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The Role of Mindfulness in Alleviating Social Exclusion

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Abstract

Based on three perspectives—the target of exclusion, the source of exclusion, and the bystander—and across three temporal stages (pre-exclusion, during exclusion, and post-exclusion), this work elaborates on the series of questions regarding whether, when, and how mindfulness functions in social exclusion contexts, and synthesizes these into a mindfulness-exclusion model. This model indicates that prior to exclusion, mindfulness can alleviate rejection sensitivity in targets and reduce exclusionary behaviors in sources; following exclusion, mindfulness can mitigate distress in targets and facilitate helping behaviors in bystanders; during exclusion, mindfulness may promote effective communication and reduce the likelihood of escalation. Future research should conduct in-depth investigations into the mechanisms underlying the benefits of mindfulness in social exclusion and their boundary conditions.

Full Text

The Role of Mindfulness in Alleviating Social Ostracism

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of mindfulness in ostracism from three perspectives (target, source, and observer) across three time points (before, during, and after ostracism occurs), addressing the questions of whether, when, and how mindfulness functions in ostracism situations. These relationships are synthesized into

an integrative model linking mindfulness and ostracism. The model suggests that before ostracism occurs, mindfulness can alleviate rejection sensitivity in targets and reduce ostracizing behaviors in sources. After ostracism occurs, mindfulness can mitigate distress in targets and facilitate helping behaviors in observers. During ostracism, mindfulness may promote effective communication and reduce the likelihood of escalation. Future research should investigate the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions of mindfulness' s benefits in ostracism contexts.

Keywords: mindfulness, ostracism, sources, targets, observers

Social ostracism refers to the phenomenon where individuals are excluded or ignored by others or groups (Williams, 2007). From the perspective of those involved, ostracism represents a process initiated by sources (those who ostracize) that impacts targets (those being ostracized). Additionally, observers may witness these ostracism events. Ostracized individuals not only experience intense negative emotions and mental health problems (Reinhard et al., 2020), but may also exhibit aggressive behaviors (Reiter-Scheidl et al., 2018). Identifying methods to mitigate these negative consequences holds both academic and practical significance. In recent years, mounting evidence has demonstrated the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions (Lindsay & Creswell, 2017; Teasdale et al., 2000), including in the interpersonal domain. During interpersonal interactions, maintaining mindfulness may be a key factor in promoting effective communication, reducing interpersonal stress, and building healthy relationships (Karremans et al., 2017). Therefore, mindfulness may represent an effective strategy for addressing the negative outcomes of social ostracism. This paper reviews research on mindfulness and ostracism along a temporal timeline, examining three perspectives—targets, sources, and observers—to explore whether, when, and how mindfulness functions in ostracism, and proposes an integrative theoretical framework to guide future research.

1.1 The Target Perspective

Social ostracism can be defined from both target and source perspectives (Howard et al., 2020). From the target' s viewpoint, ostracism occurs when an individual perceives being ignored or rejected by others or a group. However, such perceptions may arise from negative attentional biases or over-interpretation. Rejection sensitivity represents a crucial factor influencing perceived ostracism (Joss et al., 2020), defined as the tendency to anxiously anticipate, readily perceive, and overreact to potential or explicit interpersonal rejection (Peters et al., 2016). Individuals high in rejection sensitivity may experience anxiety or hurt from minimal rejection cues during social interactions (Velotti et al., 2015), which can affect their emotional and behavioral responses and hinder the development of stable, harmonious, high-quality relationships.

1.1.1 Mindfulness Reduces Rejection Sensitivity in Targets Research demonstrates that mindfulness reduces rejection sensitivity (Hafner et al., 2019; Joss et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2016; Velotti et al., 2015). Two self-report studies involving psychiatric patients and community adults found that individuals with higher mindfulness levels effectively employ emotion regulation strategies to reduce rejection sensitivity (Hafner et al., 2019; Velotti et al., 2015). Additionally, lower mindfulness, particularly poor nonjudgmental capacity, exacerbates emotional distress associated with rejection sensitivity, whereas among those with better nonjudgmental capacity, rejection sensitivity shows no significant correlation with emotional distress (Peters et al., 2016). One intervention study with 43 adults with childhood abuse histories found that an 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program increased mindfulness levels while decreasing rejection sensitivity. Changes in nonattachment—defined as flexibly viewing one’s experiences without clinging to or suppressing them—mediated the effect of mindfulness intervention on reducing social rejection sensitivity (Joss et al., 2020).

