Unlimited:

Ostracism's Potential to Awaken Us to Possibility and Mystery

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Abstract

Ostracism is a subtle communicative phenomenon that makes individuals feeling ignored, rejected, and left out. Ostracism is a form of social rejection less visible than bullying and harassment, but deeply painful because it disconfirms one's existence. Ostracism during adolescence can be particularly devastating because of the strong need for group belonging in childhood. Intellectually gifted adolescents might experience additional challenges to peer acceptance due to their advanced intellect and asynchronous development.   The current paper takes a social construction perspective and utilizes coordinated management of meaning theory to investigate intellectually gifted adolescents' experiences of ostracism and social exclusion. I invited 45 gifted adolescents, ages 10-18, to keep an electronic journal for at least a month about their experiences of ostracism. While many participants' experiences were deeply troubling, uncomfortable, and lonely, this paper focuses on the transformative potential ostracism held for some participants. Most participants recognized that life after exile can still be fulfilling. Some participants were motivated to work harder and become better people because of their exclusion, others gained deeper insights about themselves, their peers, or their social realities, some recognized the possibility of constructing alternative realities, and some found radical freedom from other's judgments.

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I grew up in a school that said if I can't succeed in the system that's laid out for me then my life will be unremarkable... I was taught to believe in limitations, that I must color inside the lines, that I must connect the dots in numerical order. And that's fine –if all you want is a picture of an octopus. But if you want a picture of an octopus that wears a human for a backpack so it can walk around on land and protest seafood restaurants, you're gonna have to go about things a little differently…We live in a constantly changing world, and in that world systems break because they are rigid and unbending. If we spend our lives trying to adjust to something broken, we break ourselves in the process.

-Shane Koyczan

Humans are limited only by our imaginations, and anything in the world could be otherwise if we can envision it so. We are the divine creators of our social worlds. However, from the moment of our birth, many of us exist in limiting social systems. Often, we face social consequences for rebelling against the limitations social actors place on us. For example, adolescents quickly learn that they must either both look and act in certain ways, or they will experience peer rejection. Ostracism and social rejection are tools of limitation. Adolescents are bombarded with limiting messages: *You can't. You shouldn't. You mustn't. Or, you will face exile.* However, some do rebel against these limitations and envision alternate possibilities for interaction.

The current paper discusses ostracism's ability to awaken adolescents to what coordinated management of meaning theory (CMM; Pearce, 1989) calls *mystery.* Mystery is an

awareness that our understanding of our social worlds is finite and limited by our own

perceptions. Mystery directs our attention to the fact that the current construction of a social

world is not the only possible construction. In the following sections, I will discuss research

about ostracism and adolescents and ask if ostracism can ever present positive outcomes in

adolescents' lives. To address this question, I will describe an electronic journaling study I

conducted with intellectually gifted adolescents. Finally, I will present CMM along with my

analysis of adolescents' journals.

The Ostracized Adolescent

Humans have the potential for great acts of compassion or hateful acts of cruelty.

Adolescent peer groups, in particular, manifest cruelty through social rejection and exclusion

(Sunwolf, 2008). Through acts of ostracism, we exile and marginalize other people. Ostracism

is the act of ignoring others in order to exclude them from meaningful social participation.

Williams (2001) defined ostracism as an experience "of feeling invisible, of being excluded from

the social interactions of those around you" (p. 2). Ostracism is a communicative attempt to

create a world *without* another person or group.

Few events in life are more painful than feeling invisible to those from whom we seek

acceptance. Ostracism is particularly upsetting to children and adolescents because the human

need for close social relationships and group belonging is strongest during this time of our lives

(Kerr & Levine, 2008; Rawlins, 1992; Sunwolf, 2008). Adolescents spend much of their time

seeking social acceptance by identifying with their peer groups (Sunwolf, 2008). Because the

social focus of adolescence centers on peers, young adults need to feel accepted by peer groups

in order to live well-adjusted lives (Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006). Group acceptance offers

adolescents the opportunity to develop a sense of identity, self-worth, and validation (Onoda et

al., 2010; Rawlins, 1992; Stokholm, 2009). Particularly for adolescents, ostracism symbolizes a lack of group acceptance that leaves young people feeling alone and alienated.

