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THE PROCESS OF OSTRACISM MESSAGE RECEPTION AND MEANING MAKING

by

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DISSERTATION

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DEDICATION

In memory of my late father, James Joseph Pelliccio II

You will always be with us.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Human beings have an inherent need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People are social beings that desire long lasting and intimate relationships with others and thus the need to be included into groups is widely considered an inherent part of human existence (Kerr & Levine, 2008). This need is the result of evolutionary factors that motivate people to remain included into groups because when individuals are a part of a group they have access to resources that can help keep them alive and further advance the species (Spoor & Williams, 2007). The desire to be included is so strong that when this inclusion is threatened there are physiological and psychological effects for the person excluded, such as heightened states of arousal (Kelly, McDonald, & Rushby, 2012) and mental pain (Leary, 2001; Williams, 2001). Pain signals to the person that their status as a target of exclusion reduces their chances of survival. To settle the hurt, they need to actively find another group to be included into (Kerr & Levine, 2008). In short, the desire to be included permeates every aspect of our lives and has a major influence on everything that we do. When someone is unable to attain this, it creates a distinct experience that has garnered a lot of attention from social scientists in the past few decades.

One of the primary means by which an individual's need to belong can be threatened is through ostracism. Although there are many terms that suggest an individual is not included into a group, ostracism is specifically defined as being ignored or excluded (Williams, 2009). Ostracism can happen in many different ways such as through the silent treatment or cold shoulder (Williams & Nida, 2017). Targets of ostracism are treated as if they do not exist, which threatens their sense of belonging (Williams, 2007). In the past few decades, social scientists have given more attention to this phenomenon and have found that ostracism results in very

serious negative reactions in targeted individuals. In particular, ostracism threatens the four psychological needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (Williams, 2007). Studies further show that these threats exist in almost all circumstances where a target is unambiguously excluded from a group (Williams & Zadro, 2005). Because ostracism is suggested to be painful to virtually all human beings and avoiding it is a driving motivator in our daily lives, this phenomenon demands specific attention from researchers in the social sciences to understand its many facets. Learning more about the place of ostracism in our lives has the potential to open many doors in understanding human nature, and could help others recognize the various elements that create the negative experience when ostracized.

It is well established that ostracism hurts (Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015) but there are still many questions left unanswered about the process of communicating a message of ostracism. How is it that something such as silence can be given a meaning that causes emotional pain? How is it that two people may be speaking to each other in a group but perceive one person's words or lack of words as ostracism? How is it that an individual acknowledges so many cues to conclude that they are being ostracized? (Kerr & Levine, 2008). Studies in some ways have attempted to directly address these questions, but for the most part have focused on either the effects of ostracism, or one specific part of the experience of ostracism and not the reception of an ostracism message per se. Although, there are some indications of the communicative process embedded in previous research.

Studies from psychology that examined the effects of ostracism often make projections about the ways ostracism is communicated as secondary to their primary research agenda. First, Williams (1997) conceptualized the forms of ostracism into four dimensions of visibility, motive, quantity, and causal clarity. *Visibility* refers to whether the target and the ostracizer are

physically in each other's presence. *Motive* describes the intentions of the ostracizer, including punishment and defensive positioning. *Quantity* refers to how much communication is used to express ostracism to a target, ranging from partial to complete. Finally, *causal clarity* refers to how clear the intended meaning is communicated to the target, ranging from clear to ambiguous. Williams (1997) offered these dimensions as a result of researching ostracism over the years, but they were not the findings of an ostracism communication study. Rather, the focus of these dimensions is how they influence psychological reactions as opposed to simply understanding elements that influence the transmission of meaning (communication). Certainly, they are still extremely useful, though, as they show some key aspects that will help demonstrate the ways that ostracism is communicated to a target.

In another study, Asher, Rose, and Gabriel (2001) examined groups of adolescents via longitudinal observations to understand the modes of exclusion that participants used. The researchers recorded children's conversations over a year's time. They found 32 types of rejection that were consolidated into 6 dominant categories of rejection behaviors which are: excluding and terminating interactions, denial of access, aggression, dominance, moral disapproval, and involving a third party. They report that the rejection behaviors ranged in severity, explicitness, duration, creativity, and variety. Also, the researchers stated that one of the difficulties of categorizing these rejection behaviors was that there were certain behaviors that could have been perceived differently depending on the relationship and circumstances. For example, if one of the children made an insulting comment, it was difficult to determine whether it was an intentional rejection message or if it was a playful message. This helps to show that observations are certainly a useful method of study, but when assessing meaning making, observations can only go so far in understanding the deep contextual and situational elements

that coincide with the communicator's perspective. Therefore, in terms of ostracism research, one can analyze the lived experiences of targets of ostracism as observers, but what a researcher considers an ostracism message may not align with what a target perceives as ostracism. This is because the researcher may not be fully aware of all the meaning systems, interaction histories, and contextual elements that come together to give meaning to the message.

Finally, Kerr and Levine (2008) attempted to integrate many different constructs and previous research to offer seven general dimensions of exclusion cues. These prominent cues are: disregarding, differentiating, slandering, hurting, avoiding, exploiting, and deregulating. These seven dimensions spawned from previous research about inclusionary behaviors which suggested that social reciprocity is inclusive, and in turn, when acts are not reciprocated it signals exclusion. The dimensions are also drawn from other studies that examined the exclusionary behaviors of chimps. The authors conclude that physical aggression and avoiding should be found in humans as well because of the similarities between species. Kerr and Levine (2008) conclude that the seven dimensions are a great way to understand the cues of exclusion, but that more research needs to be done to understand how people can synthesize the many elements of an interaction such as the situation and the nature of the relationship to conclude that what they are experiencing is ostracism. As a result, they offered a basis for understanding of, but not data driven results about, the perception of ostracism messages.

Each of the previously mentioned studies is important in understanding the potential ways ostracism can be communicated but they leave certain gaps in the resulting conceptual landscape. First, in Williams and Sommer's (1997) ostracism taxonomy, their conclusions are based on the large amount of research that Williams and his colleagues have done over the past few decades. Although the taxonomy is rooted in a wealth of well-documented research, it is not

the results of an ostracism communication study. It relies on the perspective of the researchers, and not the targets of ostracism. In turn, the projections are largely speculative even though they come from experts in the field with deep understanding of the phenomenon. Also, the taxonomy explains the process of communicating ostracism from the point the message is received until the end of coping. It does not discuss the stages that take place before ostracism is communicated, such as the establishment of a relationship, or the importance of the situation, context, scripts, history, and culture, which are all important factors in communication (Adler, Rodman, & du Pre, 2014).

The second study (Asher et al., 2001) consisted of direct observations of adolescents over a year's time. Rejection behaviors were clustered into dominant categories based on what the researchers perceived to be rejection. This study offers a great glimpse into some of the manifestations of ostracism. However, ostracism and rejection are not conceptualized the same. They are similar, but rejection behaviors are any behaviors that connote devaluation in a relationship whereas ostracism is when a person is ignored or excluded. In this sense, ostracism is a type of rejection, but rejection is a broader term that encompasses more behaviors such as verbal aggression or gossip (Leary, 2001). Therefore, Asher and colleagues helped forge a foundation to understand possible ostracism behaviors because some of their findings were ostracism, but the focus of the study was not on how meaning was given to messages of ostracism.

Finally, Kerr and Levine (2008) offer a similar study as Williams and Sommer (1997) in the sense that they are synthesizing existing research. Their study is a meta-analysis rather than a direct study of ostracism communication. Also, the authors state that future research needs to consider more aspects of meaning making and that there are still many elements of the process

that need to be articulated. My present study heeds their call, as I seek to examine these aspects while remaining focused on communication and the process of meaning making.

The studies discussed above are from the field of psychology and provide great insight into the experience of ostracism from the target's perspective as well as some initial understanding into the communicative process through which ostracism occurs. A communicative perspective/focus can bridge this gap and directly acknowledge the communicative elements of the experience. It can allow for a focus on how a message of ostracism is perceived by a receiver and help draw out the key aspects of how ostracism is communicated, how elements like culture and situation influence meaning making, the communicative process of ostracism, and how a message comes to be perceived as ostracism.

Before one analyzes ostracism as a communicative phenomenon, it is important to discern exactly what it is by clarifying how it is operationalized and conceptualized differently from terms that are often used synonymously but reflect unique experiences. Terms such as social exclusion, stigma, rejection, and the silent treatment are indeed different from one another. For instance, social scientists generally use *social exclusion* to refer to societal level exclusions where people do not have access to privileged spaces in society (Cass, Shove, & Urry, 2005). *Stigma* is a specific type of experience where an individual is given a discrediting social label that signals to others that they should be excluded or ostracized (Goffman, 1963). From a more interpersonal level, *rejection* represents any behavior or cue that signals a relational devaluation of any kind (Leary, 2001). Another interpersonal level construct is the *silent treatment*, which is a form of rejection that can communicate ostracism and is an intentional lack of communication toward a target (Sommer, Williams, Ciarracco, & Baumeister 2001). Each of these terms helps

to narrow the focus of what ostracism is not, and as a result, it can help us more effectively examine the ostracism message meaning making process.

In communication, the term *ostracism* does not appear as a variable of study as much as it has in other disciplines, but there are studies and concepts from the communication discipline that add further depth to our understanding of the process of ostracism communication and meaning making. A few concepts that are useful for the purposes of this examination and point to specific aspects of ostracism messages include hurtful messages, Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT), and the second-generation Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT 2.0).

To start, ostracism is hurtful. Therefore, it is a form of a hurtful message. Vangelisti (2007) states that communication is considered a hurtful message when it devalues a relationship or when the target feels emotional pain. These messages can come in many forms, making the perception of the receiver important, particularly when the message is intentional (Vangelisti & Young, 2006). Relational closeness of communicators and time are also important factors that influence how hurtful the message is and how the receiver will cope (McLaren & Solomon, 2014; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Because research on ostracism does not give as much attention to such elements of meaning making, there is little acknowledgement of influences such as closeness and time. Thus, there is a gap in the literature because ostracism is a type of hurtful message, but the elements found to influence hurt are not as prominent in ostracism literature.

Second, expectancy violation is another concept that could help give insight into the process of ostracism communication. When someone has an experience that violates their beliefs about what could or should happen in an interaction, they have a moment of arousal that signals their awareness (Burgoon, 1993). Being ostracized can be an experience that someone does not expect, and it can be argued that the arousal one experiences when they are initially

ostracized may be because their expectations were violated. However, studies demonstrate that being ostracized and having one's expectancies violated trigger reactions from two different parts of the brain, suggesting that people's attunement to ostracism is a unique function that may be separate from those explained by EVT (Kawamoto, Onoda, Nakashima, Nittono, Yamaguchi, & Ura, 2012). Other studies claim the opposite though, and that the findings of ostracism research are largely the result of EVT related reactions (Weschke & Niedeggen, 2015). EVT is certainly related to ostracism communication in some way but more examination is required to figure out how they relate.

Finally, RDT 2.0 is a recently adapted version of Baxter's original RDT (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), which asserts that the resolution of discursive dichotomies is at the core of meaning making in interpersonal relationships. RDT 2.0 offers new details that explain how interpersonal communication is embedded within a chain of utterances that also exist within relationship specific meaning systems (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). RDT 2.0 offers a vivid explanation of elements that influence meaning making in interpersonal communication. This theory can serve as an important foundation for the current investigation of ostracism because chains of interactions in relationships could certainly influence ostracism message meaning making. RDT 2.0 can help show that ostracism messages do not necessarily exist in a laboratory where the only interaction that takes place is ostracism. Rather, it demonstrates that the experience of ostracism is embedded in a chain of experiences that exist as a part of a relationship.

Thus, considering basic ostracism research, conceptual variations of different ostracism-related terms, and related communication concepts, it is clear each can be woven into the fabric of the process of ostracism communication. These connections are currently speculative and

require research to shed further light on the specific elements that influence ostracism meaning making. Specifically, it can reveal how factors such as context, relationship, and culture can affect the process of receiving and interpreting an ostracism message, which can improve understanding of how ostracism communicatively creates pain.

In one of the first dedicated communication studies of ostracism in interpersonal relationships, Pelliccio (2016) used the term *ostracism messages* to capture the essence of the lived experiences of those who felt ostracized. The study helped to uncover the primary cues and situations that targets considered ostracism and offered a foundation for how communication functions within the lived experiences of targets of ostracism. Examples of ostracism uncovered in the study included the silent treatment, deliberate hand gestures (e.g., waving no, holding up a finger to suggest silence), and denial of access to private information. Like Zadro, Boland, and Richardson (2006), Pelliccio concluded that ostracism can exist in virtually any form.

After constructing a typology of ostracism messages, Pelliccio (2016) then sought to understand the lived experiences of those who perceived interpersonal ostracism messages. Although the study revealed that the target played an important role in the communication of ostracism, one of the findings suggested that individuals experience a moment of communicative paralysis when they discover that they are the receiver of an ostracism message, which then triggers a process of meaning making; however, the study did not uncover this process or explain it thoroughly. Thus, further work needs to focus on understanding the stages of this lived experience and process of ostracism message meaning making.

The goal of the present study is to examine the communicative process of meaning making surrounding when a target perceives a message as ostracism. It seeks to understand how past interactions, current meaning systems, and future interactions contribute to a timeline of

meaning making and to outline the process of interpretation that a target of ostracism goes through to reach the conclusion that they were ostracized. To accomplish these goals, face-to-face interviews were conducted with targets of ostracism who reflected on a recent or vivid past experience of ostracism. Interviews were focused on the timeline of interactions and meaning making that took place before and after the ostracism message. The study utilized a grounded theory approach that sought to reveal the stages and categories of meaning making that inductively emerge from the narratives of interviewees (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Analysis of interview data revealed a seven-phase process of meaning making, along with many unique elements that were reported as having significant influences on the process. Overall analysis of the data reveals that targets are active participants and have a level of agency in the process of ostracism message meaning making, suggesting that targets are not fully disempowered when ostracized, but play an important role in co-creating meaning. These findings help to uncover the agency in ostracism communication. They also advance interpersonal and darkside communication scholarship (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2011) by exposing the communicative elements of a hurtful process that can be extremely important in people's everyday interactions.

In this dissertation, I first review relevant literature in Chapter 2 by discussing how ostracism is conceptualized, and researched, as well as communication constructs that share similarities to ostracism. In Chapter 3, I explain grounded theory and the methodology used for the study. Next, in Chapter 4, I present the results in two sections. First, I discuss Research Question 1 and the seven-phase process of meaning making. Second, I address Research Question 2 and the eleven factors that influence this process. Finally, in Chapter 5, I review the findings, discuss their implications, identify limitations, and offer directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on ostracism suggests that it is a universal behavior found in all social animals and in all human cultures (Williams & Nida, 2017). Ostracism can exist in many forms, where people are left out, ignored, excluded, silenced, shunned or abandoned (Williams, 2001). Although individuals are ignored every day through such interactions as crossing people on a sidewalk or standing in silence on a train, ostracism occurs when people violate norms that suggest acknowledgement, inclusion, or response as the expected behaviors in the situation (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2012). These expectations are often informed at the social level as well as the interpersonal level. When these expectations are violated, the individual may perceive that they have been left out, experiencing intense emotional pain. To explain what scholars currently know about this process, in the first section I will describe how ostracism has been referenced and studied on a macro, societal level. Then I will discuss the phenomenon on an interpersonal level, before moving onto the psychology associated with ostracism. Finally, I will explain ostracism as a communicative phenomenon and the related theories in communication studies that can complete the picture of how one perceives a message as ostracism.

Macro Level Ostracism and Social Exclusion

Forms of institutional and societal banishment have historically been used as punitive measures for social deviance. These types of organized exclusions help offer a foundation for studies on ostracism in the present day because institutional forms of exclusion are highly influential to human behavior. For example, in Amish communities, shunning is the most severe form of punishment that an individual can face. Also known as "meidung", shunning is the institutionalized banishment of an individual by the church and community from any type of

interaction with church members (Gruter, 1985). This happens if an individual goes against the baptismal orders of the church. The community will make no efforts to reinstate the individual or evangelize them after they are shunned (Hostetler, 1993). The most important stipulation of shunning is that no one in the community can have contact with the shunned individual or else they will be shunned as well (Shachtman, 2006). This can create difficult decisions for members of the community, especially if they need to break the rules for external employment (Cates & Graham, 2002).

Similarly, forms of ostracism have been used to combat social deviance throughout history and help to reinforce ingroups and outgroups. In Ancient Greece, assemblies were held to vote on whether a criminal would be sentenced to societal banishment and physically forced out of civilization (Forsdyke, 2005). Germans also used banishment to control vagrants in the 16th century (Coy, 2008). In 18th century China, banishment was used as a punitive measure for criminal behavior. Entire families would be expelled along with the convicted individual (Waley-Cohen, 1989). In modern society, this type of punishment is done through expulsion into prison systems. Modern day scholars and sociologists often study societal level banishments under the term *social exclusion*.

Social exclusion. Researchers use the term social exclusion when discussing phenomena where there is a denial of access to privileged social spaces and resources (Cass, Shove, & Urry, 2005). It is when a certain group feels a sense of alienation because they are deprived of access that is given to members of dominant society (Bossert, D'Ambrosio, & Peragine, 2006). The defining characteristics of social exclusion are marginalization, lack of power and having lower social quality than other groups (Berman & Phillips, 2000). Groups such as the homeless (Watson, Crawley, & Kane, 2016) and the incarcerated (Foster & Hagan, 2007) are often

characterized as being socially excluded. Other scholars contend that subtle classifications such as university rankings can advantage some and exclude others from access to certain privileges (Amsler & Bolsmann, 20120). Others have theorized that social exclusion and poverty might be synonymous terms, because systemic inequalities keep the poor from many privileged spaces (Betti & Lemmi, 2013).

Another way that people can be excluded from society is through geography. Public structures such as transportation systems can geographically connect privileged populations while disconnecting others (Preston & Rajé, 2007). The notion of *transport disadvantage* posits that the status of socially excluded groups is perpetuated by the infrastructure of societies. For example, individuals may be forced into using certain types of transportation such as cars, even though they do not have money to purchase one or live in areas that are not conducive to car ownership (Delbosc & Currie, 2011; Gray, Shaw, & Farrington, 2006; Lucas, 2012).

The ways that people are left out on a societal level are important to the present study because they simultaneously exist on an interpersonal level. When someone is socially excluded their status is reaffirmed by experiences with interpersonal ostracism. For example, Foster and Hagan (2007) examined the social exclusion of prison populations. Prisoners, as a social group, are institutionally ostracized from others, but the study explains that on an interpersonal level, incarcerated individuals are physically ostracized from their children in that there is physical distance between the incarcerated and child. In this sense, prisoners are excluded from access to broader societal resources, but are interpersonally ostracized from people they are relationally connected with. This aspect of the experience can produce psychological pain associated with interpersonal level ostracism. In turn, the exclusions that exist on a societal level are enacted

through and manifest in interpersonal level communication. Similarly, stigma is another social construct that impacts people interpersonally.

Stigma. Stigma is defined as an attribute that is discrediting to an individual within a social community (Goffman, 1963). It is a communicative act used to demean an individual and create distinctions between in-groups and out-groups (Falk, 2001). Stigma is socially constructed (Goffman, 1963) and culture plays an important role in giving meaning to stigmatized attributes (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Bruce, 2013). Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualize stigma as stereotyping, status loss, separation, or discrimination, in relation to the exercise of power in society. People can have an *existential stigma*, where they have little control over the stigmatization, or *achieved stigma*, where they have "earned" the stigmatization from society due to individual conduct (Falk, 2001, p. 11). Existential stigmas are associated with characteristics such as homosexuality, mental illness, and ethnicity. Achieved stigmas are associated with prostitution, drug addiction, and homelessness.

Stigma is communicated through a label or word that is given meaning by society. These words are signifiers of an undesirable social status, which then influence interpersonal interactions in that people will avoid or ostracize individuals who have a stigma. This is done via cues that distinguish certain people from society and connect the label to a related physical or social peril (Smith, 2007). For example, people who are labeled as being injectable drug users face severe societal hostility (Rance, Gray, & Hopwood, 2017). Such cues can be shared across society so that they create a sense of solidarity amongst ingroup members who will further distance themselves from the stigmatized individual. Stigmas act as signals to society that they should ostracize someone (Parker & Aggleton, 2003; Smith, 2007). For some, being stigmatized can be extremely problematic because physical characteristics such as body size are always

present in interactions and always communicate the individual's stigmatized identity (Anderson & Bresnahan, 2013). Non-stigmatized individuals resist involvement with behaviors or programs related to stigmatized identities so that they can avoid future negative interpersonal interactions (see Powell, Amsbary, & Xin, 2015).

One specific example of stigma can be found in the experiences of people who have certain types of illnesses (Rintamaki & Brashers, 2010). Medical stigmas create unique communicative environments for those who are perceived to have a discrediting attribute (Albon, 2009). People make efforts to avoid medically stigmatized people and in doing so, ostracize them through their lack of interpersonal interactions. In some cases, such as leprosy in India, peoples' fears of being infected fuel a stigmatizing label, creating experiences of ostracism (Rafferty, 2005). Infertility (Meisenbach, 2010), depression (Roeloffs, Sherbourne, Unutzer, Fink, Tang, & Wells, 2003), HIV/AIDS (Pittam & Gallois, 2000), obesity (Alegria Drury & Louis, 2005), dwarfism (Albon, 2002), and mental illness (Romer & Bock, 2008) are just some of the conditions related to medical stigmatization that scholars have studied. Medical stigma has direct consequences to one's acceptance (Richman & Leary, 2009) and can also affect those who have personal relationships with the stigmatized individual (Murphy, Roberts, & Hoffman, 2002).

In short, stigma is a reason to ostracize. By society giving someone a discrediting label, it acts as a signal to others that a person is deviant and should be avoided (Smith, 2014). These notions are important to the proposed study because they uncover a unique experience where a social label can influence interpersonal level ostracism behaviors. Stigmas are a public symbol that encourages ostracism communication. In this sense, stigmas must be communicated in some

fashion on an interpersonal level between people. Next, I will discuss how this happens, particularly in the interpersonal level ostracism message.

Interpersonal Level Ostracism

Not all forms of ostracism are the result of juries, society, groups, or organizations making conscious decisions to cast out unwanted individuals. Ostracism happens most frequently in social environments where people are going about their daily lives interacting with others interpersonally (Williams, Wheeler, and Harvey, 2001). Leading researchers suggest that there are three general forms of ostracism (Williams, & Zadro, 2005). First, *physical ostracism* is when someone is banished from a group, so their body is not proximally close to others. Some examples of this are banishment, time out, and solitary confinement. Physical ostracism can exist on interpersonal and societal levels but specifically addresses the proximal separation of a target from a group. Second, *social ostracism* is understood as situations where people are excluded while remaining in the presence of others. Examples of this type of ostracism include the cold shoulder and silent treatment, which allow the target to remain physically present but communicatively unacknowledged. Finally, *cyber ostracism* is when people are ostracized through mediated sources. When someone does not receive a text message, or gets no likes on Facebook, or no comments on their Instagram post, it would be considered cyber ostracism as the exclusion is taking place through a medium.

As previously mentioned, Williams and Sommer (1997) conceptualize ostracism into four dimensions of visibility, motive, quantity, and causal clarity. These four dimensions help demonstrate some of the important elements that researchers should take into consideration when studying ostracism and are the suggested dimensions that influence which psychological need may be affected by which form of ostracism. *Visibility* explains how easily observable a target's

status is to them. If someone is physically ostracized, through a time out for example, it is more visible to the target because they clearly cannot see anyone. Their status as target is obvious. If they are socially ostracized it could be less visible because they might still be in presence of others but given the silent treatment when they speak. *Motive* describes the source's reasons for ostracizing the target, suggesting that how it is conveyed can have an influence on effects. There are five motives of ostracism: punitive (punishment), oblivious (source refuses to acknowledge target's existence), defensive (avoiding future problems with target), role prescribed (restrictions of role characteristics), and not ostracism (source did not know they were ostracizing). *Quantity* refers to how much communication is used to express ostracism to a target. Partial ostracism involves spending less time with someone or giving one-word responses to target's requests. Complete ostracism is the total physical and communicative disassociation between source and target. Lastly, *causal clarity* represents whether the reasons for ostracism are clear to a target. Clear messages are easy for the target to understand why they are being ostracized, such as being punished with time-out for misbehaving at the dinner table. Unclear messages force the target to figure out, on their own, why they were ostracized. Williams and Sommer (1997) suggest that this type of ostracism has the most severe effects because people can manufacture self-deprecating justifications for their status. The authors conclude by stating that these dimensions influence the outcomes of ostracism. Particularly, if the message is ambiguous and partial, it can create a whirlwind of negative intrapersonal communication where sources will turn on themselves.

Although this model is "complex and largely untested" (Williams & Sommer, 1997, pp. 695) and meant to help researchers conceptualize how ostracism affects targets, there are some key aspects that guide the present study. Williams and Sommer (1997) give insight into the

specific ways that physical and social ostracism can exist on an interpersonal level. They suggest that physical ostracism can be simply leaving someone out or a target being left alone. Social ostracism is visible to others and is enacted through such communication as the cold shoulder, freezing out, or any type of communication where the source treats the target like they are invisible amongst others (pp. 695). These dimensions help us understand some of the potential ways that individuals can interpersonally ostracize others. It also suggests specific forms of interpersonal ostracism that can be further analyzed to understand more about the phenomenon.

The silent treatment is a means to ostracize people and shows how interpersonal silence can become ostracism. Its salience is dependent on the four dimensions of ostracism, in that the more ambiguous the message is to the target, the more potential it has to turn silence into a punishment. It is important to understand how the silent treatment is studied to further examine how silence can be a communicative tool.

Silence and the silent treatment. The silent treatment is defined as an intentional lack of communication towards a target enacted through verbal and nonverbal communication (Sommer, Williams, Ciarracco, & Baumeister 2001). Verbally an ostracizer will not speak to a target. Nonverbally an ostracizer will withhold eye contact, alter body positioning away from the target, or direct attention at something or someone else other than the target (Wright & Roloff, 2009). It is a prevalent behavior in intimate relationships and can be highly persuasive due to the ambiguity of the message which can leave a target uncertain (Spiro, 1983; Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998; Wright & Roloff, 2009). In a study by Faulkner, Williams, Sherman, and Williams (1997), they found that 67% of people surveyed admitted to using the silent treatment on their loved ones, while 75% reported that they were the target. It can also be effective in public

settings, such as parties, to communicate to a partner without drawing attention to the interaction. It is low in causal clarity because it can be difficult for a target to connect the communication to a specific past behavior (Williams & Zadro, 2005). However, in other cases, such as Amish meidung, the silent treatment can help to reinforce specific previous behaviors (Gruter, 1985).

It is important to understand that silence is different from the silent treatment. Silence can exist interpersonally as a collective and conscious measure that allows relational partners to avoid certain conflicts or interactions (Oduro-Frimpong, 2011). It can exist without creating hurt. Although silence can simply be the backdrop to verbal communication or the space that exists between utterances, it can also be a purposeful gesture (Acheson, 2008). When silence is goal driven and intentional, it is the silent treatment (Buss, 1992). When it is not, it is merely the absence of communication. This notion is important to the present study because the same communicative manifestation will be considered something different based on such factors as intentionality. As a result, there are many layers in the process that require specific attention when analyzing the reception of ostracism messages.

The silent treatment can be subtle and can be given in a variety of ways. In its milder forms, it can resemble notions that other researchers describe as rejection behaviors. Rejection and ostracism are sometimes used synonymously, but in terms of scholarly research they have key variations in the way they are operationalized and conceptualized. It is important to discuss the similarities and differences in the terms rejection and ostracism, before examining ostracism message meaning making.

Rejection. Research on ostracism and rejection can be found in the same texts discussing similar interpersonal phenomena (e.g. Leery 2001; Williams, Forgas, & von Hippel, 2005). There is virtually no empirical research that has attempted to differentiate the

psychological effects or the semantic variations between the two constructs (Williams, 2007). Although scholars used the terms synonymously, they are operationalized and conceptualized differently across studies.

Leary (2001) defines rejection as a behavior that connotes relational devaluation. He states that it is the broadest and most generic term, which encompasses many other behaviors that allow an individual to "perceive that their relational value is lower than what they desire" (pp. 47). Rejection can happen regardless of whether an individual felt a sense of belonging prior to the rejection event or not, meaning they do not have to be relationally connected. Also, rejection does not necessitate actual dissociation, or exclusion, suggesting that a person can be rejected as an ingroup member, with little variation to their status. Rejection simply means that an individual feels as though a current or potential interpersonal relationship is not being valued as much as it was before the rejection cue (Leary, 2001). In this sense, ostracism and the silent treatment are types of rejection behaviors.

There are a wide variety of ways that rejection can be communicated. Asher et al., (2001) conducted a longitudinal study that examined the rejection behaviors of adolescents in an elementary school. They observed, recorded and then coded the interpersonal interactions that took place between the children. They conceptualized rejection as being any observable behavior that was perceived as the opposite of inclusion. They found 32 types of rejection that were grouped into six dominant categories of rejection behaviors: excluding and terminating interactions, denial of access, aggression, dominance, moral disapproval, and involving a third party. Each one of these categories consists of groups of behaviors. For example, insulting, mocking, flicking, and aversive noises were considered types of behaviors in the aggression category, while ordering and contradicting were in the dominance category. The 32 rejection

types found in this study suggest that rejection is broad construct that includes ignoring and excluding but categorizes them separately from behaviors such as blaming, moral disapproval, or mocking. From these findings, I argue that ostracism is a type of rejection, but not all rejection behaviors are ostracism. One can make aversive noises to reject someone and suggest a relational devaluation, but it does not necessarily ostracize them.

The way that people react to interpersonal rejection is like reactions to ostracism because rejection creates feelings of sadness, hurt, embarrassment, anxiety, and loneliness (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001). Experiences with rejection have also been found to influence people's perspectives. For example, rejected people can overestimate proximal distances of interactants (e.g., how far away they are sitting) if those interactants reject them (Knowles, Green, & Wiedel, 2014). Other researchers contend the perpetrators of most school shootings in the United States experienced excessive rejection throughout their lives and that it is a significant motivation to hurt others (Betts & Hinsz, 2013; Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips 2003).

For some individuals, they are more aware of rejection cues from others. *Rejection sensitivity* is the disposition of an individual to be more receptive to rejection communication, and to have stronger reactions to the experience (Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Kang, 2010; Stafford, 2007). The sensitivity to rejection can range from low to high, where some people are so sensitive that even in seemingly non-aggressive, inclusive situations, the slightest cue can be perceived as rejection (Staebler, Helbing, Rosenach, & Renneberg, 2011). Some have a specific sensitivity to certain cues related to a characteristic such as appearance (Park & Pinkus, 2009) or race (Anglin, Greenspoon, Lighty, & Ellman, 2016) because of their predisposition toward such types of rejection. The sensitivity to rejection can also influence the outcomes of rejection experiences, in that those who are more sensitive will demonstrate higher

levels of loneliness and are more likely to withdraw from social interactions (London, Downey, Bonica, & Paltin, 2007). This is especially pervasive if the person is introverted (Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2015). People who are more sensitive to rejection are more likely to ruminate on such negative experiences and will repeatedly focus on the distressful aspects, causes, and meanings of the experience (Pearson, Watkins, & Mullan, 2011). Other research demonstrates that highly sensitive individuals are also more likely to react aggressively towards others through retribution seeking (Zimmer-Gembeck & Nesdale, 2012).

Ostracism and rejection refer to relatively similar interpersonal experiences. The key distinction appears to be that rejection is any behavior connoting a relational devaluation, whereas ostracism is an exclusion phenomenon and a means to communicate relational devaluation. In this sense, someone can speak aggressively to an individual and it can be perceived as a rejection cue because the tone of verbal communication may embody behaviors related to relational devaluation. However, the relationship and broader communication between interactants may not fluctuate otherwise. For ostracism, a message sender would not speak to the target, not acknowledge them, or would tell the target that they did not want to interact, inferring a future disassociation (Freedman, Williams, & Beer, 2016). Although rejection and ostracism exist on the interpersonal level, rejection is a broader term that encompasses many more forms of communication than ostracism does (Leary, 2001) suggesting that all forms of ostracism can be classified as rejection behaviors but not all rejection behaviors are ostracism.