1.1.2 Mechanisms of Mindfulness Before Ostracism: Target Perspective Before ostracism events occur, mindfulness in targets primarily influences how individuals perceive and respond to potentially rejecting or ignoring situations. Two empirical studies indicate that mindfulness reduces rejection sensitivity through emotion regulation (Hafner et al., 2019; Velotti et al., 2015). When facing potential threats, highly mindful individuals effectively regulate emotions and adopt adaptive coping strategies rather than habitual or impulsive behaviors that impair cognitive and behavioral flexibility (Bishop, 2004). Moreover, mindfulness does not directly alter emotional experiences but changes one’s relationship to them, emphasizing a nonjudgmental, nonreactive attitude that involves observing emotional experiences without becoming immersed in them (Shapiro et al., 2006). Consequently, highly mindful individuals can detach from anxiety about potential rejection, allocating more cognitive resources to present-moment awareness, which reduces anxiety and reactivity to rejection threats. Additionally, ambiguous social situations are common (e.g., sending a WeChat message without receiving a prompt reply), and individuals with certain traits (e.g., social anxiety) may over-interpret such situations (e.g., “They didn’t reply because they dislike me”), increasing perceived ostracism. Mindfulness emphasizes experiencing the present moment without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), enabling more objective situation analysis and reducing over-interpretation. Empirical research also finds that mindfulness reduces anxiety and depression by decreasing negative interpretation biases (Ford & Shook, 2019). Therefore, mindfulness may help reduce perceived ostracism arising from interpretation biases in ambiguous situations—a promising direction for future research.

1.2 The Source Perspective

Fewer studies have examined the source perspective. A longitudinal survey found that employees with higher state mindfulness engaged in fewer ostraciz-

ing behaviors (Christensen-Salem et al., 2020). Self-report research also revealed that trait mindfulness negatively predicted ostracism behaviors after controlling for individual stress and workplace ostracism levels (Jones et al., 2019). Some studies have begun exploring whether mindfulness interventions can reduce ostracism behaviors. A quasi-experimental study found that brief mindfulness interventions reduced teachers' ostracism behaviors in work settings (Ramsey & Jones, 2015). Another study showed that participants who completed a five-minute mindful raisin-eating exercise engaged in less ostracism in a Cyberball game compared to control groups (Ramsey & Jones, 2015).

1.2.2 Mechanisms of Mindfulness Before Ostracism: Source Perspective Although research from the source perspective remains limited, current findings suggest that highly mindful individuals show less tendency to ostracize others. Ostracism occurs for various reasons and purposes. For instance, lack of attention to and awareness of the current situation may trigger ignoring behaviors (Jones et al., 2019). Particularly in busy social environments, individuals low in mindfulness often process interpersonal matters in “autopilot” mode, likely leading to overlooking others' words and actions during social interactions and increasing the probability of ostracism events (especially ignoring). In contrast, highly mindful individuals communicate in a “being” mode, which emphasizes full presence and participation in the moment, potentially reducing ignoring behaviors. Additionally, some ostracism behaviors are purposeful, such as expressing relational aggression. However, mindfulness benefits emotion management (Roemer et al., 2015) and effective communication (Huston et al., 2011). Good interpersonal coping strategies and emotional management skills can reduce potential interpersonal conflicts, thereby decreasing the likelihood of relational aggression and ultimately reducing ostracism behaviors.