Children and young adults experience such a strong need for peer acceptance that group exclusion yields severe consequences. Academically, ostracized adolescents can experience poor academic performance (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997), underachievement, and disengagement from class participation and school (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). Psychologically, ostracized youth might exhibit increased thoughts about suicide (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), depression (DeWall, Gilman, Sharif, Carboni, & Rice, 2012), anger (Pharo, Gross, Richardson, & Hayne, 2011), and aggression (Chow, Tiedens, & Govan, 2008) than their included counterparts. Physically, ostracized adolescents tend to experience more illness than their peers experience (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Sunwolf, 2008). Socially, ostracized youth might begin to stop caring about peer relationships (Leary, 2001) and withdraw from social participation (Wood, Cowan, & Baker, 2002). Social effects of ostracism can negatively affect adolescents' relationships even into adulthood (Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Academic, psychological, and social complications of ostracism can certainly affect the lives of individuals, but the troubles associated with chronic ostracism could also impact society writ large.

The ostracized child, herself, might not be the only individual to experience negative consequences from her exclusion. Evidence also suggests ostracism can create a chain reaction of anti-social behavior. Social rejection can lead youth to turn to drugs, crime (MacDonald, 2006), or violence (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Philips, 2003; Matthews, 1996; Wesselman, Nairne, & Williams, 2012). Sullivan and colleagues (2006) found that excluded youth were more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, such as stealing, property damage, cutting school, and alcohol and cigarette use. Additionally, an analysis of shooters in 12 of 15 United States

school shootings from 1995-2001 demonstrated that these individuals experienced chronic peer

ostracism during adolescence (Leary et al., 2003). Whether the excluded adolescent or those

around her suffer the consequences, research suggests that chronic ostracism can be damaging.

Is Ostracism Always Negative?

Prevailing ideas about ostracism offer a relatively pessimistic view of the phenomenon,

whereby scholars typically discuss largely negative consequences of ostracism. For instance,

ostracism theorist Williams (2001) suggested that when we experience ostracism, it harms four

of our basic human needs. First, ostracism jeopardizes our sense of belonging because others

send the message that we are unwanted group members. Second, ostracism threatens our sense

of self-esteem because it creates negative self-evaluations by prompting us to question our worth

as relational partners. Third, ostracism takes away our sense of control. During ostracism

episodes, the excluding social group controls the interaction, thus robbing us of our voices

(Striley, 2011). Finally, ostracism threatens our need for meaningful existence. Humans must

believe our lives are worthwhile (Frankl, 2006), but ostracism can make us feel worthless. In

this model, ostracism becomes viewed as a predominantly negative social phenomenon because

it threatens basic human needs.

Additionally, the short- and long-term effects of ostracism also paint a grim picture.

Williams (2001) classified reactions to ostracism in three temporal stages. Immediately after

ostracism, a target feels intense pain and rejection (Williams, 2001; Williams & Gerber, 2005),

which actually registers as physical neurological symptoms in the brain (Eisenberger,

Leiberman, & Williams, 2003; Onoda et al., 2010). The short-term effects of ostracism will

drive targets to replenish lost needs (Williams, 2001; Williams & Gerber, 2005; Wirth &

Williams, 2009; Zadro & Williams, 2006). For instance, a threat to belonging might lead a target

to forge new friendships, or attempt to participate more in the group that has ostracized her (Williams & Sommer, 1997). Finally, if ostracism continues, the target will reach a long-term stage, where she might become hopeless, full of despair, or believe she belongs nowhere. This view of ostracism leaves little room for anything positive to come from long-term ostracism.

Scholars utilizing Williams' theory of ostracism tend to view ostracism as a painful event with lasting negative repercussions. However, *is ostracism always negative?* Are chronically ostracized individuals doomed to the depths of despair and hopelessness? Could ostracism have potentially positive effects on individuals? For example, perhaps ostracism can help adolescents develop their identities. For instance, a child ostracized from the "popular" crowd might realize she does not share the group's values and seek participation within another group with whom she has more in common. Additionally, perhaps ostracism can be freeing. Peer acceptance often requires giving up freedom by abiding by certain social norms. An excluded individual need not worry about following social norms with which she disagrees or conforming to peers to avoid rejection because she is already rejected. Perhaps, in rejection lies the freedom to act unencumbered by others' judgments.

