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PEER OSTRACISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ADOLESCENTS EXPERIENCING EXCLUSION IN A CLASSROOM PEER ENVIRONMENT

Ostracyzm rówieśniczy: z perspektywy nastolatków doświadczających wykluczenia w środowisku rówieśniczym w klasie

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Abstract

Ostracism is recognised as a unique form of withdrawal of engagement in social interactions that essentially leaves its recipients feeling undervalued, unwanted and excluded from meaningful social interactions. According to the interpretive perspective, the individual receiving ostracism engages in constructing the exclusionary event and attributes responsibility to the ostracizer for it. The research material consists of adolescent reports (n = 28) of excluding incidents within the classroom community. The analysis centers on how ostracizing actions are perceived and understood from the perspective of adolescents experiencing ostracism. A preliminary categorisation of peer ostracism and directions for future research on adolescent ostracising behaviour are discussed.

Keywords: peer ostracism, non-verbal exclusion strategies, microaggressions, adolescents' perspective.

Streszczenie

Ostracyzm jest uznawany za wyjątkową formę wycofania się z zaangażowania w interakcje społeczne, która zasadniczo powoduje, że jego odbiorcy czują się niedoceniani, niechciani i wykluczeni ze znaczących interakcji społecznych. Zgodnie z perspektywą interpretacyjną, osoba doświadczająca ostracyzmu angażuje się w konstruowanie zdarzenia wykluczającego i przypisuje za nie odpowiedzialność osobie ostracyzującej. Materiał badawczy składa się z raportów nastolatków (n = 28) dotyczących incydentów wykluczenia w społeczności klasowej. Analiza koncentruje się na tym, jak działania ostracyzujące są postrzegane i rozumiane z perspektywy nastolatków doświadczających ostracyzmu. Omówiono wstępną kategoryzację ostracyzmu rówieśniczego i kierunki przyszłych badań nad zachowaniami ostracyzującymi nastolatków.

Słowa Kluczowe: ostracyzm rówieśniczy, niewerbalne strategie wykluczenia, mikroagresja, perspektywa nastolatków.

Introduction

The study of human behaviour is incomplete without considering how people engage not only in sustaining relationships but also in social exclusion (Baumeister et al., 1993). The researchers therefore called for a systematic study of messages of rejection and ostracism (Freedman et al., 2016; Pelliccio & Walker, 2022). Although some of the situations of social rejection, such as the refusal to date and the dissolution of a relationship, have been quite well researched, less attention has been paid to how rejecters carry out their rejection, what linguistic means they choose to use and what they are trying to achieve through certain actions (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1993).

In addition, there is a noticeable paucity of work specifically devoted to communicating exclusion through behavioural and communicative means associated with ostracism. Despite the explosion of research on this phenomenon (see Wesselmann et al., 2023), it is surprisingly difficult to pinpoint the specific forms of behaviour, by which ostracism is produced.

Little scientific attention has also been paid to reflexive attributions regarding ostracising events. Although it has been demonstrated that, for most adults, the causal clarity of ostracism episodes was very low, i.e., they could not determine why they were being ignored or perceived that they were being ignored for no reason at all (Zadro et al., 2008), there is a lack of analyses focused on making meaning of relational signals (Agarwal & Prakash, 2022; Kerr & Levine, 2008; Williams & Zadro, 2005). And yet, those to whom ostracism is directed are each time engaged in interpretive practices to discern whether an excluding event has actually taken place, as well as to attribute responsibility for its outcome, to grasp intentionality and determine whether exclusion was accidental or clearly intended (Freedman et al., 2016; Nezlek et al., 2012; Williams, 2007). One may perceive a particular sensitive social action as criticism, joke, sarcasm, attack, teasing, dispute, insult or retaliation. Decoding encoded ambiguous relational messages is not an easy task and often results in a disconnection, creating a gap in the construction of meaning between the sender and the recipient (Kruger et al., 2006).

Ostracism is a unique message because, being poor in linguistic clues, it refers to hidden meanings implied by considering the specific social situation in which a given set of signs was used (Hayes et al., 2018; Wiltgren, 2022). Moreover, ostracizers may choose sophisticated and highly ambiguous methods to exclude others in order to reduce their personal liability while simultaneously implementing face-threatening strategies (e.g., Dytcham, 2018; Freedman et al., 2016). However, the issue has gone unnoticed, and many questions remain, including those concerning perceptions of ostracizing actions and whether/how forms of implied offensiveness and impoliteness may be present in actions leading to exclusion.

This paper uses an exploratory research design to learn more about how adolescents experiencing ostracism understand and construct specific peer behaviours. By

focusing on the identified relational messages, one can provide an explanation of how ostracism manifests in adolescent communication, and what measures can be taken to prevent those forms of transgressive behaviour that are perceived by their recipients as being used to exclude, and demean, or offend them.

