

**The Change of Attitude Moralization after Ostracism; and the Buffer Effect of Social
Avoidance as a Moderator**

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Abstract

Although the importance of attitude moralization is very significant for both the individual and the group, not much research has been done to discover the relation between ostracism and moralization in groups. We propose that excluded individuals will change their moralization as a psychological strategy to join the group. On the other hand, we suggest that social avoidance individuals will not change their moralizations for the sake of getting in a group, because of their desire for solitude, and their low social motivation. Our research questions are: Does ostracism lead to moralization? Does social avoidance moderate the relation between ostracism and moralization? We examined these relations through an online experiment ($N = 43$) with a sample of international first year psychology students. After examining the relation between ostracism and moralization and the effect of the moderator social avoidance on this relation. We found that participants did not change their moralization after being excluded, and there was no evidence that socially avoidance individuals will not change their moralization after exclusion. Our findings thus do not support our hypotheses that ostracism leads to attitude moralization of issues relevant to the group than social inclusion, and social avoidance will moderate this relation. Theoretical implications for the literature on moralization, ostracism and social avoidance are discussed.

Keywords: moralization, moral conviction, ostracism, social avoidance

The Change of Attitude Moralization after Ostracism and the Buffer Effect of Social Avoidance as a Moderator

Humans are social animals with a fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which becomes threatened when we face exclusion (Williams, 2007). Ostracism occurs when a person or a group is being neglected and rejected from socializing with the rest (Williams, 2007). Experiencing ostracism is always painful and leads to negative emotions, even if the person or the group is being socially excluded by a group that they hate (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007). Humans who experienced exclusion try to search for different strategies so they can regain acceptance, or they may start harming other people, or even some of them could withdraw from the excluding situation (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). Not only that but they could also use moralization as a coping mechanism to deal with pain and negative emotions after being excluded. Moralization is the psychological process of moral values towards an attitude to cause it to be more strongly moralized (Rozin et al., 1997; Rozin & Singh, 1999). Because of that the attitude will shift into stronger moral convictions (Brandt et al., 2015; Wisneski & Skitka, 2017). Moral conviction means that the attitude with a universal belief of right and wrong, moral or immoral values (Skitka et al., 2005). In this paper we are investigating whether ostracism leads to attitude moralization, and whether social avoidance moderates this relationship. Our research questions are: Does ostracism motivate attitude moralization? Does social avoidance moderate the effect of ostracism on attitude moralization?

Moral Convictions and Attitude Moralization

Moral convictions are our universal beliefs that there is right and wrong or believing in core moral and immoral values (Skitka, 2002). These beliefs are shared universally (Skitka et al., 2005), for example when we believe that abortion is morally wrong, we think that this

belief is shared for everyone. We do not think about these beliefs as just being preferences rather they are facts that we believe are our motivational guide through life (Mackie, 1977; Smith, 1994, for detailed discussions). These moral convictions are recognized as complex connections between justifying our actions, beliefs of facts and compelling motive (Skitka et al., 2005). Also, we form our moral beliefs followed by strong emotions targeted towards the values we believe in (Skitka et al., 2005). These moral beliefs are objective and universal unlike the social conventions or personal preferences that are subjective and prone to the personal taste, and norms (Nucci, 2001; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Skitka, 2014; Skitka et al., 2005). It would be hard to have friendship with people who do not share the same moral convictions as you, on the other hand, it is very likely to establish a friendship with others who have different preferences or conventions than you (Skitka et al., 2005).

Attitude moralization is an increase in the attitude on a specific topic (e.g., eating meat) through linking it with a preexisting moral belief (e.g., killing is wrong) (Rozin, 1999). This act is very important on the Micro level (i.e., individual's actions) like smoking, Meso level (i.e., some part of society) like school or foundations actions and Macro level (i.e., society as a whole) like the government's actions (Rozin, 1999). The stronger the emotions related to the attitude the more the person feels increase feelings in moral convictions (Skitka et al., 2021). Nevertheless, we still don't know much about how attitude moralization occurs or how moral convictions are developed.

