THE SCARLET LETTER STUDY: FIVE DAYS OF SOCIAL OSTRACISM

KIPLING D. WILLIAMS
University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

FRANK J. BERNIERI, SONJA L. FAULKNER, and NEHA GADA-JAIN
University of Toledo, Toledo, Ohio, USA

JON E. GRAHE
Monmouth College, Monmouth, Illinois, USA

Over the course of 5 consecutive days, each author agreed to be ostracized for a day at work by the other four coauthors. All coauthors’ offices were in close proximity and were located solely on a single floor and wing of their academic building. Each morning, the name of that day’s ostracized individual was drawn, and a scarlet letter “O” was placed above that individual’s office door. Ostracizers were instructed to ignore the “Os” by not looking at them, speaking to them, or responding to anything they said. Open-ended individual event-contingent diaries were kept to record participants’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors each time they were reminded of the ostracism. Despite foreknowledge and consent, attributional confusion surfaced and strong aversive reactions were reported. Findings are framed in terms of Williams’s (1997) model of ostracism.

Received 3 November 1998; accepted 11 January 1999.

We would like to thank Wendy Shore, Marty Bourgeois, and Meg Rohan for their comments and suggestions prior to running this study; Carla Walton and Lisa Zadro for their coding of the diaries; and Ladd Wheeler and Marty Bourgeois for their comments on this manuscript.

Partial funding for this research was provided through a University of Toledo Research Awards and Fellowship Program internal grant and through an Australian Research Council Grant (A79800071), both to the first author.

Address correspondence to Kipling D. Williams, School of Psychology, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia. E-mail: kip.williams@unsw.edu.au
Can you remember a time when you arrived at work and were greeted by your coworkers as though you possessed a contagious virus or, perhaps worse, like you were not even there? No matter what you did or said, the others steered clear of you and did not respond. They did not ask for your input as they usually did, nor did they argue or disagree with you. How did you react? How did it make you feel? What thoughts did you generate to explain or make sense of their behaviors? Now, remember a time when you were on the other side of this scenario, when you ignored your coworker throughout the day and pretended as though he or she did not exist. Why did you do this? Was it difficult and distracting, or was it simple and effortless because no specific behavior was required of you? How did actively ignoring that individual affect your attitude toward him or her? We present in this article an examination and analysis of such a situation in which we, the coauthors, were the sole participants.

The five of us planned and consented to ostracize a different person in our group each day over a period of a week. We recorded our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in an open-ended event-contingent self-report record (Wheeler & Reis, 1991). These records were later typed out verbatim, synchronized by time and day with each other so that reactions to specific episodes could be compared, and coded by two nonparticipating individuals.

We begin our analysis of this study by briefly reviewing the literature on social ostracism and presenting a new model of ostracism that generates specific predictions of its effects. We then present our arguments for the validity of employing a role-play method with consenting and non-naïve participants and of using event-contingent records for analysis. A detailed procedure is presented, followed by an analysis of our event-contingent records. Results are presented descriptively. We offer this study primarily as a phenomenological excursion into the minds of people experiencing ostracism.

**Ostracism: A Review of the Literature**

The pervasiveness of ostracism is such that it has transcended time and is evident in almost all civilizations and known cultures (Gruter & Masters, 1986). Tribal civilizations such as the Pathan
tribes located in the Northwestern Frontier Province of Pakistan and the Slavic tribes of Montenegro both exile deviate individuals for the purpose of protecting the remaining members of the group (Boehm, 1986; Mahdi, 1986). The Amish practice “meidung” (translated as shunning) in order to discipline members of the faith. According to Gruter (1986), the Amish view meidung as a “slow death” because it demands that friends, community members, and even close family not speak to the perpetrator for fear of being similarly ostracized. In such exclusion, perpetrators would be unable to carry out necessary interactions that would give them goods and essential services, rendering them and their families vulnerable to destitution.

The ubiquity of ostracism is also reflected in the many terms used to describe it—the cold shoulder, treat with ignore, being sent to Coventry, the silent treatment, exile, banishment, expulsion, time-out, and silencing. Forms of ostracism are evident throughout institutions in our society such as schools (e.g., time-outs, expulsion) and the workplace (e.g., in the ostracism of “whistleblowers” by coworkers; Faulkner, 1998). Almost all religions punish noncompliance to ecclesiastical law with some form of excommunication, removing the deviate member from the congregation and from any privileges that membership holds in the afterlife, such as ascension to heaven (Zippelius, 1986).

The pervasiveness of ostracism throughout society and institutions is also mirrored by the presence of ostracism in interpersonal relationships. Indeed, the prevalence of ostracism is such that all individuals will be both a victim (i.e., a target) and a perpetrator (i.e., a source) of some form of ostracism within almost all of their relationships, whether with loved ones, colleagues, or strangers. A survey of 2,000 Americans found that 67% admitted to using the silent treatment (deliberately not speaking to a person in their presence) on a loved one, whereas 75% indicated that they had been a target of the silent treatment by a loved one (Faulkner, Williams, Sherman, & Williams, 1997). The silent treatment has been noted as a behavioral symptom of deteriorating marriages by Gottman and his colleagues (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1992). Buss, Gomes, Higgins, and Lauterbach (1987) found that couples who are less similar and less well matched are more likely to use the silent treatment and other tactics of manipulation than those who are similar and well matched.
Ostracism is not merely restricted to adult interpersonal relationships. Barner-Barry (1986) documents a case in which a preschool class systematically ostracized a bully (i.e., ignored him and excluded him from games and conversation) without adult prompting. This case study suggests that the effective use of ostracism by young children may indicate that exclusion, as a means of controlling the behavior of others, is both innate and adaptive (Barner-Barry, 1986). Adolescent girls also tend to favor ostracism as a tactic during conflicts, whereas adolescent boys are more likely to favor physical violence as a means of resolving conflict (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, & Ferguson, 1989).

Ostracism is evident not only in human interactions but also as a behavior within several animal species. Many different forms of ostracism have been documented among primates, including exclusion of a group member (generally male) after unsuccessful attempts to take leadership, forced immigration due to insufficient resources, and ostracism due to abnormal behavior or illness (Goodall, 1986; Lancaster, 1986). Ostracism may be beneficial among animal groups since it reduces both the demand on scarce resources and the chance of inbreeding. However, rejection from the group, and thus from the protection of other members, is often the first step toward starvation and death for the ostracized member (Goodall, 1986).

Williams (1997; see also Williams & Sommer, 1997) recently reviewed the literature on ostracism and observed that (a) ostracism has been defined quite loosely and broadly, (b) most of the examinations of this phenomenon have been outside psychology, and (c) the research that has been conducted on ostracism within psychology has not been programmatic or theoretical.

In Gruter and Masters’s (1986) special issue on ostracism in *Ethology and Sociobiology*, the definitions of ostracism ranged from disparaging remarks about individuals or groups in humor (Alexander, 1986) to capital punishment of tribal offenders (Boehm, 1986). The overarching theme of this compendium of articles was one that depicted ostracism as a phenomenon in which individuals are excluded in order to preserve the group’s cohesiveness and survival. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that humor, murder, and everything in between could be adequately understood as a unitary phenomenon. Williams concluded that,
indeed, ostracism was complex and had multiple causes and multiple consequences but that it should be distinguished from other aversive interpersonal behaviors, including verbal and physical assault (Williams, 1997).

The essential characteristic that underlies all forms of ostracism is that it involves some form of ignoring of the target and usually carries with it an implicit or explicit exclusion or rejection of the target individual or group (Gruter & Masters, 1986; Snoek, 1962). However, even without explicit rejection or exclusion, being ignored even by strangers can be unpleasant. Zuckerman, Misrandino, and Bernieri (1983) found that elevator riders who were not given the usual glance-and-nod by another rider had significantly lower moods after exiting the elevator.

Individuals who deviate from others’ expectations are often the targets of ostracism (Gruter & Masters, 1986; Schachter, 1959); thus, it appears as though the primary function of ostracism is to bring the target back into the fold or to expel the target altogether. Either outcome strengthens the ostracizing group’s cohesiveness.

The existing research demonstrates convincingly that ostracism is an aversive interpersonal behavior to the targets of ostracism. Unlike other forms of aversive interpersonal behaviors, however, such as verbal or physical abuse, ostracism can be characterized as a nonbehavior. Because of this, its occurrence is enveloped in several layers of ambiguity. For instance, targets may notice that they are being ignored and think to themselves, “Is it actually happening or is it my imagination?” Or, if it is clear that ostracism is indeed happening, the target might wonder “Why is it being done? Are they mad at me? Am I so unimportant to them that they don’t even notice me?” It is precisely this ambiguity, Williams argues, that makes ostracism uniquely powerful and often used. One could conceivably ostracize another without having to admit doing it or apologize for it.