Theoretical background

Ostracism: terminological arrangements

In this work, one assumes that the broad general name of social exclusion covers a variety of social experiences that inform about exclusion from meaningful social interactions and relational devaluation. These are grouped into two subcategories: rejection and ostracism (e.g., Molden et al., 2009; Wesselmann & Williams 2017). The term rejection applies to those situations where negative attention is directed towards an undesirable person, while ostracism includes acts of omission, as well as communicative disengagement and passive exclusion from participation in social activities (e.g., Freedman et al., 2016; Wesselmann et al., 2023).

Although we point out the distinctiveness of ostracism from other excluding actions captured as social rejection, it should be noted that in the literature ostracism is often discussed as one of the experiences of rejection (e.g., Richman & Leary, 2009; Williams, 2007; Williams & Zadro, 2005). We are also aware of the confusion surrounding the use of different terms to describe the same communication behaviour (Pelliccio & Walker, 2022).

Linguistic elements of rejection and ostracism in everyday interactions

The linguistic means used to construct a message of exclusion are placed by researchers on an explicit-implicit continuum (Freedman et al., 2016). The messages produced can be unambiguously clear, e.g., when we communicate that someone is socially unwanted, but it can also be entirely subtle and non-verbal, e.g., we do not include the partner in a game or do not reciprocate eye contact (e.g., Hayes et al., 2018; Wesselman & Williams 2023). Several studies suggest that deliberately withholding eye contact or looking blank can be considered a technique for inducing feelings of disconnection (Hess, 2003; Wesselmann et al., 2012; Williams et al., 1998; Wirth et al., 2010). Eye gaze (e.g., "giving me a sideways look", "eye-rolling") and facial expressions (e.g., "scowling or frowning", "angry/indignant expression") appeared to be the main signals used to end the interaction (Kerr & Levine, 2008). Also, the dynamics of the conversation (fluidity, pauses) can provide clues about the social connectivity and inclusive status of the person (Koudenburg, et al., 2013).

Most of the literature has been devoted to actions with the use of silence at their core (e.g., Agarwal & Prakash, 2022; Pelliccio & Walker, 2022; Sommer et al., 2001; Williams et al., 1998; Zadro et al., 2008). The silent treatment is implemented by refusing to respond to your partner's comments and actions and by limiting eye contact and taking a seat away from them (Wright & Roloff, 2009; Zadro et al., 2008). Empirical research also consistently confirms the prevalence of using avoidance as an alternative to being vague and rude when engaging in social exclusion (e.g., Hess, 2000, 2003; Kerr & Levine, 2008; Wang et al., 2012).

Excluding signals in adolescents' school peer relationships

Interest in ostracism is rarely reflected in those existing studies that document the spectrum of youth peer behaviour. The number of studies actually analysing the excluding behaviours, including passive, non-confrontational, inaction-based behaviour, remains small (e.g., Coyne et al., 2006; Xie et al., 2002). In addition, previous work has often focused on cases of exclusion where the dominant aim is to hurt the victim (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crick, 1995; Field et al., 2006; Konieczna, 2024a; Nowakowska & Przewłocka, 2025; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Żeromska-Charlińska, 2020), with the result that little is known about young people's engagement with exclusion in everyday situations.

The researchers look at a wide range of behaviours described as social and relational aggression, such as: "huddling" (hugging each other to make someone feel excluded), telling someone they are not invited to an activity, threatens to end a friendship, mean notes, telling someone that an available seat at the canteen table is already taken, or "befriend someone as revenge" (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Coyne et al., 2006; Field et al., 2006). Ways of demonstrating rejection can be verbal, such as using cryptonyms (Owens et al., 2000a), or behavioural, such as putting one's hand on a chair to prevent another child from sitting down, or "demonstrating unity" by holding hands and walking past the rejected person (Murray-Close et al., 2016).

The aggressor can also pursue his or her goals without confrontation and sometimes even without being identified (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Owens et al., 2000b; Young et al., 2006). In the repertoire of unique peer behaviour among adolescents, there are many hidden forms of acts considered to "harm another's relationships", such as: turning others against by recruiting others to do the same, sabotaging someone's friendships, manipulating group acceptance by denigrating, "backbiting" (i.e., saying mean things behind one's back), telling secrets, breaking confidences, stealing friends or romantic partners (e.g., Archer & Coyne, 2005; Dyches & Mayeux, 2012; James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al., 2000a, 2000b; Wainryb et al., 2014).

There is also growing evidence that non-verbal behaviour plays an important role in conveying resentment and announcing who does not belong to the group (e.g.,

Huntley & Owens, 2013; Owens et al., 2000a; Shute et al., 2002; Underwood, 2004; Underwood et al., 2004). The various forms of body language used to disconnect included disdainful facial expressions, staring, shaking the head, glancing, sarcastic comments and using a mocking tone of voice, eye-rolling/nose-snubbing, intensely hostile stares and tossing back the head (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Owens et al., 2000a; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Shute et al., 2002).