Ostracism and Attitude Moralization

When a person is avoided or removed from the group, or a group is ignored and neglected from social interactions then they are experiencing *ostracism* (Williams, 2007). Ostracism leads to many negative consequences such as increase aggression, decrease prosocial behavior, self-regulation and people get interested more in renewing affiliation and

the social belonging (DeWall et al., 2011). Consequently, we argue that, when ostracized individuals try to relieve themselves from these negative consequences, they would change their moral convictions, so they will be accepted in the group again. After experiencing ostracism, individuals try to reconnect and one way to do so is by sharing the same moral beliefs as the group (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins & Pittman, 2008; Jost et al., 2008). Thus, changing their moral convictions to get in line with the group could be a very important aspect to be included again.

Moreover, excluded individuals pay more attention for social acceptance cues (e.g., facial expressions), so they put more energy and engage in more actions to regain their social connections (DeWall et al., 2009). One of these actions could be changing their moral convictions (i.e., attitude moralization), for example the person who is excluded because s/he is not in line with the group's morals, will try to change her/his moral convictions to gain acceptance again (Pfundmair & Wetherell, 2018). These people also have a motivation to reconnect and share the group's moral beliefs (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins & Pittman, 2008; Jost et al., 2008). People react differently to ostracism and this reaction depends on their interpersonal needs (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). For example, when a person carries a high value for social relations, s/he will engage in prosocial behavior, others may have high sensitivity towards rejection when they face exclusion, they will most likely withdraw from making any further interaction this will lead to minimize their distress (De Cremer & Leonardelli, 2003; Maner et al., 2007). To conclude, we argue that being socially ostracized by a group would lead to change in moral conviction (i.e., attitude moralization) about issues relevant to the group.

The Moderating Role of Social Avoidance

Social avoidance is a sub type of social withdrawal (Coplan & Rubin, 2010). Social withdrawal is the process where individuals try escape chances for social and engage in solitary behaviors in social contexts (Rubin et al., 2009). Social withdrawal contains of three subtypes: Shyness, Unsociability and Social avoidance (Coplan & Rubin, 2010). Social avoidance is when the person is low in social motivation with a desire for isolation and is high in social avoidance motivation by escaping social interactions (Asendorpf, 1990). We propose that because the social avoidant individuals enjoy isolation, and they are not motivated to make social connections then when they are being excluded, they will not moralize. Socially avoidant individuals will not feel the need or be motivated to change their morals to be aligned with the group morals once excluded. We argue that social avoidance will buffer the effect of ostracism on moralization. Individuals who are excluded and not socially avoidant might change their moral convictions to relieve themselves from the negative consequences that comes after exclusion (DeWall et al., 2011). On the other hand, the socially avoidant individuals find a refuge with isolation and that will lead them not to change their moral convictions in order to be included. The social avoidant individuals have maladaptive combination of social motivation, were they lack the strong need to search for social contact, also they actively avoid opportunities for social interaction (Asendorpf, 1990). We suggest because of their lack of social motivations and strong need for social contact this will drive them to not moralize in order to be included. Moreover, ostracized individuals who score low on social avoidance would be more likely to moralize than non-ostracized individuals.

Overview

This paper aims to look at: first, the effect of ostracism on moralization, and second, the moderating effect of social avoidance on the relation between ostracism and moralization. We hypothesize that ostracism leads to attitude moralization of issues relevant to the group

than social inclusion. We also hypothesize that social avoidance moderates the effect of ostracism on attitude moralization. Particularly, for individuals who score high on *social avoidance*, ostracism leads to no change on attitude moralization. Finally, we did not expect a relationship between *social avoidance* and attitude moralization.