Although ignoring is common to most types of ostracism, Williams argues that it is likely that there will be different psychological effects depending on which type of ostracism is used. For example, imagine a man being ignored by his wife at a restaurant after having a disagreement. The man (the target) may feel angry and frustrated, unable to get any response out of his wife. His wife (the source), perhaps because of the repeated communication
attempts by her husband, might feel particularly empowered by her act of ignoring. Now imagine a student who engages in daily e-mail exchanges with her friend from overseas. Suddenly, the student receives no messages from her friend for several days. The student (the target) might begin to ruminate over what she could have possibly written in her last message to offend her friend, or perhaps she might consider that a computer failure of some sort occurred. Choosing not to write back immediately, however, may have afforded her friend the chance to better articulate her hurt feelings, thus preventing her from reacting immediately and saying things she would regret. Finally, imagine a couple of factory workers having a drink in a pub after work. They get in a heated argument and begin to insult each other. One worker gets up, slams money on the counter, and leaves. Does physically leaving
allow both the source and the target an opportunity to calm down and cool off?

Recently Williams (1997; Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998) proposed a model of ostracism that attempts to both capture the complexity of ostracism and make specific predictions. This model is depicted in Figure 1.

**Model of Ostracism**

*Antecedents*

The onset of ostracism can be influenced by a variety of situational and dispositional determinants. Sometimes the situation dictates the necessity of using ostracism over other forms of disapproval (perhaps it is seen as more socially desirable than other modes of disapproval), whereas some individuals are more inclined to use it than others (perhaps those who lack power or who prefer indirect, unilateral tactics).

*Taxonomic Dimensions*

Ostracism takes many forms that vary across four dimensions (visibility, motive, quantity, and causal clarity). For example, within the *visibility* dimension, individuals can be physically ostracized (removed from the presence of others), socially ostracized (ignored in the presence of others), or cyber-ostracized (ignored over the Internet, surface mail, or telephone). The *motive* might be punitive (it is purposely done to punish), oblivious (the source of the ostracism did not notice the individual’s existence), defensive (done to minimize or preempt hurt feelings or negative evaluation), or role prescribed (as might happen by restaurant patrons with their servers), or perhaps it was not ostracism at all (misconstrued to be ostracism). The *quantity* of ostracism can also vary, from low levels (fewer communication initiations, less eye contact) to high levels (no communication, no eye contact). Finally, the *clarity* of the ostracism can vary; sometimes ostracism can occur without explanation (low clarity), whereas at other times it can be formally and explicitly announced (high clarity).
The unique combination of these dimensions will produce a large variety of ostracism types that are likely to have different consequences.

Mediators and Moderators

Williams hypothesizes that the consequences of ostracism for the individual are mediated or moderated by the individual's personality (for example, attachment style), the ambiguity of the ostracism, and the ratio of internal (self-blaming) to external (other blaming, hostile) attributions that the individual generates.

Threatened Needs

Depending on the form it takes and the mediating influence of personality and cognition, ostracism can threaten up to four fundamental needs that have been shown to be important sources of human motivation and efficacy. Ostracism threatens the individual's sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), self-esteem (for example, see Steele, 1988), control (Burger, 1992; Seligman, 1975), and meaningful existence (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). Being ostracized severs interpersonal bonds, implies disapproval, thwarts control that could otherwise occur in a bilateral exchange, and symbolizes the social death and nonexistence of the individual.

Reactions

It is hypothesized that the immediate reaction to ostracism will be negative affect and anger. This will be followed in the short term by attempts to regain the threatened need(s). This can include attempts to escape the situation, establish bonds with others (perhaps looking for new reference and support groups), inflate one's self-esteem, assert control, and establish one's worth and ability to be noticed. Long-term effects, however, are hypothesized to contribute to the individual's internalization and resignation to alienation, rejection, depression, helplessness, and worthlessness.
Effects on Sources

At the time of the study, little attention had been given to how sources would feel when they were ostracizing. In a sense, this could be considered methodologically beneficial because whereas the hypothesized target effects were to some extent known by the participants in the study, none had been discussed or read for source effects. Recent research, however, has provided some interesting data regarding the impact of ostracism on sources. Williams, Shore, and Grahe (1998) found some support for the hypothesis that the same needs threatened in targets might be fortified in sources. They asked participants to list specific behaviors and associated feelings that occurred when they either received or gave the silent treatment. Consistent with predictions, targets showed threatened feelings of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. Sources, however, had higher rates of control fortification, about equal rates of fortification and loss of self-esteem and meaningful existence, and losses in feelings of belonging. Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco, and Baumeister (1998) asked participants to write narratives about the most recent episodes in which they were sources and targets of the silent treatment. They, too, found that whereas targets generally indicated losses in feelings of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence, sources felt empowered by the tactic and more satisfied with its outcomes. Finally, Zadro and Williams (1998a) employed a short-term role-play method in which participants imagined themselves riding three-across on a train, the middle person being ostracized for 5 minutes by those in the outer chairs. Once again, targets expressed low levels of belonging, felt badly about themselves, were more frustrated, and felt invisible. Sources, on the other hand, expressed exceedingly high levels of belonging and low levels of frustration.

Based on these data, we may find that when ostracizing, sources’ self-reports will reveal fewer negative consequences and perhaps even increased feelings of control. We should be reminded, however, that the previously reviewed studies examined real episodes of the silent treatment, not role-played episodes. It may be that when role-playing an ostracizing source without having the proper motivation for doing so, few if any benefits will accrue. Indeed, Zadro and Williams (1998a) conclude that sources felt
worse about themselves when they were asked to punitively ignore the middle person because of insufficient reasons.

**Overview of the Study**

Much of the research to date by Williams and his colleagues has been conducted with short-term exposures to ostracism. In fact, in the laboratory experiments, the duration of ostracism has been fewer than 5 minutes. Assessing long-term consequences of ostracism is more difficult. Recently, structured interviews have been conducted with long-term sources and targets of ostracism (Faulkner & Williams, 1995; Zadro & Williams, 1998b) and have yielded richly descriptive accounts of ostracism episodes lasting up to 40 years. It is desirable to examine episodes of ostracism that last longer than 5 minutes, yet in a more controlled setting. The present study offers such an attempt, in which we assess the cumulative exposures to frequent episodes of ostracism that occur in a normal work setting over a period of a day (for each target) and a week (for sources).

**Role-Playing Method**

We used a role-playing method to study lengthy intervals of ostracism within a closed system. Shaftel and Shaftel (1967) stated that role-play, in its simplest sense, involves assuming a role to practice the behavior required in various situations. Unlike acting, which uses predetermined words and actions to entertain others, role-play involves experiencing a problem or situation that is governed by its own constraints in order to further one’s understanding of the situation (Van Ments, 1983). Role-play is used in various forms in schools, industrial training, the military, and counseling as a means of educating and demonstrating how the roles people play in day-to-day life potentially affect the outcome of a situation.

Role-play also has a place in psychology as a research technique, allowing psychologists to examine phenomena within ethical constraints and without undue expense or danger. One of the most notable instances of role-play in psychology is the Stanford Prison Study conducted by Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo (1973; Haney
& Zimbardo, 1998). Haney et al. randomly assigned mentally and physically healthy male college students the role of either prisoners or prison guards in a 2-week prison simulation. Six days into the simulation, the study was halted as a result of the increasing brutality of the prison guards and the decline of the health and spirits of the prisoners. The study demonstrated the power of role-play, indicating how easy it is to fill a particular role (even if the role is randomly allocated) to the point where reality and role-play merge.

In our study, the role-play method we adopted may have more mundane and experimental realism than a typical role-play method because we were always ourselves in our natural roles. In effect, we took part in a real-life simulation, because our experiences lasted an entire week and occurred completely within the context of our lives (we were not stuck in the basement of some psychology laboratory!).

Event-Contingent Self-Records

Given that we want to know about daily ostracism events, what are the alternative methods for gaining this knowledge? The traditional method is the self-report questionnaire. Participants would be asked a number of questions, such as “How many times during the last week have you felt rejected, ignored, or ostracized?” Such measures can be useful as descriptions of people’s global perceptions of their social activity, but they should not be viewed as descriptions of actual social behavior. Instead, they are best seen as personalized impressions of social activity that have been percolated, construed, and reframed through various perceptual, cognitive, and motivational processes (see Wheeler & Reis, 1991, for a discussion of the specific problems of selection, recall of content, and aggregation). The second commonly used method of studying ongoing events is behavioral observation. Although this technique has important uses, much of what happens in ostracism events is not directly observable, and even if it were, each participant would have to forgo all privacy and would require a full-time observer for us to obtain the desired data.

The method of event-contingent self-recording (Wheeler & Reis, 1991) is the most appropriate for collecting detailed data about
ongoing, spontaneous ostracism events. This method requires a report every time an event meeting a preestablished definition has occurred. The best-known example of this method is the Rochester Interaction Record (RIR; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997; Reis & Wheeler, 1991; Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). In the RIR, the event that triggers the self-recording is a social interaction. This method has been used successfully to examine other processes as well (e.g., the Rochester Social Comparison Record [Wheeler & Miyake, 1992], the Iowa Communication Record [Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991]). The event, in short, can be anything. The key is the unambiguous definition of the event requiring a report, as well as timeliness of reporting following the event itself. Unlike the checklist-style record used in the aforementioned examples, the present method uses an open-ended, diary-style format that does not presuppose relevant categories or responses. As such, the present method is qualitative in nature, amenable to descriptive rather than quantitative analysis.

