



Just you and I: The role of social exclusion in the formation of interpersonal relationships☆



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Social exclusion is often characterized as entirely malevolent.
- Our research examined how acts of social exclusion affect developing relationships.
- Participants were induced to take part in an exclusive or inclusive interaction.
- Excluders were perceived as closer, and were subject to more memory confusions.
- Our results suggest that enacting exclusion may have relational benefits.

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ABSTRACT

Social exclusion, or ostracism, has been investigated primarily for its (typically negative) consequences for those subjected to it. Although the negative effects of exclusion on its recipients are undisputed, we suggest that it may have unrecognized benefits for those who perpetuate it. The present research investigated the possibility that social exclusion acts as a signal to others – either within or outside of an exclusive interaction – that a selected relationship is particularly cohesive. Participants interacted in triads in which one individual was or was not singled out for exclusion. Perpetrators of exclusion were perceived (by themselves and by the excluded person) as closer and more similar to each other, and were more likely to be subject to source memory confusions. These findings suggest that social exclusion has not only harmful consequences for its targets, but may have relational benefits for those who enact it.

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Developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships represent a central goal in the lives of most people. A recent large-scale study by Mar, Mason, and Litvack (2012) indicated that 73.2% of the 17,000+ people surveyed reported that ‘other people’ dominate their thoughts when their minds are free to wander. Likely because of the vital importance that others play in our mental lives, both our emotional and physical well-being are jeopardized when we experience threats to optimal levels of social acceptance. Indeed, individuals who experience social rejection or exclusion suffer from a variety of cognitive, affective, and somatic ill-effects (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2005).

Despite the importance of close relationships and the social interaction they provide, instances of social exclusion, or ostracism, are common. Recent research has established the profoundly negative

emotional impact of ostracism on its targets (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Williams, 2007; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), as well as on its sources (Ciarocco, Sommer, & Baumeister, 2001; Legate, DeHaan, Weinstein, & Ryan, 2013; Poulson & Kashy, 2011; see Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014 for a review). Less understood are the cognitive implications of exclusion and, in particular, its impact on how interpersonal relationships are experienced and perceived. How do acts of social exclusion affect our perceptions of our own and other relationships?

Initial insight into this question derives from research by Wyer (2008) suggesting that social exclusion is a cue to the quality of others' social relationships. In that research, participants observed relationships which did or did not actively exclude others. Perceiving social exclusion had a number of consequences. First, two individuals who excluded others were judged to be closer and more similar to each other. Second, using a memory confusion paradigm, Wyer (2008) established that mental representations of relationship partners who engaged in exclusion were assimilated in memory (i.e., perceivers processed information about them in a similar way), whilst they were contrasted from the individuals who they had excluded (i.e., perceivers processed information about them in ways that differentiated them to a

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greater extent). Thus, observing social exclusion in a relationship impacts how that relationship is represented in memory. Importantly, to the extent that one's representations of two people are assimilated, one may be likely to generalize judgments, emotions and behaviors triggered by one relationship partner onto the other (e.g., Kang, Hirsh, & Chasteen, 2010; Lickel, Miller, Stenstrom, Denson, & Schmader, 2006).

An intriguing question emerging from this research is whether exclusion might also be used as a cue or signal by perceivers *within* a relationship. If so, social exclusion may establish or advertise a relationship's level of closeness — both to the other person in the relationship and to outsiders. At an intragroup level, Pickett and Brewer (2004) suggest that the exclusion of marginal group members may enhance one's sense of belonging or inclusion in a group. Other research (e.g., Feinberg, Willer, & Schultz, 2014; Kim, 2014) has described ostracism as a critical feature in the development of groups. This view is compatible with Kurzban and Leary's (2001) evolutionary analysis of the adaptive utility of social exclusion in the establishment of coalitions. They suggest that groups form for purposes of within-group cooperation and out-group exploitation, thus one function of social exclusion is to ensure that one's social group is not infiltrated by outsiders which would dilute the availability of its resources. In sum, there are converging sources of theoretical and empirical evidence that social exclusion has benefits for within-group cohesion (albeit through different proposed mechanisms).

