should take seriously the possibility that some people enjoy social invincibility, and the potential consequences. For example, the literally invincible mythical figure, *Achilles*, did not fear death, and accordingly behaved brazenly in battle. Just as the fear of death leads people to behave cautiously to avoid danger, the fear of social death should motivate people to be socially cautious to avoid the dangers of being shunned. A sense of social invincibility may produce socially insensitive behaviours

that, if not checked, will ultimately lead to social difficulties for the once-protected individual.

Causality

As a component of a mature death concept, *causality* refers to the understanding that death can be caused by many things, both internal, and external, and also that it is *not* caused by certain things. Just like death, ostracism (both mundane and severe) has known causes.

What leads to ostracism? A recent review of research on perpetration of ostracism notes three broad reasons for its use (Hales, Ren, & Williams, 2017). Ostracism is used by groups to protect, to correct and to eject.

Protect

Evolutionary psychologists have noted the utility of ostracism in protecting groups from outsiders who pose a physical threat (Buss, 1990). It also follows that ostracism is a useful tool for denying the entry of outsiders who are likely to take advantage of the group by free-riding and not contributing to its resources (Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Accordingly, Hales, Kassner et al. (2016) found that people are especially prone to ostracise disagreeable individuals, an effect that was mediated by distrust towards disagreeable people. Ostracism is a way to protect a group from undesirable members.

Correct

Once someone is a full member of a group, ostracism can be used as a tool to signal to them that their behaviour violates norms and needs to be corrected. Research shows that ostracism can motivate individuals to behave in prosocial ways (Williams, 2009). For example, Feinberg and colleagues (2014) showed in a multi-trial public goods dilemma, that when given the opportunity to do so, participants ostracised others who did not contribute to the public good. Participants who were ostracised contributed more on subsequent trials. Ostracism is a way to correct the behaviour of current group members who are straying from the path.

Eject

What happens when a group member resists correction? As a final measure, ostracism may be used to eject a member permanently from the group. By doing so the group becomes stronger, albeit slightly smaller. They are more likely to avoid disruptive, burdensome or dangerous behaviour from within, allowing them to contend with less obstruction social and physical factors that aid their continued survival.

These three functions of ostracism can help researchers understand the phenomenon at a very broad level; ostracism occurs because it is ultimately functional for groups in regulating the makeup and behaviour of group membership. However, individuals who find themselves ostracising others would most likely point to much more immediate causes for the event. For example, one would not say 'I am ostracising John because he is a burden to me and my friends'. Instead it is much more likely for one to point towards a specific and immediate cause, like 'I am ostracising John because he always forgets his wallet and we end up paying for him'. In much the same way, death can be described in terms of macro-level causes (such as, lifestyle, illness or tissue damage) and also micro-level causes (cancer of the left lung, accidental fall from a ladder, acute cardiac arrest).

According to the temporal need-threat model of ostracism (Williams, 2009), after a period of reflexive pain, individuals take a moment to reflect on the ostracism episode and make attributions for why it happened. That is, they engage in a *social autopsy* to dissect what lead to the behaviour and whether it can be avoided in the future. This may involve making *internal* attributions, blaming themselves for the event. This is theorised to prolong the pain of ostracism. It may also involve making *external* attributions by blaming the ostracisers or circumstances. This is theorised to speed recovery from ostracism (Williams et al., 2000). These two attributions may not be in direct competition; just as real autopsies often entertain multiple causes of death, so too can the target of ostracism search for different explanations and assign different degrees of belief to each one.

New research directions and predictions

While researchers have actively tried to identify ways to speed recovery from ostracism (for example, Hales, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2016), many questions remain about the social autopsy process.

First, how accurate are people in the social autopsy process? When people are ostracised can they accurately identify the reasons why? On the one hand, years of research in social psychology attest to the tendency for people to make self-serving attributions (for example, Greenwald, 1980). These attributions may impede an objective evaluation of the facts. On the other hand, ostracism is a survival threat, so people are unlikely to under-respond to ostracism by identifying less threatening causes outside of their own actions or personality.