Understanding rejection is important for the proposed study for three reasons. First, although ostracism and rejection are used synonymously, they embody different experiences and are operationalized differently in research. By understanding the conceptual framework of rejection, it can help to avoid studying a broader set of behaviors that are not ostracism, such as

verbal aggression, which may not signal the target's exclusion. Second, research on rejection helps to shed light on certain elements that may exist in ostracism communication that have yet to be revealed. For example, it may be possible that people are more attuned to ostracism than others. If this sensitivity exists, it has important implications for process of ostracism message meaning making. Finally, as Asher et al. (2001) explains, for avoidance behaviors to exist, it requires the receiver of the message to know that it happened. They state, "Ignoring is a rejection behavior only if a child hears a peer and purposefully does not respond. In a noisy lunchroom, however, whether the child actually hears the peer is not always clear" (pp. 130-131). Although it could potentially be an ostracism message, this specific example of a rejection behavior suggests that the receiver of the message is important because if the target is not paying attention, then an ostracism message may not exist. Therefore, it is important to study the target's perspective to truly understand the ostracism process.

There certainly needs to be more research that differentiates rejection and ostracism. Even the scholars who call for this examination often decide to move forward with simply using them synonymously (e.g. Leary, 2001; Williams, 2007). Based on a review of literature, though, there appears to be variations in the way that the two are studied, and the terms rejection and ostracism will not be used synonymously in this study. Here, rejection will be understood as the umbrella term for types of communication or behaviors that signal relational devaluation, including verbal aggression. Ostracism will represent any behavior or communication that connotes interpersonal exclusion. From this conceptualization that is rooted in a review of literature, it is assumed that some research on rejection can inform the study of ostracism, and that the results of my present study should reveal some of those specific similarities.

The Psychology of Ostracism

To understand the involvement of targets in the ostracism process, it is important to review the foundations of ostracism research. The study of the construct of ostracism began when Kip Williams was going for a walk and a Frisbee came rolling across his path (Williams, 2007). He threw it back to two people who were playing with it. They momentarily included him. Eventually, they stopped throwing the Frisbee to Williams and he felt a strong reaction. This moment of ostracism spawned the focus of his studies for the next few decades, and the creation of the Cyberball method, which will be discussed later.

Since then, there have been many studies on the psychological effects of ostracism. These studies suggest that ostracism poses severe negative effects to four basic psychological needs in humans: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (see Carter-Sowell, Chen & Williams, 2008; Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007; Liu, Mulick, & Chee, 2014; Williams, 2001). Belonging is an individual's sense of inclusion. It is how much a person feels they are relationally involved with others. Self-esteem refers to the extent that an individual values or approves of oneself. Control is understood as the perceived command over ones social environment. Lastly, meaningful existence refers to ones need to feel as though they are recognized by others and when threatened can make people think of their own death (Williams, Forgas, & von Hippel, 2005).

The relationship between ostracism and these four needs has been examined in many ways. Beest and Williams (2006) tested to see whether being paid to be ostracized affected the negative outcomes of ostracism and found that money was not a moderator. Participants still reported threats to the four psychological needs even though they were receiving a reward for being ostracized. In other studies, the participants were told that the source of ostracism was a computer, and the results were the same in terms of threats to the four needs (Zadro, Williams, &

Richardson, 2003). The researchers of another study told participants that the ostracizers were in KKK and they still reported the same levels of hurt after being ostracized (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007). Whether the target was ostracized through text messages (Smith & Williams, 2004) or the event took place in a virtual reality (Kassner, Wesselmann, Law, & Williams, 2012), the outcomes were once again similar to previous research. Because so many studies affirm similar findings across circumstances, method, and ostracizer characteristics, ostracism is considered a universally hurtful experience for a target (Tang & Richardson, 2013; Williams & Nida, 2017; Zadro, Boland & Richardson, 2006). As such, the reaction to ostracism is a part of a hard-wired alert system built into human beings through evolution to protect us from being alone (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007; Kerr & Levine, 1998; Spoor & Williams, 2007).

There are three stages of reactions to ostracism: reflexive, reflective, and resignation (Buelow, Okdie, Brunell, & Trost, 2015; Williams, 2009). First, in the *reflexive stage*, a target's immediate response will be *emotional numbness*, where a target feels neither good nor bad about anything and are only hit with a non-valenced sense of arousal (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006). Targets experience a decrease in the cognitive ability to process complex thoughts, such as logical deduction or reasoning when ostracism occurs (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002), which may lead to communicative paralysis (Pelliccio, 2016). Buelow et al. (2015) also suggest that most ostracism research is conducted in this stage, and that Williams' (2001) study of psychological threats also take place in the first stage.

Second, the *reflective stage* is the time immediately after a target feels the pain of ostracism and begins reflecting on the justifications for their status as a target of ostracism (Williams & Gerber, 2005). There are many factors that contribute to how an individual will react after the first stage, but targets can react in positive or negative ways depending on the

circumstances and the communicators involved (Chow, Tiedens, & Govan, 2007). The most common reactions to ostracism in the second stage are anti-social or negative behaviors, such as aggression towards innocent third parties (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001) or eating unhealthy foods (Baumeister, Dewall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005). In some cases, targets may react through pro-social behaviors such as being nicer, friendlier, more agreeable, or more likely to conform to positive group goals (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). In the workplace, being ostracized can also lead to some pro-social behaviors such as increased compliance, targets working harder for a group, and making more effort to integrate with coworkers (Robinson, et al., 2012). Although there is no definitive understanding of why people will react pro-socially or anti-socially after ostracism a study of high school students by Coyne, Gundersen, Nelson, and Stockdale (2011) found that individuals who were considered open-minded and open to others' feelings were more likely to act through pro-social behaviors after being ostracized.

Finally, in the *resignation stage*, individuals will deplete their coping resources and become ostracized. There are few studies claiming to research ostracism in the resignation stage. Buelow et al. (2015) found that well after being ostracized, participants reported decreases in task persistence, decision-making, and some working memory processes. In another study, Zadro et al. (2006) found that 45 minutes after being ostracized, socially anxious individuals reported increased levels of need threats. Although there is not much empirical evidence associated with the resignation stage, it still helps to demonstrate the importance of understanding the experience of ostracism well after the interaction has taken place, as there are still certain lingering effects.

Much of what researchers know about ostracism is the result of studies focused on its psychological effects. These studies have conceptualized ostracism from the point the ostracism

message is received, to when they exist as an "ostracized individual", removed from others. In the moment of receiving the message, a target briefly becomes numb as they are hit with a rush of arousal and then immediately feel pain across four psychological need measures of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. Then the target turns inward to understand the reasons why they were left out, which creates various behavioral outcomes depending on traits of the target. Collectively, this paints a vivid picture of how one experiences ostracism. However, it is important to assess how these results were discovered and whether there are deeper levels of meaning making that take place after one is ostracized.

Ostracism research methods. The bulk of ostracism research from the past decade has predominantly focused on the psychological effects of being interpersonally ostracized via a variation of the Cyberball experimental design (Williams & Jarvis, 2006). The traditional form of Cyberball consists of a participant sitting at a computer and passing a digital ball back and forth with two avatars who are said to be participants in another room but are in fact part of a computer program. For the control group, individuals receive the ball throughout the game. In the experimental group, the ball will eventually stop going to the participant, thereby unambiguously ostracizing the target. Following the experiment, participants fill out a Likert-type associated with the four psychological needs.

There are many studies that use Cyberball. The specific form and implementation of it varies in each study, but it remains the primary means to induce ostracism in laboratories. For instance, Carter-Sowell, Chen, and Williams (2008) examined social susceptibility post-ostracism. In the study, participants were ostracized via Cyberball, and afterwards were accosted by a confederate in the hallway who asked them to contribute to the university's marching band. Those who were ostracized contributed more money than non-ostracized individuals. Thus, the

researchers concluded that ostracized people are more socially susceptible. In another example, Lau, Moulds, and Richardson (2009) conducted an experiment to assess whether different recall perspectives during Cyberball would elicit different reactions to being ostracized. They told participants to reflect on the Cyberball experience through two different perspectives: as an observer or from a field perspective (first person). The researchers concluded that those who remembered the situation as an observer reported higher need threat than those who used field recall. The researchers concluded that the recall may have been more detrimental for participants because it bolstered rumination, or prevented emotional processing. These two studies are a small fraction of the many Cyberball-based studies that populate ostracism literature. In a meta-analysis of ostracism related research, one study found there are over 200 published papers using Cyberball, consisting of more than 19,000 participants (Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015).

Although there are other studies that do not use Cyberball to examine ostracism, they often incorporate methods that are functionally similar. One example is the O-train method (Ren, Wesselman, & Williams, 2015). This method asks three individuals to act out a situation where they are sitting together on a train having a conversation. In the control group, each participant talks to each other. In the experimental group, the researchers tell the two of the participants to ignore the third participant. This design mirrors Cyberball in that there are two confederates interpersonally ostracizing one unknowing participant. Wittenbaum, Shulman, and Braz (2010) conducted another adaptation rooted in the Cyberball method. The researchers gave three participants information to read about and gave one of the participants something different. The participants were then asked to discuss the topic, which created an ostracism experience for the person who read the unlike article. As in the previous example, this design mirrors Cyberball

in that one person is interpersonally ostracized by two others who have access to the same news article, rather than access to a ball. In both examples, the methods share similar construction to Cyberball.

Not all ostracism research is done through Cyberball. Williams, Wheeler, and Harvey (2001) saw the importance of using alternative methods and created the Sydney Ostracism Record. In this method paid participants were asked to keep a type of diary and to log each time they experienced ostracism over a two-week period. The goal of this research was to take ostracism measures out of the laboratory and into people's daily lives. The study found that social ostracism happens most frequently as compared to cyber or physical ostracism and that the ways people are ostracized vary widely from subtle to complete.

There is also a small set of interview studies on ostracism. Faulkner and Williams (1995) conducted interviews about long-term ostracism experiences where participants reported being given the silent treatment over many years. The researchers found that it was often an emotional experience for interviewees because it was the first time that they had to recall their ostracism event. They concluded that targets tended to see themselves as blameless, and that the experience was certainly hurtful.

In summary, research on ostracism suggests that being left out by others has negative effects on the targeted individuals. After the experience, targets go through three stages, as they attempt to rationalize and cope. There are many studies that examine how ostracism affects the target, finding that the phenomenon is almost universally psychologically painful. Quantitative methodologies, particularly Cyberball, are frequently utilized to examine ostracism, although some qualitative research exists.

While much has been learned about the psychological experience of ostracism, little is known about the communicative process of ostracism meaning making that can be influenced by culture, relationship, and situation (Adler, Rodman, & du Pre, 2014). In addition, Williams' (2001) temporal model of ostracism begins once an individual detects ostracism cues. A communicative perspective, on the other hand, would include the events that came before ostracism that allow a target to perceive a message as such. As Baxter and Norwood (2015) explain, before people enter situations they bring with them pre-existing meaning systems and expectations that influence their message interpretation. This suggests that a receiver's pre-ostracism perception should be important in the communicative process. Furthermore, a communicative perspective would incorporate the sense making processes that occur as the individual tries to understand the situation—particularly if there is ambiguity regarding the threat of exclusion (Freedman, Willams, & Beer, 2016), and the meaning making that takes place well after the individual had been ostracized. Before one can simply assess ostracism through the wealth of research on psychological effects, it is imperative to review the theories and concepts from interpersonal communication research that can offer potential insight into the process of ostracism meaning making.

Interpersonal Communication and Ostracism

Ostracism can exist on a societal level but can be experienced interpersonally. In these interactions, there is communication between people. There are many communication constructs that can support our understanding of interpersonal ostracism interactions, but here I will focus on hurtful messages, and communication theories such as Expectancy Violations Theory and Relational Dialectics Theory.

Hurtful messages. To some, hurt is an emotion that alerts individuals to rejection or exclusion-related experiences (Leary, Springer, Negal, Ansell, & Evans, 1998; Mills, Nazar, & Farrell, 2002). Others conceptualize hurtful messages in a broader sense. Vangelisti (2007) states that a message is considered hurtful when it devalues a relationship or when the target feels emotional pain. Messages such as criticism, betrayal, threats, avoiding, and teasing have all been considered types of hurtful messages (Rittenour & Kellas, 2015) but straightforward factual declarations and accusations are the most common (Vangelisti, 2007). When people perceive a message as hurtful they will have physiological responses such as a rise in cortisol levels (Priem, McLaren, & Solomon, 2010). Ostracism and rejection, therefore, can also be types of hurtful messages, as they induce hurt.

Research on hurtful messages suggest that the receiver's perception plays an important role in the meaning given to hurtful communication. Immediately after receiving a hurtful message, people will make a judgment of intentionality where they will address context clues and assess whether the message sender stated the hurtful message on purpose or not (McLaren & Solomon, 2008; Vagelisti & Young, 2006). If an individual feels relationally close to a communicator, it can make communication more hurtful which can also influence the individual's ability to cope with such messages (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Another characteristic that influences the perception of hurtful messages is the amount of time since the hurtful message was uttered. When a hurtful message is more recent, it hurts more (McLaren & Solomon, 2014). Finally, how the message is communicated also matters. When hurtful messages are communicated in a humorous way they can be perceived as being less intentionally hurtful (Young & Bippus, 2001). In terms of ostracism, the perception of ostracism messages should also be influenced by relational closeness, time, and how the message was communicated.

Ostracism is a type of hurtful message and therefore should reflect many of the conceptual elements.

An individual's perception is further influenced by the relational and cultural context within which the communication is embedded (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Jin (2013) examined the relationship between intent of hurtful messages, relational satisfaction, and distancing and found that relational satisfaction moderated the relationship between intent and distancing; when people were satisfied with their relationships, hurtful messages had less of an ability to create perceived relational distancing. Rittenour and Kellas (2015) also found that specific types of relationships influence the communication of hurtful messages. They examined hurtful messages in mother/daughter-in-law relationships and found that the most significant types of hurtful messages were ones that degraded daughter-in-law's experiences and removed them from family activities—a form of ostracism. Finally, Tokunaga (2008) studied how cultural norms of interdependence and independence in relationships can influence hurtful messages. Tokunaga used surveys that asked participants to reflect on a hurtful experience and to fill out measures of attribution, self-construal, and relational strain. The results revealed that an individual with higher levels of interdependence is more likely to feel hurt than if they are independent. This finding suggests that cultural values are important in giving meaning to communication and that they must be considered when examining messages that hurt.

These studies on hurtful messages give insight into ostracism communication in two specific ways. First, ostracism is a hurtful message. However, not all hurtful messages are ostracism. An individual can say something that is off color or offensive but does not infer ostracism. Second, hurtful message literature demonstrates that relationships and culture play an integral role in giving meaning to communication. Culture is a primary meaning system that

informs our use of symbols and has a major influence on our interactions and hurtful message reception (Tokunaga, 2008; Willis-Rivera, 2009). Likewise, the relationship between communicators can be a primary focus of meaning making in hurtful messages (McLaren & Solomon, 2015). These factors may prove to be equally important in the process of ostracism communication because ostracism is a message that creates hurt and hurtful message literature may be helpful in explaining coping, interpretation, and the lived experience of targets.

Communication Theory

Aside from research on hurtful messages, there are many other theories and constructs that could potentially explain ostracism communication such as appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), attribution theory (Heider, 1958) or spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, (1974). However, two of the most relevant theories from communication studies that are used to conceptualize the process of ostracism communication are Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) and Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 (RDT 2.0). EVT offers a theoretical framework for how ostracism could be detected and the sense making that takes place thereafter. RDT 2.0 provides a detailed explanation of the meaning making process in interpersonal relationships. RDT 2.0 emphasizes the importance of meaning systems in interpreting communication and how these processes exist within a broader chain of utterances. In this section I will discuss how the communication theories of EVT and RDT 2.0 conceptually inform ostracism messages.

Expectancy Violations Theory. When people enter social situations, they have certain expectations of what is going to take place during the interaction. According to Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT), when these expectations are not met by interactants, an individual can feel a sense of arousal (Burgoon, 1993). The theory grew from the notion that when individuals

violate proximal boundaries (e.g., invade another's physical space) it can trigger a response (Burgoon, 1978). Today, researchers have applied the notions of EVT to other circumstances beyond proxemics to help explain a variety of communicative violations (LePoire & Burgoon, 1994). Expectancies are not just based on proxemics but consist of any "enduring pattern of anticipated behavior" (Burgoon, 1993; pp. 31). Burgoon (1993) explains that these expectations are derived from an individual's assessment of the communicator characteristics, relationship, and context. These factors shape the norms that surround an interaction and for the sake of the present study can be used by a target to label communication as an ostracism message.

After an expectation is violated, a person will experience a sense of arousal and then immediately go through a process of giving the communicative experience a *violation valence* (Burgoon, 1993). The valence given to an experience is either positive or negative depending on the form of the communicative violation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Characteristics of the communicator, the relationship between interactants, and the situation can drastically affect the positive or negative valence of violations. For example, White (2015) explains that when a relational partner receives an unexpected warm embrace from the other partner, it will likely be perceived as positive because the unexpected violation is coming from a close other. Thus, the communicator reward valence is an assessment of whether the communication characteristics are beneficial to the person who was violated (Burgoon, 1993). Similarly, Johnson (2012) found that when people have a more positive perception of a communicator they are more likely to give a positive valence to communication such as workplace swearing. If someone is physically attractive, extremely competent, or powerful, their reward valence tends to be positive, and in turn a negative violation could be perceived as positive (White, 2015). Therefore, the

characteristics of communicators certainly influence meaning making when expectations are violated.

The importance of EVT to interpersonal ostracism is that ostracism occurs when people violate norms of inclusion or acknowledgement (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2012). This conclusion invited some to argue that ostracism is inherently an expectancy violation (Weschke and Niedeggen, 2015). Kalman and Rafaeli (2011) studied chronemic expectancies and found that latency in email responses (email silence) would create arousals related to EVT. People may perceive latent email responses as a form of cyber ostracism, because the silence can create a sense of uncertainty in individuals. Another study from Bevan, Ang, and Fearns (2014) examined unfriending on Facebook through an EVT perspective. Unfriending is the act of separating a digital relationship on Facebook so that two communicators are not relationally connected on the platform anymore. This resembles the termination of a relationship and communicative disassociation related to cyber ostracism. They found that the relationship of communicators was a predictor of the valence and that the importance of the experience was relative to the relationship in that violations from close others were considered more negative, unexpected, and important than violations from those who were not close. In another study, Weschke and Niedeggen (2015) used Cyberball to examine how the EVT and ostracism responses are related. The findings suggest that Cyberball reflects EVT in that participants' expectancies of inclusion were violated when they did not receive a ball. They argued that EVT better explains the experience of participants in Cyberball experiments because the amplitudes in the brain's electrical functions at the moment of ostracism reflect areas relative to EVT. They conclude that more research needs to examine whether ostracism has a specific emotional and cognitive process or if it is part of a more general human function more closely related to EVT.

In summary, studies show that Expectancy Violations Theory and the experience of ostracism are certainly related. Some go so far as to claim that the primary method to study ostracism is revealing EVT-related data. Regardless, research on EVT strongly suggests that elements such as communicator characteristics, relationship, and context are highly influential in meaning making following a violation. Yet, these studies do not make it completely clear how a target of ostracism incorporates such elements into their sense making. Nor do they reveal the particularities of the ostracism meaning making process, which may be an expectancy violation. Therefore, as I bring research on ostracism into the field of communication, it is imperative to acknowledge the existing research on EVT as it reveals important foundations of what ostracism meaning making could entail. It also helps to show that ostracism can be much more complex than experiments like Cyberball because factors such as the situation, relationship, culture, and rational assessment contribute to the reception and interpretation of a message.

Relational Dialectics 2.0. Another communication theory that may be extremely helpful in studying ostracism communication is Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 (RDT 2.0). The theory has evolved significantly since its original creation, which attempted to explain how people construct meaning in their relational experiences through discursive dichotomies (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) explain that relational dialectics should be considered across four constructs: contradictions, totality, praxis, and process. *Contradiction* refers to the dichotomies that exist in relationships that must be managed by relational partners. The theory originally focused on three prominent tensions: integration/separation, stability/change, and expression/privacy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). These tensions are not finitely resolved by relational partners but instead are constantly negotiated through communication. *Totality* suggests that when examining relational dialogue, the interactions

surrounding a specific tension exist within a broader landscape and should not be considered separate from other tensions. *Praxis* refers to the specific communication used by relational partners to move towards an acceptable balanced point between the poles of a contradiction (see Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009). Lastly, *process* explains that the social processes of a relationship can change over time. As the relationship evolves, so too does the communication that takes place between partners. RDT 1.0 was largely inductive and interpretive, focusing on the desires of relational partners rather than discourse. It was rarely used in post-positivist research, but instead helped us understand what partners viewed as most significant in each tension (Baxter & Norwood, 2015).

In recent years, the theory has expanded. In 2011, Baxter offered a new version of the theory, referred to as RDT 2.0, which gave more insight into the process of meaning making. It evolved into a critical theory, acknowledging the influence of power in relational dialectics. It also helped to show how some meanings get reproduced and how new meanings can be created, with a focus on discourse rather than desire (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). RDT 2.0 offers three propositions to understand meaning making during relational communication (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). First, every utterance is embedded in a larger chain. This proposition expands on Bakhtin (1986) and explains that no utterance is isolated; rather it is always embedded in a series of communication experiences that precede it and come after it. Utterances are fixed within "relationship-specific meaning systems" and are further influenced by culture and relational history (Baxter & Norwood, 2015, pp. 282). As people attempt to give meaning to communication, they will draw from meanings that they have access to, particularly related to the relational history with the other interactant.

The second proposition of RDT 2.0 is that meaning is constructed through opposing discourses. Baxter and Norwood (2015) contend that meaning comes from a simultaneous synthesis of discourses. Although people draw from the broader ideologically rooted language systems, relational partners essentially create their own realities through a discursive meeting point. For example, if couples sacrifice their sense of individualism for the sake of the relationship, then the dominant discourse within the relationship becomes one of community and is simultaneously informed by cultural values such as individualism (Baxter & Norwood, 2015, pp. 282). Therefore, meanings spawn from a one's synthesizing of opposing layers of discourse and meaning systems to make sense of communication. In terms of the communication of ostracism, opposing discourses can help establish what is considered ostracism and what is not based on meanings established by relational partners.

The third and final proposition states that finalized discourses are never final, but constantly changing. Relational dialogue ranges from monologic to transformative. At times discourse surrounding a relational tension is not the same. In certain instances, communication can be linearly directed by one partner (monologue). In others, it can be unified, so that it collectively alters interactions (transformative dialogue). Dialogue exists between these opposites, suggesting that in certain circumstances different approaches will be accepted in the discourse of relational partners. However, the final discourse or meaning between partners constantly changes and will not remain stagnant as the relationship continues.

RDT 2.0 is a communication theory that gives a broad understanding of how communicators construct meaning. It is also extremely useful in framing the meaning making process of ostracism messages in two different ways. First, RDT 2.0 suggests that communication exists in a chain of utterances, which helps to show that the initial meaning given

to communication rests within a broader timeline of interactions. These other meanings are integral for communicators as they have a definitive influence on immediate sense making. In my investigation of ostracism messages, it was imperative to assess meaning making on a similar timeline. The meaning systems of the past influence that of the present. As a target moves on from the ostracism message there will be continued meaning making in the future. Therefore, one of the focuses my study is to understand ostracism experiences and meaning making along a timeline, in an effort to assess the theory proposed by RDT 2.0.

Second, RDT 2.0 suggests that meaning is constructed through opposing discourses, which helps to explain that communication is not just a reflection of psychological or sociological phenomena, but experiences are given meaning through communication (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). As people continue to interact, communication can alter meaning systems. This notion is important to the present study of ostracism because it reinforces the importance of communication in meaning making. As interactants send and receive communication surrounding an ostracism message, the meaning can change over time. In particular, RDT 2.0 suggests that a receiver can work with the initial meaning of an ostracism message and incorporate new communication to further their understanding of the message and change how they perceive it. This may be an important aspect of the experience of receiving an ostracism message because it looks beyond simply the psychological effects and acknowledges the importance of target's meaning making process.

Lastly, RDT 2.0 suggests that finalized discourses are never final and that with every new interaction and communication the meaning fluctuates. Indeed, there are core levels of meaning that cohesively unify meaning in interactions (e.g., the need to be emotionally connected), but there are also surrounding meanings that can decentralize shared understanding (e.g., the

importance of individual autonomy) (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). In this sense, communicators draw from these varying levels and types of meaning to give a final judgment of meaning for communication. Ostracism messages are not the result of linear, finite communication, but are messages given meaning by communicators who draw from a matrix of various meaning systems. Thus, in this study I sought to identify how targets of ostracism draw from a diverse body of meaning to label communication as an ostracism message and furthermore, how those meanings change over time based on this network of meaning systems.

In conclusion, RDT 2.0 is not explicitly about the communication of ostracism, but its propositions serve as a foundation to understand how communication can be perceived as ostracism and the importance of acknowledging the chain of utterances between relational partners that surround an ostracism message. Although research on ostracism contends that the pain of ostracism is universal, RDT 2.0 suggests that there are many more aspects to consider in the reception of an ostracism message and how it is given meaning.

Research on ostracism has yet to explicitly focus on communication and meaning making but there are certainly concepts like hurtful messages, and theories like EVT and RDT 2.0, that provide a foundation on which to analyze ostracism communication. The hurtful message literature sheds light on the importance of the target's perspective in understanding hurt and that cultural and relational factors are influential in meaning making. Similarly, EVT demonstrates that violations create a sense of arousal like that which occurs upon discovery of ostracism and that sense making focuses on communicator characteristics, relationship, and context. Finally, RDT 2.0 suggests that when examining a specific moment of communication between interactants it is imperative to acknowledge that the moment exists within a broader chain of utterances and a larger web of meaning systems. Taken together, the hurtful message, EVT, and

RDT 2.0 research suggest that when studying the process of ostracism message meaning making, it is important to understand it across a timeline with specific elements that will influence how one navigates this process.

Beginnings of the process of ostracism communication

In summary, ostracism is a universal experience for humans and requires more attention to understand how it functions in people's daily lives. Studies suggest that ostracism is hurtful and can negatively affect the psychological needs of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. Although the concept of ostracism is rooted in societal level exclusion phenomena such as banishment and incarceration, research on ostracism directs us toward interpersonal level interactions such as the silent treatment. Ostracism is frequently discussed in relation to the concept of rejection, but based on a review of literature, the terms differ in that ostracism is a potential type of rejection, whereas rejection signifies many other messages that generally induce feelings of relational devaluation.

Our understanding of ostracism is primarily the result of studies that use versions of the Cyberball method, where a participant is left out a game, conversation, or other interactional situation, creating an ostracism experience. However, in every day interactions, people are ostracized in a wide variety of ways. These experiences range in clarity, so that in some circumstances, a target must put forth more effort to understand that they are being ostracized. This notion is not discussed at length in current ostracism research but implies that there is a meaning making process required for someone to interpret a message as being an ostracism message. Communication theory gives us insight into this process. Expectancy Violation Theory suggests that communicator characteristics, relationship status, and situation may be involved in the sense making process after ostracism. RDT 2.0 further suggests that ostracism

messages are embedded in a chain of interactions and are influenced by what took place before and after the interaction. No ostracism message exists in isolation.

There are many questions left unanswered about how a target of ostracism draws from these many layers of meaning and how they work through the process of interpretation. What are the primary discourses that influence the outcome? In what ways are relationships, past experiences, and/or the situation important in meaning making?? What communication takes place that influences meaning making after ostracism and how significant is this time period? A communication perspective has the potential to answer these questions and to uncover the elements that influence the meaning making process. It can help reveal how something such as silence can create pain. By focusing on the process of receiving an ostracism message, and not explicitly on the effects of the phenomenon, the study can help reveal how ostracism messages are given meaning and how those meanings can change over time. Also, it can offer a better understanding of how ostracism messages function in interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, by studying ostracism as a communicative phenomenon, research on ostracism can move in new directions that will shed light on what ostracism is, how it is given meaning, how it functions interpersonally, and the distinct stages of a larger process embedded in a chain of interactions.

Although the process of ostracism meaning making has yet to be directly studied in the manner outlined above, Pelliccio (2016) examined the lived experiences of those who felt ostracized through a communicative perspective, offering some initial insights into the questions posed above. The author interviewed individuals who reported that they were ostracized and asked them to reflect on the communication that took place in the experience. The findings helped uncover some of the primary cues and situations that targets considered ostracism and reflected some previous findings by others. For example, although the silent treatment,

deliberate hand gestures, and privacy boundary management were reported as being cues of ostracism, there was such a wide variety of ostracism messages types, that virtually anything could be perceived to communicate ostracism. This conclusion suggested that there was something more at play in the communication of ostracism that allowed someone to perceive a message as being an ostracism message. Furthermore, the receiver clearly plays an important role in the communication of ostracism in order for this to happen. Therefore, the study suggested that there is a need for more research to understand how ostracism messages are given meaning and the process of communicating ostracism.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine the reception of ostracism messages through the perspective of the target, and to develop a grounded theory of the target's process of ostracism message meaning making. Previous research suggests that there is a process of ostracism reception, but it only acknowledges the events that take place after a person is ostracized (Williams, 2009). Also the focus of the Temporal Model is only on post ostracism pain and coping. Other research such as RDT 2.0 or EVT demonstrate that there are periods of meaning making that take place before a message is received. Toward these ends, the following research question is posed:

RQ1- What are the stages in the process of ostracism message reception and meaning making?

Studies indicate there are several variables that significantly impact ostracism coping, such as the receiver's self-esteem (Chen & Teng, 2012) or culture (Over & Uskul, 2016). These variables exist outside of the target's coping processes and alter the amount of pain one feels and how they cope (Williams, 2009). However, these variables need to also be considered as

influencers of the process to reveal the characteristics that can affect one's passage through the process. Toward these ends, the following research question is posed:

RQ2- What are the key elements that influence a target's process of ostracism message reception and meaning making?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a methodology that does not seek to draw out a piece of reality from the objective truth (Breckenridge, Jones, Elliot, & Nicol, 2012). It is philosophically rooted in the tradition of symbolic interactionism and draws from notions such as the looking glass self and role taking (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011). The goal of grounded theory is to allow the development of a theory that emerges from data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In this sense, the data is speaking for itself. There are not hypotheses or experiments that test specific constructs or previous studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Instead, grounded theory is a method that encourages the research to constantly analyze a data set while simultaneously generating and adapting the theoretical propositions about the phenomenon being researched through *theoretical sampling* and *constant comparison*. The final theory to emerge through grounded theory is a product of the moment the phenomenon was studied but can evolve over time (Hallberg, 2006). This section will explain the roots of grounded theory, why the contemporary version of classical grounded theory was used for this study, how interviews were conducted, and how the data was analyzed.

Roots of Grounded Theory

Classical Grounded Theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) are commonly credited with creating grounded theory. Their original conception is often referred to as *classical grounded theory* and was created to challenge quantitative methods that dominated the social sciences at the time (Bello, 2015). They argued that the focus on verifiable truths drew researchers away from the discovery of new concepts and left them fixated on testing existing ones. Although testing theory is a necessary aspect of social science research, grounded theory allows for the systematic discovery of theory that is "suited to its supposed uses" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.

3). It can also incorporate outside theories without having to test their assumptions (Glaser, 1978). One of the key parts of classical grounded theory is that it results in an explanatory theory in the form of a hypothesis or model that can later be empirically tested by other researchers (Evans, 2013; LaRossa, 2005). A researcher using classical grounded theory is essentially telling the story of their data, and that embedded in the story are pieces of theory that are used as the start of new deductive research (Glaser, 1999).