Method

Participants

The five members of the social psychology graduate program (two faculty, both male, and three graduate students, two female and one male) were informed about the purpose and procedure of the study and agreed to serve as participants.1 Dr. Black was in his early 40s and was the senior member of the social area, and Dr. Brown was in his early 30s and had recently joined the faculty. Mr. Blue and Ms. Pink were nearing completion of their PhDs, whereas Ms. Yellow was a first-year graduate student. Each of us had an office on the sixth floor of the northwest wing. No other offices were housed on this wing, although undergraduate research assistants and participants in other studies were often present. No one else was explicitly in on the experiment, however, through word-of-mouth, many became aware of it.

1 Our names have been changed to provide a modicum of anonymity while still preserving status and sex differences that may be important in interpreting the results. The names are Dr. Black (male), Dr. Brown (male), Ms. Pink (Female), Ms. Yellow (Female), and Mr. Blue (male).
Procedure

Five sealed envelopes were distributed among the group at a preparatory meeting held the Friday afternoon prior to the Monday on which the study would begin. Inside each sealed envelope was a different colleague's name. The outside of the envelope was obfuscated such that, even if held to the light, the name could not be read. In open discussion, each person chose a different day of the week (Monday through Friday) and wrote it on the outside of the envelope. The envelopes were handed to the first author, who would be in charge of them during the study. It was agreed that at the beginning of the study (the following Monday before 8 a.m.), the first author would take the envelope marked Monday, open it, and place a scarlet letter “O” above the person's office door whose name was contained within it (see Figure 2). The same procedure would be followed for the remaining 4 days. This meant that four of the participants would not know whether it was their day until they walked into work on that particular day, but Friday's person would know when he or she saw that the “O” was not above his or her door on Thursday.²

It was agreed that, for each day, all four participants would ostracize the individual who had the scarlet letter “O” above his or her door. The definition of ostracism stemmed from a discussion of the taxonomy outlined in Williams's model but generally included any act that was intended or perceived to involve ignoring, exclusion, or rejection. We did not restrict the precise method of ostracism to be employed, but rather, left it up to the individuals. If something had to be said to a target because of academic-related issues, the target could be spoken to, keeping in mind, however, that it would be done as if one was otherwise not talking to that person. Targets could do whatever they wished: They could keep to themselves, attempt to talk with the others, leave the sixth floor, invite others up to their office, or anything else.

² There was one exception to this procedure. Ms. Pink was scheduled to present her dissertation proposal to the group on Friday and felt that if her name was selected for Friday, the ostracism could deleteriously affect the feedback she needed. So, it was agreed that if her name had not been drawn by Thursday, she would have the “O” put above her office on Thursday instead of Friday. (As it turned out, her day was Thursday, so no changes had to be made.)
Dependent Measures

The participants agreed to make open-ended event-contingent self-recordings (a) in anticipation of the Scarlet Letter Week and (b) during the week, whenever an episode occurred that made them
think of ostracism. Individuals were encouraged to make affective
and behavioral entries. Participants were encouraged to make their
entries as temporally close to the episode as possible and to describe
the behaviors that occurred along with their accompanying feel-
ings. Those who were ostracizing, those observing the ostracism,
and the ostracized individual were all to make entries throughout
the week.

Debriefing

Despite the fact that all participants were fully aware of the study
and its purpose, it was agreed that a poststudy debriefing session
would be helpful, if not necessary, to air out any hard feelings and
reestablish group harmony. On the Monday following the Scarlet
Letter Week, the participants met over lunch for a 2-hour debrief-
ing session.

Results

Overview and Highlights of the Week

A chronological summary of the week’s events follows in an
attempt to capture the psychological climate and phenomenologi-
cal experiences of the participants.

Entries Prior to Monday

Several participants chose to make entries prior to the first day
of the experience. Dr. Black noted that he tried to clear up any
lingering disagreements prior to Monday so that there could be no
confusion as to the reasons for the ostracism. He was worried that
participants would misinterpret the motives behind the ostracism
and respond in anger. He expressed concerns about already feeling
paranoid.

Ms. Pink said she was not worried at all, and feared most of all
that she would not take the week seriously. In fact, she thought she
might start giggling. She thought the week would be a bust, not
likely to reveal anything interesting because it was premeditated and explicit. On the other hand, she believed that if this sort of role-play would ever affect her, it would be during this time period when she was feeling particularly vulnerable.

Ms. Yellow discussed the study with her friend and said that it could be quite valuable phenomenologically but that she doubted that it would affect her. She did, however, wonder if it would adversely affect her productivity.

Dr. Brown indicated he was sort of planning a strategy but gave no details. He wondered how he would communicate effectively during the week. He hoped to be the first target and was especially fearful that his day might be on Friday, the day of his departmental colloquium.

Mr. Blue also wanted to be the “O” first—to get it out of the way. He said he felt apprehensive and aroused and ambivalent toward the coming week. He thought he might feel negative affect when being the target of ostracism but might actually enjoy being a source.

**Monday**

Dr. Brown’s name was drawn first. Dr. Brown wrote, “I was filled with anticipation as I walked up the fifth flight of stairs. As I walked down the 6th floor hall I slowly realized I might have the ‘O.’” He considered how to react. “Maybe I’ll engage in anticipatory retaliation. I saw Dr. White [another colleague] on the 5th floor and I went out of my way to tell her that I got the ‘O’ and that she needn’t participate.” Later that day, Dr. White invited Dr. Brown to join the group at a bar to watch *Monday Night Football*. He thanked her, but declined, and did not want her to tell the rest of the group until after he had left the office for the day.

Social comparison processes among the sources were evident on the first day. Dr. Black wrote, “I’ve talked with Ms. Pink and now Mr. Blue about how they are dealing with ignoring Dr. Brown, whether he’s tested them, and just how it’s going.”

Normal activity appeared to be obstructed for everyone. Dr. Brown wrote, “My interaction with Mr. Blue and Ms. Yellow was extremely awkward. I found myself speaking faster than usual almost as if to rush through. Motivationally, I want to withdraw. Contact is effortful and there’s a growing sense of dread associated
with having to deal with the ostracizers.” Examples of paranoia also seeped in: “I have wondered about the contagiousness of this manipulation. I don’t think any of the practicum students are in on it but I did find myself wondering about this at times throughout the day.”

Being a source of ostracism also proved to be difficult, but in different ways than being a target. Dr. Brown remarked on how Dr. Black accidentally looked up at him and then quickly retracted his gaze, uttering a sound that suggested regret for reacting when he should not have. “I think I caught him off guard. He didn’t turn around like he normally does. I found myself smiling and laughing like a Milgram teacher. This must be very arousing. I think there is less stress on me than on the ostracizers. I noticed Dr. Black holding his hands on his face.” Regarding Ms. Yellow as a source, Dr. Brown said, “She cracked (or wilted, or rebelled, whatever). I think I learned something. “O” is fragile.” Ms. Pink (a source) wrote, “The silent treatment takes control away from the user, too, when you think about it. It requires a huge amount of effort to remember how you’re supposed to act—it’s like the ostracism takes over you!”

There was also noticeable anxiety experienced by the sources, who felt badly for Dr. Brown. “So far all day I’ve felt really sorry for Dr. Brown. This may not be affecting him at all, but I feel this is deja-vu—do you remember how certain kids were always either picked on or left out at school? That’s what I’m reminded of—I always used to feel sorry for those kids . . . I don’t like not being able to engage in the behaviors that I normally engage in.” Although the clarity of the ostracism was high in that we all supposed knew why we were doing it, thoughts of ambiguous causality nevertheless percolated. Dr. Brown wrote about being a source, “In retrospect, I felt a bit punitive. In other words, there might have been a tendency to indulge in some tit-for-tat behavior.”

Finally, there was the feeling that the first day was exceptional, that what was experienced could be chalked up to first-day jitters and that the rest of the week would be easier and less interesting. Dr. Brown wrote, “Getting the hang of this thing. I’ve got a sense that with practice we’d settle into some sort of efficient communication.”
Tuesday

This was Ms. Yellow’s day. As the newest member, Ms. Yellow considered herself lowest on the totem pole and generally spoken to less often than the rest under normal circumstances. She made interesting attributions about her situation: “It’ll be easier for me to take ostracism since this is not my country, people don’t acknowledge my existence all the time. I don’t think they even realize that I may feel ignored at times because I’m the youngest and junior-most on the floor. So, who cares. . . .” After having washed her lab coat the night before, she wore it proudly during the day. But, of course, no one paid attention. “I wish they had looked . . . but even if they did they wouldn’t know why I’m walking around with it . . . they’re not very sensitive.” By the time she came out of her office at the end of the workday, everyone had already left. “Wanted to catch the 6 pm shuttle and all the labs and computers were to be shut down! Ran like a mad woman to shut all computers . . . almost reflexively saying aloud ‘Why the hell did they not tell me they’re leaving??’ Was really mad at everyone for a few minutes. But then I simultaneously was telling myself that they weren’t supposed to, this is not on purpose, blah blah . . .”

Ms. Pink did not always remember to play her role as source. Ms. Yellow seemed quite appreciative when Ms. Pink actually spoke to her: “Felt good that she spoke to me and was polite. It was her usual response but felt better than usual. Everything seems to have so much meaning.”