2.1 The Target Perspective After Ostracism

Research on ostracism has primarily focused on how targets cope after being ostracized. According to Williams' s temporal need-threat model (Williams, 2009), ostracized individuals experience three stages: the reflexive stage, the reflective stage, and the resignation stage. The reflexive stage involves immediate pain and threats to four fundamental needs: self-esteem, belonging, control, and meaningful existence. During the reflective stage, individuals evaluate and attribute causes to the ostracism event, adopting different behavioral responses based on these evaluations. After prolonged ostracism, limited coping resources may lead individuals to enter a resigned state. Mindfulness research similarly focuses on whether mindfulness can alleviate negative outcomes and accelerate recovery from negative experiences.

2.1.1 Mindfulness Alleviates Negative Outcomes in Targets Most studies employ self-report methods to examine internalizing and externalizing symptoms following ostracism. Regarding emotions, research with 708 university

students found that online social ostracism increased depression risk by lowering self-esteem, while mindfulness buffered the impact of online ostracism on self-esteem, thereby reducing depression levels (雷玉菊 et al., 2018). Similarly, feeling ignored on social media produces maladaptive outcomes. Compared to low-mindfulness individuals, those high in mindfulness showed lower levels of psychological distress, negative emotions, hostility, and antisocial tendencies after receiving less attention on social media (Poon & Jiang, 2020). Moreover, mindfulness helps mitigate problem behaviors following ostracism. For example, a survey of 358 university students revealed that social ostracism increased internet addiction through self-forgiveness, while trait mindfulness reduced this effect by buffering the relationship between ostracism and self-forgiveness, thereby decreasing internet addiction (Arslan & Coskun, 2021). In workplace settings, workplace ostracism not only directly impairs job performance but also indirectly affects it through acquiescent silence. Among highly mindful individuals, the impact of workplace ostracism on acquiescent silence weakens, thereby improving job performance (Jahanzeb et al., 2019). Only one mindfulness intervention study has explored these buffering effects: with 60 university students, a brief mindful raisin-eating exercise reduced aggressive behavior following rejection compared to a control group (Heppner et al., 2008). In summary, both trait mindfulness and brief mindfulness interventions show some alleviating effects on various negative impacts of ostracism.

However, mindfulness' s buffering effects show limitations in some studies. For instance, although mindfulness meditation may buffer some negative effects of rejection for low self-esteem individuals, it may not provide the same benefits for high self-esteem individuals (Ford, 2017). This may occur because mindfulness influences cognitive schemas, reducing not only interpretation biases in low self-esteem individuals but also pleasant illusions that high self-esteem individuals generate during situational interpretation (Ford, 2017).

Surprisingly, some studies find that mindfulness not only fails to alleviate but actually exacerbates negative outcomes. In a sample of 361 adolescents, trait mindfulness did not buffer the effects of peer victimization and exclusion (PVE) on internalizing symptoms (social anxiety, depression, and loneliness). Instead, when mindfulness levels were higher, PVE showed stronger associations with internalizing symptoms (Clear et al., 2020). Several explanations may account for this finding. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; high PVE experiences may have shifted adolescents' awareness from the present moment to worries about the future or rumination about ostracism events, which over time likely reduced mindfulness levels. Second, many researchers conceptualize mindfulness as a multidimensional construct (Bishop, 2004; Lindsay & Creswell, 2017). A total mindfulness score cannot reflect specific dimensional characteristics, and different mindfulness components may differentially impact mental health. The Monitor and Acceptance Theory (MAT; Lindsay & Creswell, 2017) suggests that when acceptance levels are low, high attentional monitoring intensifies immediate negative emotional experiences and responses, thereby exacerbating emotional distress. Empirically, to address limitations of variable-

