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## BRIEF REPORT

### Vicarious Ostracism: Behavioral Responses of Women Observing an Ostracized Gay Man

#### Ostracismo Vicario: Le Risposte Comportamentali delle Donne che Osservano un Uomo Gay Ostracizzato

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#### ABSTRACT

Research on vicarious ostracism showed that people observing another person ostracized try to support him or her and punish the perpetrators. The current brief report investigated the effect of observing an ostracized or included gay man (vs. heterosexual man), among 87 Italian female university students. They firstly observed a first interaction game named Cyberball and then took part in a second Cyberball with the same fictitious players. The results confirmed our expectations, showing that they restored the social pain of the ostracized player more when he was gay than heterosexual, through more ball tosses. Limitations and future directions are discussed.

**Keywords:** cyberball; vicarious ostracism; sexual orientation; women.

#### RIASSUNTO

La ricerca sull'ostracismo vicario ha mostrato che gli individui che osservano un'altra persona ostracizzata, cercano di supportarla e di punire gli autori di ostracismo. Il presente brief report ha indagato l'effetto di osservare un uomo gay (vs. eterosessuale) ostracizzato o incluso, su 87 studentesse universitarie italiane. Esse hanno prima osservato una prima interazione di gioco, chiamato Cyberball, e successivamente hanno preso parte ad un secondo Cyberball con gli stessi giocatori fittizi. I risultati hanno confermato le nostre aspettative, mostrando che esse riparavano di più il dolore sociale del giocatore ostracizzato quando era gay, piuttosto che quando era eterosessuale, attraverso un numero maggiore di passaggi di palla. I limiti e le future direzioni vengono discusse.

**Parole chiave:** cyberball; ostracismo vicario; orientamento sessuale; donne.

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RdP

## Introduction

### Ostracism and Vicarious Ostracism

Ostracism is a psychological construct that consists of being ignored and excluded from others. It causes distress and threatens relevant psychological needs such as belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence (Williams, 2007; 2009). The negative impact on victims is well documented by a wide literature showing neurophysiological, cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences (Williams and Nida, 2011).

An emergent and growing field of research is also focusing on the consequences of vicarious ostracism (Wesselmann, Williams, and Hales, 2013), i.e. the observation of another individual being ostracized. Observers report less satisfaction of the basic psychological needs, as if they were experiencing the ostracism themselves (Wesselmann, Bagg and Williams, 2009). Furthermore, specific brain areas are activated (Masten, Morelli, and Eisenberg, 2011), related to the activation of social pain and empathic processes, confirming that observers also feel social pain. Consistently, an immediate activation of Autonomic Nervous System was revealed, indicating an automatic activation of stress arousal (Paolini et al., 2016).

These consequences in observers seem to be modulated by several conditions, such as belongingness to the same social group of the victim (Paolini et al., 2016); level of closeness to the ostracized person (e.g., a friend vs. a stranger; Meyer et al., 2012); observer's ability to take the victim's perspective (Wesselmann et al., 2009). Psychological research that investigated observers' behavioral responses seems to support that observing ostracism leads to make an effort to support the victim and punish the perpetrators (Paolini, et al., 2017; Wesselmann et al., 2013; 2015; Will et al., 2013). These results seem to be in line with the Perception-Action Model (PAM) of empathy (Preston and de Waal, 2002), suggesting that observing or imagining another person's experience activates our own representation of the experience itself (for a review see Paolini, in press).

### Ostracism Suffered by Sexual Minority People: The Current Research

Sexual minority people are still often victims of prejudice and discriminations in many contexts of their lives, and ostracism represents a concrete form of such discriminations (ILGA-Europe, 2018). Ostracism is not solely an interpersonal or group phenomenon regarding sexual minority people, but it also includes forms of political and institutional ostracism (Riggle, 2017). Indeed, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) people often live in societies that stigmatize their identities and promote discriminatory laws and institutional policies aimed at ignoring or damaging them. Sexual prejudice, that is the set of negative attitudes, prejudices, discriminations against sexual minority people (Herek and McLemore, 2013), contributes to affect negatively LGBT people's wellbeing, leading them to report a higher incidence of mental health problems compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Cochran and Mays, 2000; Meyer, 2003).