The research by Wyer (2008) raises the possibility that a similar outcome may occur at the *interpersonal* level — i.e., excluding others may enhance one's sense of belonging or inclusion in a dyadic relationship and, relatedly, may be a signal to others that the relationship is a close one. The study reported here investigated this question by bringing together three previously unacquainted individuals and creating an episode of social exclusion or inclusion. We then assessed the effects of exclusion on a number of measures, including self-reported perceptions of each dyadic relationship within the group. We also collected a memory confusion measure designed to assess the likelihood that responses associated with each member of the group would be misattributed to one of the others. Past research (Wyer, 2008; Mashek, Aron, & Boncimino, 2003; Sedikides, Olsen, & Reis, 1993) suggests that conditions that foster the perception of closer relationships also promote greater memory confusions (i.e., misattributing responses associated with one relationship partner to the other partner). In our paradigm, we seek to determine whether exclusion not only influences perceived relationship closeness but also leads to assimilation or contrast of self and other representations as assessed by a memory confusion measure.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Participants included 141 undergraduate students at a large university in Southwest England who were tested in same-sex groups of three in exchange for course credit or a payment of £6 (approximately \$9.50). Data from seven sessions ($N = 21$) were excluded because participants did not comply with exclusion instructions. Thus the final dataset comprised of 120 participants (90 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.7$ years).¹ The number of sessions (and hence participants) was decided a priori based on the sample sizes reported by Zadro et al. (2005), whose studies were the basis for the paradigm used here, and on those reported by Sedikides

et al. (1993) who employed a memory confusion measure similar to the one used here. The average sample size in the Zadro et al. (2005) studies was 10 per between-participants condition, Sedikides et al.'s (1993) studies involved 25 participants per between-participants condition. We initially tested 23–24 per between-participants condition, although the final data set included only 20 per condition.

1.2. Design

Each group of three unacquainted same-sex participants was randomly assigned to the Exclusion or Inclusion condition. Within each testing session, participants were randomly assigned to one of three roles: Instigator, Ally, or Target.

1.3. Procedure

Upon arrival at the laboratory, a female experimenter directed each participant to sit in one of three chairs arranged in a row. Participants assigned to the Target role were seated in the middle chair, with those assigned to the Instigator and Ally roles seated on either side. The experimenter explained that the study would begin with a role-playing exercise in which each participant would be given individual instructions. In the role-playing exercise, participants were asked to imagine that they had a chance meeting with two other students (i.e., the other participants) on the train.

1.3.1. Exclusion manipulation

The individual instructions given to participants varied as a function of condition and role. In both Exclusion and Inclusion conditions, Allies and Targets were instructed to role-play a conversation taking place on a crowded train, and were advised that they might base their conversation around an item of gossip. Allies were additionally instructed to model their behavior on that of the Instigator, as if they were particularly motivated to befriend the Instigator.²

For Instigators in the Inclusion condition, the instructions were identical to those given to Targets (see above). For Instigators in the Exclusion condition, the instructions indicated that the experiment aimed to assess the effects of being included vs. ignored in a social interaction and that their role was to include or ignore the Target participant. They were further informed that enough participants in previous sessions had already chosen the 'include' option, so they were requested to take part in the 'ignore' condition. They were instructed that, if they agreed to take part in the 'ignore' condition, they should completely ignore the Target participant and talk over them to the Ally to ensure that the Target felt truly ignored. This procedure was adapted from Ciarocco et al. (2001) and was chosen to enhance ecological validity by ensuring that the Instigators felt that they had freely chosen to exclude the Target.

1.3.2. Idea generation task

Participants were then left for approximately 5 min to carry out the role-playing exercise, during which an audio/video recording was obtained. After 5 min, the experimenter returned to introduce the next part of the study, described as a creativity exercise (adapted from the Alternative Uses Test; Christensen, Guilford, Merrifield, & Wilson, 1960). Participants were instructed to take turns generating creative uses for a series of common household objects (paperclip, brick, shoe, button) which were identified by the experimenter. The order of turn-taking was counterbalanced to avoid order effects in a subsequent memory task. When prompted by the experimenter, each participant generated a novel use for the given object. The process was repeated until each participant had generated four uses for each of the four objects.

¹ The decision to omit sessions where Instigator participants did not comply with the instructions was made before the study was run and before any data analysis had been conducted. Nonetheless, we conducted parallel analyses in which data from all participants were retained. The results of these analyses were largely identical to those reported below, with the exception that a significant effect of exclusion condition on a memory confusion measure does not reach significance ($p = .09$) when all participants are included.

² Please see Supplementary materials for details of an independent study into how these instructions are likely to have been interpreted.

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