The two core aspects of doing grounded theory are *theoretical sampling* and *constant comparison* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In doing theoretical sampling, a researcher will adapt their interview protocol, analysis, and participants to reflect changes in the emerging theory (Draucker, et al., 2007). The focus remains on the development of theory as it emerges, allowing the method to be amended during the process. In this sense, a researcher uses the theory to drive the method through the process of *constant comparison*. This procedure is the simultaneous analysis of the data and emergent categories to ensure that they fit each other. It encompasses several procedural methods of comparing incidents to each category, integrating categories, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To do this, a researcher must pace themselves to allow for data cycling and a certain level of creativity that will help the theory form (Glaser, 1978).

As categories emerge, and the researcher checks back and forth between the data and categories, they should also be *memoing* their thoughts about the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser (1978) defines memos as "the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding" (pp. 83). These memos are essentially a researcher's side notes about how the data they are viewing at the time connects with the categories and data they have already gone through. Memoing is important because the notes

represent the emergent concepts that bridge the theory to the data while the researcher is immersed in the specific connection (Glaser & Strauss 1967). If one waits until the end of the study to reassess these connections, then it will offer less to the final theory because the researcher will have lost touch with the original conceptualization that they first recognized. When this process is done throughout the study, the resulting theory will be dense and rich with connections to the data. Because of this, some argue that to conduct a true classical grounded theory, the literature review should be conducted after the analysis to avoid skewing the codes and making them disconnected from the data (Evans, 2013).

Constant comparison, memoing, and theoretical sampling are all parts of how to do a classical grounded theory approach. Each are seen throughout the method and are also important in the first step known as *open coding*. Glaser (1978) suggests that codes consist of the root patterns embedded within the data. During open coding the researcher immerses themselves in the data set, reading the data line-by-line, memoing and forming codes that represent all the categories that can be uncovered (Glaser, 1978; Heath & Cowley, 2004). This procedure will continue simultaneously, as the researcher continuously checks the fit of the data and the categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hallberg, 2006).

Over time, certain categories will be seen more frequently, and *core* categories will become the focus of further analysis (LaRossa, 2005). At this point a researcher will conduct a phase of *selective coding* (Glaser, 1979). This process is meant to illuminate and saturate the core category to help move the researcher closer to developing a grounded theory (LaRossa, 2005). Codes that are found to be less important, will become integrated into the core categories or not be used (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross, & Rusk, 2007; LaRossa, 2005). Core categories have the most explanatory power and should be saturated as much as possible (Glaser & Strauss,

1967, pp. 70). Here, theoretical sampling allows the researcher the ability to change participants and interview protocols so that the theory can remain the focus of the method, allowing the core categories to be further saturated (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009).

Across these procedures, the goal remains the same: "to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved" (Glaser, 1978, pp. 93). A Basic Social Process (BSP) helps describe these instances and are particularly important to the present study. BSPs explain the process and stages of the phenomenon being studied and how the stages exist in the data. Glaser explains that for stages of a BSP to exist, they must "process out" (pp. 97). This means "the stages should differentiate and account for variations in the problematic pattern of behavior. If not, the stages collapse conceptually and there is no BSP" (pp. 97). Glaser continues that stages can be *in vivo*, where they are perceived by the people involved, or *heuristic* where they are perceived by the researcher. In this sense, the participant may directly state the points where stages start and end, or the researcher will find them during analysis. There are two types of BSPs: basic social psychological process (BSPP) and basic social structural process (BSSP) (Glaser, 1979), both of which were used in this study. BSPPs explain the psychological stages that an individual will go through and BSSPs explain the social stages. These two types of BSPs can influence each other in the theory and it is largely up to the researcher analyzing the data to distinguish how they are or are not connected.

One way of distinguishing characteristics of BSP stages is time. Stages will have definitive starting and ending points. Glaser (1978) explains that these points are marked with moments that are termed *critical junctures*. These are specific points where if a certain situation happens in the data, then the next stage will begin. Without these red flags, the original stage in the process will continue. If the data does not suggest an obvious transition then there may be

aspects that collectively come together to suggest a critical juncture, thereby signaling that a new stage in the BSP has begun.

There are several other aspects that are important in understanding basic social processes. First, Glaser (1978) suggests that BSPs are pervasive. They embody the most common representation of peoples' experiences. Second, they are *full variable*, meaning they exist because people do them, not necessarily because of the location that they are in. Third, a BSP can change over time. If a theory is developed that has a specific stage, but the parameters of the stage have changed because of changes in society, it does not necessarily disprove the theory. Rather, one part of the theory needs amending to acknowledge the change that took place.

BSPs are important in the present study. As I created a timeline of ostracism reception, BSPPs and BSSPs helped frame the key turning points in the process of meaning making. They helped differentiate the phases that a target went go through. They were also used to help shape the interview protocol to acknowledge the potential for psychological and social phases that may come about as participants established their storylines. By giving both types of BSPs particular attention in this study, critical junctures were revealed to allow the final model of ostracism meaning making to reflect specific turning points that differ based on the targets psychological process and the social process of ostracism reception.

Straussian and Constructivist Grounded Theory. The method described above is from classical grounded theory. Over time, it has spawned new versions as researchers critiqued its epistemology and ontology. There are several forms of grounded theory, but the primary off shoots of classical grounded theory are Straussian and Constructivist. For some, the similarities between the various forms of grounded theory make it difficult to choose the appropriate route when conducting research (Breckenridge, Jones, Elliot, & Nicol, 2012). As a result, it is

common to find studies that draw from each method or misinterpret grounded theory (LaRossa 2015), despite suggestions from scholars that picking and choosing parts of the method defeats the purpose of doing grounded theory (Evans, 2013). It is important to understand the tenets of Straussian and Constructivist grounded theory to clarify the method I used in this study.

First, Straussian grounded theory (SGT) was developed by one of the original founders of classical grounded theory, Anselm Strauss, along with his colleague Juliet Corbin. They attempted to make modifications and add clarity to the process of conducting a grounded theory. Philosophically, it was more rooted in the perspective of symbolic interactionism than classical grounded theory (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2004). In *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Strauss and Corbin (1990) offered a version of grounded theory that incorporated several changes, with three aspects of importance. First, in SGT, a researcher can come into the study with preconceived notions about what they are studying. They do not need to start research completely open to how the data speaks, nor do they need to conduct the review of literature after the theory comes up (Evans, 2013). Second, SGT suggests using an analytical form that is more structured and will allow for later verification. Rather than simply being constantly comparative, like classical grounded theory, SGT places more emphasis on deduction and verification of the theory so that it can be validated (Evans, 2013). Finally, SGT presents the notion of axial coding, which is a set of procedures where the data is reformed after coding to account for connections between categories. This is done using a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 96). Overall SGT differs from classical grounded theory in that it offers more structure, axial coding, and allows for literature reviews to be conducted before coding.

The second prominent version of grounded theory is constructivist grounded theory, which is credited to Kathy Charmaz (2006), who studied with Glaser and made several amendments to the original version (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). First, constructivists include a review of literature before a study begins to assess what is already known about the topic (Evans, 2013). Second, the foundation of constructivist grounded theory is that the data is co-constructed by the participant and researcher (Evans, 2013). Charmaz suggests that theories done through classical grounded theory are affected by the researcher's experiences, and that it is virtually impossible to separate themselves from the theory in any kind of objective fashion (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). Therefore, she argues, the data is co-constructed by the researcher and the participant, rather than the researcher simply being an outside entity that processes the data. Charmaz (2003, p. 270) states that grounded theorists should work to construct a picture of the data that resembles the participants' lives. The data should simply be giving voice to the participants (Breckenridge, Jones, Elliot, & Nicol, 2012). As a result, constructivist grounded theory creates a descriptive theory, that describes the experiences of the individuals being studied (Evans, 2013).

The Method Used

The conversation surrounding the appropriate methods and goals of grounded theory continue to be debated. Bryant (2002) suggests there are several contradictions in grounded theory, such as why certain data are considered similar and others are not. Glaser remains steadfast in his original conception. Some scholars argue that what matters is for a researcher to understand the various forms of grounded theory and ensure that they are using an appropriate method for their study (Evans, 2013). Others contend though that each variation is generally the same (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). The debate over grounded theory continues to this day

and there are opposing arguments for virtually every aspect of what constitutes a true grounded theory study. Because of this, a researcher can feel forced into a certain direction or face potential scrutiny for poor methodological choices. Many researchers claim to use grounded theory, but critics suggest that they tend to simply take the parts that they want rather than doing the method correctly (Bryant, 2002; Glaser, 2016). Because of these various perspectives, Dunne (2010) suggests that the most important task for any researcher using a form of grounded theory is to make sure that they clearly describe and defend the methodological choices that they made so that there are no misunderstandings of how the study was conducted (pp. 121). In this section, I will answer this call and describe the grounded theory method that I used and why I selected it.

Over time, the original ideas of Glaser and Strauss have been modified to meet modern needs. As a result, I decided to conduct a method based on the core tenants of classical grounded theory but through the perspectives of modern day researchers, not limited to Glaser and Strauss' original version. In other words, I used a *contemporary* classical grounded theory that acknowledges the methodological variations proposed by modern day classical grounded theorists.

First, I employed the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling, which are considered foundations of grounded theory (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009). The procedure I used for this study did not model Straussian grounded theory per se because it requires a more rigid structure that would not allow for the level of freedom needed in this study. Also, I did not use constructivist grounded theory because the findings from that perspective tend to be descriptive and reflect an interviewer/interviewee co-creation of knowledge (Evans, 2013). Descriptive data and co-creation were not as important to the development a theory that explains the specific

stages of the process of ostracism because the phases are based on interviewee reflections and not necessarily the shared creation of meaning that takes place during the interview. Instead, a classical approach to theoretical sampling and constant comparison were the foundations of the method used in the present study because they allowed for changes to the interview protocol, participants, and categories so that the study remained focused on theory building. This freedom allowed for more open exploration into the process of ostracism message meaning making so that categories and critical junctures could emerge to help build a final communications model.

Second, I conducted a review of literature before the examination began. Glaser (1978) suggests that doing this will skew data analysis because it can alter the researcher's perspective. However, Hallberg (2010) contends that this is merely a suggestion to encourage open mindedness and that a review of literature is important because it helps the researcher ensure that they are not repeating another study but are establishing a direction and developing interest in the area being studied. He also states that a review of literature is required for funding opportunities and students seeking PhD candidacy. Hallberg concludes that doing a review of literature is not a contradiction of grounded theory, because it coincides with Glaser's notion of doing preliminary reading before conducting a study. Similarly, Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that working with outside literature throughout the process is part of grounded theory studies (Ramalho, Adams, Huggard, & Hoare, 2015). Other contemporary grounded theorists also state that a literature review can enhance rigor and theoretical sensitivity (Giles, King, & de Lacey, 2013). Therefore, I conducted a review of literature before interviews and throughout the study to help narrow the focus of the examination, create the interview protocol, and engage in data analysis, while also adhering to institutional requirements such as approval from the university's institutional review board and dissertation committees.

Third, modern critiques of grounded theory have identified similar methodological functionalities and I decided to use these as guidance for this study. In particular, Sbaraini, Carter, Evans, and Blinkhom (2011) state that there are seven fundamental components that are required in a grounded theory methodology: openness, immediate analysis, coding and comparing, memo writing and diagramming, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and the production of a substantive theory. *Openness* suggests that a researcher should constantly be open during the process of grounded theory as it is ever changing. *Immediate analysis* refers to addressing findings as they come up in data analysis, and not later. *Coding and comparing* explains that a researcher should break down data into smaller components and label them. As they do this, they should compare these categories to the data. *Memo writing* refers to the process of writing down ideas as the researcher moves through the data. *Theoretical sampling* is the central element to grounded theory and is informed by coding, comparing and memo writing. It is the process of modifying questions and identifying new participants to fill the gaps and clarify uncertain aspects of the data as the emerging theory is being built. *Theoretical saturation* is assessing the data through the lens of the substantive theory to reaffirm and strengthen its connections to the data. Finally, production of the *substantive theory* is the culmination of the process and represents the set of concepts found in the study as a cohesive whole. These seven components represent the integral functions in any grounded theory method and although there is still a debate as to certain aspects of grounded theory, Sbaraini et al. (2011) state that these are consistent across each type of grounded theory. Thus, I utilized them throughout this study.

Finally, Glaser (2014) suggests that the best way to do a classical grounded theory method is to use unstructured interviews where the researcher enters the interview without any predispositions. Although this may be the ideal vision of the method, ostracism related literature

helps to show that ostracism is a unique experience, different from other similar phenomena. Without some structure to interviews, they could easily go off course into other realms such as rejection, or any emotionally painful experience. In this study, it was important to establish with the interviewee that the conversation should stay focused on communication related to an ostracism event. Furthermore, in a review of theoretical sampling and category development in grounded theory research, Draucker, Martsolf, Ross, and Rusk (2007) presented a list of interview-based studies that used semi-constructed interview guides. This suggests that contemporary grounded theorists often do not enter interviews completely open, but with some structure and focus. Despite Glaser's (2014) suggestions, in this study I used a contemporary perspective of grounded theory by utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol to ensure that the interviews were focused on a timeline of ostracism meaning making.

The four points mentioned above deviate from Glaser and Strauss' (1968) original conception in certain regards, but still reflect contemporary, acceptable modes of grounded theory. From these modern perspectives, the most important aspect that guided this study was the notion of theoretical sampling, where the researcher remains focused on the development of theory, allowing the data to guide alterations in the method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As core categories and stages emerge, interview questions, analysis, memos, and participants evolved as well (Draucker, et al., 2007). Thus, this qualitative study examined the process of ostracism communication through a contemporary classical grounded theory approach and face-to-face interviews.

Procedure

Interviews were used to investigate ostracism message meaning making because they are useful when doing the constant comparative method and category emergence (Glaser & Strauss,

1967). Based on previous research (Pelliccio, 2016), interviews have a potential to go off course to non-ostracism topics, leading to longer conversations with less relevant data. Therefore, before the interview began, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that prompted them to write about their experience of being ostracized (see Appendix C). This document was used for two reasons. First, it allowed the participant more time to reflect on the events that took place and to form a stronger understanding of the communication timeline that they experienced, and second, it was a pre-screening measure to ensure that the topic was in fact about ostracism. In almost all cases, individuals spoke about an event that reflected Williams (2017) definition of ostracism, but when that did not happen, the participant was asked to offer a different experience on another questionnaire that met the definition. If the focus of the story was generally about ostracism, but the written response significantly waivered from the ostracism event, it allowed me to come prepared to the interview so the questions could be more effectively directed towards ostracism message meaning making and not other aspects. Questionnaires produced 25 pages of single-spaced responses.

After participants completed the questionnaire, they set up a time and quiet location of their choosing to conduct an interview. Interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, and when possible, face-to-face. Two interviews were conducted over Skype due to scheduling conflicts. They were recorded in a manor suggested by Burke and Miller (2001) where a microphone was set up on the table to capture the voices of interviewer and participant. This created audio files that were later used for transcription and served as the primary data set for analysis. After casual conversation and interpersonal initiation, the interviews began with a short prompt read by the researcher to ensure that the participant read and understood the information sheet (see Appendix

D). This was also done to receive verbal acknowledgement that the conversation was being recorded.

Once consent was received, the interview questions began. First, participants were asked to retell the story that they wrote about in the questionnaire and explain how they were ostracized. After this, they were asked semi-structured interview questions to help establish a timeline that took place and to reveal critical junctures in the process of meaning making. Questions remained focused on specific details related to communication throughout the entire interview. Probing questions were used as necessary to dig deeper into elements related to the emerging theory. When the interview reached a point where questions and answers became redundant or the participant appeared to be disinterested from repeating answers, the session concluded with a debriefing and explanation of the study. In some cases, further conversation took place off the record to ensure that the participant did not need support for recalling negative feelings, or if they simply wanted to have a casual conversation.

Participants

Participants were recruited through the university's SONA research pool, snowball sampling, Facebook advertisements, and face-to-face recruitment in classrooms. The study was guided by the qualitative research principle of saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015), where participants were continuously recruited until there was enough information to confidently address the guiding research questions (Englander, 2012). In total, there were 32 interviews (20 females, 12 males) with English-speaking participants, ages 18-62 (M = 30.5 years, SD = 9.7 years) (see Appendix B for participant table). Twenty-seven of the participants were interviewed for initial analysis and five more were done as member checks, which were used to directly examine the validity and reliability of the emergent model and factors (Koelsch, 2013). In terms

of theoretical sampling, the final five participants were purposefully selected to check and solidify particular parts of the model and the list of factors (Sandelowski, 1995). The participants self-identified as white (*n= 20*), Black (*n= 6*), Multiracial/Other (*n= 3*), Asian (*n= 2*), and Hispanic (*n= 1*) as well as having no religious affiliation (*n= 18*), Christian (*n= 11*), Other (*n= 2)* and Muslim (*n= 1*).

Participants who were from the university's research pool received extra credit for their participation. All other participants received a $25 VISA gift card upon completion of the interview. Interviews were semi-structured and ranged in length of time (*M* interview time= 44.71 minutes, *SD* = 9.19 minutes, *Range*= 32-62 minutes).

Analytical Procedure

After the interview recordings were collected, audio files were transcribed into individual Word documents that were used for analysis. Transcriptions focused only on the words spoken by the individuals and not conversational complexities such as breathes and pauses. Such details were unnecessary in the scope of the study as it sought to examine the meanings of the participant's words and the critical junctures in their stories (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). There was a total of 312 single-spaced pages of transcriptions.

I assessed transcript data through procedures outlined in contemporary grounded theory (Druacker, et al., 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Sbaraini, et al., 2011). These procedures acted as general guidelines, but my analysis moved freely at times to ensure that the emergent theory remained the focus (Evans, 2013). Here, I will outline general foundation for analysis which acted as a reference but fluctuated at times to account for the emergent theory. As suggested by Sbaraini, et al. (2011), the first step was open coding (*openness*) where the data was analyzed to reveal initial categories (Heath & Cowley, 2004) through memoing (*analyzing immediately,*

memo writing) (Glaser, 1978; Sbaraini, 2011). During this process, I transcribed interviews and wrote down ideas that arose as I heard them. This process created 27 pages of single-spaced memos organized into two sections. The first section was comprised of general thoughts or conclusions that arose from an interview that connected to all interviews. For example, one memo stated, "post event conversation helps add clarity to the dissonance of exclusion." This memo later evolved to become part of the Phase 5 and Phase 6 stages. The second section of memos was specific to each interview. All interviews were listed with a number, and as I went through transcription, I simultaneously wrote a brief description of the story being told by the interviewee. I then followed it with specific notes or quotations of important ideas that were revealed. For example, one memo stated, "participant explaining why she was able to get over it so quickly, and not view the event as significant due to past experiences." I incorporated these memos throughout the study through constant comparison where I frequently checked back with previous memos and emergent categories.

As I collected more data, specific categories began to emerge and were written down with names and descriptions. More memos were taken to clarify the connections and shapes of categories (Glaser, 1978; Sbaraini et al. (2011). During this phase, new categories emerged and were constantly being checked for their fit to ensure that they were effectively representing the data (*coding and comparing*) (Hallberg, 2006; Heath & Cowley, 2004). As I transcribed more interviews I would label the memos and how they related to the emergent categories. I would also review previous data for connections. In total, there were 26 initial categories that broadly reflected ideas found in the interviews (see Appendix E).

Through constant comparison, I was able to amend these initial 26 categories to better reflect each research question, and help focus further analysis. As the second half of interviews

were being conducted, I revised, strengthened, and merged categories into more concrete codes that eventually fit onto a timeline and reflected distinct phases in the meaning making process. The other codes were either recognized as variables related to RQ2, because they affected every part of the process, or they were discarded because they did not fit into the model or variable. For example, the initial code "Relationships" reflected the idea that the relationship of the source and target mattered in meaning making. The code eventually became the variable "Perception of relational closeness" as it sat outside of the process' timeline, and helped to answer RQ2.

To do this, I remained focused on the notion of Basic Social Structural Processes (BSSPs) and Basic Social Psychological Processes (BSPPs) (Glaser, 1979) searching for critical junctures embedded in the responses of interviewees. For example, one of the initial codes was that ostracism could be a learning experience. This broader idea was later incorporated into Phase 7 of meaning making as it reflected the critical juncture that took place at the end of the timeline of meaning making, where targets changed their negative feelings into a finalized meaning.

I was able to see critical junctures through the clusters of responses from participants. For example, there was a group of participants who stated they were over the ostracism event and did not think about it anymore. As more participants said this, it became a moment in time that was distinctly later in the meaning making process than others reported. The characteristics of this experience created a critical juncture because in order to reach that point, the participant had to reflect those similar characteristics. Thus, critical junctures emerged from the characteristics that clustered each group, and separated them from each other.

As the phases were solidified on a timeline, a model was created. This model was regularly adapted as more data was analyzed and the final interviews took place. Likewise,

interview questions and participants also evolved with the emerging theory and model *(theoretical sampling)* (Sbaraini et al., 2011). I originally set out to only speak with individuals who were ostracized in the past month to be certain that they could recall vivid detail about the ostracism message. However, as categories and the model emerged, I needed to interview more people who were ostracized many years ago to get more depth for Phases 6 and 7. As a result, the initial participant pool was expanded to individuals who experienced ostracism messages at any time in their lives (time between ostracism message and interview, *M*= 32 months, *SD*= 66 months, *Range*= 239.5 months). Another way that the procedure evolved was that several of the probing questions became more focused on prominent BSPPs and BSSPs. I made minor changes to the interview protocol to account for the emerging theory, particularly by becoming more structured in interviews to account for probing questions focusing on notions like pre- and post-tremors that reflect BSPPs and BSSPs. For example, as the Basic Social Psychological Process of receiving messages from the target before the ostracism message, I began to directly ask participants if there was communication before the ostracism message that was abnormal or that they previously dismissed. These changes helped add depth to specific moments in the model and more responses that differentiated the ending and starting points of each phase.

As the core categories/phases evolved, they were solidified into the seven phases of meaning making and the four Microphases that exist in Phase 3. At the same time, more of the initial themes that did not fit in the timeline were recognized as influencers of the entire process. For example, the initial code of "Repetition", which reflected the idea that ostracism messages can be repeated in an ostracism event, did not represent a particular characteristic in any one phase. Rather, I found that the notion of "Repetition" influenced aspects throughout the process.

As a result, it was considered an element that influenced the process as opposed to a part of the it.

After twenty-three interviews, I moved onto selective coding where I analyzed the data and spoke with interviewees through the lens of the core categories/phases (Glaser, 1979). For example, I began asking participants specific questions about whether they had reached the final phase of ostracism meaning making and felt comfortable with what took place. At the end of the interview I would also discuss with them the emergent model to allow them to address the fit of the model. All variables that were the least saturated and only came up once or twice in interviews, such "ostracism micro-messages", were incorporated with the core phases and factors or not included in the final theory (Heath & Cowley, 2004; LaRossa, 2005). In this particular case, ostracism micro-messages represented the minor, subtle messages that later became a part of the "repetition" category.

Finally, I focused on solidifying the substantive model by giving attention to critical junctures and connections that existed between the phases of the model *(theoretical coding)* (Glaser, 1979; Hunter, et al., 2011). Here, the primary concern was assessing the data all together to understand how they collectively created a model about ostracism (Evans, 2013) suggesting that targets are actively engaged in the meaning making process. Specifically, in later interviews and analysis I focused on how to definitively differentiate microphases, and post-ostracism meaning making phases. I also examined data to see common elements that influenced this process, which helped solidify the elements related to RQ2.

In conclusion, I developed a model of ostracism meaning making and list the core influencers of the process. The seven-phase model of ostracism message meaning making (see Figure 1 and Figure 3) represents the timeline of ostracism communication that emerged from

data analysis. The list of factors addressing research question 2, were elements that had significant influence on the model.

To address general concerns of reliability in this study, I would discuss the emergent model and theory with participants at the end of interviews to see if it was capturing their experience—a form of member checking (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Also, during analysis, I was constantly comparing the emergent categories to the data to ensure fit (see Atwood & Hinds, 1986). As far as validity, this was addressed through the notion of the basic social process in that BSPs reflect how constructs plausibly exist in peoples' everyday lives (Glaser, 1978; Atwood & Hinds, 1986). Member checks also helped in assessments of validity (Koelsch, 2013).

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this chapter, I will discuss the results of my interview analysis. Research Question 1 asked: *What are the stages in the process of ostracism message reception?* I concluded in my investigation that through the perspective of the target, ostracism message reception can be understood as a seven-phase meaning making process (see Figure 1), with four microphases that take place during Phase 3 (see Figure 2). Research Question 2 asked: *What are the key elements that influence a target's process of ostracism message reception and meaning making?* The study revealed several key factors such as individual, relational, contextual, cultural, and message level factors. In this section, I will first discuss each of the seven phases of ostracism message meaning making and then an explanation of the six groups of factors that influence this process.

RQ1- What are the stages in the process of ostracism message reception and meaning making?

Through interviews with targets of ostracism, I developed a seven-phase model that outlines the meaning making process of ostracism message reception. These phases move chronologically and represent communication from the perspective of the receiver of the message. The model (see Figure 1 and Figure 3) consists of three macro level timeframes: *pre-ostracism, ostracism reception*, and *post-ostracism*. The pre-ostracism period consists of Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the model. Phase 1 represents the preexisting meaning systems from the target's past experiences. Phase 2 is the build-up to the moment of ostracism where expectations are formed based on the communication context. The pre-ostracism phases may not be "visible" to the target leading up to the reception of the ostracism message, but after they are ostracized, Phase 1 and 2 become extremely important in understanding why the ostracism message

occurred, particularly during the post-ostracism meaning making time period. In this sense, the pre-ostracism phases lie dormant until one receives an ostracism message.

Next comes the ostracism reception period, which is Phase 3 and consists of the experience of being ostracized, culminating with the recognition of an ostracism message. Phase 3 consists of four microphases (see Figure 2) where a target first consumes the message, experiences an expectancy violation, acknowledges the message as ostracism, and does a double check of their assessment. After this, a target will enter the post-ostracism period of meaning making in Phases 4, 5, 6, and 7. Phase 4 is when the target has an emotional reaction. Phase 5 consists of moments where a target begins investigating meanings associated with the ostracism message. Phase 6 is when the target attempts to answer more of their questions and probes for a deeper level understanding of the meaning of the communication. Lastly, Phase 7 represents the end of the ostracism event where a target is able to position the experience within the broader timeline of their entire life and is settled in their understanding of what took place. Not all participants reached Phase 7 at the time of the interview, but all had at least made it to Phase 5 where they were able to reflect on an ostracism event. Although the seven-phase model exists chronologically and represents distinct periods of time, meanings that take place in each phase carry over to each subsequent phase and are incorporated into the target's present moment of meaning making. For example, if a target is in Phase 5, the communication and meanings from Phases 1 through 4 still factor into their meaning making and will impact how they understand the event throughout the process.

When creating the model of the seven-phase model of ostracism reception (see Figure 1), I used the Richter scale as an analogy to reflect the target's experience of going through the process.   A Richter scale is a device that measures the magnitude and length of the earth's

tectonic activity. It creates a jagged line that reflects a timeline of energy released by the earth. The more energy produced by the earthquake, the larger the wave drawn by the device (Boore, 1988). Much like the Richter scale, the energy line that runs through the model reflects the amount of energy the target must exert in relation to the ostracism message. The more thought and personal energy they have to exert in the meaning making process, the higher the peak goes.

Continuing with the Richter scale metaphor, tectonic tremors are minor energy exertions that suggest an impending earthquake (Ide, 2012). In terms of ostracism, pre-tremors represent moments that signal an impending ostracism message and force the target to engage in active meaning making. Post-tremors are aftershocks that force the target to think about the ostracism message again. If the tremor exceeds a certain limit, it will not be called a tremor, but another ostracism message, just like a tremor would be called an earthquake. This metaphor is not a precise reframing of tectonic studies or the Richter scale, but it was generally used as a foundation to effectively represent the lived experience of a target moving through the seven-phase model.

Finally, it is important to address the notion of critical junctures mentioned in the method section. Critical junctures embody the distinct differences that take place in the basic social process (BSP) of a target's lived experience (Glaser, 1979). For every phase of the model, the critical juncture that separates subsequent phases is when a target begins enacting the characteristics of that next phase. In other words, in Phase 5 a target will begin investigating the meanings of the ostracism message. If they have not started this investigation, then they are still in Phase 4, where they are focused on the pain and confusion of ostracism. Thus, the critical junctures of the seven-phase model are like levels in game that move chronologically; it is not until the target has displayed the characteristics of a particular phase that they are in that phase.

In the next section, I will present each phase of the model with an explanation of the dominant characteristics that distinguish each phase. I will also explain pre-tremors and post-tremors which take place throughout the pre-ostracism and post-ostracism periods.

Phase 1- The Past

The first phase in the process consists the pre-existing meaning systems that a target brings with them to interactions. Phase 1 represents the collection of past experiences and symbols that a target used as a reference for present day communication. In certain cases, Phase 1 proved to be the most important phase of meaning making as targets looked back to previous interactions to understand the ostracism message they received. In almost all interviews, participants explained that their past experiences and meaning systems were integral in giving meaning to ostracism messages. Leading up to the ostracism message, the specific past experiences that directly influence the meaning making process may not be apparent, but after a target receives an ostracism message past experiences are revealed as key periods of time in meaning making. There are three primary characteristics of Phase 1. First, it is the pre-existing meaning system that acts as the foundation for present day communication. Second, it helps to establish general communicative expectations. Third, it is the first phase where targets can experience pre-tremors.

Pre-existing meanings and beliefs. First, Phase 1 represents a target's pre-existing foundation of meanings and beliefs that they will draw from during an interaction to understand what communication means. The past experiences characteristic of Phase 1 are the target's glossary of meanings. When they receive a message, they will reach to the categorizations of communication from their past experiences to understand what it means. For example, Tonya, an international student, told a story of being ostracized from a group project in a class. She

explained that she had several similar past experiences where she was ostracized in classrooms because she speaks with a foreign accent: "Someone will just like shut it down or talk over you or not pay attention...it's something I've experienced in the past because people assume I'm from a different country so that maybe you don't know what you're talking about." This excerpt shows how the past experiences of a target will influence their perception of present interactions and that when they interact with others, they will draw from these experiences to understand the specific meanings of communication. In this particular example, when someone ignored Tonya in the classroom, she immediately drew from her pre-existing meaning system to recognize that someone is ostracizing her and that it is likely because of her accent. In this sense, past experiences helped her understand what silence, or a cold shoulder means. Therefore, when analyzing a targets experience with ostracism, it is important to acknowledge their past experiences and meaning systems because, as I will demonstrate, they are considered by the target in each subsequent phase of meaning making.

Broad expectations. Second, the past experiences of Phase 1 help establish a broad foundation of expectations. As individuals accumulate experiences, they establish a framework of what should happen in their daily lives. The past experiences before the ostracism event create a lens of expectations through which an individual will perceive the world. For example, Andre, a 32-year-old male, described a situation where a former significant other was ostracizing him from family events. He held general assumptions about interpersonal relationships before he was ostracized that informed this experience: "I expected that I would come up with a logical sensible request and I would expect that she would have came around and what I thought would act like an adult in a relationship and handle it differently." Andre explains that he held broad assumptions about how people in intimate relationships interact. This is based on his past

experiences. When Andre's significant other ostracized him, the meaning system of Phase 1 acted as the foundation for understanding. In Phase 2, there are deeper-level expectancies specific to the situation, but expectations in Phase 1 are more general and based on common interaction norms.

In another example, Kiki, a middle-aged woman from East Asia, described a situation where she was at a work-related lunch and was ignored by two others with whom she was previously interacting: "Usually, I always tend to be the only foreigner. So others tend to pay kind extra close attention to kind of welcome me socially." This demonstrates a type of broad expectation found in Phase 1. It does not signify the specific words or behaviors that will take place based on the situation; it more broadly projects that when the participant enters a social space she expects that other people will interact in a certain way, such as being "welcoming." In this situation, her expectations were violated.

