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Getting lost: Psycho-political withdrawal in the covidian era.

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Ostracism in the era of COVID-19:

Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup perspectives

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic had a profound negative impact on people's personal and social life. In this chapter, after some conceptual clarifications, we provide insights into the effects of ostracism on people's well-being as individuals, partners, and group members. Specifically, we explore (a) individual- and personality-based risk factors of ostracism (intrapersonal level); (b) deprivation of social touch, disruption of empathy and social stigmatization in interpersonal relations (interpersonal level); and (c) disruption of social identity, social stigmatization and rise in prejudiced, discriminatory, and xenophobic tendencies within groups (intergroup level). The contribution of this chapter lies in proposing an interplay among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup dimensions of identity, that is, a multi-level conceptualization of ostracism during the covidian era. By integrating theoretical

arguments and research findings, we support the view that personal identity commitment and identification with social groups have similar roots, both based on the individual's need to formulate meaningful connections to the world and, thus, cope with as well as prevent ostracism. The implications of the interplay between personal and social identity for the measurement of ostracism are also discussed. Next, strategies for tackling ostracism during the pandemic or similar widespread crises are proposed. Finally, avenues for future research are suggested.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented changes in people's personal and social lives throughout the world during the past two years. The pandemic constitutes a global crisis, with hundreds of countries reporting numerous infections and deaths daily, and imposing measures such as social distancing, quarantining and lockdowns, to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2. At the time of writing this chapter, these measures still require people in several regions of the world to remain in complete or partial *physical isolation*, that is, to minimize face-to-face interactions and inclusionary behaviors and to live outside groups for considerable amounts of time. This situation opposes the very social nature of human beings and their strong need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Physical isolation has provoked feelings of *social isolation* which, in turn, may have led to the experience of *ostracism,* that is, the experience of being ignored and excluded (Williams, 1997), even though isolation was prescribed by public health guidelines (CDC, 2020) and imposed by governments as a necessary measure for health protection.

Ostracism is a universal and pervasive social phenomenon that impedes satisfaction of the following fundamental needs: belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence; thus, it causes psychological distress and pain (King & Geise, 2011; Hales & Williams, 2018; Stillman et al., 2009; Williams, 2009; for a meta-analysis see Hartgerink et al., 2015). Ostracism emerged as one of the most prevailing experiences during the pandemic (Hales et al., 2021). Specifically, it has recently been proposed (Graupmann & Pfundmair, 2022) that isolation resulting from social distancing during the pandemic may be regarded as *oblivious ostracism*. This was the name given to the unintentional and non-punitive forms of ostracism; they are not due, for example, to the individual's failure to meet social standards or expectations, but are rather a disregard for another person's existence, a fact that also acts as a threat to the four fundamental needs (Williams, 1997). Although during the pandemic oblivious ostracism is not disregard of the other, it has become all-pervasive because it is mandated and mutual. Research evidence shows that even this form of "normative" ostracism threatened fundamental needs during the pandemic (Graupmann & Pfundmair, 2022). Moreover, its mutual nature is expected to result in thwarted psychological needs for everyone involved; indeed, existing data indicate that the needs of autonomy and relatedness are negatively impacted not only for those ostracized but also for the ostracizers – and this may happen even when ostracism is felt justified to them (Legate et al., 2021).

Consequently, two important questions concern how ostracism is experienced and in what ways people's *identity* is affected by it during the pandemic. To this end, the focus of this chapter is to discuss various consequences of ostracism at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup levels of identity. As we will show, ostracism impacts on people's individual self-perceptions and perceived self-worth

and self-esteem, as well as their perceptions as members belonging to or excluded by several social groups. Therefore, ostracism is related to people's personal and social identity, in other words, the ways they perceive themselves in individual or in group terms (for an overview on personal and social identity see Ellemers et al., 2002).

On the basis of ongoing research on ostracism, and after discussing some conceptual issues, we will attempt to provide insights into the effects of ostracism on people's well-being as individuals, partners, and group members. Specifically, we will explore (a) individual- and personality-based risk factors of ostracism (*intrapersonal level*); (b) deprivation of social touch, disruption of empathy and social stigmatization in interpersonal relations (*interpersonal level*); and (c) disruption of social identity, social stigmatization and rise in prejudiced, discriminatory, and xenophobic tendencies withing groups (*intergroup level*). Furthermore, we will attempt to provide a comprehensive argument of how this multi-level conceptualization of ostracism can deepen our understanding of ostracism during the covidian era. The implications of the interplay between personal and social identity for the measurement of ostracism will also be discussed. Next, a conceptually integrative approach to ostracism will be formulated as well as strategies for tackling ostracism during the pandemic or similar widespread crises. Finally, avenues for future research will be suggested.

