



Rejection perceptions: feeling disrespected leads to greater aggression than feeling disliked^{☆,☆☆}



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Feeling disrespected mediates the relationship between exclusion and aggression.
- Feeling disrespected from exclusion increases aggression more than feeling disliked.
- Disrespectfully excluding people increased aggression.
- However, respectfully excluding people may reduce aggression.

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ABSTRACT

Social rejection can lead to feeling disliked and disrespected. From research on the culture of honor and perception of procedural justice, we predicted that feeling disrespected should be a more potent predictor of retaliatory aggression than feeling disliked. In four experiments, using correlational measures and experimental manipulations of dislike and disrespect, people who felt disrespected responded with greater aggression than people who felt disliked. The results suggest that merely being rejected may not be enough to trigger aggression; the person needs to feel disrespected. This has implications for understanding why people are more likely to respond to rejection with aggression, as well as future research explaining how people's perception of rejection affects their behavior.

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Which is preferable: to be seen as a lovable fool or a brilliant jerk? Obviously, if given an opportunity, people would like to be liked and respected, but that is not always possible. So the question is, when being pushed away, would people rather hear they are being rejected because they are disliked or because they are not respected? Based on prior research, we will argue that feeling disrespected leads to greater aggression than feeling disliked.

Rejection and aggression

Extensive evidence suggests that rejection is hurtful and often leads to aggression. For example, in a meta-analysis of 41 studies, peer rejected children demonstrated greater aggression than accepted children (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). Experimental evidence (e.g., Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Twenge & Campbell, 2003) supports the conclusion that social exclusion, one type of interpersonal rejection, can cause rejected people to act aggressively. A meta-analysis on social exclusion studies conducted with adult populations confirmed a strong effect for social exclusion causing aggression (Gerber & Wheeler, 2009).

However, what is unclear from these findings is how rejection is interpreted. Rejection can communicate multiple messages; most significantly that one is not likeable or not worthwhile. In other words, people who are rejected may feel disliked or disrespected (or both, of course). Although these are both painful messages, they convey very different information about the person. Typically, in studies of exclusion, people are not told why they are being rejected or what criteria

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are being used, leaving the ultimate cause of the rejection ambiguous at best.

We believe that this is a critical oversight, as we suggest the rejection itself is less the cause of the subsequent aggression than what it communicates about the individual. That is, people do not aggress merely because of the rejection. Instead, they aggress because rejection tells the rejected people something negative about themselves, which they wish to negate. Indeed, arguments about the link between ego-threats and aggression hinge on the individual trying to prove that the negative information is not true (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Tangney, Wagner, Hill Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Hence, we think it is critical to examine how people interpret the causes of the rejection, rather just focusing on the rejection itself.

In particular, we think that feelings of being disliked and disrespected must be considered when examining the effects of rejection on aggression. Some theories on rejection suggest that different types of rejection may have distinct impacts on the rejected individual (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001; Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia, & Webster, 2002). This line of research suggests that when rejection leads the rejected individual to feel his or her status is threatened, this type of rejection (versus non-status threatening rejection) could lead to different cognitions about the rejection and their self-esteem. Thus, rejected people may feel a lack of appreciation for their status when they interpret rejection as a sign of disrespect.

Further research has suggested that feeling disliked and feeling disrespected make unique contributions for feeling included. Indeed, people feel disliked when they perceive a lack of fondness or enjoyment from others, whereas people feel disrespected when they perceive a lack of regard or consideration from others (Wojciszke, Abele, & Baryla, 2009). Thus, a person may feel disliked, but respected and vice versa. Furthermore, theories on the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) suggest that people may seek inclusion through several different pathways, including being liked by others and by doing great deeds. Research has found that feeling respected by group members contributes to a sense of inclusion (de Cremer, 2002; de Cremer & Tyler, 2005). In other words, being respected may be just as important as being liked for fulfilling the need to belong.