The emergence of pre-tremors. Finally, Phase 1 is the start of when a target will report experiencing *pre-tremors*. Pre-tremors are the minor moments that take place in Phases 1 and 2 before the ostracism message is communicated. They act as mild signals that heighten a source's attention and active meaning-making. Interviewees suggested that pre-tremors tend to be moments of expectancy violations, or abnormal behavior that were not categorized as ostracism messages but rather as another form of communication. They exist in varying forms but pre-tremors represent the communication that signals an impending ostracism message to a target. Pre-tremors have two characteristics: they tend to violate an expectation and they are not categorized as ostracism.

First, pre-tremors tend to be mild and subtle as compared to the ostracism message but still break an expectation. Norah reported being ostracized by two friends who she wanted to see

but who refused to directly acknowledge her. She explained the pre-tremors that led to the ostracism event as: "They are doing this thing together or they're doing XYZ thing together…" Norah noticed that the two others were frequently interacting, but did not perceive their behaviors as an ostracism message. These brief moments piqued her interest, but never exceeded this level of meaning making. Therefore, these moments are pre-tremors. Many participants experienced similar pre-tremors. Some explained pre-tremors as, "I didn't know that they were working on that project, which was strange" or "Well it threw me off that after I met her parents…she would still postpone it or just stall it out." Another participant said, "I would say hello and it would just be a nod of the head." These statements represent moments that signaled a violation of expectancies or abnormal communication that made the target alert, but were not yet considered ostracism messages. After being ostracized, however, these minor, abnormal behaviors were seen as pre-tremors or warning signs of an impending ostracism message.

Second, a pre-tremor is initially categorized with a different meaning than ostracism. For example, Barb was a 62-year-old grandmother who was ostracized at church by her fellow congregants. Before it dawned her that she was a target, she explained that one Sunday at church she received cold shoulders and short responses from everyone she talked to. However, she did not interpret this as an ostracism message. She explained, "I didn't relate it to this issue. I was confused even then and I just thought, well maybe they're having a bad day, you know what I'm saying? You try not to read into it a whole lot and you just let it go." Barb demonstrates that although she was being ignored by others, she did not perceive these gestures to be ostracism messages. Similarly, in another example, Karen had trouble figuring out the meaning of interactions that took place between her and a coworker. She explained that she originally viewed communication from the source as, "it's offensive or it's rude or it's like you're having

an off day". These examples demonstrate that a message from a source can give a target signals of abnormal behavior, but in order to be a pre-tremor, it was not registered as an ostracism message. Both Barb and Karen considered these expectancy violations as the other person simply having a bad day, rather than what they would later come to acknowledge as ostracism messages. This is a key characteristic of a pre-tremor, as it is not considered significant in the moment it happens but can be given a different meaning later once an ostracism message is revealed.

In conclusion, Phase 1 is the foundation of meaning before the ostracism message is communicated. It embodies many of the core expectations that individuals have as they enter into interactions. It is the story before the story, or the life course that led the individual to the current situation. Phase 1 is also the beginning of when targets will report experiencing pre-tremors. The meanings and events that exist in Phase 1 influence every subsequent phase of meaning making. The specific influence of Phase 1 may not be fully revealed until after the ostracism message is received, but it is imperative to understand the past experiences of a target to have a firm grasp of how they make sense of present day communication and how they continue to rationalize and give meaning after the event.

Phase 2- The Build Up/Setting the Stage

Phase 1 transitions to Phase 2 when a target finds themselves in the specific context leading up to the communication of the ostracism message. As a target moves about their life, they will find themselves in a certain situation, in a certain environment, with certain people, for certain reasons when they receive an ostracism message. This moment in time separates Phase 2 from Phase 1 in that Phase 1 is disconnected from an interpersonal interaction and consists of foundational meaning systems that one carries with them. Phase 2 though is the build up to a

specific ostracism experience. As a part of the pre-ostracism time period, the importance of Phase 2 may not reveal itself until after the ostracism message is received. There are several key components that make up Phase 2 and differentiate it from other phases. First, it establishes why interactants were communicating. Second, it sets the foundations for event-specific expectancies and third, it can establish a target's attunement to potential ostracism messages.

Why interactants were communicating. First, a primary feature of Phase 2 is that it addresses motivation for why interactants were interacting. It gives background information that explain why the ostracism message was able to exist. For example, Mike was an 18-year-old freshmen student who was a few months into his first year of college. As we talked about his story of being ostracized, he said, "So, basically, one day I was going into the dining hall and there was an open seat at a table and I went up, got my food, and went to sit down." Mike went on to explain that the people at the table told him to leave because someone else was coming and when he went to sit by himself in a different part of the cafeteria, he discovered that they were not saving a seat for anyone. In this example, Mike described a fairly routine day in his life. Mike explained that he was well-intentioned, as he was simply getting lunch in a communal space that he regularly did and needed a seat. The reason for his presence in the cafeteria made him see the situation in a particular way. In another example, Rose was a support instructor who was ostracized by a member of the faculty. She explained:

> One day I needed to approach the third grade teacher and talk to her about a student that the psychologist told me might need services… I approached her at a time when teachers have time to talk to their coworkers, which is lunch.

Rose went on to explain that this was the first time that the teacher ignored her. When she received the ostracism message, it was understood through these moments in the lunch room

and the school. The conditions of the interaction were a lens through which she could understand communication and acknowledge the ostracism message.

Specific expectations. The second primary feature of Phase 2 is that specific contextual, relational, and environmental expectancies are established. When an individual enters an interaction, they form expectations based on the elements that surround them. In the above example, Mike described what he would consider a fairly normal experience of going to the dining hall. He went on to explain:

Before I walked up, I figured, it's a seat at a table. I was gonna put my plate down, go

get my drink and sit down and just meet some people. I mean they seemed like they

looked like freshmen...There was more than enough room for them to pull a chair up and

have somebody else sit.

As the participant points out, the other people looked like freshmen and because of this, Mike formed an expectation specific to these elements. He also noted that there was plenty of room for a chair, which made him assume that it would not be a big deal for him to sit there. These points demonstrate how in Phase 2 a target will form specific expectations based on aspects of the interaction and in turn the stage is set for violations and ostracism messages. This is different from Phase 1 expectations because the expectations are of the particular relationship and setting, whereas Phase 1 is much more broad. In Mike's case, the relationship with the source was that they were both freshmen students at the same university, and the setting was in a casual and welcoming cafeteria at his own school that he was very familiar with. These pieces of information reinforce how he understood messages during this time period.

Attunement to ostracism messages. The third defining characteristic of Phase 2 is that a target can begin forming an attunement to ostracism messages. For many participants, in Phase

2, elements of the communicative environment could suggest a potential for ostracism messages. In particular, people of color reported that some places, people or situations tend to spawn more racism and ostracism than others. During Phase 2 when certain elements were present, a target would have heightened awareness of potential ostracism messages. For example, Shanae identified as being mixed race. She explained that her identity shapes her perspective so that she is more attuned to certain words and conversations that would suggest ostracism. She said,

> If you try to interact with racist people enough times you start to gauge what their
>
> reactions are. Not even racist people but people with racist rhetoric. You start to weed it
>
> out quicker and you can start to tell more.

Shanae explained that as a biracial person she faces unique communicative environments that can often lead to ostracism communication. Because she has encountered similar situations in the past where certain words and conversations inferred racialized ostracism, she has become more alert when those words or elements are present during interactions. In particular, she described an environment where she was in a foreign country and saw a sign for a diversity festival that she felt was racially insensitive because it depicted black and white people in a careless fashion. Also, there were little to no people of color at the event. The people she came to visit did not understand why she felt the festival and imagery were problematic. She explained that these were some of the key elements of the communicative context that led to her to have a predisposition that she may encounter ostracism messages throughout her time in the foreign country. This shows that Phase 2 is an important time period in ostracism message meaning making as it can fixate a target's attention on new communication, making them more capable of revealing an ostracism message in a given circumstance. In this sense, if the scene is set, then in Phase 2 a target will be on the lookout for any communication that signals ostracism.

In conclusion Phase 2 captures the moments that lead up to the communication of the ostracism message. It explains who was involved, why they were involved, and how they were involved, which come together to form expectations for that situation that may attune them to a forthcoming ostracism message. As these moments merge, they will culminate in Phase 3, which is the moment the ostracism message is received by the target.

Phase 3- Communication of the Ostracism Message

Phase 2 ends and Phase 3 begins when the target receives the ostracism message. Phase 3 consists of four distinct microphases (see Figure 2). Each microphase can be of varying lengths of time dependent on the interaction, but they are characterized as microphases because they often exist as very brief moments. First, Microphase 1 exposes how the ostracism message was communicated and received. Second, Microphase 2 signifies the arousal of an expectancy violation. Third, Microphase 3 is the moment of ostracism message recognition and finally, Microphase 4 is a brief self-check that acts as the final step before a target feels pain. It is possible to move through the microphases so quickly that they are felt as one unified feeling or experience. However, even in these circumstances, each microphase was addressed by the target in some fashion before they moved on to Phase 4. Collectively, the microphases of Phase 3 are a key turning point in ostracism message meaning making, as they embody the timeframe where communication is categorized as being an ostracism message. Without these moments of meaning making, a target may label communication as something other than ostracism and there would be no need to make sense of an ostracism message.

Microphase 1. Phase 3 of the process begins with Microphase 1, which is when the target receives the ostracism communication. There were many ways that participants reported receiving ostracism messages but all of them met the definition of ostracism operationalized by

Williams and Nida (2017) as being ignored or excluded by an individual or group. For example, 50-year-old Rhonda was prepared for a friend's event, and to her surprise, she was unable to reach the friend for more information. She described the ostracism message as: "I sent her a text message to find out if tickets were required and if I had a ticket. No response. So I called her. She didn't answer." In this example the ostracism message was a non-response, or silent treatment where the target did not receive feedback from a message they sent. For others, the ostracism message was a nonverbal gesture. Tony explained that when he was standing on his neighbor's doorstep, he perceived a message from two others when, "They weren't looking at me. Their body language wasn't projected in an open format." Another participant described the message they received as physical absence: "After the bell rang I went up to her classroom and she wasn't there." For others, they were physically included, received a verbal response, but something was off: "I had asked him a question about something and he just turned to me and said, 'I don't know' and just went back to what he was doing." Although each participant reported a different type of message, it was meaningful enough that it led the target to the next microphase (unlike the behaviors described in Phase 2 which did not proceed to that conclusion).

The second key feature of Microphase 1 is that the message is consumed/received by the target. In every interview, even if the message was reported as being silence or no response, the communication was still received/consumed by the target in some fashion. There were no cases in which participants reported being ostracized without receiving some type of message that suggested their status as target. In other words, if a message was never received, even the most direct, intentional, intense ostracism message would essentially lie dormant and have no influence at all. Microphase 1 is imperative in the process of ostracism message meaning making, because without the receiver/target ever receiving a message, there is nothing to give

meaning to. It is one of the most important phase in the entire process, as one needs to receive a message in order to make sense of it.

In conclusion, in Microphase 1, there is no meaning making. It simply consists of how the message was communicated and if the target received it. Once this has happened, the target then moves to Microphase 2 where they will feel the arousal of expectancy violations and begin to make sense of the communication they just received.

Microphase 2. Following message reception, in Microphase 2, a target will experience an expectancy violation. This is the first moment of message-specific meaning making, as the target acknowledges that the communication is abnormal. Next, they will experience a heightened sense of arousal that can range in intensity. As Annie explained, she was scrolling through Facebook one afternoon when she discovered a picture of most of her closest friends together at an event that she was not invited to. Annie had a heightened sense of arousal when she saw the picture: "I was expecting children pictures like every other day, not everybody together!" After Annie explained her expectations when looking at Facebook, she described the immediate arousal as, "It kind of like hits you." In other examples participants reported violations based on workplace-specific behavior. For example, Daria needed help with a patient at her hospital and asked a coworker for help. The coworker gave short dismissive responses. Daria explained, "I was assuming that she would kind of walk me through the situation." In a similar instance, another participant explained, "Teachers, even at this school, have always been very accommodating and helpful. So I expected her to be the same way." Each of these examples demonstrates that individuals enter interactions with specific expectations based on the elements of Phase 1 and Phase 2, which were subsequently violated when the received message

failed to align with these expectations. Although each experience had a unique set of expectations, each reaction was generally similar.

When an expectation is violated there is an immediate sense of arousal and the first moments of meaning making begin. The communication consumed in Microphase 1 is now understood as being a violation of expectancies and deserving more attention. Microphase 2 is very similar to the experience of a pre-tremor, but differs in that it will lead to the conclusion of ostracism. If a target does not acknowledge the expectancy violation as an ostracism message, then it may be a pre-tremor and Phase 1 and 2 will continue to lie dormant in the process.

The arousal from an expectancy violation can range in intensity depending on the interaction. For some they described the experience as being more intense. One participant explained:

> It almost felt like an adrenaline rush. Like ya know not even really knowing how to control that feeling or how to perceive it just knowing that it's there and just being like, 'Oh my God,' and not even really focusing on anything except that moment.

For others who reported receiving less severe ostracism messages they described the arousal more as a type of alertness: "Then we were kind of just standing there and it went from nice flowing conversation to like, 'Did I do something wrong?'" These excerpts demonstrate that in Microphase 2 the target will experience some level of arousal, but will also begin the first steps of meaning making by acknowledging that the communication is abnormal. At this point, targets move to Microphase 3, where they will intake more communication and/or draw from the pre-ostracism meaning systems to make sense of the message and label it as an ostracism message.

Microphase 3. In Microphase 3, the target begins trying to make sense of the expectancy violation. The individual acts on their alertness and quickly draws from their past experiences, the situation, context and/or other elements related to the event to decide what the message means. If the communication is connected to a meaning of ostracism, then the target will move onto Microphase 4. However, if it is not, the communication is categorized as something else, such as a pre-tremor, and the individual will proceed with their life by adding these experiences to the dormant meanings of the pre-ostracism phases.

Microphase 3 represents the moments where a violation is first given meaning. The search to label the communication an ostracism message varied in the amount of effort required of the target. For some, they had to actively engage and think about whether the communication was intended to communicate ostracism. For example, 28-year-old Vernon told a story where he was doing laundry at his significant other's home and it created a conflict with the roommate who lived there. He reported that he began receiving abnormal communication from the roommate, which he originally understood as being a miscommunication or another type of message: "So I say good morning and she doesn't respond. And she just, whatever, was just ignoring me. At first I thought, 'Oh hey. You didn't hear me.'" This moment captures Phase 3 sense making leading up to Microphase 3. In Microphase 1, Vernon consumed the ignoring message from the roommate. Then in Microphase 2, he acknowledged that it was abnormal and unexpected communication, and in Microphase 3, Vernon immediately tried to give it meaning. However, he initially falsely categorized the non-response as being a miscommunication, in that the roommate simply did not hear him. As he continues to examine the non-response through the prior meaning systems, he changes his conclusion and acknowledges the communication as an ostracism message. He explains, "…Then I realized that she must have heard me if she goes

downstairs and starts cursing to herself that she can't use the laundry machine." Here, Vernon demonstrates how he continued to think about the communication he received and quickly re-categorized it as an ostracism message. He rationalizes that if *he* can hear *her* from that far away, then *she* must have been able to hear *him*. The roommate must have consciously ignored him because everything is audible in the house. Therefore, Vernon concludes that he was in fact receiving an ostracism message. This brief moment of meaning making is the tipping point for the entire process of ostracism communication. Without this phase, ostracism messages may simply be interpreted as something else and one will not enter the post-ostracism meaning making phases. Microphase 3 represents the culmination of pre-ostracism meaning making and is the pivotal juncture that will lead a target into an experience of ostracism-related pain, confusion, and coping in the post-ostracism phases.

Interviews suggested that meaning making in Microphase 3 is highly dependent on how the ostracism message was communicated. In a previous study, Pelliccio (2016) contended that ostracism messages range across three dimensions of intentional/unintentional, direct/indirect, and clear/ambiguous. Interview responses revealed that the form of the ostracism message had an impact on the fluidity of the microphases. For participants who experienced ostracism messages that were more intentional, direct, and clear, the microphases were fairly succinct. For participants like Calvin, he was explicitly and directly told that he was not allowed to be on the basketball team. In Calvin's case, there is not much sense making needed because the message is directly, verbally stating an ostracism message. The target's passage through the microphases of Phase 3 was unabated. Their expectancy violation and ostracism message designation are virtually one in the same because the message is so clear. Although the microphases might be described as being discernibly different, they may be experienced as one swift emotion. This

notion suggests that the form of the ostracism message influences the time span of the meaning making process, particularly in Microphase 3.

Conversely, other participants reported receiving ostracism messages in multi-layered environments where the message was indirect or ambiguous. This required the target to do more in the ways of investigation and rationalization to figure out what took place. Steve was a young Christian man who explained a complicated story that involved several characters and different locations. Steve stated that one of his closest friends, Beth, with whom he worked at his church, had recently ended a relationship with another mutual friend. After this incident, the mutual friend started to ostracize and ignore anyone associated with Beth as an act of revenge and punishment. Steve was one of the individuals who was being ignored. In one particular interaction that took place at the church, Steve explained:

So, he was walking with his brothers and his brother's girlfriend and that's when I went up to them and said hi. He walked passed me. They lingered a little bit. I talked to his brothers for a second, and then they left.

This excerpt demonstrates a complex social interaction where there were several individuals involved that were physically moving and all communicating at the same time. This type of interaction required Steve to be fully aware of the many behaviors and messages that were taking place and to acknowledge past meaning systems in order to draw out one message and a specific meaning from the many he was simultaneously consuming. Although the ostracizer was socially engaged with two other individuals, he walked right past Steve, who attempted to offer a greeting. At the same time, Steve acknowledged the many aspects of the Phase 1 and Phase 2 meaning systems that informed the situation in that he knew Beth and the target just separated and it may have something to do with this unexpected communication. This

example demonstrates how a target may have to incorporate many levels of meaning to understand current communication, which may require more effort and time on the part of the target to rationalize the meanings they were presented with. For Steve, he had to consume the message in the moment and then factor in the many contextual elements that led up to this scenario such as the relational history of his friends. Unlike the previous example with Calvin, where he received a direct verbal ostracism message, Steve had to incorporate much more meaning making because of the indirect nature of the message and complexities of the interaction.

In another example of multi-layered messages and contexts, Sean was invited to an event but perceived the invitation as an ostracism message because other members of his group were not invited. He explained, "There's no way three of us are gonna go and two of us aren't. So it's like if you're gonna get rid of two of us, you're getting rid of all of us." In this example, although Sean was directly told by the source that was invited to the event, he considered it an ostracism message because others in his group were not invited. The moment of meaning making required the target to assess the content of the message through several meaning systems to reveal an ostracism message. Sean demonstrates that in Microphase 3, there are many meanings that a person may have to consider when assessing ostracism communication and the layers of meaning associated with the message can make it more or less difficult to immediately acknowledge communication as an ostracism message.

In conclusion, Microphase 3 is an extremely significant moment in the process of ostracism message meaning making. It is the pivotal turning point where a target labels communication as being an ostracism message. It is here that they may feel the anxiety beginning to boil up as they approach a potentially intense experience. However, before they

fully feel the pain of ostracism described by so many studies, they will do one more brief double check in Microphase 4 to ensure that they are correct in their assumption.

Microphase 4. After an individual acknowledges that they indeed received an ostracism message, they will feel a need to double check. In Microphase 4, before a target feels the pain of ostracism, they immediately attempt to confirm that the communication was correctly labeled as an ostracism message. Respondents demonstrated that the Microphase 4 double check is commonly reported and can manifest in a variety of ways. Participants explained that in face-to-face interactions, this can often manifest as an immediate verbal statement by the target, such as "Are you serious?" or "Really?" In a previously mentioned example, Annie saw an image on Facebook of all her friends together. She explained that before she fully committed to an emotional reaction, she checked with her partner who was in the room: "I was like, 'What the fuck?! [Partner] look at this! Everybody is together and they didn't invite us.' And he's like, 'Well. Your friends are assholes.'" Here, Annie sees the image and immediately recognizes the expectancy violation as an ostracism message. However, before she fully enters into the pain of being ostracized, there is one brief moment where she attempts to confirm that her assessment is correct by checking with her partner.

In another example, Vicky was at work and saw one of her coworkers inviting everyone in the cubicle to go to the cafeteria other than her, but she had headphones. So before she felt any reaction, she checked to make sure what she thought she saw was correct. She explained, "I took my headphones out…just to double check that she's not like, 'Anyone want to go?'" Microphase 4 represents the finalization of meaning making in Phase 3. It is the moment where an individual is done calculating all the pieces of the experience and are checking the math to

make sure that their conclusion is correct. It is the cliffhanger before the target falls fast into the whirlwind of emotions created by ostracism.

In conclusion, the microphases of Phase 3 represent an extremely significant stepping-stone in the process of ostracism message communication. Without the meaning making that takes place in this phase, an individual does not experience the post-ostracism phases of the process because, quite simply, they have not yet acknowledged any communication as being an ostracism message. If the communication is not perceived as an ostracism message, then it may just be considered awkward, a nuisance, an anomaly, or someone having a bad day. As a result, the pre-ostracism phases of meaning making continue to lie dormant. In order for an individual to acknowledge communication as being an ostracism message they must go through the four microphases where they consume a message, experience an expectancy violation, classify it as an ostracism message, and then reaffirm that their assessment is correct. The microphases vary in size and length. After the individual goes through all of them though, they move to the most well-studied aspect of ostracism message meaning making, which is the pain and confusion of being ostracized.

Phase 4- Reaction

Microphase 4 ends once the target confirms that they have received an ostracism message, and they immediately enter into *post-ostracism* Phases 4-7. It is in the post-ostracism phases of meaning making that the target changes, clarifies, and reframes the meanings of the experience and actively works to cope with the pain of being ostracized. The first post-ostracism, Phase 4, is when a target feels the initial shock and pain of being ostracized, reminiscent of the *reflexive stage* described by many studies on the psychological effects of ostracism (Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015; Williams & Nida, 2017). The

key characteristics of Phase 4 are that first, the target will experience ostracism specific pain, shock, and confusion. Second, the target will turn inward where they become stuck in their own inner dialogue and third, the target will ponder initial reflexive questions.

Pain and confusion. The first characteristic of Phase 4 is that a target experiences an initial shock and pain often discussed in Cyberball related research (Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015). After receiving an ostracism message, a target is so engulfed in a dissonant mental state that it can be difficult for them to access deeper level cognitions. Therefore, they report being communicatively stuck or frozen. There were many participants who described this moment in various ways, but it was prevalent in even the least significant cases of ostracism. For some, their experience of being ignored or pushed out took place on a sports team. Devon, a young football player, found out the day before a game that he was going to be benched for the rest of the season and perceived the exclusion as an ostracism message. He described the moment of receiving the message as: "It all just hit me at one time, so my head was just spinning at that time." Another participant described the moment as, "My face flushed in embarrassment. I was just like, I was dumbfounded. Like who the fuck does this? And ya know I was angry." Another participant reported Phase 4 as, "kind of like your stomach drops a little bit." Whether it was a major moment that shook the target to their core, or a subtle realization that made them uncomfortable, every participant explained that for a brief moment they felt stuck, unable to do much sense making, which suggests that one of the key characteristics of Phase 4 is that there is little meaning making other than the recognition of how they feel.

Interviews further suggested that one of the main reasons that targets were momentarily stuck was because of confusion. Whether the participant reported being sad or angry after ostracism, they always reported being confused immediately after receiving the ostracism

message. In the case of Devon, who was excluded from the starting line up on his football team, he explained, "I was sitting there thinking, 'Everybody has a bad practice. So why am I getting punished for one bad practice when I had outside stuff going on that people knew about?'" For another participant they experienced all three reactions: "I was confused. I was hurt. Yeah. I was pissed off." Another participant explained, "It was as if it was going on and when it was done I was just left confused not really knowing what was going to happen." In some instances, the confusion was brief, but for others it lasted for a long time. Olivia told a detailed story of intentional, systemic ostracism by an organization that attempted to silence her. She explained that her confusion was deep and long lasting because of its volatility.

> Within that first month I was really in a catatonic kind of state in that I was just confused. What was going on? Ya know? It really hadn't hit me, the gravity of the situation and the extent of the emotional damage that was done. I remember I just felt overwhelmingly sad and angry and tearful.

These statements demonstrate how the whirlwind of emotions and confusion that happen in Phase 4 can create a moment where there is little meaning making; the target feels the pain of ostracism but is unable to do much more than feel these emotions.

Forced inner-dialogue. The second characteristic of Phase 4 is that the target will feel forced to turn their attention towards their inner dialogue. Although they may have already been addressing their thoughts, in Phase 4 a target is unable to release from their inner dialogue. For example, Jane described an experience where she was at a learning retreat and she felt as though the teacher in charge was intentionally ostracizing her by ignoring her questions over a period of time. After she recognized that she was being ostracized, and felt the pain and confusion associated with being a target, she was forced into her inner dialogue: "I was thinking to myself,

'No one else is being treated like this. Anytime someone else has a question, it's answered. No one else deals with this. What is going on? What did I do?'" Jane demonstrates how in Phase 4 of post-ostracism meaning making, the target immediately turns their attention to their own thoughts as they begin the search for meaning. They may be engaged in other interactions, but their mind will be focused on making sense of the ostracism message because they are forced to acknowledge it and begin resolving the confusion and pain. This was particularly vivid in the case of Carlos, who saw photos on Facebook of many of his college friends at a wedding. He explained that in his Phase 4 of meaning making:

> You're pacing around. You're going about your day, your schedule, like you're normal. And then you realize you're not thinking about your schedule or what you were just doing. That's how you know it just hit. That's how you know you know you care. Now I'm thinking, 'What the fuck?'

These examples demonstrate how one of the key characteristics of Phase 4 is that a target feels an internal obligation to turn their attention inwards and be focused on their inner-dialogue surrounding the ostracism message. As Carlos demonstrates, he could not go about his normal day, because he felt compelled to resolve his thoughts surrounding the ostracism event.

Reflexive questions. The third characteristic of Phase 4 is a target will pose the first reflexive questions that they will answer in later phases of meaning making. Predominately, these questions were a form of "Why?" Jackie was a young woman who broke up with her significant other Don. However, she worked together at a summer camp with Don and they saw each other regularly. Don decided to intentionally ostracize her from every conversation and interaction that took place. As these moments happened, she explained that she would ask herself reflexive questions: "I would just be standing there at the counter, and I just remember

thinking, 'Why am I here?'" Steve, the participant who reported being ignored at church by a friend, explained that when these instances happened, he had reflexive questions as well: "I was like, 'What's his deal? Why did he walk right past me?' I was trying to be friendly. I didn't think anything was happening." Others reported reflexive questions such as, "Why can't I be a part of your study group?...Why wouldn't you have multiple people there?" These questions represent the first moments of post-ostracism message meaning making as they take place after the reception and confirmation of an ostracism message. They are the intrapersonal manifestations of the confusion and pain of being ostracized. During this time, the target is incapable of offering any answers to these questions, as they are still in a state of shock. In Phase 4, these reflexive questions are simply expressed internally, but not reasoned or understood.

In conclusion, Phase 4 is a reflexive moment of pain and confusion. It represents a timeframe where the target will turn their attention to their inner dialogue, feel the initial pain and confusion of being ostracized, and pose the first questions related to meaning making. Although one could argue the confirmation questions in Microphase 4 are the first moments of meaning making, it is not until the ostracism message is confirmed that one feels the full reaction of being ostracized and are able to start making sense of what took place post-ostracism. Reflections in Microphase 4 ask whether the communication *did* just happen, whereas the reflexive questions in Phase 4 ask *why* it just happened. After this experience, the target will begin to investigate meanings in Phase 5.

Phase 5- Investigation

Phase 5 consists of the period after the individual feels the immediate pain and is able to begin rationally and logically comprehending the experience that took place. Here they look back on events that transpired and begin to genuinely understand them. They are also capable of

calming their mental pain. It is in this time that individuals also go through some of what Williams (2009) refers to as the *reflective stage*, where the target copes with the negative feelings of being ostracized. In terms of meaning making, in Phase 5, targets begin to understand new communication and how it is related to the ostracism message. Their lens of meaning is now altered by the ostracism message. Phase 5 has four main characteristics. First, it is the beginning of the investigation into the reflexive questions from Phase 4. Second, the target proposes new questions to clarify meaning. Third, the target looks back on old communication and modifies meanings. Finally, the target may begin to experience post-tremors.

Target begins investigating. First, Phase 5 represents the beginning of the investigation into the reflexive questions and confusion that arise in Phase 4. Up to this point, the target is still overcome by the reaction to being ostracized but in Phase 5 they begin to reflect and investigate meanings. One way that targets reported doing this is by seeking out new information from various sources. For example, after Steve was repeatedly ostracized by a former friend, he decided to reach out to others in his social circle to gather information about the meanings of the communication: "I talked to his brother's girlfriend, who I'm really good friends with and that's when…she told me about why exactly he was doing this." Here, Steve expresses the beginning of the meaning making investigation where he actively sought out more knowledge from a third party. Through this investigation and collection of information, he was able to make a more informed conclusion about the meanings related to the ostracism message and recognize that he was being intentionally ostracized by the source.

Others described similar meaning making strategies but went directly to the source of ostracism for more information. This happened in the case of Sean, who reported being ostracized from an event even though he received an invitation: "So she tells me this happened

and she's in tears and I was like let me talk to [him] and see what I can find out. So I called him and…" Sean went on to explain a long and detailed conversation with the ostracizer that turned aggressive, with heavy personal insults directed at Sean. It is through this active investigation that Sean was able to accumulate more information about the source, which yielded new insights that would later help him solidify some answers to his initial questions. Although participants reported different methods to probe for information, each one made efforts to investigate their pain and confusion in Phase 5.

Proposing detailed questions. The second characteristic of Phase 5 is that the target assembles more detailed questions related to specific elements of the experience that would (ideally) be answered later. In Phase 4 questions are broad and reflexive. In Phase 5, new questions arise that are more focused. Tony was a middle-aged man who did not identify with any religion but lived in a community that was predominantly Amish. He was close with his neighbors and offered to give one of them a car ride to various locations in preparation for an Amish event. After they were done driving around, Tony walked with his neighbor to the front door of the event and was passively and nonverbally ostracized by the two Amish neighbors, because non-Amish people were not welcomed. When asked what questions and inner dialogue took place following the experience, Tony explained, "On one hand you're like, 'Oh I thought I knew these guys better' or like, 'Did I judge these people wrong?' or like, 'Have I been investing my stock in the wrong people? Like maybe I thought these people were better than they were.'" This passage demonstrates how in Phase 5 the questions became more specific to the ostracism message in that situation. Tony proposed new questions specifically about his relationship with the ostracizer rather than broad reflexive questions of why it happened. These Phase 5 questions

are more directed at particular aspects of the interaction. Another participant described this moment as:

> I'm just like, 'What is the reason behind this or is there a reason? Am I crazy? Am I making this shit up in my own head? Should I say something? No I don't want to be drama. I don't want to like start anything. We're fine. She's good. And then she got pregnant so that was like another thing too I didn't want to bother her with that.

As the target moves forward in meaning making, the questions that arise in Phase 5 will become the focus of further investigation in Phase 6. This moment is important in post-ostracism meaning making as it is the time period where the target begins to funnel their questions toward more specific notions in an effort to begin making real sense of what took place and what communication means.

Reappraising previous meanings. The third characteristic of Phase 5 is that the target is now able to look back to earlier communication related to the ostracism event and change previously established meanings, reappraising their interpretation. Upon reflection, a target can change pre-tremors to ostracism messages or other meanings. They begin to reframe communication of the past through their new meaning system that acknowledges the ostracism message. This is particularly salient in stories where a target receives many minor and ambiguous ostracism messages before realizing they were being ostracized. For Jackie, who was repeatedly ignored during conversations and workplace interactions by a former significant other, she had to look back and change many of her preconceived notions of what took place:

> I made excuses for him just because I didn't want him to be a bad guy I guess, and I didn't want the situation to unfold like that. So I think I really made excuses and was like,

'How would I react if I was him in this situation?' I probably wouldn't want to be around

me either. But then as it kept going on I was like, 'Alright…this is just ridiculous.'