The contribution of this chapter lies in proposing an interplay among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup dimensions of identity, which can provide a better understanding of ostracism during the covidian era. By integrating theoretical arguments and research findings, we will support the view that personal identity commitment and identification with social groups have similar roots, both based on the individual's need to formulate meaningful connections to the world and, thus, cope with as well as prevent ostracism.

Ostracism: Conceptual issues

People are naturally attentive and responsive to how others perceive them in terms of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Moreover, the actual valence of those perceptions, that is, whether others approve and accept or exclude, ostracize and reject them elicits various emotional reactions (Leary et al., 2001; Williams & Zadro, 2001) which determine the quality of social relations (Buckley et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2000). In other words, individuals' feelings, thoughts, motivations, and actual behaviors as well as their overall well-being are strongly influenced by other people's reactions. Such reactions and the emotional states they elicit to their recipients act as triggers of the experiences of social exclusion, ostracism and rejection.

Ostracism may be regarded as a subcategory of *social exclusion* (Eck & Riva, 2016), which means being kept apart from others (Williams, 2007). Ostracism has been defined as the situation of "ignoring and excluding individuals or groups by individuals or groups" (Williams, 2007, p. 427). It has been regarded as including the experiences of both rejection, that is, the explicit declaration that an individual or group is not wanted, and social exclusion, that is, remaining apart and kept distant from others (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). However, other investigators argue in favor of a differentiation between ostracism, as an experience of being ignored, and rejection, as an experience of receiving direct negative attention, whereas they acknowledge that social exclusion may induce feelings of being ignored (Eck & Riva, 2016). When ostracism lasts for a long period of time, people experience it as a form of social death (Allen & Badcock, 2003; Williams & Nida, 2011). Nevertheless, ostracism can trigger a reflective process in which individuals take a step back and observe what is going on, what the threatening situation is and how to respond to it

(Gruter & Masters, 1986). By doing so, they may resecure their place in group and society, thus, regaining the control that was previously lost (Williams & Nida, 2011).

Ostracism can be expressed in various forms. First, it may acquire ritualized forms, which dates back to the prehistorical period of tribal communities and the period of ancient Greece and is often manifested in the institutional practices of excommunication, incarceration, political exile, and time-outs as children's discipline (Williams & Zadro, 2001). Second, ostracism can be expressed in non-ritualized forms, such as individuals' perceptions of being ignored and excluded by others who exhibit trivial behaviors, for example mean-spirited laughter or ongoing silences (Wesselmann et al., 2021). Ostracism can also be expressed via avoiding or ignoring immediate physical contact or eye-contact or more explicitly via discrimination and more direct exclusionary behaviors accompanied by verbal comments against the target of ostracism (Williams & Zadro, 2001).

By paying attention to the components of ostracism, its meaning and expression in daily interactive life, we can understand the extent to which it has been part of people's experiences and lives during the pandemic. Many people were excluded from social and economic life across the globe, found themselves isolated or experienced racism and discrimination (e.g., Chinese people worldwide because the virus first appeared in China). Ostracism was often expressed through avoidance of, at least, physical contact and through verbal comments against people who, for example, did not use face masks or had a negative attitude toward vaccination and the overall management of the pandemic crisis. Additionally, people who lost their jobs did not have access to resources, thus, they ended up isolated from social activities.

The following three sections examine the effects of ostracism with reference to the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the intergroup level.

Ostracism and COVID-19 pandemic: Intrapersonal level

There is, generally, a consensus in the literature that people feel ostracized in contexts where the following needs are threatened: belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), self-worth and self-esteem (Steele et al., 1993), perceived self-control (Seligman, 1975), and meaning in life (Solomon et al., 1991). According to the *temporal need-threat model* of ostracism, which was proposed by Williams and colleagues (Williams, 2009; Williams & Nida, 2011), ostracism unfolds in three distinct stages: a reflexive, a reflective, and a resignation one. In the *reflexive stage*, reflexive responses to ostracism occur and pain is experienced as a result of non-satisfaction of fundamental needs. Anger and sadness can be experienced too. Next, in the *reflective stage*, people may carefully think of the experience that causes feelings of ostracism, reflect on it, and figure out ways to satisfy the threatened needs. There are individual differences in the reaction or mere desire to cope with the stressful experience for a long period of time. Finally, during the *resignation stage*, people's coping strategies become less effective, as they experience futility. When the needs for belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence are thwarted for a considerable period, people are likely to experience alienation, depression, helplessness, and unworthiness, respectively (Wesselmann et al., 2021).