Dr. Brown wrote some interesting reflections upon his return from exile. When he walked in that morning he wrote of his first contact, a greeting to Mr. Blue and Ms. Pink, “Apparently, a need developed which was satisfied by that greeting. Can’t help but wonder what would happen with prolonged exposure . . . very satisfying.” He also noticed that some of the sources were now trying to make up for the ostracism, “Ms. Pink made a peace offering. An interesting one; unpalatable raisins.”

As Dr. Brown was the first to compare being a target and a source, he revealed, “I found it to be much easier [being a source] and the act carried no amount of excitement or anxiety.” Dr. Brown also noted what may have been a status difference in being a source with high status relative to a lower status target: “It seems
more natural to me to overlook or ignore students than my colleagues or closest friends."

Nevertheless, Dr. Brown was looking forward to getting back to normal with Ms. Yellow. "Tomorrow I’m looking forward to greeting Ms. Yellow. I’m curious as to whether the greeting will be as rewarding to her as the one I received from Mr. Blue and Ms. Pink this morning."

**Wednesday**

Mr. Blue was the target, one day before his birthday. He began by writing in a humorous tone, "For some reason no one is talking to me today, and there is a scarlet O in front of my door. I decided earlier this week that when it was my day, I would make it difficult for everyone else and keep talking to them." But, in his first attempt, he noted "I just needed to tell him something and he ran away. I was quite amused actually."

The sources noticed Mr. Blue’s strategy. Wrote Ms. Pink, "The little shit is trying to talk to me about everything under the sun. I’m pretty proud of myself though—I’m pursing my lips and not looking at him."

Later that day Mr. Blue’s amusement seems to have dissipated some. "I am going to give the paper to Jude [an undergraduate research assistant] and ask him to give it to Dr. Brown, because I really don’t want to be ignored by him again."

Mr. Blue believed being a source was particularly difficult for Ms. Pink. He wrote, "I think it was very difficult for her not to engage me, because we always interact and discuss personal issues. It was hard for me too, because I keep getting confusing attributions. I feel like I am a ghost on the floor that everyone hears, but no one can talk to." Later, when Ms. Pink broke role and talked to him, Mr. Blue echoed Ms. Yellow’s reaction, "I saw Ms. Pink in the hall, she forgot that she was ignoring me and we maintained eye contact for about 5 sec. which felt wonderful. I actually got a full interaction."

Mr. Blue’s strategy turned to evoking any sort of response as the day progressed. "It is funny that I have begun using tactics to force them to acknowledge me, I don’t care if I anger them, I just want someone to notice me."
Once Mr. Blue returned home that evening, he continued his quest to be recognized. He said he wanted to “find out what ostracism was like over the phone,” so he called Dr. Brown, Dr. Black, and Ms. Yellow. Dr. Brown and Dr. Black upheld their source role even on the phone, although Ms. Yellow talked to Mr. Blue until he reminded her.

**Thursday**

Because of the exception clause, on Wednesday we knew Thursday would be Ms. Pink’s day. She appeared prepared. “Today is my day to be ostracized and I think I’m going to enjoy it. I know that sounds crazy, but I’m looking at it as a game, a challenge. It’s a battle of wills, a contest: I bet I can do a better job countering them, if that’s the expression.” She was quite effective in her strategy. She remarked, “I walked right past them, didn’t look at them—they didn’t even exist.”

Most sources admitted she did a better job ostracizing them on the day she was “O” than on the days she was a source. Dr. Black wrote, “Seems like Ms. Pink is using defensive ostracism, not trying to talk to me since she knows I won’t talk with her.”

Nevertheless, the day was beginning to take its toll on her as it neared its end. “This is absolutely no big deal today, but it does demonstrate one important point: I certainly would not want to work in an environment like this on a daily basis.”

Because of Ms. Pink’s tactic of counter-ostracizing, as she put it, being a source apparently felt different. “I didn’t really feel that guilty today because, as I said, it was as though she was ostracizing me, so, in a way, it was sort of annoying. Another feeling I had was that her presence today was like the presence of a stranger, whom we don’t feel compelled to introduce ourselves to, and who doesn’t seem interested in us.”

**Friday**

This was Dr. Black’s day, and it was unusual for several reasons. Because Ms. Pink was presenting some preliminary dissertation data in a social area practicum, it was the first time that all members of the social area were required to be in each other’s presence. Typically, these practica were noted for enthusiasm, arousal (coffee was served), interruption, and peripatetic discussion. It should be noted that Dr. Black usually drank the most
coffee and interrupted the most.

Also, Dr. Brown was scheduled to present a colloquium to the entire Psychology Department at noon, yet another opportunity for all social area members to be present, although in the company of others.

Finally, it was the final day of the Scarlet Letter Study (as we had begun to call it), which made it unique as well. There would be no convenient opportunities for making up with the target on the following day and no chance for Dr. Black to use his experience as target to affect his behavior toward the next target.

Apparently, anticipating that Friday was his day affected his sleep the night prior. “I woke up this morning thinking how odd it was that I actually dreamt about this; that it must be affecting me more than I thought.” He dreamt that not only were his colleagues ostracizing him, but also his wife. He told her she did not have to do that because she was not part of the study, but she continued ignoring him anyway.³

Upon arrival to the office, he encountered two colleagues in the hallway who talked among themselves and did not make eye contact with him. His first response was “Sort of humored, but in a defensive sort of way.”

Unlike Mr. Blue, Dr. Black had not initially planned out a strategy. But soon after a few ostracism episodes, he found himself reacting much the way Mr. Blue had. Dr. Black’s primary motive was to be acknowledged, and to cause the others to break role. Before attending the morning’s practicum session, he cut himself a small scarlet “O” and put two-sided adhesive tape on the back. Soon after Ms. Pink began her presentation, Dr. Black stuck the “O” on his forehead. Several of the students noticed and smirked or openly laughed. Dr. Black wrote, “I felt victorious . . . I got them to acknowledge me.” But Dr. Brown did not notice the “O” for almost 30 minutes. When he did, he was visibly angered and annoyed, saying, “How long has that been on your head?” Ms. Pink and Mr. Blue replied, “The whole time.” Dr. Brown said, “Take that off. It isn’t necessary!” Dr. Black wrote, “I got a rise out of him—Good!” But Dr. Black’s feelings of success were mixed

³ This dream, in fact, came true on Friday night when Dr. Black joined his wife and her coworkers, whom he had not met before, at a bar. No one looked at him or signaled for him to come to their table, and when he did sit at their table, no one looked at him or talked to him for several minutes. Finally, they broke down and laughed.
with regret. "He chastised me, he's mad at me—I feel like I want to get into his good graces. I also wonder if you guys want to find more to criticize about my comments than you usually would..." Thereafter, provoking a response became paramount for Dr. Black. "I beep at Dr. Brown as I pass him (I'm driving back to school, Dr. Brown's walking). He waves. I laugh... I got him again! Oh, to be recognized." Finally, Dr. Black writes, "I'm seeing my goal today as trying to get people to recognize my existence, with good or bad evaluation—it doesn't matter."

Dr. Brown's ostracism during the practicum was perhaps his most extreme of the week. "At one point toward the end I attempted an active ostracism act by speaking over Dr. Black as he was finishing a point and switched the topic of discussion. So, as he was finishing a sentence (before he did finish) I blurted over him, 'Let's move on...'. This was perhaps the most active, hostile, deliberate 'O' I achieved during the whole week."

Later that day, Dr. Brown gave a departmental colloquium in front of more than 50 people. Despite the fact that he was being evaluated by his peers and students in a very public forum, the ostracism intruded his thoughts while on the podium. He wrote, "I start my talk and notice Dr. Black in the classroom. I catch him nodding occasionally (acknowledging a point or two). This was extremely painful for me. Perhaps in some sense it was the most difficult aspect of the entire week..." After the talk, Dr. Black wrote, "I said 'Very good talk, Dr. Brown.' He looked up, said, in sort of a begrudging, unaffected, below-his-breath mutter, 'Uh, thanks.' I realized how much worse that was than if he'd acted like I didn't talk at all (at least I think so). It was like he really didn't like me, but knew he had to say thanks."

Other paranoid attributions continued to surface for Dr. Black. He wrote, "No matter how much I know why they're doing that, there's a part of me that worries if it isn't something else. This is so weird."

**Content Analysis**

**Coding**

Two coders conducted a content analysis on the diaries. Several coding categories emerged from themes that became salient from
an initial "bottom-up" analysis of the diaries. That is, the coders initially noted themes and categories that emerged from the diaries themselves. Other categories and coding schemes were derived from a "top-down" procedure, according to propositions put forth by Williams’s model. Some coding could be described as being relatively objective, such as counting the number of words, singular and plural pronouns, in-group versus out-group references, and even types of ostracism (according to Williams’s model, using the dimensions of visibility, motive, quantity, and causal clarity). Other codes were established for relatively subjective measures, such as associated feelings (including the four needs), affect, attributions, introspections, and nonverbal behaviors.