Second, does conducting a social autopsy prepare someone to behave more appropriately in the future, and thus reduce the chances of future ostracism? Though the process may be unpleasant, the act of contemplating the reasons for one's ostracism may be critical in arming one's self in the future to not behave in ways the invite the ostracism. Whereas research has not addressed this question directly, researchers have noted the importance of both noticing and responding to the pain of ostracism. Distraction promotes recovery from ostracism (Wesselmann, Ren, Swim, & Williams, 2013). It may be that taking away the opportunity to conduct a social autopsy improves feelings in the short term, but denies people the opportunity to make changes to their behaviour that reduce the chances of ostracism in the future.

Third, are there times when it is better not to know? Just as real autopsies may uncover disturbing facts about events that precipitated a death, so too may an accurate social autopsy uncover psychologically uncomfortable facts about causes of the ostracism (that is, an honest assessment of the facts may lead people to conclude that they were ostracised because of unchangeable aspects of their identity). Given research documenting the health benefits of *positive illusions* in a wide range of domains (Taylor, 1989), it is possible that under certain circumstances, targets of ostracism may not be psychologically well-served by an accurate and thorough social autopsy.

Total non-functionality

Marlene Dietrich famously declared 'When you're dead, you're dead. That's it'. There is no function that your body can perform or experience that your mind can absorb. This fact is so well accepted that death is the standard by which behaviour itself has been defined: 'If a dead man can do it, it isn't behaviour' (Lindsley, 1991, p. 457). When measuring whether

children understand this component of death, they are typically asked questions such as 'Is there anything a dead person can do?' or 'Can a dead person still hear?' (Speece & Brent, 1996, p. 36). Adults, however, know that death is total and complete. It means the end of *all* physical and mental activity.

By analogy, we can ask whether ostracism means the end of *all* social activity. The original taxonomy of ostracism (Williams, 1997) notes that it can range from partial to complete (i.e. being ignored while others carry on with their interaction as if you were not present, perhaps even talking about you as if you were not there). For instances of *complete* ostracism, the death metaphor is a good fit; complete ostracism means that all social interaction ceases. People do not respond to your questions, they do not acknowledge you and they do not even make eye contact with you.

Research on how ostracism is typically deployed and experienced reveals, not surprisingly, that partial ostracism is the more common phenomenon, but complete ostracism does occur. Nezlek and colleageues (2012) conducted a study in study in which participants recorded every time they were the target of ostracism over the course of two weeks. For each ostracism event (which occurred on average, once per day), participants rated the degree to which the ostraciser(s)' behaviour had changed on a scale from 1 (Barely) to 5 (Complete). The average response was near the scale midpoint, at 2.79, indicating moderate changes in the ostracisers' behaviour. This finding is corroborated by a similar study from the ostracisers' perspective in which they report the same degree of behaviour change (2.80, on a similar scale; Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler, & Williams, 2015). While most ostracism seems to be partial, rather than complete, anecdotal and qualitative research abounds attesting to the occurrence of complete ostracism.

If we imagine someone who is completely ostracised by an entire social community, they are, in essence, totally socially non-functional. All activity has ceased. Because social activity is communication between humans, it can also be said that all communication has ceased. If one were to speak to, or even provide minor acknowledgement to someone who is otherwise being completely and totally ostracised, then it is as if they are communicating with the deceased, or engaging in *social necromancy* – the act of receiving or delivering even trace amounts of acknowledgement in the context of otherwise complete ostracism (with the term *necromancy* referring to communication with the dead).

Literature often depicts 'actual' necromancy as a deeply moving and important event that gives closure to both the living and the deceased (as in Hamlet speaking with the ghost of his father). Even non-supernatural communications from the dead can be deeply meaningful (as in the film/book *The Outsiders* when, after Johnny's death, Ponyboy discovers a letter Johnny had written shortly before he died). Communications from the dead are depicted as precious and possibly even sacred. Similarly, unscrupulous mediums who claim to be able to provide a chance to communicate with deceased family members often evoke very strong emotions from those who participate in their performances.

New research directions and predictions

Just as communication with the dead is precious to the living, so too should communication from the socially living be precious to the socially dead. Because people who are completely ostracised are essentially ghosts who have no contact or communication with others, the little acknowledgement they do receive (in the form of social necromancy) should be especially valuable to the target of ostracism.