Ostracism and social exclusion are experienced to a different degree and in several situations (Bernstein & Claypool, 2012). An immediate response to "hurt feelings" may be low sensitivity to pain and numbness (analgesia) (DeWall &

Baumeister, 2006; Twenge, Baumeister et al., 2007). If rejection and ostracism persist, they lead to reduced or no satisfaction of fundamental psychological needs such as social belongingness and self-esteem (Nezlek et al., 2015), depression, low psychological resilience (Fung et al., 2017), lack of self-worth and social alienation, and resignation and isolation (Riva et al., 2017; Williams, 2009; Williams & Nida, 2011). Ostracism evokes negative and intense emotional experiences, which are universally lived, such as sense of dehumanization and exclusion, accompanied by low self-worth (Zadro et al., 2015). When experiencing ostracism, people tend to deploy several cognitive and behavioral strategies to satisfy their needs and recover; they also endorse various attributions regarding reasons for ostracism (Wesselmann et al., 2015).

Despite experiences of exclusion and isolation, people may make efforts to be re-included again to regain self-control and restore self-esteem and self-worth (Williams, 2009). In particular, the emotion of shame has been traditionally described as a social regulator (Gilbert, 2019) and as an existential emotion which, like a glue, sustains social connectedness (Scheff, 2000). During the pandemic, emotions such as embarrassment, humiliation and shame have been found to be predominant (Haller et al., 2020; Sahoo et al., 2020). People's vulnerability and exclusion from social activities caused feelings of shame (Walsh et al., 2020) and guilt that resulted in major depression episodes (Duan et al., 2020). Furthermore, people who unintentionally spread the virus, felt ashamed in various occasions (Max, 2020), as well as people who suffered from shortages in food and other supplies (Weissman et al., 2020). Those who had transmitted the virus to their family members experienced shame and other similar negative emotions (Kato et al., 2020; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2019). Moreover, living alone during the quarantine along with changes in the monthly

financial income because of job loss strongly predicted negative and unpleasant emotions and reduced positive emotions such as joy (Sekścińska et al., 2022). Such findings provide further support to the view, already put forward by emotional appraisal theories (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), that what matters more in crisis situations, as a significant predictor of emotions, is the appraisal of the situation rather than the situation per se.

As the pandemic constitutes a multifaceted crisis, different aspects of it evoked different emotional reactions. Support for restriction policies to mitigate the spread of the virus was found to be high among individuals who experienced heightened anger and fear, whereas the need for supportive economic policies was aggravated among those with high anxiety levels (Renström & Bäck, 2021). These findings imply that people who feel ignored and excluded are in urgent need for governments' supportive policy interventions which will reduce current risks and facilitate social (re)integration during the post-pandemic era.

Another facet of the effects of ostracism at the intrapersonal level is cognitive function. There is an emerging body of research during the pandemic (Ingram et al., 2021; Lippi et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) supporting the fact that cognitive decline is a consequence of ostracism. It has been consistently found, in studies deploying event-related brain potentials and electroencephalograms, that ostracism affects human brain, cognition and neurophysiology (for a review see Kawamoto et al., 2013). Intelligent thought and self-regulation as parts of executive function are also impacted by social exclusion (Baumeister et al., 2002, 2005; for a review see Baumeister et al., 2007).

During the pandemic, prolonged restrictions in social activities had a negative impact on cognitive function, whereas opportunities for social interaction increased cognitive performance in memory and attention tasks (Ingram et al., 2021). Furthermore, fear and worry about the pandemic and its unpredictable nature have been found to negatively affect speed of information processing, proactive thinking, and control, as well as task set shifting (da Silva Castanheira et al., 2021). Although such findings have been observed in adults and older adults, Attwood and Jarrold (2022) found that adolescents' anxiety and negative emotions due to the pandemic also predicted a decline in cognitive function, as this was reflected on performance in planning, attention and memory tasks.

In sum, at the intrapersonal level, both before and during the pandemic, ostracism has pervasive negative effects on individuals' emotional and cognitive processes as well as on mental health. However, during the pandemic, research has shown that the ways ostracism was experienced at the micro-level (i.e., individual) had clear links with policies at the macro-level (i.e., government). The mechanisms underlying these effects seem to be non-satisfaction of basic psychological needs, threats to self-concept and self-image, and perceived exclusion from social activities and social life, which also affected cognitive functioning. We argue that *the personal-is-political approach* could be of value for understanding ostracism. This approach first appeared as a slogan in the era of the rise of feminism movements, when women's problems regarding their bodies and life choices urged them to engage in politics (Rogan & Budgeon, 2018). Similarly, in our attempt to outline the multifaceted effects of ostracism and to inform relevant policies for counteracting social exclusion, we need to approach ostracism at the interpersonal level; this is the focus of the next section.