Varieties of staring (e.g. "giving daggers", "death stare") are also used with differing intensity to induce feelings of rejection and isolation (Huntley & Owens, 2013). As the Australian adolescents explain, "daggers" is a way of saying how much you hate someone (Shute et al., 2002, p. 360); it involves staring at another person in a threatening manner, looking disliked people up and down in a disparaging way, using "bitchy looks", giving them a raised eyebrow, staring while walking past or throwing a glance over one's shoulder. Resentment and exclusion were also communicated by adolescents by not engaging in eye contact, turning away (Shute et al., 2002). "Cold shoulder", according to the young girls' descriptions, included turning their backs or standing in front of the person and blocking them from the group (Huntley & Owens, 2013).

This study

This study responds to the paucity of empirical work on ostracism as an everyday form of expression and communication. Given that it is still unclear how those targeted by excluding actions interpret episodes of ostracism and, in particular, how they understand the ambiguous intentions of ostracisers (Nezlek et al., 2012; Ciarocco et al., 2001; Williams, 2007), it was decided to conduct an exploratory study on this topic.

This work focuses on the linguistic realisation and perception of ostracising actions produced and functioning among schoolchildren, in the Polish sociocultural context. The main aim of the study is to gain insight into how adolescents experiencing ostracising actions construct the relational messages contained in ostracising actions directed at them by their peers. Given the interpretative approach used, the research is undertaken to clarify their understanding of the various methods of ostracizing.

Method

Participants: The participants in the study were 28 adolescent students (12 males, 16 females). Their mean age at the time of the study was 14.7 years (age range 12–17 years). They were all Caucasian, with no statement of special educational needs. The schools they attended were public, located in central Poland.

Data collection: As has been shown, a methodological strategy based on informants sharing their own experiences can offer advantages over experimental methods for studying ostracism in the laboratory. It can also provide insightful and nuanced data that

is difficult to capture in observational studies or based on reports from other informants (Boykina & Chirkina, 2020; Hayes et al., 2018; Underwood et al., 2018).

Participatory methodology is commonly used in research on adolescent social behaviors as it allows students to express their own perspectives, rather than working with categories imposed by adults (e.g., Bowker et al., 2014; Sunwolf & Leets, 2004; Wainryb et al., 2014). Adolescents can provide extensive narrative accounts, rich in detail and personal commentary, which can provide an understanding of how they perceive excluding actions (e.g., Dyches & Mayeux, 2012; Wainryb et al., 2014).

Although qualitative descriptions are a form of reflection and do not provide details about the course of conversational interactions, they have many advantages. This is because they contain numerous comments that reveal insightful interpretations regarding peer behaviors and evaluations of their appropriateness (e.g., politeness, mitigation, indirectness, vagueness).

A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared for the interview including questions on the characteristics of the class group and experiences of building belonging in class peer groups. An initial pilot test with 5 participants was carried out beforehand to try out the procedures and make any necessary modifications.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving minors. Informed consent to participate was obtained from both the adolescents and their legal guardians. Participants were informed about the aim of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the recording of the interviews, the confidentiality of the material, and their right to refuse to answer any question or to withdraw at any time without consequences.

All interviews were conducted in a quiet and private setting in schools. The interviews lasted between 20 and 120 minutes. The audio recordings were transcribed and anonymised, and all identifying details were removed from the excerpts cited in the article. Anonymous citations are linked to gender, age (e.g., F12), and school year (e.g., Grade 7 in primary school or Grade I in secondary school).

Analysis: A full transcription of the recorded conversations during the interviews was conducted. For the purposes of this study, only extracts containing descriptions of episodes of exclusion presented from the perspective of the recipient were analysed. First, all the scripts were read in full, and then broad categories and themes were deduced by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts. In the subsequent stages of the analysis, the focus was on qualitative descriptions of individual excluding actions as units of analysis. The data were grouped in various ways to ensure that a better understanding of the phenomenon was obtained. The study was grounded in an interpretive qualitative approach, and the analytic categories were developed inductively from the accounts of the adolescent participants. A thematic analysis was conducted, taking into account the logic of reconstructing different ways of assigning meaning to the phenomenon under study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, feedback was obtained from two experts experienced in qualitative analysis, who were asked to comment on the way the study had been conducted and interpreted. Summaries of the findings were also provided to three teachers. The teachers and experts agreed with the picture presented by the researcher, and their comments were used to improve the coherence of the interpretations. Analytic notes were also kept throughout the process in order to document interpretive decisions and maintain transparency.

Results: Perceived forms of expression and functions of ostracism (from the perspective of the ostracised)

The main categories developed from the interview data are: ostracism among friends and ostracising strategies with high social distance. Each set of categories will be discussed.

Category: ostracism among friends

Included within the category highlighted here are those instances of ostracism that tend to function in dyadic communication (single sender and recipient), or in small friendship circles. Although, some also involve peers from the larger class group. Episodes of ostracism produced between friends in the process of turning friendship into an antipathetic relationship predominate. This group of strategic actions identified by participants includes five subcategories: Temporary communication separation, Coercion, Early signs of withdrawal of investment in the relationship, Abandonment, Expulsion from the pack.