However, despite this, ostracism did not receive much attention in LGBT research, that focused more on other kinds of discriminations and victimizations such as bullying (Camodeca, Baiocco, and Posa, 2018). Particularly, gay men are targets of victimization more often than lesbians both in heterosexual people (Herek 2002; Cohen, Hall, and Tuttle, 2009) and in LGBT community (Salvati, et al., 2018a; 2018b). Furthermore, specific programs of interventions to prevent or counteract social exclusion in educational and working institutions are still very rare in Italy. For this reason, and since previous literature investigating ostracism suffered by sexual minority people is still very limited (Michniewicz, 2011), the current study aimed to contribute to fill this gap. Specifically, we investigated the effect of observing an ostracized gay man (vs. heterosexual man), in a sample of heterosexual female participants. Heterosexual women, compared to heterosexual men, typically represent a social group with less sexual prejudice (Herek 2002). Furthermore, both popular culture and the psychological literature have recognized the special significance of the "straight female-gay male friendship" (de la Cruz and Dolby, 2007; Grigoriou, 2004). This suggests that when compared to heterosexual men, heterosexual women are emotionally closer to gay men and form closer relationships with them. The several reasons for this are beyond the purposes of the current research, thus, just as one among several possible explanations, gay men would provide positive attention for heterosexual women and would accept and admire them for who they are, regardless of their physical appearance (Russell et al., 2013).

Prior research (Wesselmann et al., 2013a) suggested that those who first observed the inclusion (vs. ostracism) of another person during an online ball-toss game and then were invited to play a second game with the same players are inclined to toss a greater number of balls towards the ostracized target rather than towards the included one. Furthermore, observers are more motivated to restore social pain of a victim when they are close to him or her (Paolini et al., 2017). Thus, following the same procedure adopted by Wesselmann and colleagues (2013a), we hypothesized that heterosexual women, compared to heterosexual men, being emotionally closer to gay men (de la Cruz and Dolby, 2007; Grigoriou, 2004), would try to restore social pain felt by the ostracized gay man more often than ostracized heterosexual man.

## Method

### *Participants*

The original sample consisted of 102 university female students, attending a course of Social Psychology. Inclusion criteria were: a) being female; b) being Italian; c) having an exclusively heterosexual or mostly heterosexual sexual orientation. The choice to include only female participants was also due to the fact that most of the students of that course were girls.

Fifteen participants were excluded from the analyses because they were not Italian or self-declared as bisexual, mostly lesbian or exclusively lesbian. Thus, according the inclusion criteria, the final sample consisted of 87 female, Italian, heterosexual or mostly heterosexual students in Psychology. Participants' age ranged from 19 to 34 years ( $M = 21.66$ ,  $SD = 3.10$ ).

### *Procedures and Measures*

All students voluntarily participated in the research in exchange for university credits. Before starting the experiment, participants signed the informed consent according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

Next, researchers explained to participants that they would observe a first interaction game among three male players, and after some questions, they would have taken part in a second game (i.e., Cyberball, see below details). Before observing the first game, participants were presented a written players' sheet with some information: Name; age; sexual orientation; one hobby. This procedure allowed us to introduce the first manipulation of the experimental conditions. Based on experimental conditions we manipulated the sexual orientation of only one player (i.e., Andrea see below). Specifically, half participants read that Andrea self-described as gay, whereas the other half read that he self-described as heterosexual. Instead, the other two players always self-described as heterosexual (i.e., Marco and Luca).