Ostracism and COVID-19 pandemic: Interpersonal level

The social restrictions that were imposed during the pandemic caused dramatic changes in people's interpersonal lives. Citizens around the world minimized their close contacts. This situation was initially described by the World Health Organization as "social distancing" but later this term was replaced by "physical distancing" because alternative, mainly virtual, types of social contact were encouraged.

As discussed previously (at the intrapersonal level), a common immediate response to exclusion and ostracism is *numbness*. This has been found to be unexpectedly followed by a rise in positive affectivity, a finding which has been attributed to the individual's attempt to deal with the pain that is very likely to ensue later, when numbness subsides (DeWall et al., 2011; for a review see Baumeister et al., 2007). Hence, the important finding that social exclusion damages *empathy* (Twenge, Baumeister et al., 2007) may be explained, at least in part, by this rise in happy thoughts that reduce the capacity to feel other people's pain and relate with them (Baumeister et al., 2007). Indeed, one of the most common responses of people during the pandemic was emotional numbness (for a review see Mukhtar, 2020), which, apart from being a typical post-traumatic stress reaction, it can also be thought of as a reaction to ostracism caused by physical distancing.

Research data show that, when ostracized, people are likely to seek reconnection and proximity to others (Chester et al., 2016; Maner et al., 2007). When in contexts of threats against the need for belonging, people tend to be more socially attentive, and desire to join groups and interact with peers (DeWall et al., 2011; Pickett et al., 2004). In this way, they replenish their potential for self-regulation and

self-control when responding to psychological challenges (Twenge, Zhang et al., 2007) – pandemic is, of course, such a challenge. The more people practice social distancing, the more they feel the desire for interpersonal reconnection (Maner et al., 2007).

In addition, *social touch*, as an essential element of non-verbal communication, is naturally craved by people, especially in periods of social isolation (von Mohr et al., 2018; von Mohr et al., 2021). Existing research has shown that social touch facilitates closeness in interpersonal relationships, enhances social bonds (Hertenstein et al., 2006), promotes affiliative behaviors (Lööken et al., 2009), and increases the perceived likability of the other person (Burgoon et al., 1992). It reduces, if not eliminates, social pain and discomfort, as well as anxiety and loneliness (Fung & Alden, 2017).

There is research evidence that, during the pandemic, people craved intimate social touch to a greater extent than before (von Mohr et al., 2021). This also became evident in special populations or settings. For example, the use of face masks, which became mandatory, by people with special needs and disabilities, and especially by those who relied on non-verbal communication (e.g., people with hearing problems), augmented their feelings of being ostracized due to the lack of immediate interpersonal contact and perception of others' emotions or expressions such as smiles (Mheidly et al., 2020). In addition, face masks reduced the healthcare professionals' ability to empathize with the patients' feelings, and monitor their responses accordingly, thus leaving the patients with a sense of not being understood and felt (Nobilo, 2020).

Social stigmatization constitutes one of the main underlying interpersonal mechanisms that explained many incidents of ostracism. During the pandemic, healthcare professionals have been ostracized and stigmatized by fellow citizens, who feared contamination and avoided immediate contact with them (e.g., Moreira & Pinto da Costa, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020) or with citizens offering services to healthcare professionals, such as driving them with a taxi or delivering food to hospitals (Kotb, 2020; Sutrisno, 2020). Individuals from Asian countries or those with recent travel history have also been stigmatized during the pandemic (Ren et al., 2020). Social stigmatization gave rise to several risk behaviors, such as alcohol abuse during periods of quarantine (Arora & Grey, 2020).

In sum, at the interpersonal level, physical distancing, deprivation of social touch and use of face masks had negative effects on people's verbal and non-verbal communication. Various groups were accused of being responsible for or spreading the virus, a fact that resulted in stigmatization and ostracism. All these disruptions had adverse consequences on the intrapersonal level too and documented the deeply social nature of humans, the importance of interpersonal contact, and the necessity of implementing social policies for enhancing interactions in periods of crisis and uncertainty. Beyond the interpersonal level, however, individuals have a collective self too, which is manifested in people's inclusion in large social groups and in contrast to out-groups (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). In the next section, we review the effects of ostracism at the intergroup level.

Ostracism and COVID-19 pandemic: Intergroup level

Social identity, defined as the sense of selfhood in terms of group memberships, provides emotionally meaningful frames for self-definition and navigation in the social world (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Individuals aim to maintain as much degree of certainty regarding their social identity as possible (Hogg, 2007; Hogg & Abrams, 1993). When the external environment becomes unpredictable and unstable, the individual's sense of self-certainty decreases and the motivation for group identification increases (Hogg, 2007). The pandemic and the related restrictions formed an unstable and unpredictable environment which affected people's lives within groups, their sense of belonging to them and, consequently, their social identity (see also Kruglanski et al., 2021, for threats towards the self).