centered approaches that assume sample homogeneity and only examine overall variable relationships (Bravo et al., 2018), researchers have used latent profile analysis (LPA) or clustering to identify mindfulness subtypes (Bravo et al., 2018; Ford et al., 2020). For example, one study with university students identified four mindfulness profiles via LPA: high mindfulness group (high on all Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire [FFMQ] dimensions), judgmentally observing group (high observing but low nonjudging and acting with awareness), nonjudgmentally aware group (high nonjudging and acting with awareness but low observing), and low mindfulness group (low on all dimensions) (Pearson et al., 2015). The judgmentally observing group showed the most maladaptive emotional patterns, followed by the low mindfulness group, while both high mindfulness and nonjudgmentally aware groups showed adaptive emotional patterns. Therefore, mindfulness' s failure to buffer PVE' s effects on internalizing symptoms may result from this group' s high observing levels coupled with low nonjudging and other dimension levels. The limitations of mindfulness in alleviating negative outcomes after ostracism among high self-esteem and adolescent populations require deeper investigation.

2.1.2 Mindfulness Promotes Recovery in Targets Researchers have also examined mindfulness' s role in recovery across different stages. One study found that after a Cyberball ostracism task, both focused attention intervention and control groups showed reduced levels of the four fundamental needs, with no significant between-group differences. Thus, during the reflexive stage, mindfulness interventions showed no significant alleviating effects. However, after a three-minute rest, the focused attention intervention group showed greater recovery in need levels (Molet et al., 2013). This indicates that during the reflective stage, mindfulness interventions facilitate recovery from ostracism. Additionally, a study with adults high in borderline personality disorder traits examined the effects of brief mindful breathing (MB) and loving-kindness meditation (LKM) on emotional and behavioral responses to social rejection (Keng & Tan, 2018). Although no significant differences emerged in immediate emotional reactions or aggressive behavior following rejection, the MB group showed faster recovery from negative emotions compared to control and LKM groups. These findings suggest that mindfulness training may be an effective strategy for alleviating negative emotions following social rejection.

2.1.3 Mechanisms of Mindfulness After Ostracism: Target Perspective Overall, mindfulness effectively alleviates negative impacts during the reflective stage after ostracism and facilitates faster recovery in emotional distress and need satisfaction. Understanding how mindfulness achieves these effects warrants deeper exploration. On one hand, ostracized individuals may become trapped in rumination about the reasons for their ostracism, a cognitive pattern that not only fails to alleviate negative outcomes but deepens entrapment. Highly mindful individuals can shift attention from past distress and future worries to the present moment (Poon & Jiang, 2020). On the other hand, the

mindfulness coping model suggests that when facing stressful events, mindful mode enhances attentional flexibility, enabling positive reappraisal of conflict situations (Garland et al., 2009). Therefore, after experiencing rejection or ignoring, highly mindful individuals can become aware of their internal thoughts and external environment without being limited by them, consciously experiencing the present moment and positively reappraising the event, thereby opening up more possibilities.

2.2 The Observer Perspective

A smaller body of research has examined mindfulness' s role among observers. One study investigating prosocial behavior after watching Cyberball ostracism videos found that both high trait mindfulness and brief mindfulness interventions predicted more helping behavior (Berry et al., 2018). Another study with adults found that observers' mindfulness levels predicted inclusive behavior toward ostracized individuals more strongly than other motivations (e.g., compensatory motives, sympathy, personal distress, punitive motives, and anger toward sources) (Jones et al., 2019).

However, findings diverge regarding how mindfulness promotes helping behavior toward ostracized individuals. Berry et al. (2018) found that brief mindfulness interventions promoted helping behavior primarily through state empathic concern, compared to focused attention and relaxation groups. In contrast, Jones et al. (2019) found that empathy did not significantly mediate the relationship between trait mindfulness and inclusive behavior. Moreover, when participants were instructed to ensure equal ball-tossing among all players, the correlation between trait mindfulness and inclusive behavior became non-significant. The researchers speculated that individuals high in trait mindfulness pay more attention to ostracized targets, thereby engaging in more helping behavior.