Journaling about Ostracism

In order to explore ostracism in adolescents' daily lives, I asked 45 intellectually gifted adolescents to participate in an electronic journaling study. The National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC; 2008) defines individuals scoring within the intellectual top 10% of the population as "gifted". Intelligent Quotient (IQ) tests are currently the only widely accepted tool to identify gifted adolescents (Vaivre-Douret, 2011); typically, children with IQs above 125 are considered gifted. Gifted adolescents quickly acquire, retain, conceptualize, synthesize, and apply new information, and connect new ideas rapidly (McCollins, 2011); they possess unusual

intellectual curiosity (Kaufman, 2009; Kwang-Han & Porath, 2005) and an intense need for

mental stimulation (Robinson & Campbell, 2010). However, they also tend to feel lonely and

isolated from their peers (Cassady & Cross, 2006; Niehart, 2002). Williams and Gerber (2005)

reported, "gifted children often complain that their worst obstacle is dealing with being

ostracized by other children in their classroom" (p. 364). Some gifted adolescents feel that their

advanced intellect sets them apart from peers and makes them easy targets for ostracism.

   I recruited participants by first contacting their parents with the help of the national

organization Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG), the Belin-Blank Center at the

University of Iowa, and the Davidson Institute. Forty-five intellectually gifted adolescents

participated in the study. Ages ranged from 10-18, with 22 girls and 23 boys. A total of 25

middle school and 20 high school students participated. Participants came from 18 different U.S.

States and four different countries (United States, Colombia, Canada, and Germany). The

majority of participants self-identified as Caucasian (39); two individuals identified as Hispanic,

one as Native American, one as African American, and one as Asian. One participant opted not

to disclose her racial identity.

   I conducted preliminary one-hour telephone interviews with participants and their

mothers before they began journaling. Then, I asked participants to keep an electronic journal of

their ostracism experiences for a minimum of one month (some journaled for up to five months).

Journaling on the website offered a modern twist to the diary method (Zimmerman & Wieder,

1977) of data collection. This method captures intimate descriptions of naturally occurring daily

experiences (Lämsä, Rönkä, Poikonen, & Malinen 2012; Nicholl, 2010) and is ideal for

exploring social rejection among adolescents (Sanstrom & Cillessen, 2003). Diary studies have

the potential to reduce problems associated with participant recall that sometimes occurs in

interviews (Flook & Fuligni, 2008; Nicholl, 2010; Suveg, Payne, Thomassin, & Jacob, 2010), might elicit more detailed descriptions than interviews (Palmero, Valenzuela, & Stork, 2004), and could provide more complete views of children's emotional states (Suveg et al., 2010).

In the diary method, researchers ask participants to record specific daily experiences in a journal. Therefore, I instructed them to write about four things: (a) anytime they, personally, felt ignored, excluded, or left during the journaling period; (b) anytime they, personally, ignored, excluded, or left someone else out during the journaling period; (c) anytime they observed someone else being ignored, excluded, or left out during the journaling period; and (d) if they wanted to journal but did not experience the first three events on a given day, they could write about a memorable experience from the past where they felt ignored, excluded, or left out. Participants averaged writing three to four journal entries a week. I checked in with participants via telephone, text messaging, or email (based on their preference) every week that they journaled. Finally, I conducted a one- to two-hour exit telephone interview when participants had finished journaling.

Despite ostracism scholars' tendencies to suggest responses to ostracism are predominantly negative, my work with intellectually gifted adolescents suggests that many of them transformed ostracism experiences into something positive. Adolescents are not always condemned to lives of loneliness when exiled by their peers. Somehow, they continue living meaningful lives. Ultimately, participants exhibited numerous positive responses to chronic ostracism, including an ability to re-imagine their social worlds through the recognition of CMM's mystery.