Method

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Behavioral and Social Sciences of the university of Groningen. We aimed to recruit over 200 students to have 80% power to detect a Cohen d 's effect size .40 (Leal et al., 2021).

Participants and Design

Forty-nine international psychology students participated in the online study in exchange for 0.6 SONA credit. The online survey was conducted via Qualtrics. Six participants were excluded from the survey because they failed the attention checks leaving us with 43 participants in total. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 26 years ($M= 19.98$, $SD= 1.73$) with 12 being male, 31 being female and one participant did not wish to report their age. We did not achieve the expected sample size, due to the lack of response from the participant pool. Participants were randomly assigned to either social inclusion condition or social exclusion condition.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the platform university for SONA credits. They received a link to the study where they could complete it. All participants filled out a consent form before participating. After giving informed consent, participants filled out the first questionnaire that measures their moral convictions and attitude strength at Time 1 towards

three societal issues: diversity in the workplace, gender equality, animal testing in medical research. But we were interested in measuring their moral convictions only towards gender equality.

In the second part of the study, we presented them with a description of a new student association, “Speak up”, it is a soon to be student association. The association is interested in the life of the international student’s social life and different societal issues, like discrimination in student housing and fighting for gender equality. After the association description we present the participants with attention check questions as an exclusion criterion. Using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely) we asked the participants what they think and feel of this association as filler questions “I think SpeakUp Groningen is important for students”, “I think SpeakUp Groningen supports social minority students’ inclusion.”. Also some questions to assess their need to belong to the group, for example: “I identify with SpeakUp Groningen”, “I feel I want to be accepted by the members of SpeakUp Groningen” ($\alpha = .904$). We asked some questions as well to determine the participant’s fit in the group “Having friends from different (e.g., cultural) backgrounds.” and “Supporting minority rights.”. Afterwards, we introduced the manipulation where participants were randomly assigned to either social exclusion (i.e., not a good fit in the group) and they will receive this message: “We are sorry to announce that you do not fit into SpeakUp Groningen. Unfortunately, based on your responses, you do not seem to be a good match for this new student group and its members at this time. This means that you currently cannot become a part of SpeakUp Groningen. At the moment, the student association focuses on addressing diversity, sustainability, and gender equality issues and wants to give opportunities to those who seem to represent and care about these values. We would not encourage you to get in touch with them and to voice your opinions. Perhaps there may still be another opportunity to join the student association in the future”, or social

inclusion group (i.e., a good fit in the group) and they will receive the following:

“Congratulations! We are happy to announce that you fit into SpeakUp Groningen. Based on your responses, you seem to be a good match for this new student group and its members. This means that you can become a part of SpeakUp Groningen from now on! At the moment, the student association focuses on addressing diversity, sustainability, and gender equality issues and wants to give opportunities to those who seem to represent and care about these values. We encourage you to get in touch with them and to voice your opinions. Perhaps there may still be another opportunity to join more student associations in the future”). In this part we also asked the participants some manipulation check questions to check if they perceived the social inclusion/ exclusion as we predicted.

Lastly, we asked the participants for their opinion of the same societal issues that were presented in the first part of the experiment to measure if they changed their moral convictions at time2 and to what extent ($\alpha = .86$). Adding to that we presented them with the same attitude strengths questions at time2 ($r = .72$; $p < .001$), attention check and filler questions. Also, some socio-demographical information. At the end of the experiment, participants were thanked, debriefed, and got their credit from their participation.