This principle is illustrated poignantly in the Twilight Zone episode, 'To See the Invisible Man' (Barnes & Black, 1985), in which a dystopian government sentences a man to one year of complete ostracism. His forehead is marked with a symbol alerting everyone who sees him that they are not to provide him any acknowledgement. Initially he is non-chalant about the punishment, thinking that because it will not physically hurt him it will not be painful. Quickly, however, he becomes desperate for social interaction. As the year unfolds most citizens are loyal to the protocol and ostracise him with complete discipline. However, he enjoys three brief instances of social necromancy. At one point, a naïve child talks to him before being corrected by an adult. At another point, he begins a conversation with a blind man before someone tips off the blind man to begin ostracising him. At yet another point, he encounters a man who also has the same mark of invisibility. They share eye contact and a brief smile. On all three occasions, he appears to savour what little acknowledgement he is given. When the pain of being ostracised reaches a breaking point he tries desperately to have a conversation with another invisible woman, pleading 'Just talk to me. I have to talk to someone. I'll risk another year of invisibility if I can just talk to someone. Just for a minute. Please'. He then breaks down in tears.

If ostracism leads to total social non-functioning, the same way death leads to total behavioural and psychological non-functioning, at least two predictions follow. First, social necromancy should be valuable to targets of ostracism and lead to measurable improvements in well-being. Accordingly, an experiment found that participants recovered more quickly from an ostracism experience if they received an accompanying acknowledgement, even when that acknowledgement was hostile in nature (Rudert, Hales, Greifeneder, & Williams, 2017). Second, social necromancy may be like 'actual' necromancy, in that people will look at you funny if you do engage in it. That is, there is often a coalitional aspect to ostracism, in which people ostracise someone for the simple reason that everyone else is ostracising that person, which can make sources of the sources of ostracism feel more bonded (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2005).

Irreversibility

The dead can never be brought back to life. Can the ostracised be brought back into the fold of social inclusion? Earlier we saw that ostracism occurs across cultures and happens to most people typically once per day. It is clear from the fact that most people are not social isolates that the majority of ostracism episodes can in fact be reversed rather than cascading into eventual relationship termination. Although sometimes ostracism may be employed with the intention to permanently eject a target from a social group, another function of ostracism can be to motivate the target to *correct* behaviour that is deviant or burdensome (Schachter, 1951; Wesselmann et al., 2014). Accordingly, ostracism may very frequently be used as a warning shot (using ostracism *to correct*), rather than a tool for permanently removing a target (using ostracism *to eject*).

Indeed, research shows that following ostracism people engage in a cluster of behaviours that are prosocial and likely to lead towards reinclusion back into the group. For example, following ostracism people are more obedient to directions from an authority figure (Riva, Williams, Torstrick, & Montali, 2014), more compliant with requests to donate money to a cause (Carter-Sowell, Chen, & Williams, 2008) and more likely to conform to an obviously incorrect answer given unanimously by a group (Williams et al., 2000). Not only does

ostracism change these outward behaviours, but research has also documented that ostracism can lead to improvements in basic perceptual and cognitive processes related to social information. For example, ostracised individuals are better at distinguishing between sincere and faked smiles (Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2008), and remembering social information (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). Overall, these processes are thought to operate in the service of helping an individual achieve reinclusion.

Not only does ostracism motivate behaviours that should lead to reinclusion, but reinclusion also helps mend the pain of ostracism. Research shows that following relatively mundane cases of ostracism, minor instances of reinclusion are sufficient to partially (Rudert et al., 2017) or fully (Tang & Richardson, 2013) undo the negative effects of ostracism. While research has examined the effects of reinclusion from the targets' perspective, few studies have looked at factors that can encourage sources to actually initiate reinclusion. This is an extremely important direction for future research, since, as we will see, it is probably easier to end ostracism right after it begins rather than wait until it spirals downward into a self-perpetuating behaviour by both sources (Williams, 2009) and targets (Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2016).