Jackie demonstrates that meanings will change overtime and that the beginning of this change

starts in Phase 5 when the participant is able to look back to assess past communication.   In

another example, a participant described this process as: "It wasn't until after it happened that I

connected the dots…they're acting like this because of what happened in the group chat and

they're just basically building this all up over the entire year." These excerpts demonstrate how

previous interactions that were once classified as being miscommunications or someone having a

bad day will now be understood as informing the meaning of the ostracism message and as pre-

tremors. A new network of meaning is created and modified in Phase 5.

Post-tremors. Finally, the fourth aspect of Phase 5 is that *post-tremors* can begin to

arise. Post-tremors share some similarities with pre-tremors in the sense that they are minor

interactions, observations, or communication related to the ostracism message. In relation to the

Richter scale metaphor, they are moments that force the target to exert energy in relation to the

ostracism message. There are three distinct characteristics of post-tremors. First, they take place

after the ostracism message is recognized. Second, they force a target to draw their attention

back to the ostracism message, and third, they have a severity threshold that differentiates them

from a new ostracism message.

The first characteristic of a post-tremor is that it takes place after the ostracism message

is confirmed. Phase 4 is turbulent. Targets are so lost in their inner dialogue, confusion, and

immediate reactions that it is difficult to do much of anything else. Because of this, post-tremors

are not as easily recognized. Therefore, Phase 5 is the first moment where a target perceives

communication as post-tremors that influence their meaning making. Participants reflected this

idea by stating that the post-tremors came later on or after the ostracism message was received. For example, Rhonda was not invited to a family-friend's event. Sometime later she got new information that made her think about the experience again. "I still never heard back from her. So I took that as I was being eliminated from the group. Later on I found out that all the other sister friends in the circle were invited." In this example, the original ostracism message was that Rhonda never heard back from the ostracizer. Rhonda explains that *later on* she experienced a post-tremor when she found out that she was the only person not invited. Participants regularly described post-tremors in a way that reflected a passage of time after the ostracism message was communicated. This suggests that post-tremors do not happen until Phase 5 when targets begin their investigation into the meaning of the communication and when they are not explicitly focused on the emotional reaction.

The second defining characteristic of a post-tremor is that it forces the target's attention back to the meanings of the ostracism message. Even if a target is trying to avoid thinking about the ostracism event, a post-tremor forces them to acknowledge the message again. For example, Lola was a college student who explained that she was not invited to a study group with two of her close friends and that she found out during a conversation with one of them. After the incident occurred, she still had to study for the upcoming test and during these times, she thought about the ostracism message again. "I mean for a day or two I'd come back to the thought of like, 'This feels really crappy' or any time that I thought about doing the midterm, it was like, 'It would be nice to be studying with other people.'" Lola's story demonstrates that a post-tremor causes a target to think about the ostracism message again. Because the act of studying was closely related to the original meaning of the ostracism message, it forced Lola to think about the

events that took place again and gave her minor negative emotions. The key aspect is that the post-tremor forced her attention to the message.

For another participant, they had to continue to interact with their ostracizer, which brought on several post-tremors: "He's still very awkward and it feel like he holds this grudge against me for something I didn't do. So I would like to get past this but I am reminded of this every time I have to interact with this person." In this example the participant wants to move on from the ostracism experience, but because they have to interact with the individual in other settings, they continue to experience post-tremors that force them to think about what happened, the way they felt, and to continue assessing their meaning systems.

The final characteristic of a post-tremor is that it has a threshold of significance. In short, if a post-tremor becomes too significant or intense, then it has the potential to be perceived as a new ostracism message, and as discussed later, the process of meaning making would start over at Phase 4 because one received a new ostracism message that requires meaning making. This would essentially create a loop in meaning making that continuously creates pain and adds to the experiences that require sense making. The threshold of significance with post-ostracism communication is largely based on the perception of the target. As previously mentioned, Steve reported that a former friend was repeatedly ostracizing him. As time passed, Steve became more settled with the meanings of the interaction. Months after the initial ostracism message, the ostracizer tried to communicate what would appear to be an ostracism message to Steve, but it had little effect. Steve explained,

> I had walked up and I was sitting down with most of my very good friends and he kind of
> came up and sat down. This was like 15 minutes into the game. I was trying to be
> civilized and I was like, 'Hey. What's up?' and he didn't say anything to me.

Although this non-response could be perceived as a new ostracism message, Steve explained that it was insignificant to him. When asked why he viewed the message this way, Steve responded,

> I think because it's been months. The most recent was within the last month but I kind of got used to it and at that point…I've kind of wrote him off already. So, I think I've had a lot of time, and I've been out of the country. I've grown myself.

This interview excerpt shows the agency of post-tremors and that post-tremors have a threshold of importance. If communication does not exceed this threshold, then it will be considered a post-tremor, even if the message attempts to communicate ostracism. For Steve, although he was ignored, it was simply a post-tremor that he quickly got over. For others though, when messages exceeded the threshold, participants reported ostracism message repetition, which sent them in a different direction of meaning making that will be discussed later.

In conclusion, Phase 5 is the beginning of conscious reflection and investigation, where the target is able to process the pain, confusion, and questions that emerged in Phase 4. There is still residual pain but the target is starting to work through it. New questions form as the target investigates the communication that took place, and post-tremors may arise as new interactions and communication force a target to think about what happened. Although most participants had moved beyond this phase, there were four participants whose stories showed that they were still in Phase 5 during the interview. For example, Mya reported that she was still asking broader level questions, and did not demonstrate that she had many answers for what the ostracism experience meant. She was also still coping with much of the hurt from ostracism. Each of the participants who spoke from a Phase 5 perspective were at a surface level of meaning making, and were still dealing with much of the reaction in Phase 4, but had begun their investigation into the meaning of the ostracism message. This investigation of meanings in Phase 5 sets the stage

for Phase 6 where the target will probe and modify meanings as they search for a deeper level understanding of what took place.

Phase 6- Probing

Phase 6 of the process of ostracism message meaning making embodies the time period when a target begins shaping deeper levels of meaning making and addresses previous questions. At this point, the target has broadly dealt with the reflexive pain, and has already started the investigation into their initial questions. Phase 6 differs from Phase 5 in that a target begins to probe for a rich and deeper level understanding of how all the meanings they have encountered fit together. Their questions are more focused on specific elements and they are beginning to formulate a full perspective of what took place. Also, during interviews, targets largely discussed their stories in the past tense when they reached Phase 6. They explained what *happened* rather than what *is happening* because much of the ostracism message communication had already taken place. They may still be disturbed or resentful of what transpired, but their perception is much clearer and they were able to state with some level of confidence how they feel about what took place. There are two defining characteristics of Phase 6 of ostracism message meaning making. First, many of the questions that arise from Phase 5 are answered in some way and second, targets are able to reflect upon previous communication and change previous meanings at a deeper level than Phase 5.

Answers to previous questions. First, many of the questions that arose in Phase 5 are answered in Phase 6. Although the individual may not have specific or correct answers to every question, they are much closer to a conclusion that can help resolve their thoughts and emotions. For example, Rhonda was not invited to an event with family friends, and stated:

I think I have been somewhat questioning the strength of my circle and if my circle really intended to be long term or if it's that some things are seasonal and don't necessarily continue forever. People grow up. They have their own lives. They do their own things. They go their own way. I'm thinking that we may be at that point in our lives.

This example demonstrates that in Phase 6 targets have more firm answers for the questions projected in Phase 5. Rhonda conveyed a mild level of uncertainty, and confusion, but she was much closer to a plausible answer for the questions she was thinking about in Phase 5 such as how one of the bystanders of the situation felt, why she was blocked on social media, and whether she needed to change her perception of her friends.

In another example, a young black man named Andre explained that he received new information that helped him settle some of his questions from Phase 5. In particular, he was ostracized by a former significant other from family functions, and one of the main questions he was contemplating up to this point was whether his race played a role in his exclusion.

She officially breaks it off and says, 'We're not talking. We're not doing anything anymore. We're going to move on.' Three weeks later she puts a Facebook post up with her father and this new guy…It just made it more known that she wanted to be with someone who she could satisfy her family with: a white guy. Because it was a white guy. It was pretty devastating. That was probably the one time in my life where I was like this happened because I'm black. You can pull the race card in different situations and you could say, 'No that's not the reason why this happened.' That was clearly why that went on.

This passage depicts how in Phase 6 a target answers their previous questions and conveys a deeper level understanding of the meanings of the events. Leading up to this moment, Andre had

some uncertainty about why he was ostracized from family events and thought that it could be for several reasons. However, Andre explains in his interview that when he saw the photo on social media, he became fully certain that every ostracism message he experienced was because of his race. This answered many of the questions he proposed in Phase 5 allowing him to probe deeper into the meanings that took place and move him toward a solidified understanding of the entire event.

Reappraising on a deeper level. Second, targets continue to reflect on previous events and change meanings based on new information. This is functionally similar to what may take place in Phase 5, but in Phase 6 there are more in depth, long lasting, and impactful changes in meaning. The changes in meaning are not as superficial as connecting a pre-tremor to an ostracism message, but rather connecting groups of behaviors to larger and deeper meaning systems. For example, Barb, a 62-year-old grandmother, told a story of ostracism that took place two decades before the interview that was still vivid in her mind. She explained that she was an active member of a church in a small rural town where she once lived. Outside of church, she made a personal decision that members of the congregation discovered and disagreed with. One day when she entered the church she got many dirty looks, and cold shoulders from people who were once cordial to her. As she entered a back hallway, a leader approached her to directly tell her that the church did not approve of the decision she made and that eventually she would be ostracized from the church. Well after receiving this ostracism message, she would face more post-tremors, ostracism messages, and challenging post-ostracism coping over the next several weeks. She explained that now, she sees the event as a learning experience and is over it but in order to get there, in Phase 6 she had to actively probe deeper into the meanings of what took

place and address specific notions. Barb explained the thoughts she went through while in Phase 6 of the process:

> The group leader came up and was the only one…So it told me that it wasn't the fact that they were out against me; they had a fear for themselves that they might be put in the same situation as me and they know they wouldn't be strong enough to take it or didn't want to confront that. So it's best just to side gate, turn your shoulder, and go on and drop it and never talk to me ever again because they're off the hook. They didn't say anything. They didn't do anything.

Here, Barb explained specific elements of the communication that took place. Simultaneously, she connected these occurrences to broader positions about the nature of human interaction. This reflection revealed a change in the meaning of the pre-tremors as well. The cold shoulders that originally signaled to her that something strange was happening are now understood as a symbol of human fear and the inability to go against groups. She explained why the congregation did what they did, rather than questioning their reasons. She connected this notion to broader ideas. This moment captures the deeper level meaning changes that take place in Phase 6. In Phase 5 they are more surface changes, whereas in Phase 6 they are multifaceted connections with deeper roots and conceptual relationships.

In conclusion, Phase 6 of the process of ostracism communication reflects a period where a target is able to effectively reflect on the events that took place and explain them in a more detailed fashion that offers deep connections of meaning. They have significantly resolved their initial distress, they have more answers to their previously purported questions, and they are able to reflect back onto previous meanings and change them. This time can certainly range in length and depth. About half of the interviewees met the criteria to be categorized as being in Phase 6

of meaning making (i.e., being more settled with the reflexive reaction, answering previous questions, and deeper level reappraisals). For example, Rose was ostracized by a coworker only two weeks before the interview, and explained that although she was processing the experience at a deep level and much of the reaction to ostracism had worn off, she still had a few reservations about future interactions and that she was not able to posit the experience within the broader context of her life. She was settled, but still unsure about some meanings associated with the message. Once a target is able to feel more settled with their understanding though, they move onto the final phase of meaning making where they will begin to the see the experience in relation to their entire life.

Phase 7- Resolving

Phase 7 is the final phase of ostracism message communication. It represents the time where the target has little to no interaction with the ostracism message or ostracizer anymore, largely because significant time has passed. In Phase 7 of meaning making, targets explain how the meaning of the ostracism message is positioned within the broader framework of their entire life's meanings. This may result in an extremely different understanding of the original ostracism message. There are several key characteristics of Phase 7. First, the target reports that the pain and questions associated with ostracism have subsided, unlike Phase 6 where there are still remnants. Second, the target is able to posit the event within the broader context of their entire life, not just one part. Finally, the target sees the ostracism message through a final meaning, often characterized as some kind of learning experience.

Pain is settled. First, the primary characteristic of Phase 7 is that the pain of the event is almost entirely settled. Although the target may still experience post-tremors that make them think about how much they were hurting, they do not think about the experience much. In each

interview, participants were asked how they currently feel about the situation and if it still affects them. For participants who were in Phase 7, they expressed great change in how they once felt. Martin was a 32-year-old black man who told a story that took place roughly four years ago. He was an active volunteer for a local high school sports team who acted as a mentor and coach to the young players. He was closely connected with the staff, until one day he found out that they hired someone for the Junior Varsity coaching position. He was shocked that he was never informed that a position was open, and felt ostracized by the coaching staff that they did not let him know about it. Martin explained his reaction at the moment it took place as, "My heart dropped out to my stomach." However, later in the interview when asked where he currently stands with the experience he explained, "I'm fine with it. I'm always questioning what's going on [with the team] but me personally, I'm over it. I'm not bitter about it. I want to see them succeed. They are in dire need of help right now." This example shows how in Phase 7 a target will explain that the ostracism message does not make them hurt anymore and that their reflexive emotions are entirely in the past. For Martin, the initial reaction that made his "heart drop" has subsided and now he simply wants his local people to succeed.

For another participant, when asked how they feel about the situation today they responded, "What? Um… It happened." This participant reflected on the event as it if had little to no significance in their life, despite them also stating that in the moment they received the ostracism message they were hurt and felt a rush. In Phase 7, the pain is gone, and although targets can look back and experience a mild tremor from reflecting on the pain, it does not affect them in their daily life at all.

Connecting to life course. Second, in Phase 7 a target explains how the ostracism message influenced their life. In Phase 5 and 6 a target is still working to settle their perspective

and have yet to really contemplate how the experience is related to their life, but in Phase 7, they are able to explain this connection. For example, Calvin was a 34-year-old black man who told a story from over a decade ago where he was ignored by a coach of a sports team who did not like him. During the interview, I asked whether this experience had any influence on who he is today. Calvin responded:

> Definitely. I mean, I say children are our future. Teach them well and show them the way. And I volunteered a lot when I was an undergrad. After I graduated high school, I went back to my high school and I coached JV for free. I volunteered my time. I did that for 3 years because I wanted young men to grow up with an understanding that they're not out there all alone. I mean someone cares, at least one person.

Calvin demonstrates that a target will reflect on the ostracism message and give it a meaning relative to their entire life. They are no longer confused as to why they were a target, but instead have generally accepted the events and understand how they fit into all the meanings of their life. Calvin shows that he used the experience as the basis for giving back to others, positing the ostracism message of the past as an important moment that helped reinforce and produce present day meaning systems.

Finalized meaning. Finally, in Phase 7, targets propose a final meaning for the experience, which is often described as a learning experience or as an uncontrollable past event. Even though a target may have felt extremely hurt at one point, if they are in Phase 7, they will speak about being ostracized in two different ways.

First, participants who were in Phase 7 explained that they felt less of an urge to make sense of the situation and decided they had enough information to bring the event to a final meaning. This process was frequently reflected in a statement that was said by several

participants: "It is what it is." This phrase echoed the finalization of meaning making, where participants were not pleased with the outcome, but felt they could move on. For example, although Calvin explained that the ostracism experience positively influenced him, he still did not agree with how it was done. He stated, "I think that he just generally doesn't like me and that's kind of the feeling I've gotten over the last few years, which it is what it is." Martin, who also did not agree with the events that took place stated, "For me, it's politics. It is what it is." This statement was echoed in several interviews by individuals who felt they had a strong enough grasp on the situation, but still did not approve of what took place. They were not happy with the outcome or the way that the events transpired but felt that they had settled on the answers to their questions. They were not thinking about why they were ostracized anymore, and had already moved on in their lives. As a result, they would say something to the effect of "It is what it is."

The second way that participants reported finalizing their meaning making was by positioning the event as an experience that helped them learn. This was the highest level of interpretation because it allowed participants to offer a final positive reappraisal of the ostracism message. For example, Joe was a business owner that faced hardship when he first entered his career. He took over a business that his parents once owned and explained that he was ostracized by people he knew in the business as a type of organizational hazing. The event took place 13 years before the interview and when asked how the event affects him today, he stated:

> It affects me in the sense that I try not to do that to people who are coming up that are new in the business. I try not to do that in general. I try to be more caring and thoughtful. Business is tough because its super competitive and ya know, it is winner take all but at the same time, especially our business, it's in a transitional period to when

people were total pricks and now it's becoming more thoughtful and I'm trying to

become more thoughtful myself. A lot of that's because of this situation and ones like it

that I've been involved in.

Joe helps to demonstrate how in Phase 7 a target explains that a once painful experience taught

them a lesson that changed the way they do things in the present day. He used the experience of

being ostracized to change meanings in his entire life, and in turn altered his behaviors.

In another example, Tony, who was ostracized from an Amish event, saw his experience

of ostracism as a lesson about human interaction:

It made me realize just because you're being ostracized, you don't have to take it like it's

the worst thing ever…it's like when people get mad when it's just men doing something

together, or just people of a certain race doing something together, or whatever. It's just

them doing their thing. It's not them being rude to me.

Tony took the meaning of the original ostracism message, which was painful, confusing and

unsettling, and transformed it into a new meaning. Tony and Joe both spoke about their

ostracism events as learning experiences that they articulated with confidence. They both

demonstrated that they did not need to think about it more, as he had already given the message a

finalized meaning. Leading up to Phase 7, targets have much more difficulty doing this as they

are still coping and investigating meanings. In Phase 6 there are still some unanswered questions

and emotions. Once enough time has passed for the target to comprehend and deal with all of

the emotion and communication, they are able to come to a conclusion about the experience,

often reflected as a lesson they learned.

In conclusion Phase 7 is the final phase in the process of ostracism message meaning

making where targets are completely settled with a message that previously gave them

confusion, and pain. A target reaches Phase 7 first when the pain has subsided, second, when the target discusses the ostracism message within the broader context of their entire life, third, when the questions and confusion have subsided, and finally when the target can offer a final concluding meaning, which is often, but not always, expressed as a type of life lesson or learning experience. Phase 7 embodies the end of the story. Fourteen of the interviewees met the criteria for Phase 7 of meaning making because they spoke of the situation as something that was resolved, and they could reflect on the whole experience in relation to their life. For some, like Vicky, it was because the event was so minor that her reaction was very brief. For others, it was because the event took place decades earlier and they felt they had enough time to manage a once extremely hurtful experience.

Overview of RQ1 Results

In conclusion, through a grounded theory approach that looked for specific common critical junctures in the responses of targets of ostracism, I found seven distinct phases of ostracism message reception and meaning making. Each phase is comprised of unique qualities that differentiate them from the others. It is not until a target displays the characteristics of a particular phase that they can move on towards the end point of Phase 7. As a target moves through the phases, meanings carry over from each previous phase, and are incorporated into present day sense making. The seven-phase process helps to demonstrate that ostracism message meaning making is indeed a process, and that meanings are not stagnant. Rather, they are ever changing. A target is constantly incorporating old and new communication to understand the meanings of ostracism messages. They are in a constant state of awareness, cognition, and investigation as they attempt to resolve the confusion and pain of being the target of ostracism in order to move to a finalized meaning in Phase 7. Even in cases that ostracism researchers would

characterize as minor ostracism events, individuals still went through the seven phases of meaning making. Therefore, the seven-phase process helps to illuminate the key turning points or critical junctures in ostracism communication and demonstrate that being ostracized involves much more than simply not being included and feeling hurt. From the perspective of the receiver, there are many levels of meaning making and comprehension that exist.

RQ2- What are the key elements that influence a target's process of ostracism message reception and meaning making?

Thus far I have discussed the seven-phase model of ostracism message communication from the target's perspective. Research Question 2 sought to understand the factors that influence this process. Interviews revealed many variables that may affect the model, but the factors outlined in this section represent the most prominent features that should be considered when assessing any ostracism experience because they have a significant impact on how targets make sense of ostracism messages throughout the process. These were revealed in interviews by the frequency they were discussed by a participant, the number of participants who referenced the factor across all interviews, or the significance of its influence in the stories told by participants.

In the following section I will discuss each of the eleven factors through three broader categories: intrapersonal factors, social factors, and structural factors (see Figure 4). Intrapersonal factors represent the elements that are related to the target's personal cognitions and include *self-esteem*, *goals*, and *rationalization through alternative contexts*. Second, social factors consist of elements that are related to social interactions and include *perception of relational closeness, relational expectations, message severity, repetition, and reconciliation*.

Finally, structural factors embody the elements that communicators exist within and include *the workplace, culture, and race.*

Intrapersonal Level Factors.

 Self-esteem. First, self-esteem is a variable often discussed in ostracism literature and is defined as the subjective evaluation of one's own personal worth (Orth & Robins, 2014). Williams (2017) posits self-esteem as being one of the four psychological needs threatened by ostracism. Likewise, Chen and Teng (2012) found that an individual with low self-esteem will experience more distress post-ostracism than others. O'Driscoll and Jarry (2015) found that women who connect their body image to self-esteem face severe reactions when they are rejected based on body weight. Interviewees in this study showed that self-esteem could be a major factor in the 7 Phase process of ostracism meaning making as well. Not many participants discussed self-esteem explicitly or through like terms, but the notion was embedded in their responses by making related claims about who they are as a person. The ones that did discuss self-esteem though, portrayed it as an extremely significant element in the process of meaning making. For example, Lola was not invited to a study group and throughout the interview she discussed the importance that self-esteem played in her perception of the message.

  I don't have a very strong concept of self. I have a very eroded self-esteem and it becomes very apparent that even small, little things like this can make me feel so bad for several days…That's what it feels like to me. It feels like a, 'We don't want you. You don't meet the criteria. You're not good enough. You don't have the skill set enough' or, 'you would bring something to the group that would be detrimental' and I don't want to be seen as a detriment to my friend.

This passage depicts the internal dialogue of an individual with low self-esteem making sense of a post-ostracism message. Lola shows that when a target is going through the rationalizing and coping in Phases 4, 5, 6, and 7, she is fixated on the how these meanings connect with her sense of self. Individuals who discussed having low self-esteem reported similar experiences, as they had more trouble rationalizing the situation and exerted more effort towards meaning making then others. In Phase 4, the experience hurts more and she is more confused. In Phase 5 and 6, she will think more about what this experience says about her, and be more focused on the fragility of self and lastly, in Phase 7, she might reflect on the experience in terms of how it influenced her sense of self. Through each phase, self-esteem is incorporated into meaning making.

In another example, Claire explained that she still struggled with the implications of the several years she was ostracized from her peers to be placed in a special education room. She explained:

> The self confidence I still continually struggle [with], not physically but the
>
> academic…just basic things like sending an email, ya know?...Or even trying to articulate
>
> my ideas or communication at work sometimes I feel like it, in a way, is holding me
>
> back.

Claire further demonstrates how one's sense of self can continue to influence meaning making throughout the process of ostracism message reception. Even though the experiences took place over a decade before the interview, she still struggles with what it all meant.

Goals. Interviewees frequently discussed the importance of their desired goals in the process of meaning making. A goal-based perspective of communication suggests that we communicate purposefully to achieve personal, desired outcomes and that certain situations

produce certain goals (Hample, 2016). Likewise, participants explained that when these personal goals were not achieved, it often led to the revelation of an ostracism message. For example, Sean was ostracized from a family event, and the significance of the situation rested on his desire to be with family.

> Every family has their problems in a larger context of things but it's like, here was a wedding. Weddings are usually tied to [the idea that] we all come together to celebrate these two people, and you know? In that moment we weren't family anymore. He cut us out from that whole family dynamic.

Here, Sean explained that the significance of the situation created a desired outcome of inclusion, and because of its importance, the ostracism message was perceived differently. Sean's meaning making process required specific attention to his goals, particularly in Phase 3 of meaning making. It could be that if Sean was not invited to a family picnic or a night out at the movies, he would not have responded in such a manner, but the significance of the wedding and the implications associated with it suggested that his goal was to be at the wedding. Because he was denied the ability to reach this goal, the message was perceived as an ostracism message and created hurt.

In another example, Vicky described a scenario at work where there was a special event in the cafeteria. She overheard conversations that they were giving out brownies and she was excited. Vicky works in a cubicle section where there are about six other employees. One of her coworkers stood up and asked everyone in the section if they wanted to go get brownies, but did not acknowledge Vicky. During the interview, Vicky explained that under normal circumstances she prefers to be left alone and not talk to people at work: "I don't want to be her friend and I don't want to walk around with her needlessly." However, because of the significance and

uniqueness of the brownie event, she established a goal of attaining a brownie. As a result, she took notice of how her coworker was communicating. Vicky explained that this was solely because of the brownie: "I actually wanted something from this little event. I wanted to go to this event." Vicky shows how situations can produce specific interaction goals and that they can significantly influence the meaning making process. Even something as simple as the desire to attain a brownie can influence an individual's perspective so that they perceive messages as ostracism that they would otherwise not notice. Vicky preferred to be ignored, but because of the significance of the situation, she established a communicative goal and her interpretations of communication changed.

Rationalization through alternative contexts. Context also helped targets rationalize alternative outcomes during the coping process. Here, context embodies the circumstances in which the message took place. Many participants explained that "in a different situation" the message would mean something completely different. The thought process of comparing alternative scenarios was a factor used by many participants to assess and explain the meanings of the ostracism message. Marco is a young man of Italian descent who recently graduated from high school. He told a detailed story of how one of his friends was accused of deviant behavior at a party during that past school year. Marco decided to stand up for his friend, and shortly afterwards he was ostracized by a large network of 18 friends who disagreed with them. He had much to think about in the post-ostracism phases, and explained that thinking of alternative contexts helped him cope and probe meanings.

> I still had my best friend, but if someone only had that group of friends and they lost all
>
> of them, I feel like it would hurt them more. It would hurt me if I didn't have anybody to
>
> talk to. I know that would hurt. Then a different scenario: if I never went to the party and

I was not really good friends with him, and said hi to my friends and they didn't say hi

back then I would kind of be a little more worried. Like, 'Why aren't they saying hi to

me? Did I do something?'

This passage demonstrates how some targets reported comparing the ostracism event to a different context to understand the meaning further. By doing a comparison in Phase 5, 6, and 7 of meaning making, it allowed targets to probe deeper into their investigation of the ostracism message's meaning and become more settled with their understanding of what took place. For Marco, this was an important function post-ostracism because it gave him an alternative perspective to understand the event and meanings.

Social Level Factors.

> **Perception of relational closeness.** The perceived relational closeness of target and ostracizer had a major impact on meaning making. Close relationships can be understood here as individuals who are past surface level contact and exist as relational partners who share mutuality and interdependence (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). For twelve of the participants, they were ostracized by someone who they considered family or a close friend. The perceived closeness of the relationship made post-ostracism meaning making more complicated as they had to factor in the significance of the relationship into their rationalizations. For example, Mya was a young woman who had a string of minor events that culminated in the revelation of an ostracism message from her closest friend. Mya explained that she would frequently try to meet up with her friend but was constantly given the run around. One day, Mya found pictures on social media suggesting that her friend was still going out, even though Mya thought she was busy. The closeness of the friendship played an important role in Jen's meaning making.

When I have those experiences with someone who is supposed to be my best friend, it's really hard to kind of like let go I guess because it's just surprising. I didn't expect any of this to happen. When it first started I didn't realize that something was up and I wasn't sure because of her depression and anxiety situation and everyone told me to give her space. So maybe I'm a little overboard and maybe I'm just trying to be annoying but I just thought we were continuing to have the relationship that we had. So it's very interesting to see how maybe that's what has sparked her pushing away from me but like I said I feel like I haven't changed. I don't know what it is.

This response demonstrates how the relationship of communicators can be a major factor in post-ostracism meaning making. Mya described an ostracism event that took place a few days before the interview and she appeared to still be working through coping and probing meanings in Phase 5. Her struggle to understand the ostracism messages was largely complicated by the relationship of target and source. Mya knew that something strange was happening, but the communication was coming from "someone who is supposed to be my best friend." This aspect made it much more difficult her to make sense of the communication she was receiving in Phase 5 because she constantly had to filter the communication through the relational meaning system that she forged with the source.

In other cases, interviewees described ostracizers as being distant others, strangers or acquaintances. This was still a contributing factor in their meaning making. For example, Vernon reported frequent and visible ostracism messages from his significant other's roommate. He explained, "It would be hurtful if it was somebody I care about like my [sibling] or a long-term friend or someone like that, but it's not like that because it's kind of like an acquaintance doing it to me." Vernon went on to explain that although the roommate frequently treated him

like he was invisible, it did not affect him much in the long term. The relationship was a primary variable in deeming the ostracism message as insignificant.

In other cases, though, participants reported being ostracized by a distant other and it still had major negative effects. Isabella had an interaction at work where a total stranger gave her the cold shoulder and silent treatment. During the interview, Isabella was visibly distraught and broke down in tears several times as she reflected on the experience that took place in the past month. The message was extremely hurtful, but the ostracizer was a stranger. She explained, "In that area there isn't many Hispanic people. So I'm pretty much the only colored person there. There's clients that come in and they could care less for me." Here the relationship was factored into the broader idea of racism, and it made her hurt more in the sense that even strangers will ostracize her. The major element of Isabella's interpretation of the ostracism message was rooted in race, but the relationship of communicators added to her perspective. Mya, Vernon, and Isabella help to demonstrate that relational closeness or distance mattered, but in a variety of ways. Regardless of how it influences though, the relationship of the ostracizer and the target was always considered in the meaning making process.

Relational expectations. Interviews revealed that the type of relationship between source and target had a major impact on what a target expected from a source. According to EVT, how someone perceives a relationship with another influences their communicative expectation but also can impact whether they view communication as being positively or negatively valenced (Burgoon, 1993; Johnson, 2012; White 2015). One participant talked about the significance of the sibling relationship during ostracism and how it influenced expectations: "I think this is why I was more mad with [my sister] then anybody because to me it was like, you're my sister and you're supposed to be looking out for me." Here the participant's sister was

expected to make the target aware of social events and invite her based on their relationship and the communicative expectations. As a result, an ostracism message emerged from the preconceived notions found in the pre-ostracism phases and relational expectations. In another example, Jane explained that she held communicative expectations based on the relationship between student and teacher that a teacher should openly communicate with students and actively include them in class.

> I understand the dynamics of making fun of each other in a friendly way, but there has to be another side of that which is that you can have real conversations with people and have respect for them and realize when is an appropriate time to pick on people and when it isn't and I felt like I only got one side of that which if your teaching your class and a student is asking you questions you should answer. That is not a time to joke around or make fun of them.

Jane explained what the teacher *should* be doing, based on their expectations of the student/teacher relationship. When those expectations of inclusion and response were violated, the communication was perceived as an ostracism message. The relationship can distinguish what messages a target perceives as ostracism in Microphase 1 of Phase 3. As she moved through the post-ostracism phases, she continued to acknowledge how this relationship affected the final meanings. In terms of pre-tremors, these expectations can narrow the focus of what a person perceives as being ostracism and what is simply an abnormal form of communication. In Jane's case, because she held an expectation that teachers openly communicate with students, she perceived the silence as an ostracism message. Whereas, if she was riding on crowded subway, asked a stranger a question, and got no response, she may not react in such a way because there is an expectation that people do not necessarily want to interact with anyone on the

subway. Therefore, it may just be a perceived as a type of pre-tremor and not an ostracism message.

