

Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures: The Effect of Ostracism on Zero-Sum Beliefs

Zero-sum beliefs refer to the subjective perception that the sum of all the gains and losses of the involved parties in a situation equals zero, wherein one party's gain inherently offsets another party's loss. These beliefs are prevalent across contexts, including economic exchanges, workplace dynamics, political negotiations, and daily encounters. Strong zero-sum beliefs often predict undesirable outcomes, such as increased conflicts, decreased relationship satisfaction, and impaired psychological well-being. The profound influence of zero-sum beliefs has aroused strong interest among researchers in understanding the formation of these beliefs. Recent studies have demonstrated how dispositional and situational factors influence zero-sum beliefs. However, it remains unclear whether interpersonal factors may also promote such beliefs. In this research, we examine whether ostracism, a common interpersonal experience in daily life, increases zero-sum beliefs and test the underlying psychological mechanism. We also investigate whether post-ostracism increases in zero-sum beliefs predict unethical behavior and test whether situational interventions weaken the effects of ostracism on zero-sum beliefs and unethical behavior. Ostracism occurs when individuals are excluded and ignored. When individuals are ostracized by others, they may perceive higher stress because they cannot obtain the benefits of positive interpersonal relationships. In such a stressful state, ostracized individuals may mistrust others and perceive resources as scarce, competitive, and zero-sum because doing so provides a simplistic way to navigate complex situations with minimal cognitive effort. Therefore, we predict that ostracism increases zero-sum beliefs through perceived stress. We also examine whether post-ostracism increases in zero-sum beliefs motivate individuals to behave unethically. Zero-sum beliefs entail that one's and others' interests are completely opposed, which may motivate ostracized individuals to acquire benefits even at the expense of others. Therefore, we predict that ostracism increases unethical behavior through zero-sum beliefs. When the zero-sum beliefs of ostracized individuals are weakened through awe interventions, their unethical behavior may also be weakened. By adopting a multimethod approach, we examine the effect of ostracism on zero-sum beliefs, reveal the psychological mechanism and behavioral consequence, and identify methods to weaken the relationships among ostracism, zero-sum beliefs, and unethical behavior. As these phenomena are prevalent in daily interactions, it is crucial to test their interrelationships. A comprehensive investigation of the relationships among ostracism, zero-sum beliefs, and unethical behavior can advance existing knowledge and theories. It also facilitates the development of intervention strategies to overcome their negative outcomes and promotes harmonious and cooperative social environments.