



Social rejection increases perspective taking

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HIGHLIGHTS

- I predicted that rejection motivates a shift from egocentric to other focus.
- Rejected participants displayed more perspective taking relative to controls.
- Cognitive load moderated this effect on a nonsocial task but not a social task.
- Enhanced perspective taking predicted enhanced social memory.
- Enhanced perspective taking cannot be attributed to a desire to escape the self.

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ABSTRACT

Given that threatened belonging needs heighten attention to social cues and enhance their decoding, social rejection should motivate a shift in perspective from an egocentric focus to an other focus. In three studies, this hypothesis was tested by manipulating rejection using a reliving task (Study 1), Cyberball (Study 2), and gaze aversion stimuli (Study 3); manipulating cognitive load using an 8-digit recall task (Study 2); and measuring perspective taking (Studies 1–3), social memory (Study 3), and desire to escape the self (Study 3). In every study, rejected participants displayed greater perspective taking than accepted participants. Even under load, rejected participants took others' perspectives on a task requiring social coordination. The effect could not be attributed to a desire to avoid self-awareness. Perspective taking also predicted social memory suggesting that this rejection-induced shift in perspectives is adaptive. Findings are discussed in relation to the social monitoring and empathy literatures.

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Like your grandmother who advised you to “walk a mile in (another's) shoes,” many influential social scientists have recognized the value in taking others' perspectives. For instance, Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) suggested that individuals come to understand themselves by seeing themselves from others' points of view. Piaget argued that children must develop the ability to see the world from another's perspective in order to experience empathy (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Kohlberg (1964) posited that perspective taking plays an important role in moral development, and similarly, empathy often motivates prosocial behavior, according to Toi and Batson (1982). More recently, Chartrand and Bargh (1999) argued that individuals who spontaneously take others' perspectives engage in more nonconscious mimicry which, in turn, improves social interactions.

On the flipside, individuals who fail to take others' perspectives often perform worse socially. For example, Baron-Cohen and colleagues have shown that individuals with autism do not spontaneously attend to others' gaze direction, suggesting that a failure to take another's

perspective contributes to their social deficits (Leekam, Baron-Cohen, Perrett, Milders, & Brown, 1997). Coworkers report feeling less satisfied when communicating with poor perspective-takers than with more skilled perspective-takers (Park & Raile, 2010). Similarly, couples who do not engage in perspective taking report worse marital adjustment and less satisfaction in their relationships (Franzoi, Davis, & Young, 1985; Long & Andrews, 1990; cf. Vorauer & Sucharyna, 2013) and have a greater propensity for divorce (Long, 1993). Consequently, therapists providing marital counseling often use clinical interventions to boost empathy and perspective taking within couples (Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, & Orsillo, 2007).

Perspective taking among the rejected

While many relationships could benefit from increased perspective taking and empathy, perhaps socially rejected people could benefit the most. Given that experiences of rejection and ostracism threaten individuals' belonging needs, such individuals are motivated to regain a sense of connection (e.g., Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). Indeed, rejected individuals try to get into others' good graces by conforming to their decisions

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(Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000), ingratiating themselves (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010), spending money to fit in (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011), complying with their requests (Carter-Sowell, Chen, & Williams, 2008), and performing well on public tasks that would boost their relational value (Jamieson, Harkins, & Williams, 2010).

Arguably, taking another's perspective would be adaptive for rejected individuals because perspective taking improves social coordination and fosters social bonding (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). Moreover, perspective taking would allow rejected individuals to better understand why they were rejected in the first place. Armed with such knowledge, they might be able to avoid future rejection. To date, no research has shown differential perspective taking as a function of inclusionary status, but the social monitoring literature suggests that rejected individuals might consider others' perspectives because such an other-focus has adaptive value.

According to Pickett and Gardner (2005), heightened belonging needs activate a social monitoring system whereby individuals tune in to their social worlds. Relative to individuals with satiated belonging needs, those with acute or chronic belonging deficits more accurately decode facial expressions and vocal tones (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004), are more attentive to positive, low-level social cues (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009), demonstrate better memory for own-group faces (Van Bavel, Swencionis, O'Connor, & Cunningham, 2012), show greater gaze-triggered orientation (Wilkowski, Robinson, & Friesen, 2009), and more accurately discriminate real and fake smiles and happy and angry faces (Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2008; Sacco, Wirth, Hugenberg, Chen, & Williams, 2011). Rejected individuals also show greater selective memory for social information (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000), and, revealingly, they recall more other-related social information than self-related social information (Hess & Pickett, 2010). Such social attunement should be adaptive in facilitating subsequent social interactions, as would consideration of others' perspectives.