When people encounter threatening situations which trigger ostracism, they attempt to restore their position in the group to which they previously belonged; when this attempt fails, they often exhibit non-normative, antisocial or even extremist behaviors against the group (Wesselman et al., 2010), perhaps with the aim of establishing recognition from it. There is ample empirical evidence before the pandemic (e.g., DeWall et al., 2009; Poon & Teng, 2017; Twenge et al., 2001) showing that ostracism predicts the rise of aggressive and antisocial behaviors which, in turn, inhibit prosocial and positive behaviors that could promote the collective welfare (Van der Linden, 2015).

During the pandemic, numerous cases of 'othering' worldwide (e.g., Bhanot et al., 2021) concerning the group-based societal response to the spread of the virus provide further support for ostracism from an intergroup perspective. Across history, the outbreak of infectious diseases has provoked discriminatory, xenophobic, and

racist tendencies against other groups, which emerge as efforts to assign responsibility for the cause and the spread of the disease to an outer source (Clissold et al., 2020). Furthermore, the *behavioral immune system theory* predicts that cues to infection lead to avoidance of potentially infected people which, in turn, is likely to result in xenophobia (Schaller & Park, 2011). Indeed, perceived COVID-19-threat motivated aversive emotional responses which elicited hostility toward outgroups (Freitag & Hofstetter, 2021). Increased discriminatory and prejudiced behaviors against social groups or even xenophobic attitudes toward immigrants have been consistently observed during the pandemic, especially against Chinese people (Chou & Gaysynsky, 2021) and Asian Americans (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, 2021). Furthermore, during this time, in the social media, hashtags, as manifestations of people's attempts to assert their social identity (Zappavigna, 2014), were used both to indicate enactment of group affiliation and to target or discriminate against other groups (e.g., #ChineseVirus), whose members felt ostracized in host countries (Chou & Gaysynsky, 2021).

Social stigmatization has been found to be a key underlying mechanism leading to ostracism not only at the interpersonal level, as discussed in the previous section, but also in intergroup settings. Group members tend to attribute stereotypical traits to other group members who are perceived as deviant from a social norm (Parker et al., 1995) and, thus, become stigmatized (Simmons & Chambers, 1965). From an *evolutionary perspective* (Kurzban & Leary, 2001), ostracism serves the function of protecting the group from individual members who are burdensome or potentially dangerous for the group as a whole. During the pandemic, infected people were considered dangerous for the societal welfare (Bhanot et al., 2021). In the framework

of the *labeling theory* (Becker, 1974), it can be suggested that a new, stigmatized group, that of “infected people”, has emerged.

Finally, from an institutional and political perspective, ostracism is likely to have a negative impact on attitudes or trust towards institutions and governments. As long as many political messages are tailored in a way that implies a prejudiced or discriminatory attitude toward foreigners, ostracism occurs at the national (intergroup) level too (Frischlich & Humprecht, 2021). To combat this, in periods of uncertainty, such as the current pandemic, societies need a leadership that (a) expresses the prototypical group values, and (b) provides unambiguous guidance on the ways group members should act and behave to reduce uncertainty which lies at the root of ostracism (Abrams et al., 2021).

In sum, at the intergroup level, the uncertainty, instability, and unpredictability caused by the pandemic disrupted people’s social identity, therefore their motivation for group participation. Social stigmatization as well as prejudiced, discriminatory, and xenophobic tendencies emerged within groups. Taken together, the intergroup effects of ostracism reflect the individuals’ fundamental need and motivation to belong to social groups (Allen, 2020), a fact that should inform future policies and actions to promote opportunities for associations, collectivities and other prosocial groups which are expected to provide support in challenging times.

The interplay of personal and social identity: Implications for the measurement of ostracism

Ostracism has been the topic of empirical investigation for the past two decades with the use of experimental and descriptive methods. Studies investigating ostracism

have largely evolved from independent lines of research within developmental and social psychology and have led to different methods of investigation. Within developmental psychology, sociometric methods have been commonly used to differentiate socially accepted from socially unaccepted children (see Cillessen, 2009, for a review). Although methods vary, typically, the participants within a reference group (usually classrooms) are asked to rate each other on a dimension of social status (e.g., popularity) or reputation. In contrast to sociometric methods, social psychologists often focus on understanding the immediate, phenomenological experience of being ostracized, which is often induced by experimental control (e.g., Blackhart et al., 2009).

