

NIGEL NO MATES!

Ostracism: The act of Social Rejection

By Henry Pharo

What I wanted to know

Ostracism is the act of being excluded or ignored by your peers. Can you remember a time when you were rejected or left out? How did you feel? Ostracism can have devastating effects on your self-esteem, and it can lead to some catastrophic outcomes. For example, ostracism was a factor in a number of recent high-school shootings in the United States.

My research was on ostracism during adolescence. Because adolescents really care about being socially accepted, I thought that **adolescents would be more sensitive to ostracism** than older people.

What I did

Groups of four friends were told they would enter separate rooms and play a ball-toss game (**Cyberball**) with each other over a computer network. The players in the game were actually controlled by the computer, but everyone *believed* they were playing with their friends. The players were either **included**, where they received the ball the same number of times as the other players, or **ostracized**, where they received the ball twice before being excluded by their virtual team mates.

Adolescent (15- to 17-year-olds) and **young-adult** (18- to 20-year-old university students) participants completed a questionnaire designed to assess **self-esteem**, before and after playing Cyberball. This way, I could look at **the effect of ostracism on self-esteem**.

Specifically, I wanted to **compare the self-esteem of adolescent and young-adult participants who were ostracized or included**.

What I found

Imagine how you might react: you sit down to play a computer game with your friends, but they have decided to exclude you from the game. You are powerless to do anything about it; you can't talk to them, and you can't leave the room, you just have sit there and take it. Would that be hard to handle? In fact, the people I tested did find ostracism hard to handle!

I found that:

- 1) **Ostracism did reduce self-esteem.**
- 2) Contrary to what I predicted, **adolescents were actually less affected by ostracism than the young adults**. The young adults in my experiment displayed greater declines in their self-esteem after ostracism compared to the adolescents.

This can be seen on the graph over the page.



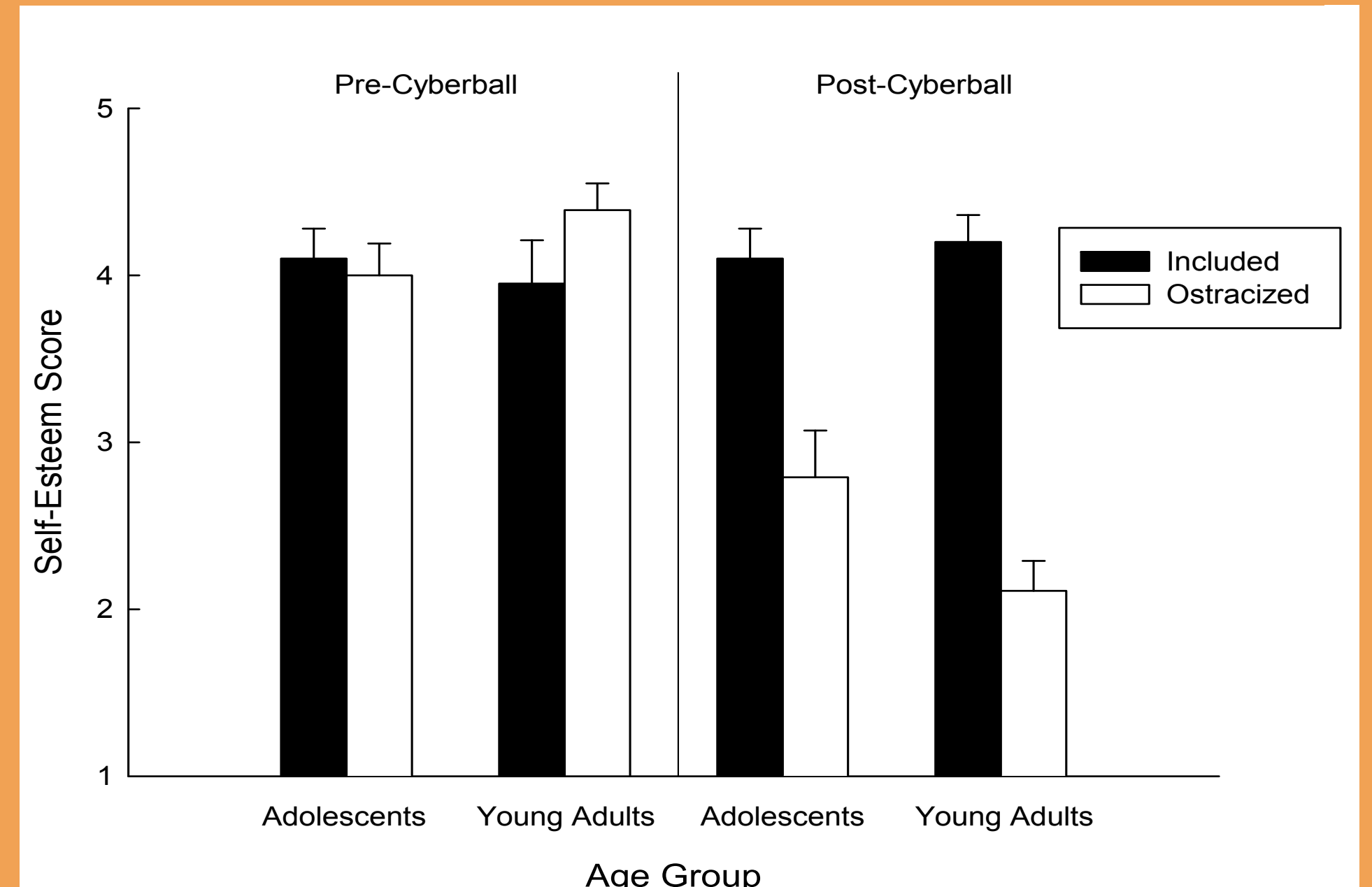
What does it mean?

The results led me to two main conclusions:

- 1) **Ostracism is a potent negative experience:** All of the participants who were ostracized reported declines in their self-esteem. The fact that such a simple computer game caused these changes highlights the powerful effects of ostracism.
- 2) **University students appear to be particularly sensitive to Ostracism:** The young adults in our sample actually had larger declines in their self-esteem compared to the adolescents. I initially predicted that the opposite would occur.

I'm currently exploring several future directions:

- 1) I'm conducting further research across a greater range of age-groups (13- to 30-year-olds) to see if this pattern is stable.
- 2) The young adults were all first-year university student; a period which is difficult socially. Most first-year students have left home for the first time and are making new friends. This might have made the young adults more sensitive to ostracism.



Pre-Cyberball and post-Cyberball self-esteem scores for adolescents and young adults who were ostracized or included.

What's the big deal?

Ostracism is a significant issue in New Zealand; **54% of New Zealand youth report being ostracized at school**, so it is important to understand what makes someone more or less sensitive to ostracism. Remember that ostracism impacts negatively on peoples' self-esteem, and it can result in some devastating outcomes.

In the future, I hope to inform anti-bullying programmes in New Zealand, and help youth who experience ostracism in New Zealand schools.

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