Message severity. Williams (2017) states that ostracism ranges in severity from simply being left out of a conversation to being physically cast out of society. Here, ostracism message severity can be compared to transgression severity (Kelley & Waldron, 2005) in that it is the perceived level of social/relational damage or threat that a message can have to the target. This notion can be incorporated into the seven-phase model of meaning making (see Figure 1), in that the jagged *energy line* that runs through the model is metaphorically based on the line that is created by a seismograph that measures earthquake magnitude. The height of the line generally represents the amount of mental and physical energy a target must exert in relation to the ostracism message. The severity of the ostracism message is represented by the length and height of the model. If it is more or less severe, the amount of time, energy, and magnitude will vary. For people who experienced subtle and more trivial forms of ostracism, the model may be short and small in that the energy line might just be a small hill, whereas for people who were relentlessly ostracized resulting in long lasting painful effects, their diagram may resemble a massive earthquake on a seismograph. The idea is that the severity of ostracism messages varies and that although they are still generally the same type of communicative phenomenon, they certainly differ in power and influence. The energy line helps to differentiate more severe experiences from less severe experiences, and in some interviews, participants felt that it was a useful way to describe their lived experiences.

Indeed, in the interviews, this conceptualization of ostracism severity proved to be important in meaning making. In cases where the ostracism message was considered less severe and it was not perceived to be all that potentially damaging or threatening, participants were able

to move through the process of meaning making more efficiently because there was less pain and confusion to address. In more severe cases, targets faced tumultuous periods of post-ostracism meaning making. Throughout the study, interviewees expressed a wide range of ostracism message severity.

One example of a more trivial ostracism message was in the case of Kiki, who was excluded from a conversation at a work lunch. She was attempting to be a part of a conversation happening with two other colleagues, when she began notice that no one was acknowledging her and she was indirectly being pushed out of the conversation. Although she originally interacted with the group because she was eager to talk to one of the individuals in a casual environment, she eventually left and felt as though she had been ostracized. She described having minor feelings of confusion, frustration, and anger, but described the experience as "quite trivial." For her there was not much to think about or get over. She simply reported that it was a minor bump in the road that day, largely because the message was not perceived as being that threatening or potentially damaging to Kiki.

For others, they told stories that were extremely severe where ostracism messages invoked the potential for significantly threatening social/relational damage. Olivia and Barb were two individuals that had such stories. Olivia was relentlessly ostracized by an entire organization as punishment for being a whistle blower. At the time of the interview she explained that she was still having trouble coping with the situation even though it took place two years before. The first ostracism message she received had major potential to damage her identity as well as her social and relational connections. It was extremely severe, and each message she received afterwards was equally threatening. In another example, Barb was methodically ostracized from her church over a three-week period of time, receiving direct and

indirect messages from various members of the community. When she received the first ostracism message, it had serious implications for her life, as she was deeply involved in the church. The ostracism message was devastating for her, and it took her several years to come to terms with the event. During the interview she was distraught even though it happened over two decades before. The severity of the message left a lasting impression on her. These stories had more severe reactions and longer post-ostracism phases. It required extensive attention and energy from the targets.

Repetition. The interviews I conducted for this study attempted to focus on one specific event where the target received an ostracism message. For some participants, their experiences were fairly concise, in that they received one distinct message, not unlike what is represented in the Cyberball method. For others, though, the post-tremors that took place exceeded the threshold of significance and became new ostracism messages so that the communication of the target's status was repeated. These repeated ostracism messages had a profound influence on meaning making in two ways. First, the repetition of subtle messages helped form communicative patterns of ostracism. Second, the repetition of severe messages created long lasting negative effects and were extremely detrimental to targets.

Repetition of subtle ostracism messages creates a pattern of communication. In certain instances, targets received subtle, indirect ostracism messages that were difficult to uncover. However, because there were so many messages repeated over a period of time, the collection of communication created a pattern that allowed the target to perceive their exclusion. These types of patterns can change communication environments and influence meaning making for a message receiver (see Vangelisti, Maguire, Alexander, & Clark, 2007). For example, Jen, who was subtly and regularly excluded by her closest friend, explained:

> She never really directly has ever said, 'No, I don't want to hang out with you. No, I can't make it to the party.' She's never just actually told me, or ever been clear with me in any situation. So it's just a very indirect like, 'You probably shouldn't come. It might not be a good idea' or, 'I think I'm probably busy'…It is just a lot of little things that have kind of added up.

Jen demonstrates how when subtle, more minor ostracism messages are repeated over time, these events accumulate and create a pattern that is observable for the target. Each new instance cannot be dismissed as some other type of communication because collectively the pattern of communication suggests an ostracism message. In a similar experience, Karen, who was ostracized during a work meeting, explained how she assessed the pattern that led up to this moment:

> My awareness is heightened with each interaction and so the cumulative experiences are going, 'This is validated. This is real. This is fucked up.' Before it was like, 'Oh, that was something. I don't know what that was…' But until you have like one, two, three…now this is a pattern and there's something happening here.

Karen explained that the pattern of pre-tremors made her alert to the ostracizer's communication and that it eventually led her to discover an ostracism message. In both of the above examples, the repetition of subtle or ambiguous ostracism messages influences meaning making because it helps a target reveal patterns of communication. From this pattern, a target can assess the communication cumulatively, and perceive it all to be an ostracism message.

The second way that repetition influences the process of interpersonal ostracism message meaning making is that when the ostracism messages are strong and clear enough, they can force the target to start the process over again, creating a tumultuous, long-lasting, and extremely

painful experience. The repetition of severe ostracism messages represented the most hurtful and intense stories of ostracism. A few participants reported receiving repeated messages that were all highly, potentially damaging, and were sent relentlessly, intentionally, and systematically by an individual and/or group. This type of ostracism significantly changed the process of ostracism message meaning making in that each new message would be considered equally as hurtful and significant as the first ostracism message, thereby creating an experience that is like a broken record of pain, forcing the target to start over the process as each ostracism message is repeated.

This experience is found in the story of Olivia, who spoke of relentless, organized, and purposeful ostracism that produced many ostracism messages of equal importance over an extended period of time. Olivia explained that she was once deeply involved in an organization, until she became a whistle blower of devious activities within the organization. After word got out about the whistle blower, many members of the organization actively tried to ostracize and silence Olivia. She explained that at every corner she turned for help, she discovered a new individual from the group actively trying to ostracize her. Over a fairly long period of time, Olivia would experience new ostracism messages from many different people, ranging from subtle and ambiguous to aggressive and intentional. When asked which message was the most important, Olivia explained that many of the messages were equal in value:

> I think that it's going to continue to be an issue. So there is this aspect of like, this on going, and yes that particular traumatic experience in my life, I can't frame it on a particular timeline but the repercussions still exist.

Olivia's story demonstrates how repetition of ostracism messages can create a unique lived experience. Most participants explained that after receiving an ostracism message, they

would feel emotional pain and confusion in Phase 4, but in Phases 5, 6, and 7 they would cope and search for deeper level meanings of the communication. However, in the case of Olivia, each message she received was equal in strength and required her to cognitively go back to the pain and confusion of Phase 4. Therefore, when the target received a message that was strong enough, it would go over the post-tremor threshold and would be considered an ostracism message. This would start the meaning making process over again at Phase 4 because the target would need to deal with a new set of meanings and a new set of emotions. In this sense, the lived experience of someone who receives repeated, severe ostracism messages is tumultuous, painful, and extremely influential in meaning making. It can have long lasting negative effects and require serious interventions to curb the stress and confusion of being ostracized. Olivia explained that she still suffers from the experience and has yet to come to grips with the meanings of the event, even though it took place several years before the interview. For individuals like Olivia, they never have the chance to make sense of what is happening, because they are perpetually stuck in Phase 4 and when they finally get to Phase 5, they have so much information they need to address that it takes a long time to make sense of everything.

Reconciliation. In five interviews, participants described stories where they were ostracized, and felt the pain of Phase 4, but then reconciled their differences with the ostracizer and reported a major change in meaning making in Phase 5 or 6. Reconciliation is the act of communicators resolving past transgressions, and forging a new relationship under the assumption that the previous negative behaviors will cease (Freedman, 1998). In terms of the ostracism message reception, reconciliation significantly altered the meaning making process. For example, 38-year-old Annie explained that she moved out of her hometown and found a picture on social media of all their friends together at an event. She was angry and sad when the

ostracism message was communicated. Several months after the event took place, Annie and her friends reconciled and the meaning of the original ostracism message changed drastically. Annie explained how this change happened:

> At the time, it's like, 'Well they're not gonna come out because they can't do it because we're not friends anymore.' Just overthinking everything and just like getting into my own head, which honestly was probably not true. They might have just been busy. They probably didn't mean to be mean to me but at the time they're not nice. They probably didn't think about it, but it was also that I was probably out of site out of mind. Like if you're not there, no one's gonna think about you and when I'm not trying to talk to them either because I'm mad I can't really to be expected to be included in everything. But now everything's normal. Now I talk to them every single day.

This excerpt demonstrates how someone who felt the severe pain of ostracism and is in the process of meaning making, can take a very different course once they reconcile with the ostracizer. In this particular example Annie switched the valence of each preconceived rationalization after reconciliation. Rather than assuming that her and the friend were not interacting because "We're not friends anymore," Annie was able to change the meaning of the communication to, "They might have just been busy" or also self-blame by saying, "I'm not trying to talk to them either because I'm mad." Although the target may not forget about what took place, reconciliation can bring the process of meaning making to a close in certain regards.

Another participant, Kayla, who reconciled with her ostracizer explained, "We did not want to lose our friendship. We value each other as human beings." She continued, "It was like a big miscommunication from the get-go. We talked about it…" These passages demonstrate that reconciliation can move a target expediently through the meaning making process, so that

they can resolve their uncertainty and become settled with their understanding of the situation. In the cases where participants discussed reconciliation, they reported that they were over the situation and felt confident in their new perspective.

Structural Level Factors.

Workplace. One specific type of context is place, which is the physical situation in which the interaction occurs (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011). Interviews revealed that the workplace can have major effects on the process of ostracism communication. Ten of the participants reported that their event took place at work or was with co-workers. Workplace ostracism is a well-studied phenomenon (see Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008; Zhang, Ye, & Ferreira-Meyers, 2017). It is an environment that requires individuals to negotiate many meaning systems and behavioral expectations (Myers, Seibold, & Park, 2011). Because of this, in situations where people were ostracized at work, every phase of ostracism meaning making was influenced by the contextual environment. For one participant, workplace ostracism was a difficult situation when they discovered an ostracism message, reassigned pre-tremors, and coped with the reaction to the message all while speaking at a work meeting with superiors. As previously mentioned, Karen is a middle-aged woman who was uncertain why a coworker was treating her differently than others. Karen and the coworker had an important meeting with two of their bosses, and during the meeting the coworker silenced her and ignored her while they were presenting their ideas. Karen explained her thoughts during this interaction as she had many elements to think about.

> It's like I'm not there. Things are whirling by and I'm ruminating, 'Da da da da' going through, 'Whats up with that,' not looking at [ostracizer]. But if my energy could shoot darts across the table he'd be in pain. And, like 'Okay that's what that is. I'm going to

have to revisit that later to figure out how to adjust in the future because this needs to stop, because it's very real and valid and uncool. Yeah. And then I have to reengage.

Here, Karen explains that at first, she was unsure if the abnormal responses she received were ostracism messages. Initially, she describes them as pre-tremors in Phase 2 and that the ostracizer was simply "having a bad day" or that the communication was "rude" or "offensive". She describes Phase 3 of meaning making when she says, "Okay that's what that is" and then the experience became "very real and valid and uncool" in Phase 4 when she says, "if my energy could shoot darts across the table he'd be in pain." It is here that the work setting has a major influence on the process of meaning making. Because Karen was at a work meeting, she had to commit to the expectations of the work group while simultaneously assessing the communication of one individual. She explains that it was difficult to avoid the immediate "whirling" thoughts that took place in Phase 4, and her inner dialogue had to be "revisited" because she was in the middle of a meeting. The workplace environment was influential in this process because Karen had to participate while she was being ignored by one person, and the workplace restricted certain types of negative communication, such as verbal aggression towards coworkers. She was left to navigate a maze of appropriate behaviors to figure out what was the best way to react at work. This is embodied in the statement where Karen said, "I will have to revisit that later." Her story helps demonstrate the significance of the workplace context and how it is major factor that is considered in the reception of ostracism messages. It has the potential to influence every phase of meaning making.

Culture. Culture is an important communicative framework. When people interact interpersonally, culture is an a priori group membership that consists of a shared system of meanings and communication (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2011). Interviews with targets of

ostracism demonstrated when people interact interculturally, it can be difficult for a target to perceive and rationalize ostracism messages because they must assess multiple levels of meaning through two different sets of norms and meaning systems. Tonya was an international student who was studying in the United States. She explained that when she first came to university she felt as though people were ignoring her based on greeting norms: "Where I come from, it's common courtesy to say hello to someone. Even if a stranger walked into an office or somewhere and they saw a stranger, it's just common courtesy to say hi." She goes on to explain that this did not happen to her in the United States and she thought that people were sending ostracism messages. Culture influences the process of ostracism communication as it offers a foundation of meaning and norms. As Tonya shows, this can happen when a target has to filter meanings across cultural meaning systems.

In another example, Shanae explained that when she went overseas to visit family, there was a festival with pictures and logos that were offensive to her and proved to be pre-tremors to an impending ostracism experience of intercultural miscommunication. In her attempts to explain her perspective of these symbols, it created a problem with her family, which led to her ostracism. At the foundation of the experience was the miscommunication of cultural messages in that what the messages meant in the United States were not what they meant in the country Shanae visited. Even though the intention of the festival was to be inclusive, the meaning system of the country's culture differed from that of Shanae's, and as a result it allowed an ostracism message to emerge, as she felt isolated when communicating her perspective.

Race. Race is an important construct to consider in the study of any communicative phenomenon because it is a central cue in perception (Allen, 2007). Race is a socially constructed classification of human beings that is reinforced by communication and is based on

various characteristics that can simultaneously create a sense of group inclusion and perpetuate stereotypes (Fraley, 2009; Orbe & Allen, 2008). Race is largely distinguished by external factors, in that one can be ascribed a racial identity by a society (Willis-Rivera, 2009).

For many of the eleven participants who identified as being persons of color, they reported that race was a major factor in interpreting ostracism messages. Interviews revealed that racism and ostracism can go hand-in-hand. Isabella is a young Hispanic woman who explained in the interview that she worked in a rural area where she was one of the only people of color. In one particular instance, she had a customer who acted as though she did not exist: "The client wouldn't even do eye contact with me. I was asking questions, and he's just short, like, 'Yeah. Okay.'" She goes on to explain that she first thought, "…well maybe he's having a bad day, or doesn't want to talk." Later, Isabella's perspective would change: "But then the eye contact thing really got to me. He was just looking at the floor the whole time." As her mind started to focus on these interactions in the beginning of Phase 3, she would classify the communication as being an ostracism message when she noticed communicative discrepancies: "Then I got back in with the doctor, [he's] like, 'Hey how are you?' and everything, and he just perks up and is like, 'I'm good! How are you doing!?' looking at him straight in the eye which is nothing that I was getting [with my clients]." During this interview, Isabella was visibly distraught and had trouble holding back tears. She firmly felt that the reason she was being ignored was because of her race. It was difficult for her to explain exactly why but she did state: "It's just the first thing that comes to my mind. I guess right now, everything that's going on, it's race related. So that's the first thing that comes to my mind." This excerpt demonstrates the importance of racial identity in assessing ostracism message communication. For Isabella, her tears during the interview were largely because of what she saw as the racist foundation of the

ostracism message. The pain of ostracism was magnified and induced by racism, and influenced each phase of the process.

In another example, Martin, who reported being in Phase 7 of meaning making, told a story of how he was a volunteer on a coaching staff and was ostracized from a new paying position. At one point in the interview, he briefly brought up race as being a factor. When asked later to elaborate on how he acknowledged race in his meaning making, he said, "I mean it's being black in America. You know what I'm saying? It's just something you deal with and learn with…I just can't leave that out." He explained that as a person of color, he could essentially never forget that race might be a factor. In essence, it is constantly a part of meaning making. Martin and Isabella's stories demonstrate that when assessing ostracism messages, it is important to acknowledge the racial identities of targets to fully grasp their perspective. Although not every participant who identified as a person of color reported that race was a factor in their story, the ones that did suggested it was virtually unavoidable in their process of meaning making and that it had a significant impact on each phase.

Overview of RQ2 Results

Research Question 2 asked: *What are the key elements that influence a target's process of ostracism message reception and meaning making?* There were many different factors that influenced the meaning-making process of participants, but there were three levels of eleven dominant factors that stood out among the rest (see Figure 4). In my qualitative analysis, it was difficult to reveal any causal relationships, such as how specific factors created specific outcomes in the process, but these factors lay the foundation for future research to assess such connections. They also demonstrate that there are important elements surrounding the process that can have a significant influence on how ostracism is perceived and made sense of.

Interviews suggested that it is imperative to acknowledge elements such as relationship and race because they may be the primary motivators in a target's meaning making. Also, in the absence of direct verbal communication, a target may have to draw from these many factors to make sense of silence.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overview

In this study, I sought to understand the meaning making process of ostracism message reception. Current ostracism research strongly suggests that being ostracized is a painful psychological experience. Many ostracism studies use the Cyberball methodology and focus explicitly on reactions to ostracism. Instead, this study examined ostracism as a communicative phenomenon and thus, focused on the process of meaning making that exists before, during, and after an ostracism message. Through interviews with targets of ostracism and a grounded theory analysis, the findings revealed that ostracism meaning making can be understood as a seven-phase process, where each phase influences every subsequent phase. The study also identified eleven key variables that appear to exert significant influence on the process.

Discussion of Results

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked: *What are the stages in the process of ostracism message reception?* Qualitative interviews and grounded theory analysis revealed a seven-phase process of ostracism message reception and meaning making (see Figure 1). The phases exist on a timeline that begins with the target's past experiences and ends when they have resolved the reaction and cognition associated with the ostracism message. As a target progresses through the phases, the meanings of each phase carry on to the next subsequent phase. Targets regularly reappraise meanings as they cope and work towards resolving their pain. The process exists in three macro time periods: *pre-ostracism, ostracism reception*, and *post-ostracism*. Each is important in the meaning making process and help to replicate, challenge, and expand current conceptualizations of ostracism.

The seven-phase model depicts a receiver's perspective of message reception and sense making. It illustrates the significant role that a target plays in the meaning making process by suggesting that they are active participants in meaning making and can reappraise meanings that were once hurtful into positive learning experiences. Although the role of the target is acknowledged in current ostracism literature, my analysis suggests that they play a much more significant role than currently conceptualized. Particularly, ostracism can create personal growth. Unlike the Temporal Model (Williams, 2009), the final stage of the seven-phase model is one of resolution, not chronic hurt. Fourteen of the thirty-two interviewees spoke from a Phase 7 perspective, where all of their pain and cognitions were resolved and several saw the ostracism message as a positive experience. Furthermore, the seven-phase model frames ostracism as an event that lasts over a period of time, as opposed to one distinct moment. Thus, the seven-phase model presents a different conceptualization of ostracism message reception and suggests that the target plays an important role in the communicative process of ostracism. In the section, I will discuss each phase of the seven-phase model, and their implications, beginning with the pre-ostracism period.

Pre-ostracism period (Phase 1 and 2). The pre-ostracism period consists of Phases 1 and 2. It represents the time before the target appraises the ostracism message. The meanings brought from the pre-ostracism period were not always active in message reception. For some, they were brought up after the target appraised an ostracism message. The pre-ostracism phases of the seven-phase model add a novel perspective to understanding ostracism as a communication construct. Analysis suggests that without Phase 1 and 2, some ostracism messages, such as ambiguous or indirect messages, may never be interpreted as ostracism because the pre-ostracism period offers the context for a message to arise. Relational Dialects

Theory 2.0 (Baxter & Norwood, 2015) helps to explain this through the notion of utterance chains. Baxter and Norwood (2015) suggest that no utterance exists in a vacuum, but rather is a part of a chain of utterances that is linked together with past and future communication. Thus, the pre-ostracism phases reveal the importance of the parts of the chain that take place before ostracism message reception.

There has not been much attention given to the pre-ostracism period by ostracism researchers. In Williams' Temporal Model (Williams, 2009), the reflexive, reflective and resignation stages all take place after the message is received; the model does less to acknowledge what happens before someone is ostracized. The seven-phase model offers recognition of this time period and encourages researchers to further examine its influence. Based on the findings, Phases 1 and 2 influence every subsequent phase of the process, and by not giving this time period attention it is difficult to fully understand the lived experience of someone who is ostracized.

Phase 1. Phase 1 represents the past experiences and former meaning systems that a target brings with them into present day interactions. Scholars suggest that when people enter unfamiliar situations they draw from their past experiences for sense making (Duncker, 1939; Louis, 1980) and that depending on the interaction type, a message receiver will focus on different aspects of their past experience during sense making (Frost, et al., 2015). In ostracism research, the discussion of past experiences is normally in reference to events of chronic ostracism, in that researchers are concerned with how a lifetime of ostracism events can create or explain long-term negative psychological or behavioral outcomes such as self-harm or drug abuse (see Carbone, 2008). A communication perspective helps to reveal the importance of Phase 1 in message reception because it acts as the foundational meaning system through which

an individual perceives the world. Thus, different people will perceive ostracism under different circumstances because of their past experiences.

Findings also revealed that in Phase 1 targets establish broad understandings of what will likely happen during interactions. Burgoon (1993) refers to this as *general expectations*, which are expectancies based on typical and appropriate norms of human behaviors of a group of people. General expectations establish "primary schemata" that communicators attach to all human encounters (p. 32). Analysis suggests that these general expectations from Phase 1 carry on with a target as they continue to make sense of the ostracism message and that even in later phases, they are regularly called upon for reappraisals. The findings related to Phase 1 help to reaffirm the conclusions of Weschke and Niedeggen (2015) who argue that the experience of ostracism in Cyberball experiments mirrors that of a Burgoon's (1993) EVT. The characteristics of Phase 1 are certainly connected to EVT and further add to the argument that ostracism is a type of expectancy violation. It also puts into question whether the Cyberball method is simply inducing an EVT related reaction, if it is in fact an ostracism-specific reaction, or if it is a combination of both. If more evidence suggests that Cyberball is simply EVT, than it would require significant new inquires into this large body of research to help decipher the psychological and communicative relationships of EVT, Cyberball, and ostracism.

Pre-tremors. Pre-tremors were characterized as interactions where a target perceived a violation of expectations but upon initial appraisal, the violation was not interpreted as an ostracism message. Often, participants explained that pre-tremors were simply the source having a bad day. Pre-tremors could take place in Phase 1 or Phase 2. Burgoon (1993) explains that when someone experiences an expectancy violation, it elicits an alertness/orientation response that is followed by an immediate interpretation and evaluation. Similarly, attribution theory

explains that message receivers consume a message and then use the surrounding information to make a judgment of causal relationships, which connects the message to internal or external forces (Heider, 1958). Likewise, many targets explained that when they first started experiencing abnormal interactions with the source, their attention was drawn to the behavior and tried to quickly make sense of it. Although pre-tremors were not appraised as ostracism messages, they largely exhibit the functions addressed by EVT. Thus, the findings suggest that pre-tremors are expectancy violations that are not appraised as ostracism messages.

This finding, among others, shows that the lived experience of receiving an ostracism message from a known source is dissimilar to that found in laboratory experiments such as Cyberball. When people are ostracized they often receive many messages that require appraisal prior to being ostracized. Certainly, some participants, like Annie, described experiences where they were ostracized without any warning, but in many other cases, targets found themselves experiencing expectancy violations/pre-tremors in the pre-ostracism period. Pre-tremors further demonstrate that more attention needs to be given to the pre-ostracism period but also that the receiver of the message is actively engaged in interpretations before they perceive ostracism messages. This supports the notion that the target plays a key role in message reception, and that their interpretation of communication is significant in the creation of hurt.

Phase 2. Phase 2 represents the moments leading up to the reception of the ostracism message and reveal why interactants were interacting in a certain place at a certain time with a certain person. In Phase 2, interaction-specific expectations are formed and targets may become more attune to potential ostracism messages. Burgoon (1993) described the expectations that are present in Phase 2 as *particularized expectations*. She explains that a communicator forms these expectancies based on the various contextual elements of a current interaction such as

environmental constraints or levels of privacy. These expectations could act as "framing devices" (Burgoon, 1993, p. 32) that would allow a target to appraise communication as an ostracism message or not. This assertion offers more support for Weschke and Niedeggen (2015), who suggest that ostracism is an expectancy violation.

Phase 2 also demonstrates that in certain situations, targets can become more attuned to potential ostracism messages. This can be explained through the notion of *affective forecasting* (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). Before an individual enters a situation, they are able to make predictions about the emotional outcomes of interactions (Hoerger, Chapman, & Duberstein, 2016), through a*voidance signatures* which are the perceived characteristics of a situations that signal to a communicator that they want to avoid the situation (Frederickx & Mechelen, 2011). In terms of ostracism, studies have indicated that when people are ostracized, they make lower affective forecasts when faced with hypothetical future ostracism experiences (Dewall and Baumeister, 2006). Thus, the situation specific experiences that take place in the pre-ostracism period can trigger someone to become attuned to ostracism message reception and interpretation in present day interactions. Phase 2 adds to this literature by demonstrating that these meanings carry over into later phases. They are a part of a chain of utterances and do not remain stagnant (Baxter & Norwood, 2105). This highlights the importance of viewing ostracism as an event as opposed to a single moment, because meanings arise and transcend throughout the process.

Ostracism message reception (Phase 3). After the pre-ostracism period, a target will experience the *ostracism message* period of Phase 3, which consists of the four microphases. During this time, a target will appraise communication as an ostracism message. First, In Microphase 1 a target consumes the message. In Microphase 2 a target experiences an expectancy violation. In Microphase 3 the target appraises communication as an ostracism

message.   Finally, in Microphase 4 the target does a quick double check to confirm their interpretation.

Microphase 1. In Microphase 1 a target consumes/receives the ostracism message. Findings suggest that an ostracism message can be communicated in virtually any form, ranging from overt, intentional, verbal commands to subtle, indirect, patterns of communication that suggest ostracism (Pelliccio, 2016). Regardless of how the message was transmitted or received, without message reception, there can be no meaning making. For some communication scholars, communication does not exist unless there is intentionality on the part of the message sender (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). For others, it is a matter of whether symbols are consumed by a receiver (Andersen, 1991).   Microphase 1 helps to demonstrate that the source's intentionality is not necessary in the process of ostracism message reception. Likewise, in a study of adolescent rejection, Asher et al. (2001) contend that in order for certain rejection behaviors to exist, the receiver of the message has to acknowledge that it happened. The authors state that avoidance, for example, is only a rejection behavior if a child notices it.

This finding raises important questions about what ostracism is. If a source tries to directly and intentional ostracize someone from a group, but the target does not understand or receive the message, are they ostracized? Or, if someone plays the Cyberball game and they simply divert their attention away from the game, can they be ostracized? Microphase 1 shows that message reception is a foundational element of ostracism communication. One must consume a message to make sense of it, even if that message is silence. Thus, much more attention needs to be given to the role of the target, and the reception of communication because the target plays a critical role in communication. Quite simply, if they never consume an ostracism message, can a target be ostracized? The findings suggest they cannot.

Microphase 2. Next, in Microphase 2, participants reported feeling a form of expectancy violation after they received an ostracism message. Even in stories where participants described many pre-tremors that suggested they would be ostracized, they still felt an expectancy violation. Burgoon (1993) helps to explain this phenomenon by stating that expectancies can be *predictive*, based on what someone assumes will happen, or *prescriptive*, based on what someone wants to happen. In this sense, the experience in Microphase 2 was the result of an assumed or desired expectancy because a target could experience a violation based on what they thought was going to happen, or what they wanted to happen. In this sense, even if a target knew they would be ostracized, they still may not have wanted it to happen. In either event, it meets the criteria of EVT. This concept further adds to Weschke and Niedeggen's (2015) conclusion that ostracism is inherently an expectancy violation.

What is unique about this finding is that violations can come in any form, not just that someone expected to be included. For Sean, he thought it was unusual that he was invited to a wedding but his sibling was not. For Mya, it was strange that her close friend was always so busy. For Karen, it was abnormal that her coworker spoke aggressively to her. None of these examples of expectancy violations are inherently ostracism messages, though. Rather, they have no inherent meaning (Ogden & Richards, 1923). They may be negatively valenced, in that the behavior is perceived as bad (Burgoon, 1993), but there it still requires more meaning making to make sense of the bad behavior. Thus, the findings suggest that all ostracism messages begin as expectancy violations and it is not until Microphase 3 that they are given meaning. Therefore, more attention needs to be given to EVT and its relationship to ostracism, as it may be that ostracism experiments are simply inducing an EVT reaction.

Microphase 3. In Microphase 3, a target will draw from the meanings that they have accumulated in order to interpret communication as an ostracism message. This is an important tipping point for the entire process because one must appraise communication as an ostracism message in order for it to produce the psychological reaction described by Williams (2009). If the message is not interpreted as ostracism, it will be experienced as a pre-tremor and there will be no ostracism related hurt. Expectancy Violation Theory explains after one experiences a violation, they will assess the communicator and communication characteristics to make a judgment of whether the violation is positive or negative (Burgoon, 1993). Similarly, Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT) suggests that experiences can induce arousals that create emotional responses, but the individual's interpretation of the events dictates what specific emotion is felt (Lazarus, 1991). Appraisals are heavily influenced by a variety of factors such as the receiver's temperament, physiology, and culture, but is also reliant on what the receiver views as important in the situation (Ellsworth, 2013).

This finding reveals the importance of the target in ostracism message communication. As Andersen (1991) explains a receiver perspective of communication asserts that communication can exist without intention or fidelity and is largely based on the receiver's consumption and interpretation of symbols. Because ostracism can happen unintentionally, or indirectly, the findings suggest that it is imperative to use the receiver perspective of communication when analyzing ostracism messages. The receiver plays an integral role in the consumption and interpretation of ostracism messages. This suggests that targets have agency and that they are active participants in the meaning making process. Thus, by not positing them solely as a victim, there may be potential to uncover more about how people can overcome and manage the pain of ostracism in the pre-ostracism and ostracism reception periods.

Microphase 4. After appraising communication as an ostracism message, in Microphase 4 a target will double-check to make sure that their appraisal is correct, before they experience the pain of ostracism. Based on interviews, it appears that this is a final interpretive mechanism to assess whether the reaction is warranted. Receiver apprehension (Winiecki & Ayres, 1999) is the level of anxiety one feels in receiving communication, and the fear of misinterpreting, appropriately processing, or psychologically adjusting to communication. It may be that individuals conduct a double check because they are apprehensive of their meaning making and need to examine their interpretation one last time before committing to the reaction. In terms of Cyberball related studies, researchers may want to examine whether participants attempt to double check their appraisal in some fashion, through verbal expressions or eye gazes. By analyzing this moment, it would help to reinforce that there is a distinct process of meaning making that takes place before one feels ostracized and that this time period requires more attention by ostracism researchers.

Post-ostracism period (Phase 4, 5 ,6 and 7). After a target affirms that they have received an ostracism message, they will enter the post-ostracism period of the seven-phase process consisting of Phases 4, 5, 6, and 7. It is in this period that a target will feel the pain and confusion of ostracism and work to cope with their feelings, through distinct intervals of meaning making that help them move closer to a final settled mental state.

The post-ostracism period is similar to Williams' (2009) Temporal Model in that it explains the lived experience of a target after they are ostracized. Whereas the seven-phase model consists of Phases 4-7, the Temporal Model consists of the reflexive, reflective, and resignation stages. Phase 4 and the reflexive stage are essentially the same in that they both address the reaction to being ostracized. However, the models differ thereafter. The Temporal

Model suggests that a target can take a positive or negative route in the reflective stage. If a target travels on the positive path where they restore their lost psychological needs and effectively cope with the pain, the experience will conclude in the reflective stage. If a target travels down the negative path where they are unable to cope with the pain and continue to struggle with sense making, they will move onto the resignation stage (Dewall, 2013); yet, the resignation stage happens only when someone is chronically ostracized or is unable to restore their depleted needs, which may not be the only outcomes.