The notion that we can determine which, if any, needs are being threatened or fortified must be considered with caution. Any particular act could and may reflect threats and/or fortifications to two or more needs. In many instances, the needs are inextricably tied and hopelessly confounded. For instance, a behavior that provokes a response, as when Dr. Black slapped an "O" on his forehead during his practicum session, could reflect several needs. It could be an attempt to gain recognition, a derivative of meaningful existence. It could serve to regain control over the situation and the others. Gaining recognition or control could provide him with a sense of empowerment and victory, thus increasing his self-esteem. By getting a reaction from the others, a sense of groupness or belonging may be temporarily achieved. The decision to ultimately code this particular response as seeking recognition in order to regain a sense of meaningful existence was subjective but consistent with the aim of determining which need was most directly affected.

Descriptive Statistics

Because of the small sample size and the disproportionate ratio of sources to targets, inferential statistics are either impossible to conduct or inappropriate. The diaries ranged in length from 2,259 to 5,186 words \( (M = 3,476.8, \ SD = 1,106.6) \). The number of separate entries (comprised of words devoted to a single event) ranged from 29 to 44 \( (M = 36.8, \ SD = 5.5) \). There were 119 unshared entries (singular entries for an event that was not recorded by anyone else), 21 entries shared by two participants, 5 shared by three, 3 shared by four, and 1 shared by all five participants. In
contrast, there were only 45 events that, as written, involved no interactions (musings about the week, mostly), 60 events that involved two interactants, 32 involving three, 4 involving four, and 8 in which all five participants were involved.

Targets used more words \((M = 950.6)\) per day than sources \((M = 588.1)\). Targets also used more affective terms \((M = 9.6)\) than sources \((M = 4.5)\). The valence of these affective terms was predominantly negative (70% negative, 17% positive, and 13% neutral). The only exception to this pattern was when targets were describing a source who broke role; when this happened, there was a higher proportion of positive affective entries (63%) than negative (37%).

**Nonverbal Behaviors**

Sources and targets both used 2.8 entries per day to describe their own nonverbal behaviors. But targets appeared to be much more conscious of sources’ nonverbal behaviors (7.8 per day), whereas sources’ observations of their nonverbal behaviors were 0.4 per day, and they made only 1.9 entries per days of targets’ nonverbal behaviors. This actor-observer divergence in nonverbal behavior salience was not predicted but in hindsight is derivable from theory. Several investigators (DePaulo, 1992; Ekman & Friesen, 1969) have noted that expressive behavior is difficult to control and to monitor for the actor. This is exacerbated when under high cognitive load, such as when one is speaking or planning to speak. For an observer, however, the speaker’s nonverbal expressive behavior is quite salient and easily available for scrutiny.

Another intriguing possibility is that this divergence in nonverbal entries between targets and sources reflects a form of compensating interpersonal modalities. This argument would be analogous to the notion that a blind person’s hearing compensates the loss of sight: Targets, who are not spoken to, may be more sensitive to the nonverbal behaviors of sources.

**Themes**

**Ease of Ostracism**

Dr. Brown observed, “Each ostracizer is unique. It does not feel like the same phenomenon with each person.” Although there was
considerable variation in the way in which sources ostracized the target, the ease of ostracizing a target was most consistently affected by the nature of the relationship between the target and the source. In general, ostracism was perceived as difficult to do and difficult to take. Several sources indicated their difficulty with ostracizing. Dr. Black said, "Whoa . . . that was really difficult." Ms. Yellow wrote, "It was so difficult!"; and Dr. Brown observed, "It was extremely difficult to act that way." For sources, two aspects of the relationship between themselves and the target seemed particularly important: the preexisting bond and the status differential.

The closer the preexisting bond between the target and the source, the more likely the experience of ostracism was documented as aversive. For example, on ostracizing Ms. Yellow, Dr. Black wrote, "I didn't have as much of a reaction to this as I did to yesterday's discovery, and I don't know if that's because I probably interact less with Ms. Yellow on a daily basis, anyway, or because Dr. Brown's collegial status with me is more important." Similarly, Dr. Brown wrote about having to ignore Dr. Black during Dr. Brown's departmental colloquium: "It really killed me to attempt to ignore him during the talk. This was the one instance where I felt I was paying a supreme price for being an ostracizer." Mr. Blue wrote of ostracizing Ms. Pink, "I don't look forward to this because I typically interact with Ms. Pink on a personal level. By ostracizing her, I am eliminating an important source of social interaction . . . I felt more guilty all day, because of all the group, I desired to ostracize her the least. I felt like she didn't exist and that we were treating her so badly. . . ."

The ease associated with ostracizing a target was also affected by the status differential between target and source. In general, sources found ostracizing a target of higher status to be extremely difficult. Mr. Blue wrote, "I think it was more difficult to ostracize higher status individuals." Yet, when ostracizing a higher status target, it seemed to give the source feelings of greater power and control. Mr. Blue wrote, "I also felt more powerful being able to ostracize an individual of higher status." Even Dr. Brown made a similar comment when he ostracized Dr. Black: "The act of 'O'ing him certainly changed that [Dr. Black's higher status] during the meeting. For me I felt a very clear and
strong status differential where he was on the low end.” On the other hand, sources who held higher positions of authority experienced little difficulty in ostracizing lower status targets. Commented Dr. Brown when he ostracized Ms. Yellow, “Quite easy to do, actually, in the high status role. Didn’t even seem that rude. It seems more natural for me to overlook or ignore students than my colleagues or closest friends.” Similarly, Dr. Black wrote of ostracizing Mr. Blue, “Ostracizing Mr. Blue was somewhat difficult although not as difficult as Dr. Brown. This is either because a) Dr. Brown was our first victim, and I’ve become habituated and/or b) Dr. Brown’s status as my colleague made it more difficult and/or c) Dr. Brown seemed more hurt by my response than Mr. Blue.

The difficulty in carrying out the ostracism also appeared to take its toll on the participants’ cognitive capacity. Mr. Blue noted, “The ostracism took so much mental effort that I have little memory of the purpose or content of the interaction. This is troublesome because [Dr. Brown, the target] told me something he would like me to do, and I can’t even go ask him what it was.”

Of the same occasion, Ms. Yellow observed, “Talked to Mr. Blue [a co-source] about the lab meeting . . . strangely, both of us heard and remembered the wrong schedule. Both of us forgot what Dr. Brown said. . . . It is so effortless to pay attention to what he’s saying.”

Apparently, this effect did not solely affect those ostracizing someone higher in status, as Dr. Brown observed when he was ostracizing Mr. Blue: “He gave me some information. In my effort to ‘O’ him [Mr. Blue] I think I might have tuned out the message. I don’t trust the information processing or transfer from an ‘O’ victim.”

Signs of relief, either after an ostracism episode or at the conclusion of the week, were another indication that ostracism was effortful. After one episode in which Ms. Yellow was a target, she wrote, “Was a relief to see them go. It’s exhausting to play this act.” Then, after the week was over, Ms. Yellow wrote more generally, “Relief. Thank God this is over. I did it for this week but even another day or few more hours would have been so exhausting!”
Strategies Used to Ostracize

Sources often expressed the intention to use a particular strategy to ostracize. Dr. Brown wrote, “A dilemma: How do I play it?” Often, these strategies were expressed prior to the day’s events. Sources primarily expressed the intention to use avoidance strategies. Dr. Brown wrote, “My plan today is simply to avoid contact. I might choose to go down different stairwells today. So the ostracism will be more noncontact than awkward, nonspeaking contact. If any business can wait until tomorrow it can wait.” Dr. Black noted, however, “I feel like I’m looking for him to ignore him; like I’ve got to be super vigilant. Weird, seeking out someone to ignore.” A bit of method acting also crept into the strategies. Of another target, Dr. Black wrote, “In anticipation of ostracizing him, I was already imagining or feeling angry with him.”

New strategies also emerged for sources after initially unpleasant confrontations with targets. Dr. Black wrote, “It seems like I’ve taken the easy way out, and basically avoided Dr. Brown at all costs.” Mr. Blue lamented, “I am basically physically ostracizing him. However, since he doesn’t know that I wanted to interact with him, and since he has probably been busy all day, my physical ostracism of him isn’t really impactful.” Dr. Brown, too, found a less unpleasant way to ostracize. “So, passive neglect is what is happening so far. I’m fairly comfortable with this strategy.”

Strategies Used to Cope with Ostracism

Like sources, targets also planned a strategy for how they would cope with being ostracized. Prior to the day’s events, targets expressed the intention to either defensively ostracize or, conversely, seek recognition from sources. Ms. Pink exemplified the former strategy: “I’m determined not to look at them, talk to them—basically pretend that none of them exist.” Mr. Blue, on the other hand, wrote, “I decided this week when it was my day, I would make it difficult for everyone else and keep talking to them.” Both strategies appeared to be aimed at taking the initiative to forestall the effects of being ostracized.

After a confrontation with a source, targets expressed more instances of countering the ostracism by seeking recognition. Dr. Black wrote, “I’m seeing my goal today as trying to get people to
recognize my existence, with good or bad evaluation—it doesn’t matter.” Mr. Blue wrote, “I just decided to call everyone tonight, just to see what happens and how it makes me feel. It is funny that I have begun using tactics to force them to acknowledge me. I don’t care if I anger them, I just want someone to notice me.” Even Ms. Pink, who tried to use “counter-ostracism” as she put it, forced recognition at one point: “I have to be in Dr. Black’s office at some point today because I need to use the computer. That’s okay, and if he wants me to leave, he’s going to HAVE to talk to me . . . he will have to be verbally explicit if he wants me out of sight.”

