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Social exclusion causes a shift toward prevention motivation

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Chronic loneliness was associated with greater strength of prevention motivation and lower strength of promotion motivation.
- Recall of an experience of social exclusion increased prevention goals.
- Computer-stimulated ostracism led to fewer goal-promoting strategies.
- Reading a hypothetical scenario of social exclusion caused a cautious, conservative response bias.

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ABSTRACT

Four studies demonstrated that social exclusion caused a shift from promotion toward prevention motivation. Lonely individuals reported stronger prevention motivation and weaker promotion motivation than non-lonely individuals (Study 1). Those who either recalled an experience of social exclusion or were ostracized during an on-line ball tossing game reported stronger prevention motivation and generated fewer goal-promoting strategies (Studies 2 and 3) than those who were not excluded. Last, a hypothetical scenario of social exclusion caused a conservative response bias, whereas a scenario of social acceptance yielded a risky response bias in a recognition task (Study 4).

Being excluded from social groups is aversive and often threatening. Not only do people have a fundamental need to feel socially accepted and to maintain strong, stable social bonds — that need drives a great many cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals who are deprived of social connection experience depression, emotional distress, and low self-esteem (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Cacioppo, Hughes, Waite, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2006; Leary, 1990; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). A lack of social belonging can also cause physical problems such as low blood pressure, poor sleep efficiency, and even premature death (Cacioppo et al., 2002; Herlitz et al., 1998; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996).

Given the importance of the *need to belong*, an adaptive response to social exclusion would be initiating attempts to reconnect with others. However, past research on social exclusion has provided, at best, mixed support for this view and even found seemingly contrary trends. Social exclusion leads to defensive and even hostile or antisocial responses, which seem hardly conducive to making new friends (see Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007). Excluded people become aggressive toward another person, decline to donate money to a student emergency fund, and cooperate less with another person (DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007). Although some studies have found that rejected individuals seek affiliation, the attempts to reconnect with others tend to be cautious and contingent (e.g., Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007).

If people evolved to cooperate and work together so that belongingness is a fundamental motivation, why do excluded people seem tentative about seeking affiliation? One possible answer is that the very strength of the motivation to connect makes people highly averse to experiencing rejection, and being rejected triggers a strong desire to avoid being rejected again. In our view, the most promising explanation to integrate all these findings is that excluded people would like to make new social connections but above all want to make sure that they will not suffer through being rejected again. That is, the socially excluded would give priority to preventing further experiences of rejection rather than promoting social connection.

In sum, social exclusion may increase security concerns (*prevention motivation*) at the expense of advancement concerns (*promotion motivation*; Higgins, 1997; Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008). This motivational

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shift from promotion to prevention was the central hypothesis of our investigation.

Regulatory focus: motivations for promotion and prevention

Regulatory focus theory suggests that there are two broad motivational modes of goal pursuit: promotion and prevention (Higgins, 1997). Promotion motivation represents the need for advancement (i.e., nourishment and growth), whereas prevention motivation represents the need for security (i.e., safety and protection; Higgins, 1997; Molden et al., 2008). Promotion-focused individuals tend to make reward-seeking decisions and judgments and generally strive to achieve positive outcomes. In contrast, prevention-focused individuals are vigilant for potential losses, and they show loss-averse and security-seeking responses (e.g., Higgins, 1997; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; Molden et al., 2008).

Circumstances that activate motives for security or advancement can influence the type of regulatory focus that people have. That is, situations that highlight advancement foster promotion motivation, whereas situations that highlight security or danger foster prevention motivation (Molden et al., 2008). Friedman and Förster (2001) found that people who completed a task designed to avoid a threatening target showed a vigilant processing style more than those whose task was designed to pursue gain. Similarly, other research has found that people who wrote about hopes or aspirations became promotion focused, whereas those who wrote about duties or obligations became prevention focused (e.g., Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003). As these findings illustrate, promotion and prevention motivations can be temporarily changed as a function of situational context. A central assumption of our work was that being socially excluded would be just such a context.