Then participants were introduced to the Cyberball game (Williams et al., 2000) specifically in the vicarious version (Wesselmann et al., 2009). Following the same procedure adopted in previous studies (Paolini et al., 2017), participants were told they were participating in a research about their mental visualization ability while observing a three-players session of Cyberball. Participants were led to believe that three players were connected via the University intranet and seated in the adjoining lab. Actually, the other three players were pre-programmed avatars. The three fictitious players were labelled as Andrea, Marco, and Luca. Andrea was the target and Marco and Luca were the sources. Participants observed a Cyberball game where each of the three players received one third of the tosses from the other players, namely inclusion condition ( $n = 44$ ). Otherwise, they observed Andrea receiving 3/4 tosses at the beginning and then never receiving another toss, namely ostracism condition ( $n = 43$ ). The game proceeded for three minutes, for the total of 30 throws (Williams and Jarvis, 2006). In other words, participants observed a Cyberball game in which a gay (vs. heterosexual) target (i.e., Andrea) was excluded (vs. included) by two heterosexual sources (i.e., Marco and Luca).

Immediately after observing Cyberball, participants rated the Cyberball manipulation check (i.e., "Was Andrea included/ ignored during the Cyberball?") on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

Before taking directly part in the second Cyberball with Andrea, Marco and Luca, all participants were asked to fill an own sheet with the same information that they had read about the three players (i.e., gender, age; sexual orientation, one hobby and nationality). We made this, in order to both collect participants' demographic information and make more credible that players were really present in the

adjoining lab. To corroborate with this latter aspect, the experimenter pretended to go out from the lab for a minute, to bring the paper with the info to the three players.

Next, the experimenter came back and introduced participants to the second Cyberball game. The second Cyberball was programmed only in the inclusion condition. We were interested in evaluating participants' behaviors towards Andrea. Indeed, we used the number of participant's ball-tosses toward Andrea as measure of dependent variable, in order to notice whether the participants tried to restore the effect of ostracism suffered by Andrea during the first Cyberball (Wesselmann et al., 2013a).

Participants were then invited to answer to Andrea's sexual orientation manipulation check question. Based on the experimental conditions, participants correctly understood the Andrea's sexual orientation (100%). Finally, they were thanked and debriefed. The whole experiment required about 30-40 minutes.

## Results

In the following analyses we performed a 2 (*Andrea's sexual orientation* (ASO): Gay vs. Heterosexual)  $\times$  2 (*Andrea's Cyberball condition* (ACC): Inclusion vs. Ostracism) between subjects ANOVA.

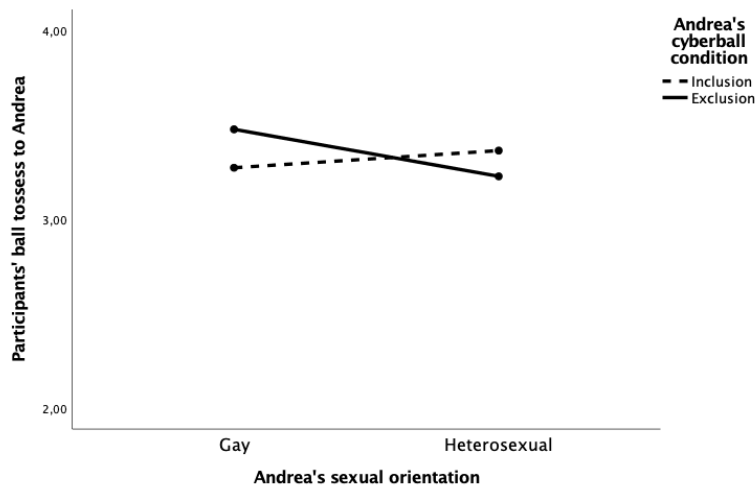
### *Cyberball Manipulation Check*

The ANOVA on the mean of the two manipulation check questions revealed that our manipulation was effective. As expected, participants observing Andrea in the ostracism condition, reported that they perceived him as more ignored and excluded ( $M = 7.78$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ), compared to the participants observing Andrea in the inclusion condition ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ),  $F(1, 83) = 127.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .606$ . In line with our expectations, neither the main effect of ASO,  $F(1, 83) = 0.82$ ,  $p = .601$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .003$ , nor its interaction with ACC,  $F(1, 83) = 2.46$ ,  $p = .121$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .029$ , affected these questions.