Temporary communication separation (waiting or timeout penalty). According to many respondents, in relationships between friends, ostracism functions as a punishment or a show of resentment, taking offence, frustration or anger. It is used when there has been a breach of previous agreements and expectations. From the descriptions, it appears that senders convey disappointment using a variety of persuasive and unsubtle expressive messages: silence, turning their backs, ostentatiously switching seats, ignoring enquiries, avoiding mutual eye contact or using distant looks full of reproach, and emotional facial expressions (e.g., demonstrating irritation, resentment, sadness, disappointment, indignation, etc.).

Respondents read such actions as a signal of a desire to maintain the relationship, despite being met with explicit refusal or avoidance of social contact. In their view, the partner's intention is to suspend social contact for a period of time until interaction resumes once the crisis is resolved. They do not perceive the situation as permanent or threatening and interpret the disconnection as a kind of deserved punishment and a time to distance themselves from the strong agitation, as one participant points out:

> …for two lessons they didn't speak to me at all. That's how you know, they took offence... and even the teacher asked them, why they were sitting on the other side of the room?...

> The whole two lessons [passed] before they got over it... [They had] that "I feel sorry for you" or "don't talk to me" face..., But it wasn't for real. (F17, II)

Another respondent interprets similar behaviour as highly strategic, based on the use of knowledge of how to hurt, motivated by a desire for revenge (such as failing to provide support when cheating in a test):

> When [she] went into a sulk, for two weeks I had no one to talk to (...) in general she has such a look on her face, she looks in such a regretful way, like "you're pathetic," and when I approached her, she would look through the window or pretend she was doing something else. Complete lack of contact! She treated me like air! (...) She wanted revenge, she knows exactly how to hurt me. (F14, 8)

Coercion (ultimatum). Respondents perceive that a certain type of performed activities may have a hidden manipulative purpose. The interruption of communication, disengagement and the accompanying expression of feelings of frustration and taking offence through non-verbal signals are merely a manifestation (theatrical performance), behind which there is the actual intention to force the fulfilment of an implicit specific demand. The media that senders reach for is somewhat distinctive in its intensity in expressing negative emotions, but they may also do so in a disguised way ("silent days"). However, the avoidance of direct communication and interruption of social contact is read as temporary and undertaken with the intention of exerting pressure, it is a kind of game. Respondents report perceived pressure and sometimes expose the goals of the action as devious, provocative, deceitful, calculated for a particular response and as a show of superiority, as in the following examples:

> She makes such mini-dramas on purpose. She wants me to keep apologising to her, and keep currying her favour and vying for her attention. (...) And she has dirt on me. She knows that if she tells to the girls on me, they won't accept me into their circle. (F12, 6)

> We are having quiet days because she is jealous of Klaudia. And she wants to separate her from me so that I could be friends with her exclusively. (F14, 8)

Early signs of withdrawal of investment in the relationship. Participants are not always confident that the relational partner will only move away temporarily and will resume social contact. Respondents repeatedly reported that, for them, the early signs of separation were excluding behaviours that took the form of: being omitted when inviting to meetings, evasive explanations, excuses and lies, cold responses, reduced intensity of interaction, unexpected reticence in expressing solidarity, exclusion from information flows. Participants repeatedly stressed that the relational message contained in such activities is ambiguous. Respondents unsure of the sustainability of relationships and having poor friendship alternatives reported the most concern and confusion:

> She is a good friend of mine. She's already stopped talking and dissed me several times. For example, when I approached her, she would look down at her shoes or she would ignore me or behave as if she were forced to talk to me.... And so, you could see that she had

> stopped taking care of this friendship. (...) But I didn't know exactly what it was about, or if I had done something wrong... (F15; I)

Abandonment. Respondents describe the actions as categorical, occurring in an abrupt manner. Verbal and non-verbal elements can be used in combination to reinforce the relational message of relationship closure. The dominant strategy, however, is the use of silence (overt communication break) combined with a characteristic set of proxemic signs (standing at a distance, moving away, turning back or sideways), stern looks (brushing aside, unfriendly stares, half-closed eyes), facial signals (lack of interest, disapproval). The emotional power of these messages is high, as illustrated by one respondent's confession about the "coming" and "leaving" of a friend temporarily excluded by her peer group:

> One girl from my class, who nobody spoke to, because she was pushed away by the class and umm, and she came, let's say, to me and I, let's say, in my naivety, I hoped we would establish some kind of relationship. And it was fun for those two... three weeks. After that the class stopped being angry with her, she was already cool, so er, so just overnight she stopped speaking to me... And you know, she wouldn't read messages, she wouldn't even say hello or anything. And I was already the umm like "it's a shame to talk to you" one. And as she stood there with her group, they would look at me in a disapproving way, with a face like "Oh, do you have to stand here?!"... (F15, I)

Another respondent describes a disconnection on the part of a close friend just after she moved on to secondary school, which similarly affected her position in the group, as dyadic exclusion extended to other important relationships:

> Another girl, from the year above: "Oh, great that you're there, I'll get you into school." And this friend of mine just said "hey" to me and walked away. And she didn't even text me saying "Look, we're not friends anymore, so don't talk to me," she just passed me around like I was invisible. And since then, I haven't had access to being cool. I simply became an undesirable person. (F16, I)