Whereas it may be a relatively simple matter to achieve reinclusion following a rather minor instance of ostracism, achieving reinclusion following a severe/long-term instance of ostracism may not be so simple. Because of ethical and logistical issues, long-term ostracism has received less attention than short-term ostracism, but existing research is consistent with the temporal need-threat model's prediction that chronic ostracism eventually produces alienation, unworthiness, helplessness and depression (Riva, Montali, Wirth, Curioni, & Williams, 2016). Much of what is known about long-term ostracism comes from systematic interviews with targets and sources of long-term ostracism (Zadro, 2004), and anecdotal accounts of the serious impact ostracism can cause.

These accounts strongly suggest that in extreme cases of long-term ostracism, finally acknowledging the target can be extremely difficult for someone who has been using ostracism, who has become entrenched in their position, and is not willing to lose face by ending the ostracism. Consider the account of a father who went two weeks without so much as acknowledging his son (reported in Williams, 2009):

> I did not speak to him, I did not acknowledge anything he said to me, or anyone else, in fact I acted as if he were not even present. I did not set a place for him at the table nor did I provide for him in any meals that I prepared for the family …
>
> I slipped into this, although for me novel, paradigm without any premeditiation and, hence, without any difficulty and maintained it comfortably as if it were the natural way of family relationships. I was able to perpetuate it easily and without any discomfort for myself …
>
> To terminate the ostracism, however, was an extremely difficult process. I could only begin with grudging, monosyllabic responses to his indirect overtures. I was only able to expand on these responses with the passing of time and it is only now, about six weeks since the ostracism ceased that our relationship appears to be getting back to pre-row normality …
>
> Ostracism can be like a whirlpool, or quicksand, if you, the user, don't extract yourself from it as soon as possible, it is likely to become impossible to terminate regardless of the emergence of any subsequent will to do so.

Breaking the silence can be a miraculous feat. When one is finally acknowledged after years of silence, we can say that have been *socially resurrected*.

New research directions and predictions

Thinking about the reinclusion process as one of social resurrection leads to two predictions. First, a resurrection is a remarkable thing. Accordingly, when depicted in art and literature, resurrected individuals often express a renewed appreciation for life and a recommitment to living with integrity. This principle is illustrated by Bill Murray's character in *Scrooged* (Linson & Donner, 1988), who after seeing his own death vividly depicted and learning that he is actually alive, experiences a complete attitude transformation to begin treating life as sacred. The inverse of the principle is illustrated by Bill Murray's character in *Groundhog Day* (Albert & Ramis, 1993) who, upon learning that he cannot die, loses all sense of meaning and casually and repeatedly commits suicide. By analogy, people who enjoy a second chance in relationships or groups that have previously ostracised them should experience both positive emotions including gratitude, and also a renewed commitment to behaving in desirable ways.

Second, just as accounts of history's most famous resurrection, Jesus Christ, include depictions of scars, so too should there be emotional scars from long periods of ostracism, even if one is eventually reincluded. According to the temporal need-threat model (Williams, 2009), long-term ostracism produces feelings of alienation, depression, worthlessness, and ultimately resignation. Research shows that reinclusion following short-term ostracism can lead to complete recovery of belonging, control, self-esteem and meaningful existence (Tang & Richardson, 2013). Is it also the case that reinclusion following severe episodes of long-term ostracism can eventually reduce the negative effects? One would predict (as the account above suggests) that the effects of ostracism will linger for quite some time even after reinclusion is initiated. In extreme cases complete recovery may not be possible, as the pain from ostracism is too great to forget.

Conclusion

Metaphors can be extremely helpful in building theories. We have seen that in many cases death is a metaphor for ostracism, leading to insights to guide future research. If ostracism is like death, then it follows that those who are never ostracised are socially invincible, those who receive some acknowledgement during total ostracism are ghosts communicating with the living, those who contemplate the reasons for their ostracism are conducting a social autopsy, and those who are reincluded are socially resurrected. This perspective can help generate new hypotheses and expand our understanding of ostracism as a phenomenon.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Andrew Hales is currently a postdoctoral research at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy at the University of Virginia. His research interests include social ostracism, social influence, and compliance.

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