These inconsistent results may stem from different empathy measurement approaches. Berry et al. (2018) measured state empathy by asking participants to rate words like “sympathetic,” “moved,” and “warm,” reflecting emotional states in the situation. Jones et al. (2019) measured empathy by asking participants to rate two items: “To what extent do you feel sympathy/compassion for the ostracized person?” —which may reflect current thoughts rather than emotions and could be susceptible to demand characteristics due to high face validity. Notably, Jones et al. (2019) also suggested that mindfulness increases observers' attention to ostracized individuals, promoting helping behavior. However, when observers were instructed to ensure equal ball distribution, their motivational context changed—they may have simply complied with the instruction rather than acting prosocially. Under such conditions, observers' behavior cannot be considered genuinely prosocial. Current research has not definitively established whether mindfulness enhances prosocial behavior by increasing attention to ostracized individuals in social situations.

2.2.2 Mechanisms of Mindfulness After Ostracism: Observer Perspective Research from the observer perspective primarily addresses the relationship between mindfulness and prosocial behavior. Jones et al. suggest that attention and empathy may be two important mechanisms linking mindfulness to inclusive behavior. First, studies have found that mindfulness enhances sustained attention ability (de Bruin et al., 2016). Neuroimaging research reveals that long-term mindfulness meditation is associated with altered activation patterns in neural networks related to sustained attention (Brefczynski-Lewis et al., 2007). In social contexts, strong sustained attention increases the likelihood of observing others' needs (Donald et al., 2019). For example, in ostracism events, highly mindful observers may notice targets being ignored or rejected, increasing the probability of helping behavior. Second, mindfulness may increase prosocial behavior through empathy—the ability to recognize others' emotions and respond appropriately (Winning & Boag, 2015). Research links mindfulness practice to insula activation (Laneri et al., 2017), a brain region involved in processing others' emotional experiences (Singer et al., 2009). Thus, highly mindful individuals are more likely to detect others' emotional experiences. Furthermore, evaluations, prejudices, and mental constructs often hinder helping behavior, while mindfulness helps individuals recognize thoughts as mental activities rather than facts, reducing avoidance of distressing stimuli and promoting approach-oriented, active coping (Donald et al., 2019). Studies also suggest that mindfulness may reduce self-attachment, making individuals more responsive to others' needs (Donald et al., 2019).

Notably, positive affect may also be a key factor linking mindfulness and prosocial behavior. Extensive research confirms that mindfulness improves emotional states (Garland et al., 2009; Grecucci et al., 2015). Neuroimaging studies show that after eight weeks of meditation practice, the left prefrontal cortex shows significant activation associated with increased positive emotion (Carson et al., 2004). The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions suggests that positive emotions expand psychological resources, facilitating social connection (Fredrickson, 1998). This mechanism warrants investigation in future research.

3. The Role of Mindfulness During Ostracism

Due to methodological and experimental constraints, no empirical studies have examined mindfulness' s role during the interactive process of ostracism. However, in other interpersonal contexts, numerous studies demonstrate that mindfulness benefits relationship building and maintenance, with these benefits manifesting in specific social interactions (Pratscher et al., 2017). Researchers have proposed the concept of interpersonal mindfulness—mindfulness during interpersonal interactions that involves nonjudgmental, nonreactive awareness of both self and others (Pratscher et al., 2017). First, regarding social attitudes, maintaining mindful states makes individuals' social behavior more prosocial (Karemans et al., 2017). Studies show that mindfulness positively correlates with interpersonal forgiveness (Johns et al., 2015). Therefore, when facing ostracism

during interactions, highly mindful targets may respond with forgiveness, striving for kindness and reducing the possibility of escalation. Second, regarding social skills, interpersonal mindfulness emphasizes nonjudgmental attention to one's own and others' thoughts and awareness of emotional experiences, which facilitates positive interactions (Skoranski et al., 2019). For example, mindfulness enhances emotional awareness and self-control (Karremans et al., 2017; Teper et al., 2013). During interactions, high emotional awareness and self-control improve conversation quality and reduce conflict. Research also finds that in conflict situations, partners high in mindfulness state levels express less aggressive or negative content (Barnes et al., 2007). If ostracism occurs during interactions, high mindfulness may help targets become aware of their negative emotions, regulate them promptly, and control impulsive or automatic behaviors to respond constructively. This may also reduce the likelihood of targets becoming sources themselves and engaging in further ostracism or other maladaptive behaviors.