Experimentally, ostracism has been typically manipulated within the Cyberball paradigm (Williams et al., 2000). In this paradigm, three participants sit in a room before the start of the experiment. A confederate picks up a small ball from a shelf in that room, tossing it to the other confederate. They both follow a script of either including or excluding the participant from that game. In addition, being ignored and excluded, as components of ostracism, are provoked by feedback given to participants as a prognosis on the basis of their responses to a questionnaire. More specifically, the questionnaire is supposed to predict that a participant would lead a life of aloneness in the future (Twenge et al., 2001), that another person (i.e., a confederate) would not like to work jointly with the participant (Maner et al., 2007), and that people joining a social task would not like to work with him/her (Nezlek et al., 1997).

Moreover, ostracism is also measured with the Ostracism Experience Scale (Carter-Sowell, 2010), which assesses individuals' perceptions of being excluded or ignored. An example item is: "In general, others don't look at me when I am in their presence". Single-item measures have been also used to measure experiences of

ostracism. For example, in their study on workplace ostracism, Fiset et al. (2017) asked participants to evaluate the degree to which they felt excluded by their colleagues.

Up until now, it is evident that ostracism is measured mainly as an individual-based trait, by assessing the subjective experience of exclusion and rejection. However, as we have previously discussed, ostracism challenges not only individual emotional or behavioral states, but also group-based feelings and needs related to the multiple groups people belong to and the related group identities they have established. As such, ostracism encompasses an interplay between personal and social identities, an idea that is rarely considered in most existing measures of ostracism.

Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup perspectives of ostracism can and need to be integrated. Even at the macro-level of intergroup relations, group coherence stems from bonds formed by group members at the interpersonal level, as well as from the internalization of the external social context which, in turn, elicits individual-based emotions and experiences, such as one's perceived sense of being ostracized (Hogg, 1992; Prentice et al., 1994). Despite the substantial research evidence on group identities and collective emotions and behaviors that should not be explained on the basis only of personal self and identities (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000; Ellemers et al., 1997), ostracism still continues to be measured as an individual trait, with the emphasis being on personal identities and individual processes even within interpersonal and social interactions (Ellemers et al., 2002; Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1989).

A lesson learnt in the covidian era is the importance of social belongingness for the well-being of people. We also realized how a hygienic crisis escalated to a broader

societal crisis, which disrupted established group identities and forced people to live in isolation (Gonzalez-Sanguino et al., 2020). This physical and, thus, social isolation has had a negative psychological impact on specific groups such as students (e.g., Liu et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2020), women (e.g., Alon et al., 2020), as well as ethnic minorities and particular groups of workers (e.g., Platt et al., 2020). Therefore, the study of ostracism should be redirected to the interrelationship between personal and social identities.

Personal identities are context-specific and embedded in sociopolitical and cultural contexts. People belong to social groups, which equip them with cognitive alternatives and encourage them to cope with adversities through finding meaning in intergroup connections (e.g., Crocetti et al., 2018). In this vein, building healthy relations with other ingroup members can help ostracized people find meaning about themselves and their previously rejected individual identities. At the same time, processes of personal identity can facilitate group identification. In particular, people's individual choices are reflected on social groups that they identify with. For example, young people with strong commitment to educational achievements can identify with the social group of classmates and, thus, not feel excluded from the educational context (Albarello et al., 2018). Regarding ostracism, people who feel ignored/excluded and therefore experience negative psychological consequences at the intrapersonal level, can refocus their interest and attention on their social environment, where they can find social groups to identify with and transfer their personal potential (Alcover et al., 2020). As a result, their feelings of exclusion and rejection are likely to be alleviated. During the pandemic, people have organized "mutual aid groups" across the globe (Ntontis & Rocha, 2020). Psychological elision of the personal and social self, as a kind of identity fusion, sets the stage for a sense of

commonality which, in turn, is expected to strengthen solidarity at the intergroup level (Paredes et al., 2021).

Considering the possible ways of interplay between personal and social identity in the study of ostracism, we conclude by underlying the informative value of *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) for the study and measurement of ostracism in contexts such as the pandemic. According to this theory, personal and social identities constitute the two interconnected poles of an identity continuum along which people define themselves and behave. It will be useful to consider potential social groups as sources of meaning and self-definition regarding personal identities when individuals attempt to deal with ostracism. Therefore, the measurement of ostracism would benefit from including social group belongingness as a perceived cognitive alternative beyond the assessment of individual-based perceptions of being ignored and excluded and their impact on personal well-being. This tactic is expected to shed light on the role of identification with social groups in preventing or reducing the negative psychological impact of ostracism at an individual level in contexts, such as the pandemic, where social contact is minimized.

