

# Ostracism and Women in the Military

Kate McGraw, PhD  
Deputy Division Chief  
Psychological Health Center of Excellence

**National VA/DoD Women's Mental Health Mini-Residency:  
Building Clinical Expertise to Meet Women's Unique Treatment Needs  
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# Disclosure



The views expressed in this presentation are those of the presenter and do not reflect the official policy of the Department of Defense (DoD) or the U.S. Government.

I have no relevant financial relationships to disclose.



“Women  
Missiliers”

1987

Air Force Art  
Collection

# Overview



- What is ostracism?
- Research
- Gender differences integrated
- Points for discussion
- Clinical and operational applications

# What is ostracism?



- Game of catch
- Interaction between players
- Impact on players

# What is ostracism?



“You’ve come a long way, baby... but you’ll never pull missile crew”

**Captain’s Log, Oscar ICBM Minuteman II Launch Control Capsule, 1987**

## What is ostracism?



- Act of excluding an individual from a group, deliberately
- Can be covert, overt, subtle, blatant, and executed through policy, institutional, words, or acts of omission and commission
- Target is not dependent on gender
- Negative impact on actor, observer, and target: no one wins

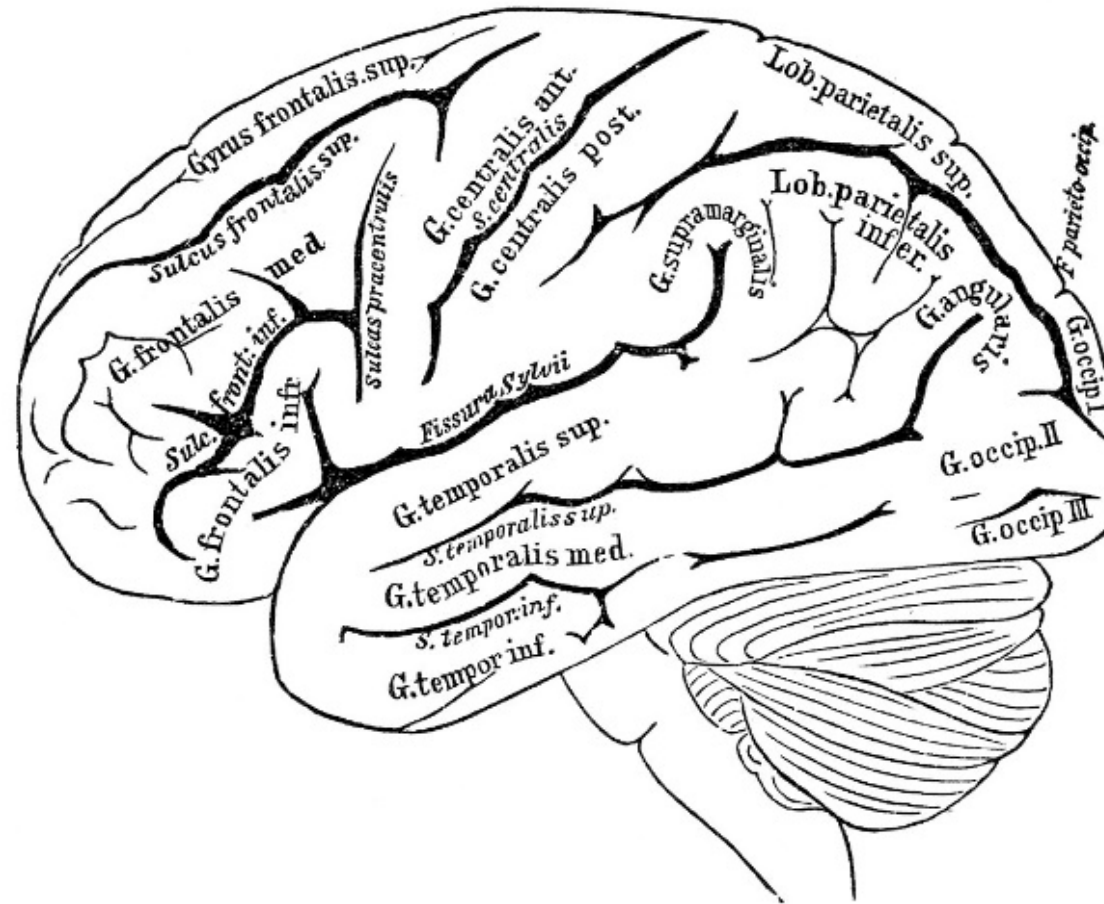
## Research on ostracism



- Eisenberger and Lieberman (2004)
- Williams and Jarvis (2006)
- Dewall et al (2010)
- Williams and Nida (2011)
- Robinson (2013)
- Wesselman et al (2013)
- O'Reilly et al (2014)



# Research on ostracism



# Research challenges with deployed females



- MHAT 2008: gender differences in perception of morale
- Limitations:
  - Sample size
  - Logistics
  - Standard constructs

# Research on gender differences related to social support



- Importance of social support for the deployed female military highlighted by initial body of research:
  - Vogt et al (2008)
  - Vogt et al (2011)
  - Vogt et al (2011)

# Research on gender differences in pain perception



- Gender differences in pain perception and impact have been established via inquiries in these topic areas:
  - Biological mechanisms
  - Genetic mechanisms
  - Coping mechanisms
  - Expected and perceived gender roles

# Research on impact of ostracism



- Female children have greater cognitive impairment than males when ostracized by their peers (Hawes et al, 2012)
- Ostracism impacts female law enforcement retention (Yu, 2015)
- Ostracism appears related to changes in motivation to eat and energy intake among adolescents of both genders (Salvy et al, 2012)
- Stroud, Salovey, and Epel (2002): increased cortisol secretion and higher blood pressure in women compared to men when ostracized
- “Thwarted belongingness” mediates insomnia and suicide (Chu, 2017)

# Research on gender differences integrated



- Limited research on deployed females: mostly retrospective report
- Military Health Advisory Team (2008): female report of morale was lower than males
- Systematic literature reviews: scant body of literature, led to integration of relevant studies from separate but related disciplines in pain, social support, ostracism (McGraw, 2016)
- Social support: mediates post-deployment mental health outcomes for females (Vogt et al 2008, 2011)
- Pain perception: females more likely to use social support to cope with pain (Racine, 2012)
- Ostracism: perceived by brain and body to be physical pain (Williams and Jarvis, 2011; Dewall et al, 2010)

## Points for discussion



- Females appear more likely to use social support to cope with pain and adjust to stress than males
- Ostracism is the deliberate withdrawal of social support to an individual by another/others and creates perceived pain
- Females appear more likely to be ostracized in traditionally male occupational settings than in other settings (i.e. new combat positions)
- Females appear more likely to have challenges coping with stress and pain in environments where they are ostracized
- Ostracism has a negative impact on the entire team, regardless of gender

- Increase awareness among commanders and leaders in the field about what ostracism is and how to prevent it in the unit
- Emphasize to leaders and patients that ostracism causes damage to the actor, the observer, and the target, regardless of gender, and degrades operational capabilities
- Include questions about social support and ostracism in initial clinical interview and follow-up interactions with patients
- Be familiar with processes related to facilitating patients engagement with Inspector General, sexual assault response personnel, domestic violence programs, and command when ostracism is impacting patient functioning, as indicated



## Discussion

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