Compensation

Compensation is the term used to characterize sources who were motivated primarily by the desire to make amends to former targets for any discomfort the target may have experienced while being ostracized. Three forms of compensation were observed: anticipated compensation, actual compensation, and acts interpreted as compensation. It should be noted that only Dr. Brown made entries related to compensation.

Anticipated compensation included instances in which sources stated their intention to make amends for their behavior. Dr. Brown wrote, “I’m looking forward to seeing Ms. Yellow. I feel a strong need to give her a hearty ‘good morning’ with a warm smile. I think I need to compensate a bit for yesterday.” Actual compensation included acts performed by sources to make amends for the ostracism. One such instance involved verbal greetings and interactions. For instance, Dr. Brown wrote, “Talked to Mr. Blue. Good/satisfying interaction. I feel we made nice-nice.” And during the ostracism of Dr. Black (in which Dr. Black had e-mailed Dr. Brown positive feedback about Dr. Brown’s colloquium), Dr. Brown wrote, “I made a promise to myself that I would reply to his message at 12:01 am that night.” Finally, acts interpreted as compensation included instances that were perceived by former targets to be compensation acts. Dr. Brown wrote, “Oh, Ms. Pink made a peace offering. An interesting one; unpalatable raisins. If there is significance to this (offering someone food that one finds unpalatable) it must be interesting.”
Exemplars of Model-Related Concepts

Representations Across the Typology

Visibility

As expected, social ostracism (ignoring in the presence of others) was the primary type of ostracism experienced and recorded. For example, Mr. Blue, as a source, wrote: "I just finished a meeting with Dr. Brown and Ms. Yellow. Because Ms. Yellow was being ostracized, we didn’t make eye contact and I didn’t direct any statements to her that I didn’t need to.” Similarly, Ms. Yellow, as a source, wrote, “Dr. Brown (target) arrived. Mr. Blue and I were at Ms. Pink’s office. Both of us saw Dr. Brown and turned our faces away towards Ms. Pink. . . . None of us wished him luck [about his upcoming departmental colloquium] or did not even look back.” Nevertheless, the other types of ostracism within the visibility dimension were also reported. For example, physical ostracism (being physically isolated from the others) also occurred with unexpected frequency. As a source, Mr. Blue wrote, “Since I haven’t talked to him [Dr. Brown, the target] in the last 1 1/2 hours, and I normally would have about 3 times, I am basically physically ostracizing him.” Dr. Black, as a target, wrote, “I then realized there was no place to sit, so I had to go get a chair from the other room. When I did, everyone (almost in unison) got up to go get coffee and cake, so I was left alone.” And, although infrequent, even cyber-ostracism made an appearance. Dr. Black, as a source, observed, “I typed up and distributed a memo to the social area, but without Mr. Blue’s [the target] name on it, asking about debriefing next Monday from 12 noon–1:45. I also e-mailed a message to the social area that went to Dr. Brown, Bonnie, Ms. Yellow, and Ms. Pink, but not Mr. Blue, announcing that Dr. Purple (a former colleague in the social area) had published a study in BASP.” On another occasion, he wrote, “I sent out an e-mail to social grad students (except Ms. Pink—T) and Psych faculty telling them about the books outside my office.” It should be noted that the concept and term cyber-ostracism were not part of Williams’s ostracism model at the time of this study.
Motives

It was perhaps most surprising that instances of motive confusion were reported. This was not expected, and indeed was anticipated as being a shortcoming of our role-play study. Whereas the model portrays perceived (and intended) motive as playing an important role in the inherent ambiguity of acts of ignoring and exclusion, by agreeing ahead of time to ostracize each other for the purpose of the study, we thought we had essentially restricted motive alternatives. Nevertheless, there were many entries recorded in which motive confusion occurred. For instance, Dr. Brown (as a source) reported an episode that exemplified non-ostracism. He wrote, “I noticed a paper from Ms. Yellow [target] on my door. She placed it there sometime late this morning. I noticed I hadn’t retrieved it yet. I’m wondering if she noticed it was ‘not retrieved’ and if she would interpret this as an ‘O’ act. This would be unintentional on my part. I simply wasn’t ready to read it and I’ve been so busy I didn’t know exactly what to do with it (where to place it so it wouldn’t be lost or forgotten, as I am apt to do). I’m retrieving it now.” Similarly, Ms. Pink, as a source, wrote, “I think he [Dr. Black, the target] was frustrated that he didn’t have the floor, but it really had nothing to do with the ostracism. That’s just the way practicum is, and why practicum on any given week can become frustrating.”

Perhaps because the actual motive for ostracism in this weeklong study was literally role prescribed, there were no recorded instances that could be classified as such. Maybe we did not feel compelled to state the obvious. Defensive motives, however, were reported. Dr. Brown [as a target] wrote, “How do I play it? My first reflex is to ‘ostracize first in anticipatory retaliation.’ Not meant to be offensive, however. I think it’s a defense. If I ignore everybody then I won’t notice or care if they are ignoring me.” Ms. Pink, who epitomized defensive ostracism on her “O” day, wrote, “I bet I can do a better job counter-ostracizing them, if that’s the expression. I’m determined not to look at any of them, talk to any of them—basically pretend that none of them exist. This may or may not make it easy for them—they may be relieved, or they may be bummed out that I’m taking away their fun. This is a perfect example of Dr. Black’s point that ostracism begets ostracism. I have the attitude, ‘anything you can do I can do better.’” Others
perceived Ms. Pink's defensive motive. For example, Dr. Black (as source) observed, "Seems like Ms. Pink is using defensive ostracism, not trying to talk to me since she knows I won't talk with her." Punitive motives were often perceived by targets, or caused sources to worry that their acts of ostracism might be interpreted as such. In one example, as Dr. Brown observed his behavior as an ostracism source, he wrote, "In retrospect, I felt a bit punitive. In other words, there might have been a tendency to indulge in some tit-for-tat type behavior. It wasn’t a very salient motivation but in retrospect I think it existed, even though the cause for the ‘O’ was well understood." There were also instances of what could be considered oblivious ostracism. For instance, Dr. Brown (as a source) made this observation: "It seems more natural to me to overlook or ignore students than my colleagues or closest friends."

That evidence for motive ambiguity was found even in this study supports the notion that ostracism is inherently ambiguous (Williams, 1997). It also suggests the intriguing idea that in some circumstances individuals may be motivated away from clarification and toward ambiguity (Geller, Goodstein, Silver, & Sternberg, 1974; Snyder & Wicklund, 1981). Geller et al. wrote of targets, "Confronting the perpetrators is unlikely, since it would lead to a possible loss of face" (p. 542). Likewise, Snyder and Wicklund (1981) argued that individuals may prefer to render explanations for social behavior ambiguous in order to defend against personal rejection or even to regain a sense of control.

**Quantity**

Although we had agreed to totally ignore the target, in fact, a range of quantity was represented. Sometimes ostracism was quite complete, whereas other times there was simply a reduction in the usual amount of communication and other characteristics of social interaction. For example, Mr. Blue (as a source) wrote, "Dr. Brown [the target] stopped me in the hall to set up our meeting, and I had to leave. This was a situation when we had to communicate so I responded to his questions, but did not make eye contact." On the other hand, Dr. Brown (as a source) writes of his complete ostracism, "Avoided acknowledging all of her [Ms. Yellow, the target] contributions. Oriented my body and face towards Mr. Blue the entire time."
Causal Clarity

Causal clarity, which refers to the degree to which the ostracism was clearly being given and why, also varied throughout the week. As an example of low causal clarity, Dr. Brown (as a target) made this rather conspiratorial attribution, "My first thought was that the act was deliberate. They [Dr. Black and Mr. Blue] deliberately chose to walk past my door talking to let me know they were ostracizing me. I'm questioning this attribution but it occurred reflexively. I'm guessing now that I'll probably attribute EVERY behavior I see or 'don't see' today in this context." Dr. Brown (as a target) makes a similar observation about Ms. Yellow's (source) behavior, "I just heard Ms. Yellow unlock her door and get something from inside her office and I immediately thought 'she's ignoring me.' It's pretty much becoming an obsession." Then there were entries that were characterized as high in causal clarity. Mr. Blue (as a source) wrote, "There was no ambiguity to the cause of the ostracism... the interaction was much less stressful this time because I noticed him smiling so I was sure that he was making the correct attribution." And Dr. Brown writes of his ostracism of Dr. Black, "I'm sure, however, that if I attempted such a maneuver on him (Dr. Black—target) and he did not attribute my action to an 'O' or a role-play that he would never have let it slide." These last two examples also support the idea that as clarity increases (or, conversely, as ambiguity decreases), ostracism appears to have less negative impact.

Evidence of Coping With Different Threatened Needs

In the model, Williams proposes that ostracism, perhaps uniquely among aversive interpersonal behaviors, has an impact on four fundamental needs. It was hypothesized that all four needs are threatened for the target, but some of them may be fortified for the sources. The diary entries were examined for evidence of need threat and need fortification for these four needs.