In sum, we suggest that current paradigms of ostracism measurement should be expanded by exploring (a) individuals' perceptions of immediately available social groups as sources of identification; and (b) whether these in-groups are felt as psychological shelters or, instead, are at the root of feelings of being ignored and excluded.

An emergent need for multi-level interventions for ostracism

Because ostracism is an individual-based as well as a group-based phenomenon, as discussed previously, it is suggested that interventions should also include both intrapersonal and intergroup/institutional aspects.

Up to date, in the measurement of ostracism, much attention has been placed on the experience of trauma in the present. This is often accompanied by a clinical focus on the traumatized person's negative view of the future, which is regarded as an indicator of emotional disorder (MacLeod & O'Connor, 2018). However, at the intrapersonal level, certain alternative interventions could be suggested. Specifically, interventions with the aim of enhancing self-affirmation and self-integrity are expected to help people cope with personality-threatening situations, such as stress, amidst a period of hygienic crisis. *Self-affirmation* constitutes the manifestation of one's adequacy and, thus, the affirmation of one's sense of global self-integrity, which is expected to help people navigate safely through adversities (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). *Self-integrity* denotes a sense of self-efficacy and a self-image based on one's perception of being morally and adaptively adequate in the face of threats. When in threatening situations, people aim to successfully respond by putting their personal strengths and potential in a positive light (Dunning, 2005). Research findings support the predictive role of self-affirmation in people's efforts to minimize the negative impact of ostracism (Poon et al., 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to explore the temporal shift from past traumas to the here-and-now with various methods such as the following: (a) focused attention tasks (e.g., McHugh et al., 2012) that train participants to direct their attention and awareness to the stimuli of the current environment and to limit rumination; and (b) projective thinking procedures of imagining and writing about oneself in the future after experiencing life-threatening

events (e.g., Sools et al., 2018). Such interventions would help people reduce the negative impact of ostracism and uncertainty.

Drawing on earlier theorizations on *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986), it will be useful to encourage ostracized people to project themselves to a better future (i.e., the post-covidian era). Self-integrity, which is enhanced via self-affirmation, is rooted on a temporal continuity between past, present, and future identities; thus, people with disrupted identities could benefit from envisioning a future-desired identity, which is expected to promote positive self-views, thus minimizing the negative impact of ostracism. At the interpersonal level, there is also research evidence that self-affirmation interventions can optimize interpersonal experiences by improving sense of self-control (Burson et al., 2012), satisfying basic existential needs (Hales & Williams, 2018), and increasing sense of interpersonal security (Stinson et al., 2011). These experiences are regarded to facilitate social bonds, a fact that is the very opposite of the experience of ostracism.

At the intergroup level, it can be suggested that formation of social identities can become an integral part of effective ostracism interventions. In social psychological literature, the “power of one” is a prominent mechanism that explains individuals’ proneness to imitate prosocial and helpful behaviors which are directed toward themselves (Burger et al., 2015; for a review on social psychological experiments see Asch, 1951). In addition, it has been found that aggression following social exclusion can be eliminated if the excluded person has an alternative source of positive social connection (Twenge, Zhang et al., 2007). If the ostracized individual experiences positive, prosocial, and helpful behaviors by another person who, in turn, acts as a helpful model, then, the ostracized person will imitate the model behavior and help another ostracized person. Just one individual can make a difference for

another ostracized individual and help mitigate the negative emotional effects of ostracism. It has been found that the mere presence of a supportive and accepting person can reduce antisocial behaviors that follow social exclusion/rejection and are directed against the group (DeWall et al., 2011).

How ostracism interventions can be informed by the "power of one" mechanism? Answers to this question can be provided by the *common ingroup identity model* (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2012), which posits that prejudice and discrimination decrease and cooperation and prosocial behaviors increase if group members' perceptions of group boundaries rise from "us" and "them" (i.e., different groups) to a more inclusive "we" (i.e., a superordinate group and a superordinate identity category). Research before the pandemic has shown that socially excluded individuals who perceive themselves as members of a majority (versus a minority) group, are more likely to experience less threat regarding their psychological needs, especially if they have a strong need to belong (e.g., Eck et al., 2016). This may be due to the fact that majority group membership (as an aspect of social identity) increases sense of connectedness and self-esteem.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, physical and social distancing led people to spend large amounts of time with ingroup members (e.g., family) and minimized intergroup contact. In this way, discriminatory, racist, and xenophobic behaviors became evident as well as social exclusion or rejection of people from other, especially foreign, outgroups (Chou & Gaysynsky, 2021; Gordils et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there was also an increasing awareness that the virus is a common enemy against which all humanity had to fight. Research before (e.g., Drury, 2018) and after (e.g., Toprakkiran & Gordils, 2022) the pandemic has shown that the more

people identify with a superordinate group, the more intergroup contact and outgroup warmth and competence they experience (“we are all in this together”).