Expulsion from the pack. From the participants' descriptions, the dynamics between the enemy and friend positions are very high in friendship groups. Violation of the norm of trust, loyalty, support between friends in many cases did not end in a mere temporary communication separation, but in abandonment or exit from the friendship group. The means of expression included: demonstrating distance by increasing physical separation, contemptuous glances, and evaluative facial expressions. Expulsion was also seen as a group action, because even if the conflict had a dyadic dimension or involved a leader, removal from the pack itself took place with the consensus of the members of the circle of friends. Members of a pack of friends tend to side with the person who is in a higher position:

> And now after the argument with Weronika they are so angry with me terribly... Weronika is the worst; well, she has become so feisty... And all the girls look at her like...like such a heroine or something. The girls have moved away [from me] somehow... For example, in

> the changing room it's like this, they're on that side, I'm on the other side and they look in a sinister way somehow... (F14, I)

Category: ostracising strategies with high social distance

A distinguishing feature of the communication activities collected under the next category is that they are seen as usually performed by a few individuals or with the support of a group, extremely rarely in dyadic arrangements. Furthermore, the emotional distance was perceived as permanent rather than temporary. Finally, the current status of the relationship was quite clearly suggestive of the parties not treating each other as close and significant persons.

Four sub-categories were distinguished: Strategies for ignoring requests for inclusion, Total avoidance, Strategies for insulting and destroying, and Expulsion from the peer group.

Strategies to ignore requests for inclusion (refusal of inclusion). Respondents reported that, on more than one occasion, they actively sought to initiate interaction or join in the group's activity (by asking questions, offering comments, coming up and standing close) or signaled that inclusion was desired by them. The refusal they faced was so emphatic that they usually gave up trying again. Perceived signals, such as breaking eye contact, not noticing initiatives, reducing responses, as well as widely used intentional proxemic signals (moving away, turning away, body posture expressing inaccessibility, avoiding standing too close) and non-verbal antagonising elements (sarcastic tone, expression of irritation, ironic smiles, pitying) played an important role in such episodes.

Respondents indicated that although the cold treatment takes place without verbal insults, sarcasm and attacks, they nevertheless interpret it as unfriendly, harsh, demeaning, causing negative singling out. The activity that stuck out most in their minds were the facial expressions, the hostile stares received, and the communicative exchanges of glances between the group of peers involved. Respondents also indicated that senders urged others to adopt a similar attitude and overtly expressed antipathy:

> I tried to approach them, just to say hello, to chat... But I felt unwanted in their group. And no one seemed to do anything to me, no one said a bad word to me, you know, no such thing as "get out of here" or worse, but I still felt that they were pushing me away and they didn't really want me in that group... They would stop talking when I came up, or they would say something like "I'll tell you later" [to each other], or one would take the other one by the hand and pull her away, take her aside like that, and as they walked they would give each other signs or giggle. And when they wrote something on slips of paper, the kind of jokes in lessons, it was so that it went to them, not to me, or they covered it up with their hand. (...) It was because of Marta. I think she wanted to turn me from a friend into an enemy. And the other girls admire her so much. (F14, 8)

The signal of distancing is sometimes passive speech, i.e., there is no complete cessation of contact, but the reticence of the peer's response becomes a signal of unwanted interaction. Respondents reported that cold responses from peers contrasted with warm and enthusiastic responses directed at desirable peers (eye contact, smiles, soft tone of voice, expressive head nods, close distance, body movements, confidentiality in the content of messages). Lack of or restrained responses were a sign of rude demonstration of indifference, as highlighted by one statement:

> I wanted to belong to their pack, so I tried many things. But they would turn their backs or dismiss me when I approached.... After that, I still tried to write with them on Facebook for a while, but they wouldn't even read the messages... I thought I wasn't cool enough and let it go (F14, I)

Total avoidance. From the descriptions, it appears that this mode of exclusion was connected to classmates who perceive their relational obligations to be low. Avoidance also characterises contacts after the break-up of closer relationships and exclusion from the circle of friends.

Participants experience avoidance as an interruption or reduction of the intensity of social contact to a minimum (communication separation, avoidance of meetings and skipping out on invitations, information sharing or group decisions) or even disconnection from the social network. Respondents perceive that excluding peers use such means of expression as spatial distancing, avoidance of eye contact, and non-colliding mutual avoidance in space. They are read as relatively mild and neutral. However, avoidance, despite some benefits in the absence of unpleasant and hurtful interactions, condemns one to social banishment. According to one respondent, "being like an invisible person" is perhaps more comfortable than non-neutral crude "open hatred" (overt insults). Despite this, she perceives her position as an outsider to the group, she sees that she is considered alien, strange and not fitting in with her peers:

> We were such two outcasts because, you know, well we just didn't fit in the background of the class (...). Well, and we didn't have a lot of friends, they didn't want to [be friends with us]..., they didn't seem to spend any time with us, neither on breaks nor on any trips they didn't talk to us. We were just like umm invisible. So, it was so much better than primary school, where I openly felt hatred from my peers. (F16, I)

> I'm alone, I spend my breaks alone, no one talks to me... And I remember exactly the phrase: "David is like air!" And I think that's a good sort of showing how many people treated me, which is just like air. That is, I don't insult you, I don't hate you, but you simply don't exist for me and such distance (M16, II)

Strategies for insulting and destroying. Most episodes of social exclusion described by the participants referred to a broad set of behaviours that share the commonality of being perceived as violations of social and communication norms. Furthermore, respondents point to the strongly persuasive, even coercive nature of the means used by senders. In their perception, the sender assumes dominance and tries to make the

recipient submissive, while the recipient cannot balance the position in the interaction system.