Social exclusion and regulatory focus

Past work has provided some basis for predicting that social exclusion would lead individuals to give priority for prevention over promotion goals. However, in some empirical studies, excluded persons have shown to make positive evaluations of new interaction partners and recall social events in another person's diary (Gardner et al., 2000; Maner et al., 2007). To be sure, these findings were published with interpretations that emphasized promotion goals, such as desire to make new friends. Nevertheless, these findings also could be interpreted as aimed at preventing further rejection. For example, the attention to other people's social diaries (Gardner et al., 2000) may indicate that people want to know what rejection experiences the others have had to learn how to avoid further rejection themselves.

The most direct evidence was provided by Molden, Lucas, Gardner, Dean, and Knowles (2009). They showed that people who were ignored adopted a promotion focus whereas those who were rejected had more of a prevention focus. Although they did not have a neutral control in any study, one experiment did contain an acceptance condition. In that study, there was no explicit rejection, but rather participants engaged in an online chat and had their opinions disparaged by confederates as well as receiving comments suggesting dislike. These participants later generated more thoughts about what they should not have done (i.e., prevention motivation) than participants whose views had been received positively by other members of the chat.

The present work sought to extend the findings of Molden et al. (2009). We sought to establish explicitly that social exclusion causes a shift toward prevention motivation, as compared to a neutral control. We also sought to establish that the prevention motivation is broader than merely focusing on the specific interaction that led to the rejection (as was the focus of Molden et al., 2009). Thus, rejection leads not just to trying to remedy the specific social failure but causes people to adopt a general attitude toward preventing problems in life.

Why might social exclusion increase the generalized strength of prevention motivation? From an evolutionary perspective, social bonds can be highly useful for facilitating survival and preventing death (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Social groups can share information to warn about dangers, protect their members from external threats, and share food and other resources (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; see Brewer & Caporael, 1990). Therefore, isolated individuals might be more vulnerable to external threats than those who have close social ties. The earliest and most basic survival benefits of belonging to a group would be the reduced need for vigilance. If any member of a herd or flock spots danger, it can alert the others, who can then all flee. Thus, a member of a large herd does not need to be constantly on the lookout for predators and other dangers, whereas a solitary animal lacks such a social warning system and must maintain its own constant vigilance.

We assume that avoiding danger and death is a top priority for any animal. The broad principle that bad things have stronger psychological effects than the good (see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001) invokes the basic importance of avoiding danger and such avoidance will often take precedence over promotion goals. Consistent with this view, past work has demonstrated that individuals deprived of close social ties are highly motivated to avoid negative evaluations by others and to avoid aversive self-awareness (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003). Furthermore, priming risk in intimate relationships activates self-protection goals among those who are particularly vulnerable to social rejection (i.e. low self-esteemed individuals; Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008). These empirical findings provide indirect evidence that social exclusion might increase prevention motivation and decrease promotion motivation.

Study 1

Study 1 provided the initial test of the relationship between social exclusion and motivations for promotion and prevention. It used questionnaire measures of loneliness and of the two motivations. Past research assumed that loneliness is a form of chronic (perceived) social exclusion, insofar as loneliness is defined as not having as many social bonds and relationships as one wishes to have (e.g., Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005; Stillman et al., 2009). We predicted that lonely people would report higher prevention motivation and lower promotion motivation than non-lonely persons.

Method

Participants

150 undergraduates (107 females; mean age 19.1) participated.

Measures

Social exclusion

Social exclusion was measured by UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996; Version 3), which consists of 20 items. Participants reported the extent to which they felt socially isolated (e.g., "How often do you feel that you are left out?") on a 4-point scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$). Participants' ratings across the items were averaged to yield a total loneliness score in which higher score indicates greater frequency of feeling lonely.

Regulatory focus

Motivations for promotion and prevention were measured by Lockwood's Regulatory Focus Scale consisting of 18 items (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002). The regulatory focus scale asks about both promotion (e.g.,"I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations"; Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$) and prevention goals (e.g.,"In general, I'm focused on preventing negative events in my life"; Cronbach's