In the seven-phase model, I propose an alternative conceptualization to the Temporal Model in that targets of ostracism travel through a similar timeline, with varying degrees of time and depth spent in each phase, and that the final phase is when the pain and confusion has resolved. The seven-phase model has only a positive route at its conclusion. If a target experiences chronic ostracism, then they will remain in one of the earlier phases. It is only when a target has resolved their pain and confusion that they will reach Phase 7. The seven-phase model is a chronological timeline that is based on how successfully one has coped with the pain of ostracism, as opposed to the Temporal Model's focus on negative outcomes. Thus, the seven-phase model offers a novel conceptualization of ostracism message reception and meaning making that can be examined in future research. In particular, the seven-phase model offers a perspective reminiscent of positive psychology, where people can "bounce back" from negative situations through resilience and be stronger than they were before (Buzzanell, 2010).

Phase 4. The first post-ostracism phase is Phase 4 where the target feels pain and confusion. In this reaction phase, a target turns inward towards their inner dialogue, experiences pain, sadness, anger, and/or confusion, and poses initial reflexive questions. There is extensive research on this period, with many studies outlining the pain and decreased cognitive ability that

takes place after ostracism (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Williams, 2001; Williams, 2009; Williams & Zadro, 2005; Wittenbaum, et al. 2010). The findings of my study mirror current literature on the reflexive stage of ostracism and thus, adding further evidence that ostracism can create pain and confusion in targets after an appraisal.

Phase 5. Next, in Phase 5, targets will begin their investigation into the ostracism message by answering their reflexive questions from Phase 4, proposing new specific questions, and begin reappraising previous interpretations. Phase 5 is also the first phase where targets can experience post-tremors.

In Phase 5 a target will begin actively seeking out new information to begin resolving their uncertainty by proposing new questions that help focus their sense making. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) suggests that we communicate to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). When someone feels they cannot predict another's behaviors, they will feel more uncertain (Afifi & Burgoon, 2000) and will increase information seeking behaviors (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Uncertainty Management Theory (UMT) expands on this notion by suggesting that if a message is appraised as negative or threatening, a person will feel a stronger urge to immediately reduce uncertainty through information seeking (Rains & Tukachinsky, 2015). In terms of ostracism research, the Temporal Model of ostracism suggests that ostracism induces uncertainty and that in the reflective stage targets attempt uncertainty reduction strategies (Guzel & Sahin, 2017; Williams, 2009). The findings of the current study offer empirical support for this suggestion, providing evidence that URT and UMT are central aspects of the post-ostracism period. Thus, more attention needs to be given to the relationship between URT/UMT and ostracism sense making in the post-ostracism period to offer more support for these connections.

Participants also explained that after the pain of ostracism settled enough to reflect on the experience, they would begin reappraising pre-tremors and other communication. The third proposition of RDT 2.0 explains that finalized discourses are never final, but are constantly changing (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). This was certainly the case post-ostracism, as participants described changing their original appraisals of communication in Phase 5. Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT) further explains this phenomenon by suggesting that an individual can look back on previous experiences and make reappraisals/reattribution's based on new information (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Such reappraisals can be a significant contributor in coping with hurtful experiences (Garland, Gaylord, and Fredrickson, 2011; Holmstrom & Kim, 2015). The findings suggest that this begins to happen in Phase 5 of the meaning making process and that reappraisals help targets move onto the next phase by resolving some of their uncertainty and hurt. Furthermore, the reappraisal process and RDT 2.0 help to show the significance of constantly changing discourses. This offers a novel perspective of the ostracism experience. Whereas experiments tend to examine ostracism as a once and done phenomenon, the findings of Phase 5 suggest that ostracism message meanings are not stagnant, but are part of an ongoing discourse that allows meanings to change. This supports the perspective of ostracism as an event containing a series of episodes as opposed to a moment. Thus, researchers should continue to examine the lived experiences of targets of ostracism to see how they work with meanings well after the ostracism message occurred and to acknowledge the many levels of ostracism events.

Post-tremors. Phase 5 is also the first phase where post-tremors take place. Post-tremors are communication, which force the attention of the target back to the ostracism message. Post-tremors have a threat threshold. If communication exceeds that point, then it is possible for the target to experience repeated ostracism messages. EVT explains that people have a threat

threshold for the appropriate distance that they will allow someone to stand near them. When they pass a certain point, the interactant may experience psychological discomfort (Burgoon, 1978). This type of violation is determined by the interactant's self-defined personal space based on the situation (p. 130). EVT began as a theory to explain violations of personal space, but these tenets have been extended into any expected pattern of behavior (Burgoon, 1993; LePoire & Burgoon, 1994). Furthermore, EVT also suggests that expectancy violations create an orientation response that forces communicators attention away from whatever they are doing and focus on the violation (White, 2015). Thus, post-tremors are a type of expectancy violation that forces attention back on the original ostracism message, offering even more evidence that ostracism events are highly related to Burgoon's (1993) EVT. Also post-tremors further demonstrate that ostracism messages are embedded in a chain of utterances and that meanings are not stagnant, but are a part of a constant discourse (Baxter & Norwood, 2015).

Phase 6. In Phase 6, a target's investigation will probe deeper into meanings. Phase 6 is functionally similar to Phase 5, but differs in that the participants reflexive pain has largely settled, they have answers to the questions from Phase 5, and reappraisals will be on a deeper level. In this phase, targets probe for a richer understanding of meanings, as opposed to surface level conceptualizations that broadly acknowledge their general questions. They also continue to implement uncertainty reduction strategies, similar to Phase 5, as they continue to move towards a settled state.

Phase 6 expands on the current conceptualization of post-ostracism sense making by showing that there are multiple levels of reflection post-ostracism. Interviewees helped to reveal a clear distinction between those who had just begun their investigation and those who were almost done. Targets in Phase 5, like Isabella or Karen, appeared to have higher levels of

uncertainty, and at times, were visibly unsettled during the interview. Targets in Phase 6, like Jackie or Andre, appeared to have lower levels of uncertainty, and spoke as though they were almost able to finalize their interpretation of events. This distinction challenges the reflective stage of the Temporal Model (Williams, 2009) of ostracism in that there is no clear distinction between those who have just begun the reflective stage, and those who have restored much of their depleted psychological needs. In the seven-phase model these groups of people are differentiated, which offers a more nuanced perspective of the post-ostracism experience. This distinction may help ostracism researchers who examine post-ostracism reflection, so that they can focus their attention on appropriate groups of targets who are at different levels of coping.

Phase 7. Phase 7 is the final phase of the seven-phase model and is when a target's pain and questions are resolved. A target speaks of the event within the broader context of their entire life, and can offer a final meaning to the ostracism message. Fourteen participants were in Phase 7 at the time of the interview. They discussed the ostracism event as if it is over and that they are currently, emotionally unaffected by the experience.

Phase 7 offers an end point that is positive, in that the target has moved on from the experience and no longer feels pain. It is the goal of the target to reach this point. Conversely, in the Temporal Model, the final stage is the resignation stage, where a target fails to restore need satisfaction and will be depressed, helpless, and alienated (Dewall, 2013; Williams, 2009). Although the resignation stage is the final stage of the Temporal Model, it ends with someone experiencing chronic ostracism. Few studies have examined the effects of chronic ostracism or ostracism later in life. Zadro et. al. (2006) claimed to study the resignation stage and found that 45 minutes after being ostracized, socially anxious individuals reported increased levels of need threats. The findings of my examination offer a challenge to the current conceptualization of the

final stage of ostracism by offering an alternative chronology of coping. Rather than positing the final period of the lived experience of ostracism as being damning, unfulfilled, and hurtful, Phase 7 suggests an end point of resolution and emotional restoration. Thus, through reappraisal, a target can re-valence the entire ostracism experience so that what they once perceived as negative, they now view as positive.

Furthermore, EVT suggests that violations can be positively or negatively valenced once an individual goes through some sense making (Burgoon, 1993). The participants of Phase 7 demonstrate how a violation can be positively valenced after further interpretation. Research on hurtful messages also helps to explain part of this phenomenon. When a hurtful message is more recent it hurts more, but if there is a significant amount of time since the hurtful message was uttered, then the receiver is less likely to feel hurt (McLaren & Solomon, 2014). Similarly, for some participants who discussed messages that happened in the past, they reported that the messages did not hurt much. However, there were many other factors, such as reconciliation, or message severity that also affected an individual's interpretation of the ostracism message and the amount of hurt. This finding suggests that more attention needs to be given to how time is a part of meaning making, and whether it has a specific effect or if it just another element that influences the process. Analysis did not reveal any commonalities about the influence of time. Thus, Phase 7 should be examined for intersections with EVT, hurt, and time.

Analysis revealed that Phase 7 can take two different paths to resolution. First, a target could reflect back on the entire experience and reappraise it as a positive learning experience that influenced their life, so that the once hurtful message is now viewed as personally beneficial. Second, targets can simply decide to give up and move on, like Martin who reported saying, "It is what it is." Several participants made this statement. In current literature, there is little

recognition of this type of lived experience in ostracism literature. This finding helps to reveal a unique ostracism experience, where someone consciously chooses to disengage, or give up on their meaning making in order to positively resolve their thoughts. Thus, this finding reveals a lived experience of ostracism reception that needs more attention, as there are people who simply give up and move on with their life without coping or having answers to their questions.

Review of RQ1. The seven-phase process of ostracism message reception demonstrates that there are distinct phases of meaning making before, during, and after an ostracism message. Each subsequent phase in the process influences the next and can exist in varying degrees of length and depth. Each target's experience is unique, but all will travel through a similar path towards the finalize meanings that take place in Phase 7. If someone still feels uncertainty and pain, then they have not reached Phase 7. The seven-phase model also helps to reveal the significant role of Expectancy Violations Theory, Uncertainty Reduction Theory, and Cognitive Appraisal Theory in the reception of ostracism messages and challenges the Temporal Model of ostracism.   The seven-phase model reinforces the reflexive stage of the Temporal Model, but offers a pre-ostracism time period, two stages of reflection, and a positive end point of emotional and psychological resolution.   Furthermore, an ostracism experience can end when a target claims that "It is what it is" or with a target being thankful they were ostracized. Targets may never reach this point, but my analysis suggests that Phase 7 is the desired destination for targets. Thus, the theoretical perspective of the seven-phase model offers a novel perspective to ostracism by positing ostracism as an event and suggesting that the target plays a key role in reception and meaning making.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked: *What are the key elements that influence the process of ostracism message reception?* Qualitative interviews and grounded theory analysis revealed eleven dominant factors that had significant influence on the seven-phase process. Collectively, the findings replicate, challenge, and expand different literatures. In particular, Williams (1997) offered a taxonomy of four ostracism message dimensions that influence the effects ostracism has on targets: visibility, motive, quantity, and causal clarity. *Visibility* is whether the message was communicated physically, socially, or digitally (cyberostracism). *Motive* describes the intentions of the ostracizer. *Quantity* is whether the message was partial (subtle) or complete (overt). Finally, *causal clarity* is whether the message is clear or ambiguous.

Based on the findings of this examination, only the *quantity* paradigm was found to be consistently, highly influential in the seven-phase process. In this study, the constructs of *message severity* and *message repetition* reflected Williams' (1997) notion of *quantity* by showing that when participants were minimally ostracized (partial), such as Kiki or Vicky, it yielded an easier process of meaning making. When participants were maximally ostracized (complete), such as Olivia or Barb, the effects were highly damaging. Interview analysis revealed that participants discussed notions related to *visibility, motive*, and *causal clarity* as being part of their meaning making, but these elements did not create consistent outcomes across participants, nor did participants report that they were highly influential. In other words, sometimes the level of uncertainty created by an ambiguous message mattered, but in other cases it did not because there were more important meaning systems such as relational closeness, or self-esteem. Thus, the findings of this study reinforce and challenge some aspects of Williams' Taxonomy (1997) of ostracism message characteristics by suggesting that visibility, motive, and causal clarity are not necessarily significant in every ostracism event, and their correlations are

not consistently positive or negative. Instead, the findings suggest that these elements are simply a few of the many important features that will be recognized in meaning making, and that they do not always correlate to particular outcomes.

Self-esteem. Several participants directly and indirectly addressed the significance of self-esteem throughout the meaning making process. Self-esteem is a common construct in ostracism research and has been studied in many ways through different perspectives (see Kong, 2015; Onoda, et al., 2010; Peng & Zeng, 2017; Teng & Chen, 2012; Williams & Nida, 2017). Thus, it was no surprise that interviewees discussed self-esteem. Research suggests that when people have low self-esteem ostracism can be extremely detrimental and when someone is ostracized it can have significant negative impact on their self-esteem (Gutz, Roepke, & Renneberg, 2016; O'Driscoll & Jarry, 2015). Conversely, other studies demonstrate that individuals with higher self-esteem are more likely to benefit from social support post-ostracism (Teng & Chen, 2012). The findings of my study reinforce the notion that self-esteem plays a significant role in meaning making.

Goals. Analysis revealed that the receiver's communication goals were a factor in message reception. Participants demonstrated that in certain situations, they had specific interpersonal goals in mind, and that when those goals were not met, the experience could be appraised as an ostracism message. Some scholars suggest that all communication is goal-directed, situated and purposeful (Hample, 2016). People store schemas associated with particular goals throughout life and when they come in contact with certain situational features, these goals become activated (Greene, 1997). Communicators assess the many features of a situation, and the multiple appropriate goals to decide which one is the best fit for the interaction (Hample, 2016; Wilson, 1990). Scholars explain that goal orientation can be conscious or

unconscious, but still motivate an individual to pursue a desired outcome (Berger & Palomares, 2011). For others, resource attainment can be a primary goal, and that when one is restricted from a particular desired resource, they can feel distress that requires coping (Hobfoll, 2002). In terms of ostracism, when people experience conflicts with goals, the same part of the brain is activated as when they are ostracized (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2001). Thus, the findings suggest that goal orientation and resource acquisition significantly influence a targets reception and interpretation of ostracism messages. For example, Vicky preferred not to speak with her coworkers, but on free brownie day, she cared. As a result, she perceived the lack of communication as an ostracism message as it interfered with her goals of attaining a resource.

This finding has important implications for the study of ostracism as it offers an alternative goal-driven interpersonal perspective of ostracism reception, beyond that which is included in the concept of social exclusion. This perspective draws from other goal-driven research (see Dillard & Solomon, 2000; Hample, 2016; Samp & Solomon, 2005) but here it implies that manifestations of ostracism messages may largely be the result of the target's inability to attain an interpersonal goal. Whether the goal was group inclusion, like Rhonda or Sean, or if the goal was an interpersonal relationship, like Andre, or a coaching position, like Martin, or a brownie, like Vicky, a goal-driven perspective of ostracism reveals that ostracism messages can spawn from an inability to attain goals. This perspective could prove to be useful in understanding the communication of ostracism messages because it offers a foundation for understanding that others can build off of and puts into question Williams' (1997) four dimensions of ostracism by simply stating that receiver goals are the primary influencer of a targets reaction to ostracism.

Rationalization through alternative contexts.   Participants reported contemplating alternative contexts to help them interpret the meanings of the ostracism event. For example, after Marco was ostracized, he thought about the ostracism message in a different context to help him make sense of the message. Context is an extremely important element in understanding human communication and meaning making (Barrett, Mesquita, & Gendron, 2011; Knapp & Daily, 2011; Nugus et al., 2017). By using an alternative perspective, one can better understand how the context influences meaning making. Studies show that similar perspective taking skills can help coping. For example, mindfulness and breathing exercises (Garland, Gaylord, & Fredrickson, 2011; Molet, Macquet, Lefebvre, & Williams, 20013) help individuals reappraise experiences through alternative perspectives that they otherwise would not take. The findings of this study potentially add to this set of literature by showing that thinking of the ostracism message through an alternative context may be equally as useful in post-ostracism coping, sense making, and reappraisals.

Perception of relational closeness.   Findings revealed that a targets perception of relational closeness with the ostracizer played a significant role in meaning making throughout the process. However, relational closeness or distance did not necessarily mean that the target would be more or less hurt by the situation though, but it was a factor in all participants sense making. Research, likewise, suggests a myriad of conclusions about the influence of relational closeness on ostracism. Some studies suggest that ostracism by individuals within close relationships is more aversive than ostracism from strangers (Nezlek, et al., 2012). Others suggest that when people are ostracized by family members it creates more hurt (Poulsen & Carmon, 2015; Zadro, et al., 2005). Yet, Gonsalkorale and Williams (2007) claim that the relationship between ostracizer and source does not matter, and that even if the source is from a

hated out-group ostracism will still produce the same outcome. The findings of my study reinforce the variety of conclusions found in ostracism literature about the influence of relational closeness. Some participants, like Isabella, were ostracized by total strangers, and the experience was devastating. Others, like Vernon, were ostracized by acquaintances, and it had little effect. It was difficult to discern a specific outcome related to relational closeness, but every participant discussed the relational closeness to the source of ostracism. It was a factor that mattered, but it did not have a uniform effect. This finding implies that relationships certainly matter in ostracism message reception, but the magnitude of that importance in meaning making is largely up to the perception of the receiver, but it also offers questions for future quantitative research to address measures of relational closeness and relationship type in the ostracism experience.

Relational expectations. Participants held particular expectations based on the type of relationship they had with the source. What a target considered to be ostracism, was understood through their expectations of that relationship, whether it be coworker, friendship, or teacher/student. Scholars contend that relational expectations develop over time and are rooted in assumptions of a shared schema of behaviors (Cohen, 2010). Expectations are formed by perceiving another's behaviors in various situations and generalizing how that person will act in future interactions (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; White, 2015). When a person diverges from expectations, it creates an arousal that requires appraisal (Burgoon, 1993). Likewise, the findings of this study demonstrate that this phenomenon takes place in the seven-phase process of ostracism reception. Participants explained that they held communicative expectations based on the relationship with the source, and that when those were not met, it created an arousal that needed to be appraised. Thus, relational expectations further demonstrate that the lived experience of ostracism is an expectancy violation.

Message severity. Ostracism message severity represented the perceived level of social/relational damage or threat to a target (Kelley & Waldron, 2005). For some participants, the ostracism message was perceived as relatively trivial, while others explained that it was devastating. Likewise, scholars suggest that ostracism ranges in severity/quantity, and the triviality of the message can influence the amount of hurt (Williams, 1997; Williams, Forgas, & von Hippel, 2005). Some suggest that messages characterized as lengthy and overt have the potential to be perceived as more severe (Leary, 2001; Sandstrom et al., 2016). The findings of this study add more evidence to this line of research by reinforcing the notion that message severity makes coping and post-ostracism sense making more demanding. The perceived severity of the transgression can leave targets in an extended state of shock, whereas communication that is perceived as potentially less damaging requires less coping and thought.

Message repetition. The repetition of ostracism messages manifested in interviews in two different ways. First, when severe ostracism messages were repeated, it forced the target to start over at Phase 4 of the meaning making process with each new message they uncovered. This experience created an endlessly tumultuous state associated with chronic ostracism (Riva, Montali, Wirth, Curioni, & Williams, 2017). Second, when subtle ostracism messages were repeated by a source, it helped the target reveal a pattern that they could collectively appraise as an ostracism message.

Indeed, the repetition of severe messages creates an experience of chronic ostracism and hurt. These were the most aversive stories told by participants. Current research on ostracism supports this notion, in that the severity of the message can create more intense outcomes and coping for targets (Robinson, et al., 2012; Williams & Zadro, 2005). However, the seven-phase model offers a novel perspective to understanding chronic ostracism.

The Temporal Model views chronic ostracism as a part of the resignation stage, where targets exist as perpetually ostracized individuals (Dewall, 2013; Riva, et al., 2017; Williams, 2009). The seven-phase model, however, does not limit message repetition and chronic ostracism to the resignation stage, but instead as an element that creates a loop in the meaning making timeline. As targets move towards Phase 7, where a target has resolved their confusion and coping, but receives new/repeated ostracism messages from the source, it creates a phenomenon where the target goes back to Phase 4, in effect creating a loop. When this happens, a target can feel stuck, and perpetually start over with the pain of being ostracized. Whereas the Temporal Model posits repeated messages/chronic ostracism as a resignation stage, the seven-phase model sees it as a loop of hurt and meaning making.

In addition, analysis revealed that a target accumulates communication with the source over time, and that if a pattern of violations begins to develop, than it can help them perceive an ostracism message. Several participants explained that sources were continuously dismissive, and that eventually they appraised the collective behaviors as an ostracism message. White (2015) explains that one of the reasons close relationships are satisfying is because people can come to expect certain gratification behaviors from their partner, but that over time, negative patterns can emerge that suggest relationship dissolution. Understanding these negative patterns of behavior can reveal that a relationship is ending or that a partner is trying to distance themselves from the other (Guerrero, Jones, and Burgoon, 2000). Thus, continued violations of expectations can create an observable pattern that uncovers deeper motivations (White, 2015). Similarly, interviewees explained that continued violations of expectations helped them to see a pattern of behavior that suggested an ostracism message. This finding further connects ostracism to EVT and reinforces the notion that ostracism is an event.

Reconciliation. Reconciliation between source and target had a major impact on a target's progression through the seven-phase process. Reconciliation is defined as communicators resolving past transgressions, and forging a new relationship under the assumption that the previous negative behaviors will not continue (Freedman, 1998). The findings of this study revealed that when people reconciled it was much easier for a target to get to Phase 7 and resolve their pain and uncertainty. Research suggests that relational characteristics such as past transgressions and expected future behavior are antecedents to whether someone will reconcile with a relational partner (Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004) and that forgiveness is key form of communication that can foster reconciliation (Zheng, et al., 2015). The way forgiveness is communicated and the severity of the transgression affect whether forgiveness will create an outcome of reconciliation, but if successful, forgiveness can significantly reduce relational and situational uncertainty and significantly increase the likelihood of reconciliation (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Freedman, Burgoon, Ferrell, Pennebaker, & Beer, 2017; Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005; Zheng, et al., 2015). In terms of ostracism, research suggests that targets can use forgiveness as a means to resolve the distress of ostracism (Will, Crone, & Güroğlu, 2015). Forgiveness can sometimes lead to reconciliation (Freedman, 1998), but the findings of this study and the findings of Will, Crone, and Güroğlu (2015) suggest that reconciliation can play an important role in the coping and sense making of ostracism message reception. More research needs to examine the connections of uncertainty reduction, forgiveness, ostracism, and reconciliation.

Workplace. Participants who were ostracized at work explained that the workplace was a major contributor to their sense making. The workplace requires a target to simultaneously acknowledge the norms and expectations of their job, while coping with and managing the

meanings of the ostracism message. Workplace ostracism literature is extensive (Williams & Sommer, 1997) and there are many studies that explain how certain aspects of the workplace can influence the ostracism experience, such as power dynamics (Fiset, Hajj, & Vongas, 2017), language differences (Hitlan, Kelly, Schepman, Schneider, & Zarate, 2006), an individual's level of future orientation (Balliet & Ferris, 2012), and workplace norms (Scott & Duffy, 2015). In this study, workplace norms and power dynamics proved to be important parts of participants ostracism message sense making. The findings help to reaffirm that the workplace is an important component of the ostracism experience and offers more evidence to support the importance of this field of study.

Culture. Culture plays a central role in ostracism experiences (Kimel, Mischkowski, & Kitayama, 2017). It acts as a lens through which targets perceive the world and offers a foundational meaning system for general and particularized expectancies (Burgoon, 1993) in the pre-ostracism period. Current research on ostracism, however, examines how culture influences coping and sense making in just the post-ostracism period (see Over & Uskul, 2016; Yaakobi & Williams, 2016). For example, one study suggests that East Asian Americans experience equal levels of sadness and anger after being ostracized, whereas European Americans feel more anger than sadness (Kimel, Mischkowski, & Kitayama, 2017). In the present study, the influence of culture in the pre-ostracism period in relation to EVT was revealed. Analysis suggests that members of certain cultures prefer more or less inclusion expressions (Freedman et. al, 2016) and that when members of a culture enter a situation they hold particular expectations (Burgoon, 1993). Thus, the findings of this study add more evidence to the notion that culture informs expectations of communication in the pre-ostracism phases and helps to distinguish what communication is appraised as an ostracism message (Burgoon, 1993). It also suggests that

more attention needs to be given to the effect of culture on the types of messages people appraise as ostracism. This may reveal dominant forms of ostracism messages in different cultures, and further our understanding of how ostracism exists communicatively in people's everyday lives throughout the world.

Race. Race is a construct that influences one's perception of the world (Allen, 2007). Interviewees who were people of color reported that they often entered interactions and assessed behaviors in relation to their racial identity and others' racial identities. Not all of the 11 participants who identified as people of color discussed race as an important factor in their interactions, but the ones that did discussed it as central to their sense making. Current studies on race and ostracism suggest that a target's race can significantly influence communicative expectations, and how a target copes with and make sense of ostracism (see Eyerman, 2004; Hayman, McIntyre, & Abbey, 2015; Goodwin, Williams & Carter-Sowell, 2010; Mosley, Owen, Rostosky, & Reese, 2017; Sacco, et al., 2011; Sue, et al., 2007). For example, Eyerman (2004) explained that racially oppressive histories can carry over to subsequent generations, and that it can influence the way people of color understand rejection experiences. The current study provides support for the idea that race can significantly influence message reception and meaning making.

Participants who discussed race as being an important factor in their sense making, also explained that when they entered situations they could be more attune or sensitive to racial messages. Research on rejection sensitivity suggests that people can have dispositions that make them more or less receptive to potential rejection messages, and/or that they will have stronger reactions (Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Kang, 2010; Stafford, 2007). People can have specific types of rejection sensitivities such as concerns about their own appearance

(Park & Pinkus, 2009). Others concluded that race is such a factor (Anglin, Greenspoon, Lighty, & Ellman, 2016). The findings of the current study suggest that people can be sensitive to racially based ostracism messages. However, this examination adds to this body of research by explaining the pre-ostracism meaning systems that allow a message to emerge. Race can make an individual more attune to potential ostracism messages in that they are aroused and alert as soon as they enter situations that appear to be uncertain in Phase 2. Thus, this study gives attention to the importance of pre-interaction meaning systems for racial exclusions and offers additional evidence of how this affects the meaning making process.

The factor of race is further reinforced by research on stigma. Stigma is defined as an attribute that is discrediting to an individual within a social community (Goffman, 1963). Stigma is stereotyping, status loss, separation, or discrimination, in relation to the exercise of power in society (Link & Phelan, 2001). Howarth (2006) conducted research that connected race and stigma, and suggests that conceptualizing race as a stigma can be beneficial to researchers. Specifically, it can illuminate the dehumanizing nature of discourse surrounding race and reveal the unequal relations of power that are imbedded within the label. Research on stigma and the findings of this study help to show an important point where race, stigma, and ostracism intersect. The three concepts are certainly related, in that one can be ostracized because of a racial stigmatization, however, the findings of this study reveal that their conceptual similarities require more attention. Stigma, race, and ostracism are studied separately yet they have more in common than they do not.

Furthermore, participants' stories raised important questions about the relationship between chronic ostracism and racism. Chronic ostracism is considered an intense and long lasting hurtful experience that can create significant psychological damage in a target (Williams

& Nida, 2017). Similarly, experiences with racism take place over a lifetime and create similar damaging outcomes (Carter, 2007; Larson, Gillies, Howard, & Coffin, 2007). Thus, participants like Isabella draw attention to the connection between effects of ostracism and racism, in that people of color who experience racist exclusions, may in fact be feeling the effects of chronic ostracism. This could have significant research implications, because ostracism literature and racism literature would overlap, instead of being different.

Review of RQ2. In conclusion, analysis revealed three levels of eleven primary factors that had a significant influence on interviewees' progression through the seven-phase model of ostracism message reception. Collectively, the factors reveal just some of the many elements that require future examination to understand their specific relationship to ostracism. The findings related to RQ2 help to reinforce some notions and offer new contributions to others. In the next section, I will discuss the specific conceptual, methodological, and theoretical contributions of the findings.

Contributions

Conceptual contributions. In this study I have attempted to synthesize several concepts and literature across several disciplines of study to offer a definition of ostracism messages. Ostracism is closely related to constructs such as rejection and exclusion. They clearly overlap in certain regards, yet how they differ is a much more difficult task to determine when the constructs are brought into the field of communication studies. Based on an extensive review of literature, it appears that across publications, words like exclusion, social exclusion, ostracism, rejection, left out, ignored, banished, abandoned and others are operationalized and conceptualized differently depending on the field of study or researcher audience. Generally speaking, in sociology, *social exclusion* is used as a measure of people's access to resources. In

the field of communication and psychology, *social exclusion* often refers more to the interpersonal distancing of interactants (see Buss, 1990.) The term *ostracism* tends to be used if the method is Cyberball-related or if the study examines psychological effects (see Gonsalkorale, & Williams, 2007; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). Others offer taxonomies arguing that the difference between the constructs is that ostracism does not include verbal communication, whereas rejection does (Freedman et al, 2016). Across disciplines and studies, there are varying perspectives of what these terms mean.

Some scholars argue, though, that differentiating these terms defeats the purpose of studying them. In a chapter in *The Social Outcast* (Williams, et al, 2001) Leary had the task of defining ostracism, rejection, exclusion, and other related terms. Throughout the piece he seems to do so unwillingly as he frequently reaffirms his position that defining terms is "fruitless" (p. 49). After defining them anyway, he concludes the chapter by suggesting to the reader, "I have not only obscured clear thinking about these constructs but the reader now possesses less worthwhile knowledge regarding rejection than before reading this chapter" (p. 49). Although Leary's perspective may be true in some regards, it becomes integral to understand conceptual variations when assessing these phenomenon as communication constructs because in order for to study any communication phenomenon, the first task is to explain what they are and how they are communicated. Without a clear definition of ostracism communication, I decided to merge the prominent definitions across literatures and disciplines to offer a conceptualization of ostracism messages that could be used to structure my interviews. The definition I used in this study was based on how it was presented by Williams (2001) and in most Cyberball-related studies: the exclusion of an individual or group by an individual or group. It is fairly broad and

accounts for individual behaviors such as ignoring or the cold shoulder as well as major events of institutionalized out casting.

In spite of these attempts, researchers appear to frequently add more confusion to this field of study. In Mark Leary's discussion of definitions, after he states that the task of conceptual differentiation is "fruitless" he goes on to state, "Clearly, not all paradigms induce the same experience, and we should not assume that all methods of inducing rejection are socially and psychologically equivalent…By considering the basic dimensions on which these paradigms differ, researchers can make more careful and informed decisions regarding how best to study interpersonal rejection in all of its forms" (p. 50). As a researcher who is interested in the communication of ostracism, Leary's words are seemingly contradictory and make it increasingly difficult to study ostracism beyond Cyberball. Thus, based on the findings of this study, I argue that there is a serious need for conceptual clarity in the social sciences to acknowledge how terms are different, and in what ways they are synonymous. This is of particular importance because when one attempts to study ostracism as a communicative phenomenon, the researcher must first recognize what the behavior is communicatively. In this sense, one has to describe how it exists in interactions. Because this notion has not been the focus of research up to this point, there are major levels of conceptual variation across terms and disciplines when explaining what ostracism related terms are.

Therefore, I argue, first, interpersonal ostracism is a communication event and not a single moment. The difference being that an event consists of many moments and experiences, and lasts over a period of time. It is a series of interactions that are embedded in a chain of utterances and an ongoing discourse (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). Second, it is an expectancy violation. Burgoon's (1993) EVT effectively explains much of the seven-phase process, but in

particular, in order for an ostracism message to manifest, a violation must occur and be appraised as ostracism. Finally, it is the result of discrepancies between the receiver's goals and the appraisal of a violation. Thus, I define interpersonal ostracism as a communicative event where a message receiver consumes an unexpected or undesired message that is initially perceived as threatening to their inclusion in a desired relationship or goal and results in feelings of hurt, anger and confusion. This definition offers a more detailed representation of how the phenomenon exists communicatively and can be implemented by new scholarship to address more aspects of the communication of ostracism messages. It also offers a basis from which future research can amend and build the definition of interpersonal ostracism.