Coordinated Management of Meaning

According to Pearce (1989), CMM is a social constructionist theory about how humans interact (called coordination), make sense of the world (called coherence) and recognize their creative potential (called mystery). According to CMM, everyday talk *creates* the social environments in which we live (Pearce, 2005). When I say a world is created, I do not mean it is imaginary or that it is fake in some way. Instead, I mean that human communication produces and reproduces patterns of interaction that mold the social world in particular ways (and we are molded in particular ways by our social worlds). Collectively, we determine what it means to go to school, to be celebrate a holiday, to have a funeral, and how to act appropriately in these settings. Humans are simultaneously physical entities and symbolic entities. The same mechanical, earthly processes confine humans and all other matter in the universe, but only *we* live lives of moral significance; we are never *simply* biological events.

Coordination and Coherence

According to CMM, we create our social worlds through two processes: coordination and coherence. Coordination is how we interact and match our actions with others. When someone introduces her/himself to you for the first time, often she will stretch her hand toward you. Most likely, you will also extend your hand and the two of you will engage in what is known as a hand shake. In this way, you are coordinating your actions together; a handshake is a commonly coordinated pattern of behavior between people in North America. In the case of ostracism, several adolescents might coordinate their actions to exclude another adolescent from a playground activity. Therefore, their actions are creating an exclusive reality where one individual is unwelcomed from the group.

Humans are actors, but we are also meaning makers (Pearce, 1989). As humans coordinate action together, we must also make sense of our actions and our worlds. Therefore,

coherence is our ability to make sense of the world together. In the example of a handshake, you and your new acquaintance likely both realize that a handshake is an accepted way of greeting another person. The understanding you have associated with a handshake is coherence. Coherence is the sense we make individually and collectively. In the case of ostracism, the excluded adolescent might make sense of her rejection by thinking she is "too weird" to socialize with the excluding group, or she might believe something is wrong with her or that she behaved in some way to merit ostracism from the group. Thus, she might determine that she exists in a world where one must look, act, or dress a certain way to find acceptance with some groups.

Mystery

Our patterns of interaction and sensemaking become so ingrained in us that we often forget that we can act in some other way or create some alternative to our realities. For Pearce (1989), language's continuity enmeshes us in our particular reality, impels us to make sense of the world in predetermined ways, and coerces us to recreate habitual interpersonal interactions. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) articulated, we create, and then forget our role in the creation. According to Pearce (1989), communication coerces us into accepting that our symbolic worlds are real. Pearce terms this suspension of disbelief and acceptance of our symbols *as* reality, enmeshment. When we exist in states of deep enmeshment, we might become blinded to the possibility of alternative possibilities because enmeshment makes us overlook the fabrication of social worlds. For instance, an adolescent experiencing chronic ostracism might give in to despair and depression, as suggested by Williams (2001), and become stuck in patterns of exclusion (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2005; Rosen, Milch, & Harris, 2009) if she fails to realize that other worlds are possible.

However, CMM's concept of mystery offers hope that we might escape negative social worlds and create new realities in their place. Mystery reminds us that the worlds we live in are only *some* of the worlds that could have been or might yet be. Mystery suggests that lines drawn by communication are, ultimately, arbitrary constructions (Pearce, 1989; Pearce & Pearce, 2004) and nothing inherent in realities requires us to understand them in any particular way (Gergen, 1999). For Pearce (1989), the natural human condition is to live deeply enmeshed in social worlds so that we might easily achieve coordination and coherence. However, multiple interpretations of events are possible. We are anything but fixed in place. Mystery is a recognition that every story *must* leave something out. *Everything* we think we know could be otherwise (Pearce & Pearce, 2004). Mystery, therefore, is the nexus of emancipation from particular social worlds. Mystery offers an awareness of our role in creating social worlds and our ability to direct the process of creation.

In the following analysis, I will demonstrate that exclusion has a transformative potential that can awaken us to mystery. Ostracism and social rejection do not always break us. Sometimes, as the scars heal, we become *better, stronger* than we ever could have been without the pain of exclusion. Incredible beauty can grow from the sorrow of once shattered lives. Chronic ostracism sometimes allowed participants to recognize the constructed nature of social reality. In other words, exclusion provided a window into mystery. In ordinary interpersonal interactions, we typically suspend our disbelief and live enmeshed within our social worlds. However, when some participants experienced the trauma of exile from their peers' realities, they experienced a rupture in coordination and coherence as they scrambled to repair their social worlds. This rupture provided a momentary awareness of mystery. The rupture into mystery

liberated some participants from their negative social realities. They became unfixed in their world and recognized the potential to build better social worlds in the ashes of the old.