Belonging

It was expected that being ostracized directly threatens targets' feelings of having a bond, a sense of connectedness, a feeling of belonging to others. Ms Yellow (as a target) wrote, "When they
[Mr. Blue and Dr. Brown] did not incorporate my suggestion it did feel like they are one.” Ms. Pink, as a source, made sympathetic belonging-related observations of two targets, first Mr. Blue, then Dr. Black. Of Mr. Blue she wrote, “I know that he has a higher need for affiliation than the rest of us, so maybe this really is affecting him.” Of Dr. Black, she wrote, “I know Dr. Black probably would have like to have joined in, because he likes to talk about Thursday night television (Friends, Seinfeld, etc.).”

It was hypothesized that a consequence of threatened belonging is to regain that sense of belonging in some other way. This could be by joining other groups, talking with others, trying to please others more, and so on. For example, Mr. Blue (as a target) observed, “I also noticed today that I wasted most of the day talking to practicum students about non-school related issues. This may be an anomaly or maybe I just was over-compensating for being shut out of my normal social interactions.” Dr. Brown (as a target) wrote, “Talking to Jude [an undergraduate student] more than usual.” And, in one of the more surprising self-disclosures, Dr. Black (as a target) wrote, “I feel like I need to hug someone.”

Of the four needs, belonging is the only one that does not seem to be fortified by ostracizing (Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco, & Baumeister, in press; Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998). An examination of sources’ entries related to belonging fortification also seems to suggest that ostracism threatens belonging for both targets and sources. Mr. Blue (as a source) wrote, “I don’t look forward to doing this because I typically interact with Ms. Pink on a personal level. By ostracizing her, I am eliminating an important source of social interaction.”

**Control**

Ostracism is hypothesized to deprive targets of a sense of control, causing them to experience feelings of frustration. With other types of interpersonal conflict, such as verbal or even physical arguments, the interchange can be and often is bidirectional. However, because others are ignoring the target during ostracism, targets’ counterattacks fall on deaf ears and blind eyes. When Dr. Black was a target, he observed, “It was very frustrating!!! I almost gave up and didn’t make the comment. It was like the Twilight Zone.” Both Dr. Brown and Ms. Pink made diary entries at the same time,
and they concurred with Dr. Black’s feelings. Dr. Brown wrote, “He [Dr. Black] yielded and did not object nor attempt to regain control of the conversation.” Ms. Pink commented, “One time he [Dr. Black] was trying to talk and everyone else was talking, too. I think he was frustrated that he didn’t have the floor.”

As a consequence of threatened control, targets are likely to regain control through provocative behaviors that demand responses in the sources. When Mr. Blue was the target, he frequently attempted to regain control. Sometimes, he simply thought about how to get control. He wrote, “Well, Ms Yellow left for the day and didn’t say good-bye, even though she passed right by me. I wanted to shoot her with a rubber band or smack her on the head to get her attention.” Later Mr. Blue acted on his desires. After work, he wrote, “I just decided to call everyone tonight, just to see what happens and how it makes me feel.” Dr. Black also acted in ways to regain control when he was a target. After he was the target of ostracism in the practicum meeting, he made this entry: “Then, after about 5 minutes where no one looked at me, I stuck a red ‘O’ on my forehead.” About an hour later, Dr. Black found another opportunity to provoke a response, “I beep at Dr. Brown as I pass him (I’m driving back to school, Dr. Brown’s walking). He waves . . . I laugh . . . I got him again!” These attempts did not go by unnoticed. Dr. Black wrote of Mr. Blue’s provocative behavior, “Mr. Blue’s (the target) testing us.” Dr. Brown wrote of Dr. Black’s attempts, “The guy ‘tricked’ me into completing a social exchange. I was a bit angry at myself as if someone scored a point on me during some kind of competition because of my carelessness. I thought I’ve got to be more on guard.”

In sources, we saw indications that ostracism increased their sense of control. For example, Ms. Yellow, as a source, wrote, “It felt powerful to do what everyone was doing—ostracizing and specially since I’m the junior-most.” Mr. Blue, as a source, wrote, “I didn’t really feel anything about him [Dr. Black, as a target] other than [having] greater control over the interaction.” Sources often reported feeling empowered as a result of ostracizing. Mr. Blue (source) wrote, “I felt uncomfortable ostracizing him [Dr. Brown, the target], but I also felt more powerful being able to ostracize an individual of higher status.” Mr. Blue made an observation that
suggests the power shifts away from the target, when he wrote of Dr. Black (the target), “I felt like he lost a couple notches in status.” And Dr. Brown made this insightful observation of the relative status between him and Dr. Black after he ostracized Dr. Black: “One last thing. Dr. Black [target] has a bit more status than me here for a number of reasons. However, the act of ‘O’ing him certainly changed that during the meeting. For me I felt a very clear and strong status differential where he was on the low end. This was partly due to his usually passive behavior but partly also to my willingness to assume, accept, or assert a higher status position. It wasn’t a conscious thing nor was there any intention behind it but it was there and kind of occurred naturally.”

However, Ms. Pink, as a source, made an intriguing observation, “I don’t like not being able to engage in the behaviors that I normally engage in! The silent treatment takes control away from the user, too, when you think about it. It requires a huge amount of effort to remember how you’re supposed to act—it’s like the ostracism takes over you!” This observation is consistent with those made by long-term users of the silent treatment in structured interviews (Zadro & Williams, 1998b). Perhaps control is temporarily gained by being a source of ostracism, but then overtime, the ostracism starts to take control of the source.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is another need that was hypothesized to be under attack when ostracized. The reason behind this is that ostracism often signifies punishment for some act, or for not doing something that was desired. Hence, when ostracized, targets may assume they did something wrong. Also, because ostracism often comes without explanation, targets may ruminate over the various things they may have done wrong, thus making salient to themselves a virtual laundry list of acts that provide grist for self-derogation. Because we had agreed to be ostracized during the week, and we supposedly knew the reasons why it was being done, we felt that self-esteem would not be severely shaken. Nevertheless, even in these circumstances, there were still a few entries that suggested that targets’ self-esteem was fragile during ostracism. Ms Yellow, as a target, wrote, “When I cracked a joke I automatically turned my head to Dr. Brown [a source] whom I expected to laugh, as usual.
But he, too, didn’t laugh and it made me feel pretty stupid.” Dr. Black (source) observed, of Ms. Pink (target), “I think it’s interesting that Ms. Pink felt motivated to do this (hand in her revision of the method section) today, as though she’s more concerned about receiving praise or feeling appreciated today than other days.” No evidence of self-esteem fortification was found in sources’ entries.

**Meaningful Existence**

Ostracism was also hypothesized to adversely affect the targets’ sense of meaningful existence, because the experience of being ostracized is a metaphorical reminder of what life would be like without the target. In anthropological and sociological accounts of ostracism, ostracism is often referred to as “social death.” James (1890) called not being recognized by one’s mates in their presence as being “cut dead” (p. 294). As a target, Mr. Blue wrote, “I feel like I am a ghost on the floor that everyone hears, but no one can talk to. I want to be noticed!”

A way to regain a sense of meaningful existence is to be recognized, regardless of whether people’s impressions are positive or negative. Several entries documented such motivations. Mr. Blue (target) wrote, “It is funny that I have begun using tactics to force them to acknowledge me. I don’t care if I anger them; I just want someone to notice me.” Dr. Black also seemed to care about being recognized more than creating favorable impressions. He wrote, “I’m seeing my goal today as trying to get people to recognize my existence, with good or bad evaluation—it doesn’t matter.” When they did something to get attention, they felt rewarded. Dr. Black wrote, “Oh, to be recognized! I felt victorious that I got them to acknowledge my existence.”

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to provide us with a substantive experience with ostracism. To this end, it was successful, perhaps more than we bargained for. Prior to the week of the study, most of our colleagues expressed doubts that we would experience anything,
that it would be nothing more than an uninvolving role-play exercise that would yield nothing more than a few laughs. Contrary to these expectations, laughter was one of the rarer events. The ostracism, unlike that in the laboratory, affected the daily lives of the individuals involved. It prevented some from doing their work, collaborating with their peers, being mentored, receiving help. It interfered with the normal pleasantries and politenesses that lubricate the social gears of a working group. It caused temporary emergence of group factions, displays of anger, embarrassment, concern, anxiety, paranoia, and general fragility of spirit. Attempts were made moments after midnight to seek reconciliation with the ostracized individual, even when it was quite apparent why the ostracism was taking place and that it was not personal. At the conclusion of the study, we think our understanding of ostracism was benefited at a phenomenological level, a theoretical level, and a methodological level.

Phenomenologically, we experienced what we were studying in the laboratory and what we were listening to in our structured interviews. Despite knowing the reasons behind the ostracism, and knowing that a predetermined end was in sight, ostracizing was effortful for sources and unpleasant for targets. We questioned each other’s motives, had difficulties carrying out our day-to-day duties, and felt disengaged from our friends and colleagues. As targets we felt disconnected to the group, frustrated by our lack of control, uncertain of the value of our contributions, and unrecognized. As sources we felt a part of the group, empowered, and of increased status, but also apologetic and eager to reunite with the target the next day.