Methodological contributions. The stories told by interviewees demonstrate that ostracism is not a cut and dry phenomenon that takes place in a bubble. Instead, it is a multifaceted communicative event that has many layers and elements that influence message reception and interpretation. Much of ostracism research focused on the psychological effects of being interpersonally ostracized via the Cyberball experimental design (Williams & Jarvis, 2006) where a participant plays a digital ball tossing game and eventually stops receiving the ball. In 2015, there were over 200 published articles that used this method (Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015). Researchers use other designs such as the O-train method (Ren, Wesselman, & Williams, 2015), but they tend to resemble the foundational elements of Cyberball and only focus on the time once ostracism is perceived. Indeed, there are still other studies that have examined ostracism through alternative methodologies (Faulkner & Williams, 1995; Williams, Wheeler, and Harvey, 2001), but there is certainly still a need for different ways to examine the phenomenon of ostracism.

The findings of this study reinforce the need for non-Cyberball related methodologies in ostracism literature. Simply by looking at ostracism as a form of communication through interviews as opposed to ostracism as a psychological reaction, I have found that interpersonal ostracism is an event with varying levels of depth and length. Further concepts such as EVT, URT, and RDT 2.0 provide relevant explanations for each element of the experience of ostracism. The findings also helped to replicate, challenge, and expand current conceptualizations and allow novel perspectives for future research. Although Cyberball related methods have helped bring attention to an extremely important human experience, there is a great need for other methods and perspectives as they may offer new insight to the experience of ostracism, beyond simply that it creates pain.

In particular, this examination allowed participants to tell the story from their own perspective. It gave them a voice to directly share and describe their lived experience of ostracism without being forced into preconceived parameters or to be tested for specific outcomes. Rather, by allowing individuals to tell their stories of ostracism, different forms of data are produced that allow for nuanced observations about ostracism and further our understanding of the phenomenon. Also, the method of using a questionnaire before the interview proved to be useful as it allowed individuals to think about the experience in advanced. For some it was the first time they thought deeply about their ostracism experience. This method helped pre-screen interviews to ensure focused content, but it also helped to reveal post-ostracism meaning making processes to the interviewee, in that they were able to be more reflexive.

Theoretical contributions. The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the seven-phase model of ostracism message reception and meaning making. It proposes a theory of

a basic social process—how ostracism is received and interpreted by a target. It offers a receiver perspective of communication and the phases one will go through in order reach a final goal of uncertainty resolution. In accordance to contemporary grounded theory, this theoretical model is meant to be empirically tested (Evans, 2013; LaRossa, 2005). Although there were member checks of the meaning making process, the model requires future analysis to further examine whether it needs to be amended.

The Temporal Model of ostracism (Williams, 2009) is the most prominent conceptualization of ostracism used by researchers. I offer an alternative perspective to this model with the seven-phase model, suggesting that the end point of ostracism is in fact one of positive outcomes. Targets are driven to reduce their uncertainty, settle their dissonance, reappraise previous meanings, and effectively cope with hurt feelings in order to move onto a concluding interpretation of the events that resolves their cognitions. The Temporal Model and ostracism researchers rarely acknowledge the personal positive growth that ostracism creates. Yet, in my examination, fourteen of the participants discussed their ostracism experience in Phase 7, and revealing that it is possible for ostracism to have a positive or null personal outcome.

The Temporal Model and ostracism researchers often discuss the experience of ostracism from the point of receiving the message, and the coping that takes place after. The seven-phase model reveals that the pre-ostracism period is integral in sense making. In order to appraise a message as ostracism, a target must draw from past experiences and many related elements to offer an ostracism interpretation. Without the meanings that come from the pre-ostracism period, it is difficult to imagine how an ostracism message would actually create an effect.

The overall implication of the seven-phase model is that targets of ostracism have some agency in their experience. As the microphases of Phase 3 demonstrate, a target must consume an ostracism message in order for any meaning making to take place. If the target does not receive a message, then can they be ostracized? If the target does not give a meaning of *ostracism message* to communication, then will they ever experience pain? If the target does not care about the other person anymore, so that ostracism messages are meaningless, are they equal to other messages? These questions help to show that a target is an active contributor to the outcome of ostracism and that they are not necessarily at the mercy of a source or that the communication of ostracism is a linear process that posits the target as the victim. Targets appear to play a pivotal role in the communication of their own status. Without the targets involvement in the meaning making process, an ostracism message may just be silence, a verbal gesture of exclusion may just be noise, and a cold shoulder may just be a body movement. Thus, targets should not simply be deemed a victim without a base level acknowledgement of their significance in meaning making and the circumstances of the ostracism experience.

Target agency in ostracism has significant implications. If a target is actively involved in meaning making, then it may also possible for them to learn to perceive ostracism communication as not hurtful. If there is subjectivity in the reception and interpretation of ostracism messages, then can a person learn to not feel ostracized? By always labeling the target as a victim, researchers are unable to acknowledge the power that message receivers have in the communication of ostracism messages.

Limitations

In spite of my best efforts to create and implement a sound examination, there were certain limitations. First, I attempted to find participants of varying demographics but based on

the final count, the largest participant group was white women. It may be that if I spoke to people of more varied demographics, the results could have reflected different content, particularly in terms of RQ2. For example, Carbone (2008) conducted a case study of homosexual individuals who experienced a lifetime of ostracism due to their sexual identity. In this sense, I may have found content more related to gender or sexual identity if I spoke to individuals from the LGBTQ community. Similarly, if the participant pool reflected more international backgrounds, the eleven factors may have been different. Another limitation is that the interviews were retrospective. Some suggest that interviewees can forget aspects of their experience, or offer a skewed perspective that does not allow the researcher to collect completely accurate data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The purpose of this examination was to understand the targets perspective, though, so it may have accounted for the limitation.

Future research

The results of this examination offer many directions for future research. First, more research should examine other aspects of ostracism other than the Phase 4 reaction. The Cyberball methodology certainly captures an important moment in ostracism communication and has made ostracism research highly visible, but the findings of this study suggest that interpersonal ostracism is an event and that there is so much more to be understood in the process of message reception and sense making. The communication of ostracism takes place in dynamic and multilayered social environments that require individuals to draw from many levels of meaning systems to uncover an ostracism message and interpret it. For example, Tony was nonverbally pushed out of an Amish funeral by his neighbors. This was a very specific situation with unique elements that influenced the meaning making process. Certainly, there was a moment of shock, but Tony explained that the religious and personal aspects of the event helped

him get over those immediate reactions fairly quickly. Experimental designs like Cyberball may not be able to fully capture such intricacies of targets' lived experiences. Thus, future research should utilize alternative methodologies to examine ostracism events. For example, ethnographies could help answer questions about the behaviors and interactions that take place during the process. Auto-ethnographies could help reveal unique instances of ostracism experiences that would otherwise be difficult to capture in a laboratory such as making sense of subtle, unclear ostracism message in social settings. Longitudinal studies could help answer questions related to the lasting effects of ostracism meanings and how they change over extended periods of time. Likewise, future researchers should use different perspectives such as qualitative or critical perspectives in various fields like nursing, education, gerontology, linguistics or anthropology.

Second, the form of grounded theory that was used in this study is designed to produce a theory that researchers can later test. Future research should continue to test, adapt, and critique the proposed model. In particular, are there experiences that people have that are not captured with the seven-phase process of meaning making? Can the model be applied to counseling sessions in some way? Can it help create a measure? Research Question 2 revealed a list of many factors that have a clear influence on the process. These factors could be used as testable variables in future examinations to further our understanding of how ostracism exists in nature.

Third, race was a significant factor in the stories told by people of color. Whether it was a direct influence or an unavoidable cognition, there is some connection between racism and ostracism. Based on interviews, it may be plausible that the pain induced by ostracism, is the same pain felt by individuals who are racially segregated or marginalized. Future research should examine the connections between racism and ostracism as they appear to be closely

related in some regard and could offer a vivid depiction into the psychology, sociology, and communication of racism.

In particular though, race brings to light that ostracism events are set within a socio-political-economic environment that have a profound influence on meanings. The histories of people of color will carry with them when they interact with people, and impact the process of meaning making. Race helps to demonstrate it is not necessarily a factor that sits outside the model, but rather that the model is embedded within broader social environments that contribute to perception. They are not exclusive from one another but work in tandem to produce one's understanding of meaning systems. Future research should examine the relationship of such socio-political-economic contexts as race to understand more about an individual's perception of ostracism messages.

Fourth, Buelow et al. (2015) and Dewall (2013) claim that most ostracism research is conducted in the reflexive stage and reflective stages of ostracism. My analysis suggests that the pre-ostracism time period is extremely significant in the process of interpreting ostracism messages. Future research should focus on articulating and documenting the influence of the pre-ostracism time period to understand more about how perspectives and interactions that exist before message reception can shape coping, hurt, and meaning making. Interpretations in the pre-ostracism period carried over to every subsequent phase, and affected the entire process. Thus, understanding more about predispositions, sensitivities, and experiences that exist before ostracism happens could prove to be important in ostracism research.

Fifth, the findings of this study helped forge a definition of interpersonal ostracism messages. This definition needs more attention in future research, though. With so many related terms such as exclusion, social exclusion, rejection, stigma, left-out, ignoring, and ostracism that

are used across various fields of study, a substantial task of clarification remains. Future researchers should conduct a comprehensive review of literature to reveal the current state of these constructs and how the social sciences can mend the gaps that exist. This will help add conceptual clarity and allow researchers to have more focused efforts in their studies.

Furthermore, the findings of the study suggested many connections to other concepts from various fields of stay that may prove to be important in conceptualizing interpersonal ostracism messages. For example, bullying is closely related in that ostracism can be a form of bullying (Keashly, 2012; Olweus, 1993). Thus, bullying literature may reveal even more about the ostracism process. Similarly, micro-aggressions are understood as subtle forms of discrimination towards various social groups (Sue, 2010). For the people of color who were participants in this study, their ostracism messages may have been micro-aggressions and this line of research could help reveal more about the dynamics of this particular type of communication. Bullying and micro-aggressions demonstrate just some of the many related concepts in the social sciences. Future research should also look at the connections of interpersonal ostracism messages with such concepts.

Sixth, target agency suggests that there may be an eighth phase to the model that was not revealed through the data. If an individual is an active participant in their meaning making, is it possible for them to reactivate the process after they perceive the event to be over? For people who reported that they were done the process and that they did not think about the event anymore, can there be instances that trigger reappraisals? Particularly for people of color, does the experience ever truly end if the ostracism is related to their race? Agency helps to demonstrate that there may be an eighth dormant stage that exists for a person's entire life that can reactivated if they accost certain stimuli or choose to revisit the experience. For example,

people who have experience traumatic events, work with meanings throughout a lifetime (Khoury, et. al, 2010). This notion was not revealed in data analysis but target agency suggests that there may be something more beyond Phase 7. Future research should examine how ostracism events are dormant in people's lives and whether an eighth phase should be considered.

Finally, I examined the process of ostracism communication from the perspective of the receiver of the message. However, it is imperative that researchers also understand this phenomenon from the sender's/source's perspective. What are the motivations to ostracize others? Why do ostracizers choose the method they ultimately decide on? There are many questions that are left unanswered about ostracism messages and the source. Although there are studies that have begun the investigation into sources of ostracism (Grahe, 2015), future research should examine ostracism communication from the source's perspective to understand the many aspects of sending an ostracism message.

Conclusion

Research on ostracism overwhelmingly suggests that being ostracized is a painful experience. Yet, we know much less about how ostracism is communicated and how ostracism messages are given meaning beyond the initial pain. The goal of my study was to examine the communication of ostracism through the perspective of the target and to assess the target's process of message meaning making and the factors that influence the process. Through qualitative interviews with targets and a grounded theory analysis, I uncovered a seven-phases meaning making process and eleven dominant factors that had significant influence on a target's interpretation of communication. The critical junctures embedded in interview responses helped illuminate that in order for a message to create pain it has to be consumed, and that a target plays

a key role in giving meaning to the original message. Thus, I conclude that a target of ostracism has a varying level of agency in the communicative process of ostracism message meaning making, in that they can be co-creators of meaning. In order for ostracism to hurt a target, they must engage with the seven-phase process. Without it, ostracism messages can simply be perceived as something else, such as a person having a bad day. For some this process of interpretation can be brief and succinct; while for others it can be long and draining. Ostracism is indeed a multilayered communicative phenomenon that exists in dynamic social environments that require targets to perceive and make sense of messages through multiple meaning systems. Research has gone to great lengths to firmly establish that ostracism is an important phenomenon that creates hurt. This study adds to that literature by suggesting that through a communicative perspective, targets are certainly involved in the interpretative process of ostracism message meaning making and their role is highly influential to the outcomes of the ostracism experience.

Appendix A

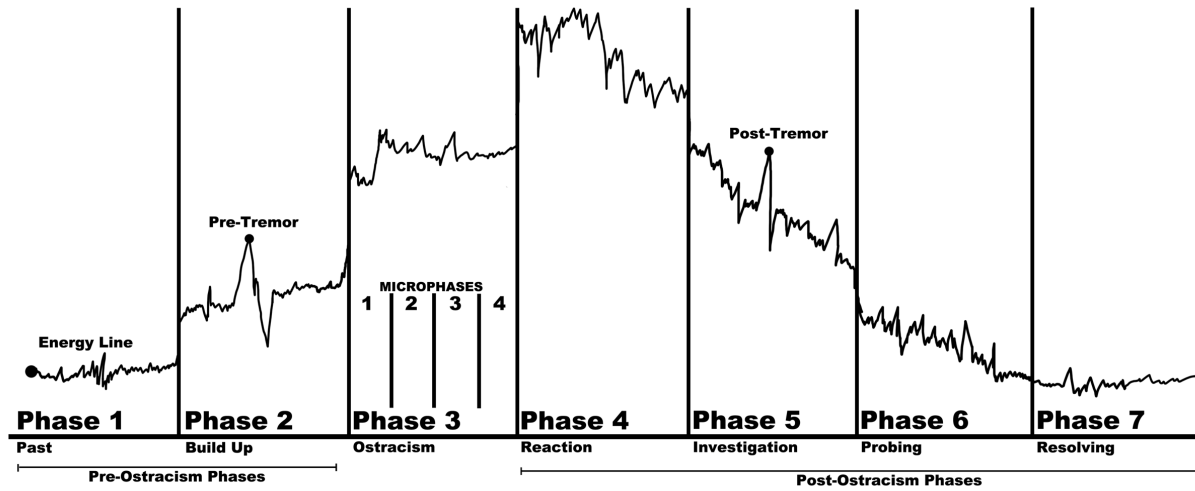**Figure 1.** *Model of the seven-phase process of ostracism message reception*

Figure 2. *Four microphases of Phase 3*

1 **Reception**	**2** **Expectancy Violation**	**3** **Ostracism Labeling**	**4** **Double Check**
Consumption/ reception of the ostracism message	Target will feel the arousal of an expectancy violation. Awareness is heightened without meaning	the message is given the meaning of ostracism through the meanings built up from pre-ostracism meaning making and other factors in the moment	After labeling the communication as being an ostracism message, target will make sure that their assessment is correct

Figure 3. *Seven-phase model of ostracism message reception*

Phase	Phase Characteristics	Definition	Interview Excerpt
Phase 1 *The Past*	a) Pre-existing meanings	Meaning systems that targets bring with them to interactions	"..it's something I've experienced in the past because people assume I'm from a different country."
	b) Broad expectations	General assumptions about how people act	"I would expect that she…would act like an adult in a relationship"
	c) Pre-tremors	Violations of expectancies that are not appraised as ostracism messages	"They are doing this thing together or they're doing XYZ thing together…"
Phase 2 *Build Up*	d) Why interactants were communicating	Motivations and reasons for interpersonal communication	"One day I was going into the dining hall and there was an open seat at a table and I went up, got my food, and went to sit down."
	e) Specific expectations	Relational, contextual, and situational specific expectancies are established	"I figured, it's a seat at a table"
Phase 3 *Ostracism Message*	f) Microphase 1	How the message was received	"So I called her. She didn't answer"
	g) Microphase 2	Expectancy violation	"I was expecting children pictures like every other day, not everybody together!"
	h) Microphase 3	Appraisal of ostracism message	"He walked passed me."
	i) Microphase 4	Double check	"Are you serious?"
Phase 4 *Reaction*	j) Pain and confusion	Ostracism induced hurt and perplexity	"It all just hit me at one time, so my head was just spinning at that time."

Phase (cont.)	Phase Char. (cont.)	Definition (cont.)	Interview excerpt (cont.)
	k) Forced inner dialogue	Intrapersonal communication	"I was thinking to myself, 'No one else is being treated like this.'"
	l) Reflexive questions	First questions related to ostracism message	"'Why am I here?'"
Phase 5 *Investigation*	m) Target begins investigation	Target's initial exploration of meanings and events	"I talked to his brother's girlfriend…she told me about why exactly he was doing this"
	n) Proposing detailed questions	Target thinks of new questions related to the ostracism message	"'Have I been investing my stock in the wrong people?'"
	o) Reappraising previous meanings	Target looks back on old communication and give it a new meaning	"I made excuses for him… But then as it kept going on I was like, 'Alright…this is just ridiculous.'"
	p) Post-tremors	Experiences that create arousal related to the ostracism message but do not create an ostracism reaction	"Later on I found out that all the other sister friends in the circle were invited."
Phase 6 *Probing*	q) Answers to previous questions	Target has definitive answers to questions proposed in Phase 5	"People grow up…I'm thinking that we may be at that point in our lives."
	r) Reappraising on a deeper level	Reappraisals of previous meanings have more depth than Phase 5	"It told me that it wasn't the fact that they were out against me; they had a fear for themselves that they might be put in the same situation as me."

Phase (cont.)	*Phase Char. (cont.)*	*Definition (cont.)*	*Interview excerpt (cont.)*
Phase 7 *Resolving*	s) Pain is settled	The reaction in Phase 4 is resolved	"I'm over it. I'm not bitter about it. I want to see them succeed."
	t) Connecting to life course	Target explains how the ostracism event fits within the broader experience of their entire life	"I wanted young men to grow up with an understanding that they're not out there all alone."
	v) Finalized meaning	Target is able to offer a final appraisal of the meanings of the ostracism message	"It is what it is."

Figure 4. Eleven factors that influence the seven-phase model

Factor Level	*Factor*	*Definition*	*Interview excerpt*
Intrapersonal	Self-esteem	Subjective evaluation of one's own personal worth	"I have a very eroded self-esteem and it becomes very apparent that even small, little things like this can make me feel so bad for several days"
	Goals	Desired outcomes	"I actually wanted something from this little event."
	Rationalization through alternative context	In the post-ostracism phases, a target will compare the ostracism message to another context to understand more meanings	"If someone only had that group of friends and they lost all of them, I feel like it would hurt them more."
Social	Perception of relational closeness	Target's subjective view of the level of connection they share with a relational partner	"When I have those experiences with someone who is supposed to be my best friend, it's really hard to kind of like let go I guess because it's just surprising."
	Relational expectations	Target's assumptions of communicators behaviors based on relationship type	"If you're teaching your class and a student is asking you questions you should answer."
	Message severity	Perceived level of social/relational damage or threat created by a message	"Within that first month I was really in a catatonic kind of state."
	Repetition	Recurring ostracism messages of varying severity	"It is just a lot of little things that have kind of added up."
	Reconciliation	When two communicators resolve their past transgression and move forward with new relational goals	"I'm mad I can't really to be expected to be included in everything. But now everything's normal."

Factor level (cont.)	*Factor (cont.)*	*Definition (cont.)*	*Interview excerpt (cont.)*
Structural	Workplace	The location that a target is employed	"I'm going to have to revisit that later to figure out how to adjust in the future [at work]"
	Culture	Primary group membership that directly informs personal norms	"Where I come from its common courtesy to say hello to someone."
	Race	Racial identity, socially constructed identity based on various factors	"I mean it's being black in America. You know what I'm saying? It's just something you deal with and learn with."

Appendix B

Participant Table

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender	Religion	Time since ostracism message	Phase at Interview	Relationship
1 Rhonda	50	Black	F	Christian	2 months	6	Close Friend
2 Calvin	34	Black	M	Christian	20 years	7	Coach
3 Sean	27	White	M	None	3 months	6	Family
4 Karen	43	White	F	Other	2 weeks	5	Coworker
5 Kiki	44	Asian	F	None	1 month	7	Colleague
6 Devon	18	Black	M	Christian	2 ½ years	7	Coach
7 Jane	28	White	F	None	2 years	6	Teacher
8 Tonya	26	Black	F	Christian	1 month	6	Classmate
9 Lola	30	White	F	Pagan	5 months	6	Friend
10 Rita	27	White	F	None	4 months	6	Close Friend
11 Vernon	28	White	M	None	2 weeks	6	Friend of Partner
12 Shanae	20	Multi	F	None	2 months	6	Family
13 Steve	22	White	M	Christian	1 year	7	Friend
14 Olivia	36	Asian	F	Muslim	2 years	5	Organization
15 Jackie	20	White	F	Christian	2 years	6	Partner
16 Daria	28	White	F	Christian	3 months	7	Coworker
17 Marco	18	White	M	None	6 months	6	Close Friends
18 Mike	18	White	M	Christian	5 weeks	7	Acquaintance
19 Isabella	23	Hispanic	F	None	2 months	5	Patient
20 Tony	35	Other	M	None	1 year	7	Neighbor
21 Annie	37	White	F	Christian	2 years	7	Close Friend
22 Andre	32	Black	M	Christian	5 months	6	Partner
23 Rose	28	White	F	None	2 months	6	Coworker
24 Claire	29	White	F	None	17 years	6	Organization
25 Mya	19	White	F	None	2 months	5	Close Friend
26 Kayla	30	White	F	None	1 year	7	Close Friend
27 Vicky	27	White	F	None	2 weeks	7	Coworker
28 Tasha	31	White	F	None	6 months	7	Close Friends
29 Martin	32	Black	M	None	4 years	7	Coaching staff
30 Barb	62	White	F	Christian	20 years	7	Church
31 Joe	37	White	M	None	8 years	7	Coworkers
32 Carlos	37	Multi	M	None	3 months	6	Close Friend

Appendix C

Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this study. This is the first part of the two-part study. Here, you will be asked to write about a specific time that you were ostracized. When I say "ostracized" I am referring to experiences where you were given the silent treatment, cold shoulder, pushed out of a group, shunned, ignored, not invited to an event, left out of a group or gathering, silenced, cast out of a situation, treated as if you didn't exist, or any other number of events that may be similarly related to what I just described. I am really interested in experiences that happened interpersonally, so the interactions and communication that took place between you and the other people who were ostracizing you. I will be asking you many details about the specific situation during the interview, but here I want you to tell the story in your own words. Pick one event that took place between one to three months ago.

In order to write about this event, what I would like you to do is to write as is if the experience were a story that has a beginning, middle, and end. As you do this I want you to walk me through the conversations that took place throughout this timeline, almost as if you were describing a movie script. So start off with your relationship with the people/person who ostracized you and give some background about the event. Then move onto how it all started (beginning) and outline your interactions before you were ostracized. Next describe the conversations and interactions when you were ostracized (middle). Finally, what happened after you were ostracized (end), how did you think about the situation after it happened and what conversations took place? If your story does not fit into the timeline exactly how I just described it, that is fine. Just do your best to tell me the story of how you were ostracized, offer a timeline of the event, and the conversations and interactions that took place.

If you have any questions feel free to contact me directly through email at FQ7120@wayne.edu. After I receive this document from you, we will set up a time to conduct the second part of the study, which will be a face-to-face interview about the story. Remember that all of this remains private, and that your name or any identifying characteristics are completely changed so that you have no affiliation with your responses. You will not receive compensation of extra credit or the 25$ VISA gift card until you have also completed the interview portion of your participation.

1) Write your story below. Try to offer enough detail that you write over half a page single spaced, but no more than 2 pages.

Appendix D

Interview protocol

(This is a script meant to be used as a general guide to help the interviewer stay on track with the research topic. Questions will vary. The numbered questions represent dominant ideas that help the interview stay focused. The hyphenated questions are potential probing questions that are only listed as a reference for what could be said as a follow up, and are not necessary or required.)

Interviewer script read before interview begins for IRB record:
The recording is on. Thank you very much for participating in this study. I want you to listen to a short script before the interview begins so that I have verbal record of you confirming your participation. This entire conversation will be recorded for the sake of future analysis. It will remain entirely confidential. You are considered a willing participant but can back out of participation at any point. So, first, do you acknowledge that you are currently being recorded? (Pause for response). Second, Second, have you received the informed consent form, understand it, and you are willing to participate in this study? (Pause for response)

Now that we've done that, let's get started with the interview. This is meant to be more of an open conversation so feel free to interject or ask questions if you don't understand something. I have a few general ideas that I would like to address, but if you think of some thing lets talk about it. I am interested in understanding a specific time that you were ostracized or excluded by a group or individual. When I say ostracism I am referring to experiences where you were given the silent treatment, cold shoulder, pushed out of a group, or situations where you weren't invited or included in some way, or a time you didn't receive a message, or you got left out, or any other number of events that may be similarly related to what I just described. I am really interested in experiences that happened interpersonally, so the interactions and communication that took place between you and the other people who were ostracizing you. I will be asking you many details about the specific situation. If you could pick an event that took place around a month ago that would be ideal but please take your time and think of a specific event and the details associated with that event. When you are ready we can begin the conversation.

1) Tell the story of the ostracism event. As you tell the story, walk me through the dialogue that took place too. Do not be afraid to talk about the event in a "he said, she said" kind of fashion.
2) Why did you pick this event to tell me about?
   -Why was it important or not important?
3) Why do you think you were left out?
   -Do you put blame on anyone, anything, or yourself?
4) Tell me more about the person(s) who ostracized you.
   -What was their age, gender, level of power in the relationship?
   -Who else was involved/around/important?
   -Describe your relationships with those involved.
   -How would you define your relationship?
5) Describe your history of interactions with this person.
   -Did you expect this to happen?

-Were there events in the past that are related to or important to this event?
-Did this group or person ever ostracize you before?
-How do you think previous experiences influenced this event?
-Describe what a normal conversation would be like with your group or this individual.
-Was this different in anyway?

6) I want to talk more about the timeline of events. What was going on before the event took place?
-What were you doing?
-Where were you?

7) Describe the moment that you realized you were being left out.
-What were your immediate thoughts, feelings, emotions?
-What was said or not said to you?
-Describe what the other person was doing or not doing.
-Describe the setting.

8) After you realize you were excluded, can you describe what happened after that?
-What were you thinking about?
-Who did you talk to?
-What intrapersonal communication took place? Talk me through your inner dialogue.
-Was there a part that helped you rest your mind/dissonance or gave you comfort?

9) Describe where you are today with this event. How do you think about it now?
-Has your perspective of the situation changed or stayed the same?
-What would you have done differently?
-Has this event changed anything about you? Your behaviors, life perspective, opinions?

10) Is there anything else important that you would like to add to the conversation that I have not mentioned?

Finally, I would like to get some general demographic information. Remember you do not have to answer anything you do not want to.
1) Age
2) Gender
3) Race
4) Ethnicity
5) Religious affiliation

(Interviewer script for IRB record): I have no more questions. Thank you so much for your time and participation in this study. I am about to turn off the recording. I would like you to stay here after I have finished so I can explain to you why I am interviewing you and help you understand the scope of the study. If you have nothing else to say, and understand that the recording will end, please say "I understand".

Appendix E

26 Initial Codes

Initial Code	Definition
1) Relationships	Relationship is imperative in understanding the dynamic of all meaning in ostracism experiences and has a major influence on what people think is ostracism.
2) Past	Past experiences affect everything about every part of all participant's stories.
3) Dealing with it	"It is what it is."
4) Dynamic events	Ostracism happens in dynamic social environments and social networks such as extended families with sub groups and co-cultures.
5) Multi-layered	In order to understand the many symbols that are being thrown at a target, they have to consume and comprehend the message in relation to all the other messages that they have received throughout the whole experience.
6) Importance	Some events are more important that others and some experiences carry more social significance.
7) Clarifying	Post event conversations help to add clarity to the dissonance of being ostracized.
8) Past relationship	The same ostracism message means something different to different people because they understand it through their past experiences with the source. What constitutes an ostracism message in each relationship changes overtime too.
9) Real time social	Meaning is given by the contrasts of other people in the event. In others words, if an individual acts differently towards me than everyone else, then I can give a message the meaning of ostracism because my treatment was different and negative compared to the people around me.
10) Coping mechanism	You can learn to deal with ostracism. You can be taught to care less about communication that suggests that you are ostracized.
11) Disgust	While participants wrote the questionnaire they reported that they often shook their heads and said, "Why is this even happening?"
12) Culture	Cultural norms are a primary framework through which the entire experience is understood
13) EVT	Violation of expectations is often the trigger for one's attention to a source. The abnormal behavior says, "Hey! Look at this situation more critically" and then a meaning of ostracism may be given.
14) Timeline	Post-tremors are given meaning by the ostracism event. As one participant explained, they were studying for an exam and it made them remember that they were left out of a study group. Therefore, the experiences before, during, and after an ostracism event inform the entire meaning making process.

15) Self-esteem	An individual's self-esteem mitigates many aspects of the experience of ostracism because ostracism makes people question why they were not included in a group. For those with low self-esteem the immediate response is that it was something they did wrong. They also seem to me more attune to ostracism messages.
16) Expectations across dimensions	There are situational, contextual, behavioral, culture, and relational expectations. People are alert to all of these experiences and when they are violated it arouses a targets mind.
17) Relational resources	What people can get out of a relationship matters. If you have things I want but I can't attain them, then I can perceive the resistance as ostracism. Likewise, if coworkers cause issues, it can resist someone's access to getting paid, creating potential ostracism messages.
18) Perspective	Sometimes people are more concerned about particular aspects of the experience than anything else, such as the event happening at work.
19) Attunement	Certain environments or conversation types can make people more aware to ostracism messages.
20) Ostracism micro-messages	People can receive many subtle ostracism messages that collectively suggest ostracism.
21) Bad day	Targets often first thought that the ostracizer was just having a bad day.
22) Each part effects each part	People take in new meanings throughout the entire process and each new meaning affects the others.
23) Repetition	Ostracizers can repeat messages and create a sense of conscious targeting, which makes it harder to ignore.
24) Chronological phases	There are distinct time periods in the stories of participants that are separate from each other, but influence each other.
25) Double check	Before target's feel pain they often described a breif moment where they double check to make sure that the pain they are about to feel is warranted.
26) Williams' stages	There is much more going on than what is described in Williams' stages and there is a lot of important detail that is expressed by participants that takes place before they even ostracized.

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ABSTRACT

THE PROCESS OF OSTRACISM MESSAGE RECEPTION AND MEANING MAKING

by

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Ostracism is defined as the exclusion of an individual or group by an individual or group. Research suggests that being ostracized can create severe negative psychological reactions in targets. However, there is much less research explicitly focused on how ostracism is communicated and the process of meaning making that allows a target to interpret communication as an ostracism message. Through grounded theory and qualitative interviews, this study asked: What is the process of interpersonal ostracism message meaning making, and what are the key elements that influence this process? Analysis revealed a seven-phase process that explains the stages of meaning making a target will go through during an ostracism event and eleven important factors that affect this process. After a discussion of each phase and factor, the study incorporates Relational Dialectics Theory, Expectancy Violations Theory, and Uncertainty Reduction Theory to conceptualize ostracism as an event as opposed to a single moment, suggesting that meanings are ever changing. The study concludes that targets of ostracism play a crucial role in the reception and interpretation of ostracism messages. Finally, the study proposes limitations and directions for future research.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

I am a Mediterranean-American that grew up on a farm in Amish country to a family of construction workers. I entered college as a Communications major because I assumed that I was going to be a music producer and that the communications department was the closest I could get at my school to a production studio. As I got deeper into the field of Communication though, Dr. Mary Braz of West Chester University introduced me to the study of ostracism and my life changed. It made me deeply reflect on my own behaviors, and opened my eyes to the social world that I was a part of. As I moved into my MA and PhD in Communications, I continued to study ostracism across different sub-disciplines. Over time, I've heard many stories of people being ignored, excluded, ostracized, and left out, and still I feel there is so much more to learn and so many people that could benefit from knowing more about ostracism, in the same way that I did.