Measures

Manipulation checks

For the manipulation check for belonging “I feel disconnected” “I feel rejected” and “I feel like an outsider” (Williams, 2009), ($\alpha = .90$). The score is very high this means that they have experienced high need to belong. The manipulation checks for self-esteem “I feel good about myself”, “My self esteem is high” and “I feel liked” (Williams, 2009), ($\alpha = .83$). The score indicates that they have experienced low self-esteem. Then we have measured

manipulation check for meaningful existing “I feel invisible.”, “I feel meaningless.” and “I feel non-existent” (Williams, 2009), ($\alpha = .90$). This indicates that the participants experienced high unmeaningful existing. Lastly, we have the manipulation check for mood “I feel friendly”, “I feel angry” and “I feel sad” (Williams, 2009), ($\alpha = .86$). The higher the score the higher the negative mood. When we compose them all together, we end up having ($\alpha = .94$) for the manipulation check of the exclusion. This score is very high this means that our manipulation checks worked, and the participants have experienced a high exclusion experience.

Moralization

We measured moral convictions about gender equality at time 1 and time 2. We first asked the participants to what extent they support or oppose with the issues to measure their attitude moralization. To measure moral convictions, participants were asked to answer as honestly as possible what is their opinion in these issues: “How much is your opinion on gender equality a reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions?”, “How much is your opinion on gender equality connected to your beliefs about fundamental right and wrong?”, “How much is your opinion on gender equality based on moral principle?” (Adopted from Skitka et al., 2009; Wisneski & Skitka, 2017; $\alpha_1 = .901$, $\alpha_2 = .86$) by using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). We controlled for attitude strength in two dimensions (extremity and importance) so we can remove the effect of strengthening the attitude from moralization the attitude (Wisneski & Skitka, 2017), by asking the participants: “How much is your opinion on gender equality important to who you are as a person?” (importance), and “How strongly do you feel about gender equality?” (extremity) ($r = .79$; $p < .001$, $r = .72$; $p < .001$). We computed attitude moralization (the changes in moral convictions) by subtracting the average score of moral convictions at time 1 from the average score of moral convictions at time 2.

Social avoidance

The last thing we measure is the moderator for social avoidance these questions are made in a Likert scale questionnaire with three items taken from the social avoidance and distress scale (SADS) (Geist & Hamrick, 1983) “I try to avoid situations, which force me to be very sociable”, “I often find social occasions upsetting” and “I usually feel calm and comfortable at social occasions” (reversed), with ($\alpha = .86$) using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Being part of a larger project, the survey also included other measures, which are not relevant to the hypothesis of this paper.

Results

Manipulation Checks

We tested several 2 (social inclusion vs. social exclusion) x 2 (high vs. low social avoidance) on the three needs-threat (i.e., belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence), mood (Williams, 2009), and general feeling of exclusion. After centering the moderator (i.e., social avoidance), we found a main effect of social exclusion on belonging, $t(39) = 2.58, p = .014, d = .83$, lack of self-esteem, $t(39) = 3.79, p < .001, d = 1.2$, , negative mood, $t(39) = 3.09, p = .004, d = .96$, and general exclusion, $t(39) = 3.06, p = .004, d = .96$. However, we did not find an effect of condition on unmeaningful existence, $t(39) = 1.01, p = .279, d = .34$ ($M = 1.7, SD = .96$; $M = 1.9, SD = 1.0$), participants scored very low in meaningful existence in both conditions, so they did not feel meaningless after being excluded. Participants in the social exclusion condition reported higher levels of need to belong ($M = 2.71, SD = 1.16$) than the inclusion condition ($M = 1.82, SD = 1.17$), but they did not experience a very high need to belong because we used a 5-point scale and the mean for the social exclusion condition is almost in the middle. For the lack of self-esteem ($M = 3.4, SD = .73$) participants reported lower levels of self-esteem in the exclusion condition than the inclusion condition ($M = 2.6,$