In the vast majority of episodes described by respondents, ostracising actions were supported by disparaging verbal and non-verbal actions (gestures, emotionally charged stares, smirks, hostile tone of voice). These are, as participants understand it, some of the most confrontational behaviours; very much exacerbating mutual antipathy and harming vulnerable adolescents.

Described episodes of exclusion are also distinguished by the involvement of a wider range of peers and audiences. One respondent describes how her friend felt jealous and betrayed. Through submitting a complaint to two female leaders, she initiated harassment, part of which was group exclusion and condemnation. She stresses that the taunts and attacking behaviour of the female leaders were bearable, but the ostracism of the peer group (including the silent treatment and intense condemnatory stares) led her to run away from school and decide to change schools. Importantly, in this interpretation, ostracism becomes a tool of attack:

> I started to be harassed by these twins, they just didn't let me live. Sometimes they would tease, and sometimes they would just stare at me, they would come close to me, you know, and say "What's your problem?!" Well, er, they made my life miserable effectively. They would watch me closely a lot and also, er, they just made the whole class stop speaking to me, so that everyone just looked at me as I did something awful (...) I think they just wanted everyone to turn away from me and not talk to me. (F14, 8)

In another statement, the respondent also reports that the bully publicly devaluing the recipient in some way sets the group against her; although it does not mobilise peers for attacking behaviour or ostracising actions. Here, ostracism from the peer group does not become a form of taking a neutral position, but a means of manifesting the recipient's lack of belonging (pushing outside) and publicly announcing who is in and who is out. The respondent here also draws attention to the pleasure function of publicly belittling the recipient:

> I have the feeling that she just turned the whole class against me, because when there were people who wanted to talk to me before, suddenly everyone stopped talking to me...Umm suddenly everybody stopped talking to me like that. Just suddenly one day no one talked to me and everyone avoided me as I stood close, even though I didn't bother anyone there. (...) And this is the type of girl who actually ruled the whole class. (F16, I)

Expulsion from the peer group. From the respondents' descriptions, it appears that expulsion in extreme cases can be combined with insults, but it is generally a separate form of exclusion; there are no such obvious aggressive attacks, in addition all classmates are involved, and there is little variation in their attitudes and behaviour.

Expulsion is seen as triggered by a specific event (violation of group expectations and norms). Participants described how disloyalty and lack of solidarity with the group sometimes rose to the level of an offence against the community. Performing this form

of exclusion from the group is seen as an expression of social and physical distance and a strong interruption of social contact. Non-verbal messages that have emotional, evaluative and depreciative elements predominate. Condemnation is associated with expressions of indignation and disapproval (ostentatious stares, contemptuous facial expressions, disparaging avoidance of social encounters).

In one episode, complaining to mum resulted in an intervention, which became the moral basis for expelling the culprit. Even when the condemnation is initiated by one person or a small group, from the perspective of the recipients, solidarity is manifested in a collective way; the entire class community is involved, either taking a clear side or being overwhelmingly influenced by the initiators:

> They wrote an offensive note about me in class, they drew some kind of umm ugly pictures, some kind of naked children with one tooth, with a squint or something like that and some kind of portrait of me, it was ugly, suggesting "this is Dorota," some kind of offensive words... And I told my mum about it and my mum told the teacher. Since then, they have swayed everyone to their side. I felt such indifference from the class too. I just feel hmmm... on their part, I don't know how to describe it. Resentment. (F12, 6)

Discussion

Using a qualitative approach, this study explores the different communication strategies that people use to convey their lack of engagement in interaction and exclusion from the group, and the corresponding perceptions of these strategies by their recipients (Freedman et al., 2016; Hess, 2000). In particular, this study documents a significant spectrum of excluding behaviours used by adolescents in the classroom environment, which can be associated with acts of ostracism.

Although previous studies have provided preliminary evidence of how ostracism works in action, researchers have referred to ostracising behaviour only vaguely, focusing on more overt forms, such as silent treatment (e.g., Koudenbourg, et al., 2013; Zadro et al., 2008), or the damage that using ostracism can cause (e.g., Bowker et al., 2014; Nezlek et al., 2012). Our study provides a more in-depth description and analysis of social measures that are not so well recognised.