To this end, ostracism interventions may play a restorative role through helping people acknowledge their common, shared fate. Inspired by the common ingroup identity model and prompted by the potentially beneficial outcomes of the “power of one” mechanism, ostracism interventions can encourage people to engage in cooperative tasks (i.e., causes of commonality), then facilitate them to recategorize themselves in terms of a new common identity as “we” (i.e., representational mediator) and, finally, promote their sense of perceived group homogeneity (i.e., consequence of commonality) (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2012). Following such a common ingroup identity establishment path, the ostracized person can be accepted by other persons and become able to identify common territories on which both parts can place themselves, thus, establishing a new, common identity. A person who experiences ostracism because of their ethnicity (see, e.g., cases of racism against Chinese people in the beginning of the pandemic) can engage in cooperative tasks with other community members, such as adopting common health protection behaviors, and participate in the digital community to restore connections with others. Then, they can all recategorize themselves as “we” in terms of, for example, community members, who all have to deal with the common enemy, called COVID-19. Eventually, the previously ostracized person can become a member of a homogeneous group along with other group members, forming a common in-group identity.

To sum up, we argue for a *conceptual integration of individuals’ multiple identities*, the formation and expression of which can counteract ostracism. During the pandemic, the rapid shift towards a way of living full of risks and challenges calls for

multi-level interventions to prevent ostracism experiences and their negative effects. In the final section of this chapter, we attempt to map out avenues for future research and interventions for the reduction of ostracism amidst the ongoing pandemic and other similar crises.

Concluding remarks and avenues for future research and interventions

The multi-level nature and content of ostracism, one of the most prevalent experiences in the covidian era, calls for further research to explore more complicated underlying mechanisms that predict experiences of ostracism during a multifaceted crisis. To begin with, we identify a two-fold *taxonomy of ostracism* research: (a) a temporal focus of research on experiences of ostracism, and (b) a content-related focus of research on identities of ostracized individuals.

Regarding the *temporal focus* of research, a potentially fruitful avenue for future research would be to examine not only how ostracized people perceive the "here-and-now" but also how they imagine their individual and collective future in the post-covidian era. People are still experiencing the negative impact of the pandemic crisis and feel uncertain about the future. However, relevant research data show that prospective thinking predicts positive self-views, such as a decrease of antisocial behaviors (Sools, 2020), and an increase of positive emotions such as happiness (Sools et al., 2018). Based on research data on the rather understudied issue of the temporal dimensions of victimhood (Noor et al., 2017), we suggest that this experience during the pandemic, as a past, ongoing and present-day trauma, may result in negative views of the future. In order to capture some of the complexities of the psychological mechanisms that underpin ostracized identities, we need to pose

empirical questions on the temporal continuity and discontinuity of human life and activity and on how temporality is perceived by individuals.

Next, the *content-related focus* of research refers to the actual content of ostracized identities, wherever they belong across the temporal continuum. On the basis of the common ingroup identity model (mentioned above), an insightful avenue of research would be to explore the psychological effects of the enhancement of social belongingness on perceived personal and social identities, especially via longitudinal designs that capture dynamic changes (e.g., Albarello et al., 2018). People can dynamically belong to multiple social groups, and this membership was possible even during the covidian era due to digital communication. Via pre-post research designs, researchers can detect the transition from perceived ostracized group identities to perceived optimized and homogeneous ones. When people experience aloneness caused by exclusion, they desire to regain control and, to this end, they become violent and aggressive (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020). By uniting people and flagging up in public sphere and discourse the common enemy, that is, the virus, it will be possible to reduce ostracism, rejection, and exclusion incidents.

Finally, the heavy reliance on digital communication during the covidian era points to the need of extending investigations into this issue. Although research on digital communication and its potential to reduce prejudice and discrimination is still scarce, the Internet can provide a valuable and oftentimes easily accessible tool to overcome obstacles. These obstacles are discriminatory and prejudiced behaviors that are often inherent in the *original contact hypothesis* (Allport, 1954), which assumes physical interaction between members from different social groups. Therefore, positive intergroup encounters can take a digital form (for a review see Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2015) and facilitate ostracized people to become again parts of

larger communities. What still warrants empirical investigation are the long-term effects of such digital-based group contact interventions, with the aim to evaluate their effectiveness in reducing or eliminating ostracism experiences.

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