$SD = .72$). Participants felt more negative mood in the social exclusion condition ($M = 2.64$, $SD = .74$) than the social inclusion condition ($M = 2.06$, $SD = .58$). For the overall feelings of exclusion, participants reported greater feelings of exclusion ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .75$) than those in the social inclusion condition ($M = 2.04$, $SD = .67$). Social avoidance (centered) was not associated with belonging $t(39) = 1.70$, $p = .096$, but there was a significant interaction, $p = .038$. Also for self-esteem there was no association with social avoidance (centered) $t(39) = 1.98$, $p = .055$, and we also did not find significant interaction $p = .290$. The same goes for unmeaningful existence, there was no association between it and social avoidance (centered) $t(39) = 1.31$, $p = .197$, and no significant interaction $p = .617$. Regarding negative mood there was no association between it and social avoidance (centered) $t(39) = 1.82$, $p = .076$, also there was no interaction $p = .571$. Lastly, there was no association between the exclusion and social avoidance (centered) $t(39) = 1.98$, $p = .055$, and no significant interaction as well $p = .241$. Even though, we have a small sample, we conclude that our manipulation check as a whole was successful. Simple slope analyses revealed the effect of condition on need to belong was significantly stronger for people who scored low on social avoidant $t(39) = 3.36$, $p = .002$, but not significant for those who scored high on social avoidant $t(39) = .26$, $p = .796$.

Main Analysis

Before testing our hypotheses, we first tested whether there were effects of condition on moral convictions about gender equality at time 1. A t test demonstrated no significant effects of condition on moral conviction about gender equality at time 1, $t(39) = -.22$, $p = .830$. Then, we tested whether attitudes about gender equality became moralized (i.e., attitude moralization) and stronger (i.e., strengthening of attitude) from time 1 to time 2, regardless of condition. A paired-sample t test showed no significant evidence for attitude moralization of gender equality, $t(39) = .07$, $p = .943$ ($M_{\text{time 1}} = 6.12$, $SD = 1.02$; $M_{\text{time 2}} = 6.12$, $SD = .91$) from time 1 to time 2, regardless of condition. Furthermore, another paired-sample t test

indicated that attitudes did not become significantly stronger for gender equality, $t(39) = -.72$, $p = .474$, from time 1 ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.55$) to time 2 ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.62$), regardless of condition.

Before running our main model, we first centered social avoidance, attitude strength at time 1 and time 2, and computed an interaction between condition and centered social avoidance. To test our hypotheses, we ran one linear regression to test whether condition, social avoidance (centered), and the interaction between condition and social avoidance predicted attitude moralization controlling for attitude strength at time 1 and time 2 (both centered). We controlled for attitude strength to remove any effect of attitude strengthening from the moralization of attitudes (e.g., Wisneski & Skitka, 2017).

A regression analysis showed no significant effect of condition on attitude moralization of gender equality, $B = -.12$, $t(37) = -.55$, $p = .584$, $d = -.17$, 95% CI = [-.56, .32]. Unexpectedly, participants in the social exclusion condition did not moralize the issue of gender equality more ($M = -.06$, $SD = .63$) than those in the social inclusion condition ($M = .05$, $SD = .8$). Against our expectations, there was no significant association between moderator and moralization of gender equality, $B = .11$, $t(37) = .95$, $p = .351$, $d = .30$, 95% CI = [-.12, .34]. Finally, we found no significant interaction between condition and moderator, $B = -.25$, $t(37) = -1.64$, $p = .1004$, $d = -.5$, 95% CI = [-.55, .05].

Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine the relation between ostracism and moralization and the moderator effect of social avoidance. We hypothesize that ostracism leads to attitude moralization of issues relevant to the group than social inclusion. We also hypothesize that social avoidance moderates the effect of ostracism on attitude moralization. Particularly, for individuals who score high on social avoidance, ostracism leads to no change

on attitude moralization. Finally, we did not expect a relationship between social avoidance and attitude moralization.

Particularly, we did not find support that socially excluded people will moralize more than the socially included people. We also did not find evidence to support that social avoidance moderate the relation between ostracism and moralization, and socially avoidance was not associated with moralization. However, we must note that the study was underpowered (N= 42) due to the lack of response of the participant pool, so we need to interpret these findings carefully.