The findings show that participants experienced ostracism from dominant leaders, as well as from the peer group, and also from friendship relationship partners and antagonistic relationship partners. From the perspective of the participants in this research, ostracism as a dyadic phenomenon, i.e., ostracism used by one person against another, was an important part of their everyday experience. Furthermore, the recalled dyadic episodes indicate that the ostracisers' intentions were interpreted as seeking to break not just the interaction itself, but to break the relationship. The dissolution of a friendship (or the threat of its termination) was seen as a devastating experience because it threatened one's position in the group and was associated with the loss of access to the entire social network. Breaking a friendship with a particular person often condemned the

rejected person to leave the group; which involved being temporarily or permanently outside, without belonging to a group.

It is also worth noting that acts of ostracism have been described as occurring when the sender has more power in the relationship. The sender decides when to start and when to stop performing excluding actions (Agarwal & Prakash, 2022; Konieczna, 2024b; Zadro et al., 2008). The issues raised by the participants in this research about the manifestation of power in the relationship provide an understanding of how conflict in the dyad is situated in the wider social context of the relationship with class members, with a group of friends. Detecting the role of ostracism as a power strategy implemented among adolescents in the school context may be an important finding, as the withdrawal of investment in the colleague relationship by one partner caused a real threat to group integration with others.

Of course, there were also descriptions of innocent episodes of deliberate ignoring, of temporary "taking offence" until the partner relents on an issue, which appeared as a part of the misunderstanding between befriended people with symmetrical status, mutual sympathies. Similarly, the adolescents in Shute et al. (2002) study saw episodes of ostracism as temporary and said that they would go 10 minutes or a few weeks without speaking to each other, but then become friends again. This pattern is also highly consistent with other previous studies that have documented that excluding strategies (e.g., silent treatment) can be initiated by a desirable companion or friend, and may even persist over time (e.g., Leontovich & Gulyaeva, 2018; Nelson et al., 2008; Zadro et al., 2008). However, the current research provides evidence that the relatively high levels of ostracism regularly used in the context of interactions in friendship dyads can be worrying and requires attention, as it not only threatens the closeness and continuation of the desired relationship, but indicates that aggressive or manipulative tactics are being used between friends (Dyches & Mayeux, 2012; Field et al., 2006; Konieczna, 2024b; Xie et al., 2002).

It is noteworthy that participants in this research reported that they experienced ostracism from colleagues who were not friends much more often than from people close to them. Most of the descriptions collected included instances of repeated ignoring/exclusion by various classmates, and in extreme situations a particular peer was consistently and directly confronted with exclusion by members of the entire class community. Moreover, the specific cases of described excluding behaviour functioned as a group phenomenon that had already reached a very serious stage, similar to expulsion (Shute et al., 2002), or complete physical and communicative disengagement (Hess, 2000, 2003; Bowker et al., 2014). The actions of the main actors were reinforced in the context of friendship, as well as the larger group, which is in line with the concept of alliance behaviour indicated in earlier studies (e.g., Shute et al., 2002). The results also suggest that the excluded adolescents were unable to engage in any kind of self-protection if the incidents were of public nature.

In addition, respondents indicated that interaction patterns tend to evolve negative behaviours and antipathies. They also reported that the episodes of ignoring and exclusion they experienced tended to cluster together (usually occurring together) and co-occur with other negative behaviours perceived as coercive attacks. Adolescents have quite a significant repertoire of means of expression and may use a combination of forms of hurtful behaviour, as previous studies of social and relational aggression or studies of silent treatment have also documented (e.g., Benton, 2011; Shute et al., 2002; Owen et al., 2002). In light of the analysed descriptions, ostracism occurred in various configurations, accompanied by both mild and antagonistic distancing behaviours (Hess, 2000).

As this research shows, strategic engagement in ostracism is worth to be considered more carefully in a way that is sensitive to the perspective of the recipient of the action. The adolescents in this sample rarely identified the actions of peers as neutral, unintentional or accidental, defensive, or being a result of not noticing, making adolescent ostracism stand out from actions performed in other settings involving adults (e.g., Nezlek et al., 2012; Wright & Roloff, 2009). Peer-excluding behaviour was recognised by participants as a manifestation of negative emotions, of paying close attention (monitoring), as essentially a repressive action.

The study also provides new insights into the recognition of aggressive and impolite intentions; an area that remains largely undescribed in previous research. Implied aggression was a significant issue for participants. They noted various impoliteness strategies, not just withholding politeness, but acts of impoliteness that attempt to insult the recipient, belittle, ridicule and threaten them (Kruger et al., 2006). It has been shown that, from the perspective of the adolescents in this sample, the explicit function of excluding behaviours is to degrade, humiliate and take away social support, which is consistent with the understanding of such behaviour as victimising and offensive, expressing hostility and domination (e.g., Benton, 2011; Dyches & Mayeux, 2012; Konieczna, 2024a; Underwood, 2004). According to the respondents, the behaviour of their peers contributed to depriving them of social ties, harming their self-esteem, their sense of well-being, reputation. These surprising interpretations can be explained by the fact that most of the cases of ostracism described in the literature refer to a close relationship. Described actions of ostracism at a great social distance operated between students who resent each other, do not focus on maintaining the relationship or affirming the relational value of the partner, and do not try to minimise the blow of exclusion. The results may indicate how the struggle to make sense of a situation of exclusion is deeply anchored in the history of relationships.