Life after Exile

Humans experience both joys and sorrows in our short time on Earth. Sometimes we find ourselves living in repressive, negative worlds. Sometimes we face exile from social groups, and we might feel like we will never find acceptance again. However, there is life after exile. Many of my participants did not succumb to despair and depression when peers excluded them from their social worlds. Some participants found a bright side to their sorrow. For example, Jonas, a 13-year-old 8th grader, reflected on the possibility of healing after ostracism. He wrote about his reaction to a Ted Talk his gifted class watched of Shane Koyczan's performance of his spoken word poem, *To This Day*. Watching Koyczan stirred a powerful response in Jonas and his classmates. Jonas wrote,

> Some classmates cried. I didn't cry, but I felt bad for the guy in the video and I felt bad for my friends that cried. We all related to past experiences where we were bullied, excluded, etc. I felt true empathy for my friends that day, as their true emotions about bullying and exclusion came out that day— as well as my own— but I am now happy that we shared our experiences. I now truly know that I am not the only one who has ever experienced it, but also I know that there are people, like my friends in that classroom that day, that care for me.

Jonas and his friends became closer through the realization of their shared painful experiences. Ultimately, Jonas saw the beauty in their shared sorrow, and their potential to heal each other.

Jonas wrote that Koyczan's words reminded him that, "healing is possible, and we have to be each other's lights." For Jonas, Koyczan's words helped him to realize he could turn the memory of exclusion into something positive.

Many participants' experiences of ostracism transformed them in different ways. Their isolation and loneliness compelled them to mindfully reflect on their lives and, often, ignited change. Now, I will share participants' insights about overcoming ostracism in their lives. I have given all participants pseudonyms to protect their identities. Additionally, I have provided participant quotes exactly as they appear in journal entries; I have opted not to change grammatical errors or typos in participant responses. Some participants experiencing chronic ostracism were able to develop deeper understandings about reality because of their exclusion. Other participants were able to alter their perceptions of and desires about the world to find freedom from other's judgments. Still others found freedom from following unquestioned social norms. Some participants were even able to catch glimpses of other possibly realities as their worlds fractured and ruptured before their eyes.

Deeper Understandings about Humanity

For some of the gifted youth in my study, chronic ostracism allowed them to see the world more clearly as they developed profound understandings of the human condition. Umberto, a 17-year-old male living in Colombia best exemplified the cultivation of a deeper understanding. Umberto described his greater perception of people because of his rejection. He wrote,

> At first, social awkwardness was my life. I was rejected all the time. This caused me to
> turn my intellectual attention to people, I had to perceive them better. Now, I can
> communicate much better than most people. I can easily capture even the slightest

gestures, and make sense of it all in a matter of seconds….[understanding] body language

and gesticulation is something that I VERY RARELY fail at. Now, You could call me a

social genius.

Umberto's rejection compelled him to try to understand humans better; now, Umberto uses his

advanced perceptions to "read" people. He continued his journal entry to explain that he has

figured out several ways to make people happy. For instance, he always remembers

"characteristics and likes of others to show that you pay attention."

In order to escape his life of rejection, Umberto had to develop a survival tactic.

Therefore, he chose to consciously study human behavior. Anzaldua (2007) argued that those

who are rejected develop shifts in their perception as coping mechanisms. Anzaldua said, "this

shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people" (p. 61). Umberto often

discussed his deep love for humanity and his desire to use his ability to read people as a way to

make them happy. As someone who could bring happiness to others, he eventually found

acceptance after years of rejection.

Freedom from Other's Judgments

After experiencing chronic ostracism, several study participants decided they would

change their reactions to other's judgments about them. For example, Tesla, a 16-year-old 12th

grader, explained that he used to care what his peers thought, "but now, I no longer concern

myself with their judgments. I am free to just be myself and not confined by my thoughts about

their thoughts about me." Tesla stopped desiring peer acceptance, and thus, no longer viewed

exclusion negatively. He said in an interview, "I no longer want to be liked at school because

most people are painfully, stereotypically, normal. My life has been consumed by the desire to

learn. I don't need anyone for that." Tesla revalenced social acceptance as negative and valued

learning over peer interaction. Therefore, the likelihood that his peers would reject him no longer bothered Tesla. Although his view of his peers is somewhat negative, he feels free to pursue what he loves, unhampered by the thoughts of others.