Theoretical Implications

This research makes a few theoretical advances for understanding what can potentially lead to moralization and if social avoidance could moderate the relation between ostracism and moral convictions (i.e., attitude moralization). First, this research is the first to examine the impact of ostracism on moralization of issues that are related to the group. It is true that we did not find support for our hypothesis, our findings could add valuable insights to the psychological processes involved in attitude moralization in regard to the join of the group. In line with previous research, we still do not know much about the relation between ostracism and moralization, we know that ostracism could lead to changing moralization, but we do not know how or when (DeWall et al., 2011). This experiment offers a promising area of research in which moralization can be shaped by groups processes, that is, being socially excluded from a group. This is in line with previous research work suggests that group moralization could be increased after ostracism if the ostracised individuals are sensitive to social belonging. And it drives the individuals to involve in extreme violence actions for the group (Pfundmair & Wetherell, 2018). More research is needed to check the impact of ostracism on moralization in groups.

Second, connecting to our findings previous research only knows that ostracism changes attitude moralization, it is only shown that the negative consequences such as increase aggression, decrease prosocial behavior and self-regulation could affect people differently (DeWall et al., 2011). But in our research, we do not know some of the negative consequences of ostracism that are concern changes in morals, values, and beliefs. It is useful to test again what previous research suggested that not all people who experience the same negative consequence will change their moralization the same way (DeWall et al., 2011).

Third, the influence of social avoidance on the relation between ostracism and moralization deserves further attention and discussion. Although we do not have significant findings of this moderator, it still can help in understanding this phenomenon. With a larger sample size and more diverse one, we could reduce the interaction effect. But with the sample size we have in this research not many conclusions could be drawn from it. Social avoidance could still affect the relation between ostracism and moralization. For future research, we suggest that they should explore more how socially avoidant individuals react to being excluded in a real-life situation. For example, maybe asking them to write when did they experienced exclusion before in their life and how did they feel about it?

Limitations, Strengths, and Direction for Future Research

Our research has some limitations. First our research is underpowered, and this is due to the lack of response from the participant pool. Another reason for that is the restricted sample range. The sample is not diverse, where they were only international first year psychology students whom their age ranged from 18 to 26. Future research should use a larger sample and more diverse in the aim to explore in depth the relation between ostracism and moralization and the moderator effect of social avoidance. Also, this research is very useful to be considered generalizable for international students.

Second, participants score very high on moral convictions at Time 1 so there was not much room for them to moralize. This could be due to using this specific moral issue (gender equality), but we used it because previous research has shown that these samples would score moderate to moral convictions regarding gender issues (i.e., sexism) (Leal et al., 2021). In this regard, we suggest for future research to use other moderate moral issues that people may not have high moralization for before exclusion, to see if they may moralize more after exclusion or not.

Third, this research unfolded many possible moderators and ideas to examine the relation between ostracism and moralization. In this experiment we investigated the moderator effect of social avoidance on the relation between ostracism and moralization. Social avoidance is only one type of social withdrawal. This means that social avoidance is not the only way for us to investigate as a moderator we could also examine other types of social withdrawal such as: shyness and unsociability. Thus, future research could find an effect if one of these types would be used as a moderator to investigate the relation between ostracism and moralization.

Conclusion

This research paves the way for a more in-depth understanding of what could trigger attitude moralization, and what could lead excluded individuals to make this change. Our findings suggest that excluded individuals will not change their moral convictions in order to join the group. We also did not find evidence to support our hypotheses that ostracism leads to attitude moralization of issues relevant to the group than social inclusion. Neither that social avoidance moderates the effect of ostracism on attitude moralization. Particularly, for individuals who score high on social avoidance, ostracism leads to no change on attitude moralization. Finally, we did not find a relationship between social avoidance and attitude

moralization. This implies that we need more research with wider and more diverse sample to better understand this relation. Also, this may lead us to understand how people change or do not change their moralization towards moral issues like gender equality.

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