Although it appears that both feelings of disrespect and dislike may trigger negative feelings of rejection and subsequently the need to belong, the effects of disrespect and dislike on resulting behavior may be very different. Indeed, research on topics very disparate from the social exclusion literature suggests that feelings of disrespect lead to very different outcomes than feelings of dislike (e.g., Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996; Judge, Scott, & Ilies, 2006). In particular, being disrespected seems to be much more likely to lead to aggressive behavior as compared to being disliked.

Disrespect, dislike, and aggression

Clearly, the concepts of dislike and disrespect have a great deal in common because both are negative appraisals (Benditt, 2008; Gawronski & Walther, 2008). But to some extent, they are distinct concepts because the information conveyed when people are disrespected or disliked is quite different. For example, some research suggests that being disliked is displayed by a lack of fondness for others, whereas being disrespected is expressed by lacking regard for others (Wojciszke et al., 2009). Conversely, a warm person would indicate a well-liked person, whereas competent people are respected people (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999). These studies suggest it is possible to be disrespected, but still liked and disliked, but still respected.

Several other lines of research point to the critical role of feeling disrespected in aggression. Most notably, research on honor and aggression (e.g., Cohen et al., 1996) has suggested that there may be a link between feelings of being disrespected and aggression. That is, feeling

disrespected may lead to aggression as a means of regaining lost honor and proving one's worth. Indeed, in experimental studies of aggression, men (especially those who strongly subscribed to the importance of honor in relationships) who were publically disrespected responded with greater aggression than men who were not publically disrespected. This research points to the impact of feeling disrespected on aggression.

A lack of interpersonal justice, or feelings of respect, has also been linked to retaliatory behaviors (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008). For example, workers who felt they were being treated rudely and with disrespect had greater feelings of hostility and anger than workers who were treated politely. Additional research on workplace attitudes and deviance indicated that feeling disrespected led to more negative and aggressive behaviors (Judge et al., 2006). The effects of being treated with respect even seem to negate injustices in pay and decision making (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997).

Research on the self also suggests that feelings of disrespect are a more potent driver of aggression than feelings of dislike. For example, narcissists who have inflated but unstable views of themselves are very sensitive to suggestions of disrespect. Consistent with that thesis, extensive research has found that narcissists respond to rejection with greater aggression (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Likewise, research on shame (Tangney et al., 1996) further suggests that when individuals feel that their value as a person is diminished, they are more likely to respond with aggression.

Hypotheses

In prior research, it has not been clear if aggression that follows rejection is caused by participants feeling disliked, disrespected, or both. However, some research indicates that there should be a link between feeling disrespected and aggression. Thus, people's interpretations of the causes of rejection must be considered when examining the link between rejection and aggression. That is, rejection itself may lead to aggression only to the extent it communicates disrespect—that the person is not worthwhile. Currently, little if any research has examined if rejection solely due to being disliked (and not conflated with disrespect) will increase aggression. We believe that feeling disliked, while hurtful, should not lead to similar reactions of aggression. Although rejection may lead to feeling disliked and disrespected, especially if the reasons for the rejection are not made explicit, we believe that feeling disrespected, but not disliked, will lead to greater aggression. With four experiments, we attempt to dissociate the effects of disliking and disrespect on aggression.

Experiment 1

In the first experiment, we attempted to extend previous research on ostracism (a form of rejection) and aggression (e.g., Twenge et al., 2001) by asking participants to rate how disliked and disrespected they felt by the other participants in the experiment. We predicted that feeling disrespected (after controlling for feelings of dislike) should be a much more potent contributor to aggression than feeling disliked (after controlling for feelings of disrespect). In other words, feeling disrespected from rejection should predict aggression to a much greater extent than feeling disliked. In fact, feeling disrespected should mediate the relationship between rejection and aggression.

Method

Participants and design

We recruited 45 undergraduates (25 females and 20 males) from the University at Albany to participate in an experiment about taste preferences in exchange for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to be either included ($N = 23$) or excluded ($N = 22$). One extreme outlier

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