Several participants recognized that inclusion in some groups sometimes meant giving up the freedom to forge their own identities. For instance, Ginny, a 16-year-old 12th grader, used to want acceptance from the "popular" crowd at school. After years of ostracism and exclusion from the popular girls, she recognized that she no longer sought their acceptance because she found acceptance with a group of peers who let her act like herself. She wrote, "my friends in band don't ask me to dress like them (we all dress differently) or act like them (we're all weirdos and act completely randomly). So why would I want to join a group that expects me to change for them?" Similarly, Marie, a 16-year-old 11th grader who experienced the pain of social rejection so strongly that she switched schools, realized she was also tired of caring what others thought about her. She wrote

> My view now is that not everyone has to like me. In fact, I don't want judgmental people to like me. I'm sick of living by their judgments and rules. With this new mentality, I can now just be me.

Both Ginny and Marie realized that acceptance sometimes came with the price of conformity. Their experiences of rejection helped them to understand their freedom to just be themselves.

Several participants' experiences of ostracism fostered a realization that they were free to be non-conformists and to think their own thoughts. Poppy, a 14-year-old 9th grader, said in an interview, "people who are always included are followers. They always follow other people and don't think or act for themselves. People who are excluded think differently, don't go with all

the trends, but go their own way and are independent." Several participants exemplified the freedom expressed by Poppy and performed their nonconformity.

Jennifer, a 13-year-old 7th grader, wrote,

I'm tired of caring what others think, so I don't. they never accepted me anyway. So now, I'll have my hair how I want it, and I will wear my clothes how I want, and if you have a problem with how I look, it sucks to be you, doesn't it.

Exclusion gave Jennifer the strength and desire to act as a non-conformist, seemingly free of the constraints that others often feel. Katniss, a 15-year-old 10th grader, wrote, "Go ahead and call me crazy, I will consider it a compliment. I go my own way and do what I want. It might seem crazy to you, but it is the only sane response I see to an insane world." Like Jennifer, after years of facing social rejection, Katniss now felt free to act unconstrained by other's judgments. Umberto wrote, "I accept myself as somebody often deemed 'weird'. I am different. I am not normal. I can live without being normal." Many participants celebrated their "weirdness" and reveled in the newfound realization of freedom that sometimes accompanied exclusion. Anzaldua (2007) also described the radical freedom we often find when we live in the borderlands. She said,

Don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods…I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails…I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture – *una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar. (p, 44)

Awakening to Mystery

Ostracism sometimes allowed participants to recognize the constructed nature of social reality and awakened them to mystery and possibility in their daily lives. Our enmeshment within our social worlds allows us to mindlessly engage in coherence and coordination with others. We tend not to question our social worlds when things are going well. However, when we have a profoundly negative experience, sometimes it can jar us into questioning the world. For example, Umberto described how the state of happiness could ensnare us and sadness could free us from our old perceptions. He explained that happiness comes with a side effect: conformity. However, when we are sad from loneliness,

> We have nothing to lose, but happiness gives us everything to lose. So, when we are happy, we are not free. Sadness makes you introspective. To figure out what is wrong you look inward. Sadness carries depth, urges you to fix yourself. So sadness and loneliness make us free to act and think how we want.

For Umberto, exclusion and the sadness it brought, allowed him to both see mystery and recognize that he had the freedom to act without the fear of losing anything. Sadness allowed Umberto to be a non-conformist and re-imagine his social world.

When some participants found themselves in a world where their peers actively denied them, they began to question their reality. For example, Amelia, a 17-year-old 11th grader living in Germany, said in an interview,

> Ostracism and exclusion made me realize that reality, at least the reality of high school and middle school is a game. We made up the game and everyday we create the game over and over. People didn't want me to be part of the game, so they ignored me. I just decided not to play their game anymore and create my own.