[Figure 1: see original paper] A Model of Mindfulness' s Effects on Different Individuals in the Ostracism Process

4. Summary and Outlook

By reviewing previous research, this paper proposes a model of mindfulness' s effects on different individuals throughout the ostracism process (see Figure 1). Before ostracism occurs, from the source perspective, present-moment awareness may help reduce ostracism resulting from inattention. Some ostracism behaviors purposefully express relational aggression through rejection or ignoring. Mindfulness' s benefits for emotion management and communication may reduce the tendency to handle relationships through ostracism. From the target perspective, mindfulness alleviates anxiety and overreaction to potential rejection through effective emotion regulation. After ostracism occurs, mindfulness not only reduces rumination about the event but also promotes positive reappraisal, helping alleviate targets' distress. From the observer perspective, present-moment attention helps individuals notice ostracism, creating possibilities for helping behavior. Mindfulness may also promote prosocial behavior by enhancing empathy. Additionally, positive emotions may underlie mindfulness' s promotion of prosocial behavior. During ostracism, highly mindful targets are more likely to engage in high-quality communication with sources, reducing the likelihood of escalation.

Despite rich existing research, several limitations remain. The following outlines future directions for this field. First, research on the source group is relatively scarce, possibly because social desirability makes measuring active ostracism challenging. Future research could develop new paradigms or measurement methods to more objectively record ostracism behaviors and examine whether mindfulness and mindfulness interventions can reduce such behaviors, which would address ostracism at its root. Additionally, since ostracism occurs during interpersonal interactions, current research lacks studies on dynamic in-

teractions between sources and targets during ostracism events; this paper only offers theoretical speculation.

Second, research quality needs improvement. Current methods rely primarily on self-report measures, which may be affected by recall bias and social desirability, particularly when examining whether highly mindful individuals engage in ostracism. Most self-report studies use cross-sectional data, allowing only correlational inferences, requiring caution with causal claims. Furthermore, only one study has preliminarily explored neural mechanisms underlying mindfulness and rejection (Martelli et al., 2018). Future research should employ more objective measures (e.g., behavioral tasks, neuroimaging). Meanwhile, relatively few randomized controlled intervention studies exist, making it difficult to determine the magnitude of mindfulness' s effects in ostracism contexts.

Third, boundary conditions for mindfulness' s benefits in ostracism require clarification. As noted earlier, mindfulness effects may not appear under certain circumstances (Clear et al., 2020; Ford, 2017). When examining mindfulness' s buffering effects on negative outcomes after ostracism, outcome variables include not only negative emotions like social anxiety and depression but also behavioral problems such as aggression and internet addiction. Mindfulness' s alleviating benefits may differ across psychological symptom types. Moreover, research seldom considers outcome differences across populations. Ostracism research has identified differences in negative outcomes across gender and age groups. For example, girls who are ignored by peers show worse cognitive performance than those who receive attention, whereas boys' cognitive performance remains similar regardless of attention (Hawes et al., 2012). Older adults experience greater hurt after rejection compared to younger adults (Cheng & Gruehn, 2015). Investigating individual differences and outcome categories represents a promising direction for future mindfulness and ostracism research.

Finally, research on underlying psychological mechanisms remains scarce. From the observer perspective, two empirical studies have examined mechanisms behind highly mindful individuals' helping behavior, focusing primarily on empathy, yet with inconsistent results. Building on existing theory, this paper also proposes that positive emotions may be a key factor linking mindfulness and helping behavior, offering preliminary discussion of potential mechanisms. However, deeper investigation is needed. In conclusion, while numerous studies have explored mindfulness' s role in stressful situations, research on its role in ostracism is just beginning. This paper summarizes existing findings along a temporal ostracism process, examining three perspectives—targets, sources, and observers—and discusses underlying mechanisms. We hope future research will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between mindfulness and ostracism.

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