The experience, while not an empirical test, lent credibility to Williams’s model and the need-threat theory. We experienced several types of ostracism that varied across the four dimensions: visibility, motive, quantity, and causal clarity. Attributions were frequent moderators of the incidences and seemed to act as buffers or intensifiers. This was surprising because the attributions for the ostracism should have been quite clear. Each need—belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence—was represented in the dairy entries. And the immediate reactions of discomfort and unpleasantness were often converted to acts aimed at regaining the lost or threatened needs.
Methodologically, we learned that some questions about ostracism can probably be tested with role-play methods, whereas others may not be amenable to this technique. Even knowing that motives for ostracism are under the control of the scriptwriter, ostracizing, and being ostracized, still had impact. This was probably more true of the targets—it feels almost immediately uncomfortable to be ignored in the presence of others, especially others who are friends. It takes little time to feel excluded, rejected, and ignored. Loss of control and wanting to regain control are particularly noticeable. Threats to self-esteem, however, seemed less affected than would happen without consent and knowledge of the roles to be played. Also, the experiences of the sources were probably substantially different from those of actual ostracism sources who chose to ostracize for a reason. Usually, if we chose to give friends the silent treatment, avoided eye contact with them, or did not invite them to a group activity, it would be because we were angry with them or they had hurt our feelings. Without this inspiration, sources are likely to feel uncomfortable and apologetic, as we did. On the other hand, the effort and difficulty in maintaining the ostracism may very well track the real world of experience of extended ostracism. In structured interviews, long-term sources of ostracism often claim that it is an all-consuming activity and is exhausting to keep up. As Dr. Brown so keenly observed, “A lot of effort was put forth to ‘O’ him during the meeting but I found that if I hyper attended to the task at hand and to everyone else in the room I could neglect him. Neglecting or ignoring is easier than actively ‘O’ing. One qualification, ignoring is not quite the correct term because it was an ignoring ‘act.’ In fact, I processed every thing Dr. Black said and contributed at the meeting but only attempted to communicate to him that I was ignoring him. So, in fact, I was endeavoring in deception. Perhaps this is partly responsible for the effortful nature of this. Deception is difficult to do. Maybe all this acting takes a lot.”

Attributions

We all had the most clear and the most forgiving (and self-serving) attributions for our sources, and yet the impact was felt strongly.
We could not have had a more face-saving context. Yet, we still all bore the brunt of attributional confusion.

Attributionally, the participant observers had a clear schema through which to make and interpret observations and guide their expectations for sources’ behaviors. Despite knowing the cause of the ostracizing behaviors to be external, targets nevertheless seemed tempted to consider (or perhaps needed to inhibit) internal attributions for sources’ behaviors. This tendency is reminiscent of the correspondent inferences made by participants who interacted with either a “friendly” or “unfriendly” confederate even when they were informed that the confederate’s behavior toward them had been intentional according to the experimental design (Napolitan & Goethals, 1979). It has long been known that the hedonic relevance of another’s actions, particularly if it is negatively valenced for the perceiver, will increase the tendency to attribute those actions internally (Jones & Davis, 1965).

Recent stage theories of interpersonal perception (Gilbert, 1995; Jones, 1990; Trope 1986) can be applied to the present context to suggest what might be occurring in the minds of the targets. Given a prior, clear, and strong expectation for ostracism, targets are primed (predisposed) to identify an act, or perhaps even a nonact, as an instance of an ostracism act. This will occur to the extent that such schemas are activated (i.e., salient) within the minds of the target. The diaries of our participants clearly showed that, while a target, the ostracism schema tended to be chronically activated, as evidenced by the reported rumination and increased diary entries of all participants on their day as targets. This chronic activation predisposed targets to make ostracism-related identifications. Furthermore, targets and sources seemed to be experiencing high cognitive load during these interpersonal encounters with their attempts to compensate for the impediment to the normal flow of their social discourse. The added interpersonal burdens placed on targets may interfere with the subsequent inference and adjustment stages of the social judgment processes, thus causing internal ostracizing-related attributions to creep into their consciousness.

We may have also learned something about ourselves—and about each other—that we did not know before. As Dr. Brown observed, “Each ‘O’er is unique. It does not feel like the same
phenomenon with each person. 'O' comes in many varieties. People handle it differently.” Indeed, Dr. Black and Mr. Blue sought recognition, Dr. Brown introspected and worried about the impact on others, Ms. Pink was defensive, and Ms. Yellow was resigned.

*When the Rules Were Challenged*

Van Ments (1983) wrote, “When people take a particular role they use a repertoire of behaviors which are expected of that role... this behavior is often the result of internalizing the expectations developed by others—in other words doing what other people expect of that person in the role... when people act out of role... they upset our expectations” (p. 18). Although it may not have been discussed, it would seem that each individual in the study held expectations about how targets and sources should respond to ostracism. That is, sources should not respond to the target and targets should passively endure ostracism. When sources challenged their role and failed to ostracize the target, targets responded both positively and negatively. Mr. Blue wrote, “I saw Ms. Pink in the hall, she forgot that she was ignoring me and we maintained eye contact for about 5-sec. which felt wonderful.” Nevertheless, Mr. Blue continued, “She didn’t ignore me very well during the interaction. I felt uncomfortable, because I wasn’t sure how we were supposed to act and I just tried to get through the interaction quickly and end it.” Dr. Black wrote of Ms. Pink’s failure to ostracize him, “One part of me wishes she’d ostracize me, the other part appreciates the interaction.”

Targets challenged their role by seeking recognition, attempting to provoke a reaction from sources. Source reactions to such tactics were overwhelmingly negative, tending to center on perceived loss of control. As a target, Dr. Black beeped while he drove past Dr. Brown and Dr. Brown reflexively waved. Dr. Brown wrote, “As I raised my hand and the car passed I saw it was Dr. Black. I brought my hand down fast but it was too late. The guy ‘tricked’ me into completing a social exchange. I was a bit angry at myself as if someone scored a point on me during some kind of competition because of my carelessness. I thought ‘I’ve got to be more on guard.’” But this anger could also be turned toward the provo-
king target. On Dr. Black putting the “O” on his head, Dr. Brown wrote, “Normally, it would have struck me as being really funny and perhaps it was and did, but I could not nor did I want to be humored by him so I fought the urge. What is extremely interesting is that I managed to sincerely change or manipulate my affective response from one of laughter to one of annoyance and irritation. . . . I genuinely achieved a state of irritation and annoyance and was sincerely ordering him to knock it off. Stop with the pranks. Apparently, when I’m ‘O’ing somebody it’s annoying to me for them to attempt to humor me or make me feel good. Altruism, warmth, compassion, and good humor actually are responded to (by me) with irritation, annoyance, and anger. It’s as if I’m saying, ‘no, don’t be nice to me. I don’t want to be nice to you. If you try I’ll get angry at you.’ Off hand, I can’t think of any other instance where I get angry at somebody for being nice and friendly.”

**Conclusions**

Engaging in and experiencing a week like this was both revealing and uncomfortable. We have recently learned (from a participant in one of our structured interviews) that an organization in the United Kingdom begins its orientation week by inducing its new members to join together and ostracize each member for a period of time so as to increase their sense of cohesion and commitment within their group! Having experienced this procedure ourselves, it is difficult to imagine that cohesiveness is often achieved. In fact, we feel that attempts to replicate this experience should be undertaken with caution. Despite this being an unanticipated week of powerful psychological effects, we were perhaps less affected than less cohesive groups. Preexisting quarrels, hidden resentments, and competitive rivalries would almost certainly be magnified under the weeklong cloak of ostracism. As Ms. Yellow observed about the week, “Everything seems to have so much meaning.” Harvey and Miller (1998) argue that assigning meaning to episodes of loss is potentially enlightening and even empowering to the sufferer. Attaching meaning to the loss of belonging and recognition from important others may be an important step in coping with it, but
further research may also set forth conditions under which attaching meaning can be debilitating and hurtful.

References


**Kipling D. Williams** received his BS in psychology at the University of Washington, and his MA and PhD in social psychology from Ohio State University. He has been an associate professor at Drake University and the University of Toledo, with short stints at the University of Washington and Purdue University. He is now a senior lecturer at the University of New South Wales, in Sydney, Australia. He is interested in all aspects of ostracism, from a variety of methods and perspectives, and is currently working on a book about this topic.

**Frank J. Bernieri** received his PhD from Harvard University in 1988. He is an associate professor at the University of Toledo. His primary interests involve face-to-face interaction.
Sonja L. Faulkner's current research interests are whistle-blowing (the reporting of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices) and ostracism. Sonja received her master's degree in industrial/organizational psychology from Central Michigan University, and she recently completed her doctoral dissertation in social psychology from the University of Toledo.

Neha Gada-Jain received her BA from St. Xavier's College, Bombay, India. She is currently completing her MA in social psychology at the University of Toledo. Her thesis investigates the role of interpersonal synchrony in job interviews as it affects perceived rapport and hiring decisions.

Jon E. Grahe received a BA in psychology from Shippensburg University and a PhD in experimental social psychology from the University of Toledo. Currently, he is a visiting assistant professor at Monmouth College. His research interests include studying the ecological and perceptual impact of nonverbal behaviors in interpersonal interactions, individual differences in social judgment accuracy, and the impact of ostracism on interpersonal relations.