For Amelia, the discomfort of her reality fostered a mindfulness about her social world; the recognition of life's mystery induced her mindfulness. She experienced a rupture in her reality because she realized others were coordinating an undesirable reality without her; thus, she had to scramble to repair her social world. This rupture in reality is a moment when we might become aware of mystery. For example, Phoenix, a 17-year-old 12th grader, said in an interview, "being gifted makes you very non-conforming. You are so used to rejection and so smart that you realize life is not 'yes' or 'no.' There is so much more to life than most people will ever see." Sharing a similar sentiment, Umberto wrote,

> I was alone for so long –or I should say lonely—that I began to intimately study and think about reality. I felt like I was getting ever-closer to another reality that hides behind reality itself…This is what I call the 'different echo.' Most people are blind to this, they just live their lives asleep. I've been spending my life waking up.

Phoenix, Amelia, and Umberto sought comfort in mystery by realizing there is more to life than the reality at their school.

The rupture into mystery liberates us, as the snares of language become visible. Through the experience of a highly negative social reality, some participants comforted themselves by recognizing the myriad other realities possible. For example, Harper, a 14-year-old 10th grader, reminded herself that other possibilities existed. She wrote,

> We chose the reality we live in. I could have chosen to be sad all day when people didn't like me in middle school, or I could chose to make a better world. I want to make my world and other people's world better…There is no REASON that the popular kids are on the top. Really, if we all rebelled we could create a much more fair school environment where everyone was treated equally. I think no one thinks its possible so they don't try,

BUT IT IS POSSIBLE! I love the quote that says "If you can imagine it, you can achieve

it; if you can dream it, you can become it." I think not enough people realize that.

With the realization of mystery, Harper became unfixed in the world. She was able to recognize

possibilities that remained clouded to others. According to Anzaldua (2007), persecuted people

develop the capacity to "see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the

deep structure below the surface…[making us] excruciatingly alive to the world" (p. 60). For

Anzaldua, "it's a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between worlds, unknowingly

cultivate" (p. 61). Many participants embraced mystery because the recognition of mystery was

freeing.

Implications for Seeing a Brighter Side to Sorrow

The major implication of the analysis presented in this chapter is that if we are able to

survive ostracism, the experience of rejection can transform us and awaken in us deeper insights

and understandings about the social worlds in which we reside. Ostracism is not always

negative; it can have positive effects on individuals, as well. For some participants, ostracism

empowered them to see the world not as it is, but as it could be. Therefore, ostracism fostered

resiliency, imagination, and allowed individuals to find their voice. These findings suggest that

individuals are more versatile and hardy than some ostracism scholars might suggest. Williams

(2001) has suggested that ostracism usually results in terrible pain and despair. However, most

of my participants were well-adjusted and happy, despite years of chronic ostracism. Future

studies should explore the positive side of ostracism. Why do some individuals find an unseen

benefit and become better after ostracism, while others fall into depression and despair? How

can we harness the positive potential of ostracism? Perhaps, findings about the positive effects

of ostracism can help children and adolescents cope more effectively with exclusion. Maybe

parents and educators can learn to bring out ostracism's transformative potential in victims of exclusion. Ostracism's apparent ability to foster mystery is fascinating and more research should explore the connection between rejection and imagination. Does rejection create an opportunity to recognize our creative potential and the ability to forge new paths of interaction?

We communicate in order to be heard, to exist, to define ourselves, and to become something *more* than we could be on our own. However, ostracism is a ubiquitous form of human communication that primarily hinders our interactions with others. When others exclude us from meaningful social participation, they communicate that our existence is unwanted. However, paradoxically, even when we are ostracized we find ways to be heard, to exist, to define ourselves, and to become something *more*. Humans are capable of great love and great hatred, yet the human spirit is resilient. I hope this chapter is a first step in understanding how to help individuals to live more healthfully with exclusion. We are not powerless; we do not have to accept our own rejection from a social world. We have agency and we can reclaim agency when others attempt to steal it away. If ostracism really can make us better people, maybe our goal should be to help navigate better ways to cope with exclusion. Maybe, the point is that exclusion is a very human experience from which we can learn a great deal. We do not need to become lost in the impulse to "get better" because, sometimes, living with the pain of ostracism makes us better.

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