Rejection might shift individuals' attention to others' perspectives in the service of belonging needs, but other factors might disrupt this process. One such factor is lack of cognitive resources. Taking another's perspective and understanding how they see their environment would require individuals to override their egocentric bias (e.g., Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004; Surtees & Apperly, 2012). More generally, social monitoring depletes individuals' regulatory resources (Tyler, 2008), which may explain, in part, the self-regulatory impairments observed following rejection (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; vanDellen et al., 2012). Consequently, shifting from a private, egocentric perspective to another's perspective may be too demanding for rejected individuals. On the other hand, rejected individuals may shift perspectives automatically, as rejection increases unconscious behavioral mimicry (Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008). Given that people passively and unintentionally mimic others' behaviors (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), perhaps neither cognitive nor regulatory resources are needed to shift perspectives after rejection.

Another factor may negate the proposed shift from an egocentric view to another's view after rejection: an empathy gap. Past research has revealed that rejected individuals demonstrate poorer empathic accuracy and less empathic concern than their accepted counterparts (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Pickett et al., 2004; cf. Nordgren, Banas, & MacDonald, 2011). Moreover, rejected individuals do not recruit brain regions associated with mentalizing when exposed to negative social information, suggesting that they do not consider others' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs under these circumstances (Powers, Wagner, Norris, & Heatherton, 2013). If social threats reduce expressions of empathy, they may also reduce perspective taking, given that these are similar constructs involving the understanding of another's point of view. While some researchers do not distinguish between these overlapping constructs, others consider perspective taking to be the cognitive component of a multidimensional conceptualization of empathy

(e.g., Davis, 1983; Hodges, Clark, & Myers, 2011). Thus, rejection may reduce perspective taking as it often diminishes empathic responding. On the other hand, one might conceive of perspective taking as a basic shift in focus from oneself to others that may lead to empathic responding but does not necessarily need to. That is, individuals can take another's point of view without empathizing with one's plight.

Present investigation

The current investigation was designed to test these opposing predictions regarding the effects of rejection on perspective taking. To determine whether rejection triggers a shift from an egocentric focus (our default mode; e.g., Epley et al., 2004; Nickerson, 1999) to an other focus, I ran three studies manipulating rejection and measuring perspective taking. The aim of Study 1 was to demonstrate the hypothesized effect – that rejected individuals demonstrate greater other-focus than the accepted. Study 2 examined whether this shift in perspective taking is efficient and occurs even under cognitive load. Finally, Study 3 examined whether the effect could be accounted for by a desire to escape self-awareness. Also, the final study examined the adaptive value of this shift for social memory.

Study 1

The goal of the first study was to determine whether social rejection motivates a shift in perspective taking from an egocentric focus to an other focus.

Method

Participants

Forty undergraduates (23 female; mean age = 20 years) from a small liberal arts college participated for monetary compensation. All participants were recruited from around the campus area.

Procedure

After participants consented, the experimenters handed participants an envelope containing the prompts for one of two reliving tasks. The experimenters in this study and all subsequent studies were blind to condition. Participants were prompted to spend 5 min writing about “a time (they) felt intensely rejected...as if (they) did not belong” in the *rejection condition* or “a time (they) felt very accepted...as if (they) belonged” in the *acceptance condition*. Previous research has used these reliving tasks to manipulate social threat successfully (e.g., Pickett et al., 2004).

Next, participants completed a measure of perspective taking, the *E-task*. Created by Hass (1984), the *E-task* has been used by numerous researchers to assess perspective taking (e.g., Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Steins & Wicklund, 1996). Using an adapted version of the task, the experimenters asked participants to draw four letters on their forehead with their index finger. Participants were asked to draw an *O* for practice and then the letters *E*, *L*, and *R*. For the final three letters, the experimenters counted the number of letters drawn for an external audience, and this number served as our index of perspective taking. After the participants provided demographic information, they were compensated and dismissed.

Results and discussion

To determine whether the number of letters drawn from an external perspective ($M = 1.38, SD = 1.32$) varied as a function of condition, we ran an independent samples *t*-test. It revealed a marginal effect of reliving task, $t(38) = -2.10, p = .042, \eta^2_p = .10$. Consistent with predictions, participants who relived a rejection drew more letters for an external audience ($M = 1.80, SD = 1.26$) than those who relived an acceptance ($M = .95, SD = 1.33$).

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