This research also contributes by emphasizing the diverse methods through which peer exclusion takes place and by illustrating the extensive array of ostracism practices encountered by adolescents in the sample. Furthermore, this study extends previous findings by providing evidence of the significance of non-verbal measures used by

adolescents in executing exclusionary actions among their peers. Although the literature describes ostracism as doing nothing, cessation of exchange, inhibition of emotional and verbal expressions, passivity or inaction (e.g., Freedman et al., 2016; Lutz & Schneider, 2021; Wesselmann et al., 2023), it is important to recognise that ostracism can communicatively manifest itself in a variety of ways, including those described as partial ostracism, which combines multiple passive and active non-verbal components; being situated "in between" explicit and implicit.

We find empirical support for this perception of ostracism in rich literature. Collected evidence suggests that keeping distance and silent treatment can be very noisy and interactional, as documented by Zadro et al. (2008) showing a whole set of "flamboyant gestures of ostracism." In light of the explanations given by participants in this research, certain behaviours, such as turning their backs, using eye contact, proximity and physical orientation, and reticence in responses, were used to communicate resentment and social disconnection. Facial expression, gestures or body posture had the status of linguistic tools that a trained peer could operate in such a way as to achieve communicative goals, which is in line with other studies (e.g., Konieczna, 2024b; Owens et al., 2000a; Shute et al., 2002; Wiltgren, 2022).

It is worth adding that forms of implicit exclusion have received little scientific attention (Deptuła, 2013). Being ostracised can be different from being rejected because less information is provided directly. However, in describing a phenomenon, such as ostracism, a simple division between the verbal and the non-verbal, the active and the passive, the overt and the indirect, the responsive and the unilateral, the normative and the victimising may prove unreliable. Experiences of rejection and ostracism may have a different quality not because of their linguistic manifestation, but because of the meanings attached to the actions by those to whom the exclusion is directed. What matters is how the ostracised understand why the ostracisers are doing it and whether the ostracised believe that the rejecters are trying to mitigate the reception of exclusion by undertaking relational work.

Limitations and future directions

The results of this study should be considered after taking into account certain limitations. Firstly, given that the means used to identify acts of ostracism was in the form of stories from people who had experienced rejection, the reported incidents may not have represented what actually happened during the encounter, but rather illustrate what people believe happened, how they assess it. While the reliability and validity of self-report data has been positively documented (e.g., Nelson et al., 2008; Sunwolf & Leets, 2004; Wainryb et al., 2014), it should be verified by direct observations of actual interactions, or by obtaining information from multiple perspectives. It would also be important to include a broader sample, as participants may not have experienced exclusion events as

diverse as those that occur among adolescents with different positions and reputations. It would also be useful to increase the number of ostracism cases analysed before chronic exclusion has occurred.

Moreover, social interaction being in its nature a communal creation, to which each participant contributes, requires a greater understanding of specific actions as bilateral behaviour. As the participants in their narrative reports focused on the strategies used by their peers and often omitted their own behavioral reactions (e.g., counterattacks), it is therefore likely that they may also have omitted their own negative behaviours that contributed to the escalation of the rejection process (Boykina & Chirkina, 2020; Xie et al., 2002). Issues of socially aggressive behaviour should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Additionally, due to the dynamics of social processes, it may be important to conduct longitudinal studies to identify the trajectories of excluding strategies over time. Such research could help to identify how relational partners involved in ostracism modify the objectives of their actions over time and consequently modify their communication strategies. Researchers have rarely examined whether partners move from more subtle forms to more coercive strategies or vice versa (Hess, 2003).

Finally, the question of positive intent and the use of ostracism as a positive politeness strategy remains very unclear (Leontovich & Gulyaeva, 2018; Wiltgren, 2022). Withdrawal may reflect cooperative goals, and may be used to avoid further involvement in an inappropriate interaction (Hess, 2003; Wang et al., 2012). A person may become silent or leave the scene in order to remain calm and not threaten the other person's face when trying to avoid confrontation (Agarwal & Prakash, 2022; Konieczna, 2024b; Zadro et al., 2008). These are important issues to consider in a comprehensive view of the ostracism phenomenon.

Conclusion

The article addresses the issue of ostracism as an everyday form of expression and communication in the contemporary school social reality of adolescents. It is an attempt to define this phenomenon, show examples and draw the boundaries between rejection and social ostracism from the point of view of communication and language in social relations.

Social exclusion, particularly ostracism, can be a difficult action to take and usually requires different strategies. Similarly, recipients may find this type of social behaviour more challenging to interpret successfully compared to other rejection strategies. The study provides detailed descriptions of ostracising behaviours as they are perceived by the recipients, thus expanding knowledge of less overt forms of peer exclusion among adolescents in everyday life. The article also discusses the areas for future research concerning the experiences of excluded teenagers.

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