### *Participants' ball tosses*

The ANOVA on the number of total tosses that participants throws to Andrea, during the second Cyberball showed neither the main effect of ASO,  $F(1, 83) = 0.61$ ,  $p = .438$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .007$ , nor the main effect of ACC,  $F(1, 83) = 0.11$ ,  $p = .742$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ . Although the expected two-way interaction only approached conventional level of significance,  $F(1, 83) = 2.81$ ,  $p = .098$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .033$ , we deepened this result by a simple slope analysis. Figure 1 showed that in the Andrea's ostracism condition, participants tended to pass the ball to him more time when he was described as gay ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ), rather than heterosexual ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ),  $F(1, 83) = 2.98$ ,  $p = .088$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .035$ . Instead, the number of ball tosses to Andrea when he was gay ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ), or heterosexual ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ), did not vary when Andrea was in the inclusion condition,  $F(1, 83) = 0.41$ ,  $p = .525$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .001$ . Finally, no differences in ball tosses resulted between the conditions of inclusion and exclusion neither when Andrea was gay,  $F(1, 83) = 1.99$ ,  $p = .162$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .023$ , nor when he was heterosexual,  $F(1, 83) = 0.92$ ,  $p = .342$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .011$ .

Figure 1. *Simple slope analysis on participants' ball tosses to Andrea during the second Cyberball*



### Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this brief report seem to confirm our expectations, showing that heterosexual female observers try to restore the social pain felt by an ostracized man more when he was gay than when he was heterosexual. Our findings are in line with previous studies showing that observers are more motivated to restore social pain of a victim of ostracism when they are close to him or her (Paolini et al., 2017; Wesselmann et al., 2013a; 2015). This is supported by previous literature that confirmed that women report less sexual prejudice than heterosexual men (Herek, 2002). Furthermore, although it is a stereotypical belief, however gay men are still considered more similar to heterosexual women than heterosexual men (Salvati et al., 2019).

The main limitation of the present study is represented by the small sample size that affected the statistical significance of our results. Other limitations regard the limited generalizability of our results because of both the convenience sampling and the restricted characteristics of the participants (i.e. only female students). Further research might extend such results by involving male or sexual minority participants or by manipulating victim's gender, sexual orientation, or adherence to traditional gender roles, allowing to investigate these possible effects on restoring behaviors of observers.

Previous research (de la Cruz & Dolby, 2007; Grigoriou, 2004) has shown a special bond of friendship between heterosexual women and gay men in which both would be accepted and admired for what they are, regardless of gender and sexual stereotypes (Russell et al., 2013). Consistently, the current study seems to give a positive prospect, by suggesting that heterosexual women may thus constitute a valid social and emotional support on whom ostracized gay men may rely in many contexts, such for example in work places where ostracism acts can be implicitly repeated. Furthermore, results also provide information to both educational and working institutions to implement specific programs of intervention. Therefore, the role of a supportive friendship seems to be crucial in order to prevent a depletion of cognitive, emotional and behavioral resources that the victim of ostracism typically suffers (Paolini, in press). Specifically, perceiving a support from a heterosexual woman can help the ostracized gay man to overcome his loneliness.

To conclude, our results are in line with the Perception-Action Model (PAM) of empathy (Preston and de Waal, 2002) suggesting that people observing others' social pain not only feel hurt but also make an effort to support the target. Moreover, we provide evidence that this process can be driven by the target's sexual orientation.

**Author Contributions**

All authors wrote the first draft of the manuscript and have critically revised it and approved the final version.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards****Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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**Ethical approval**

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent**

Each participant signed an informed consent before starting the experiment.

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