Reaching out by changing what's within: Social exclusion increases self-concept malleability

Stephanie B. Richman [a,*], Erica B. Slotter [b], Wendi L. Gardner [c], C. Nathan DeWall [d]

[a] Westminster College, USA
[b] Villanova University, USA
[c] Northwestern University, USA
[d] University of Kentucky, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Socially excluded people alter the self to gain social connection.
- Excluded people expanded their self-concept to incorporate new attributes.
- The attributes were characteristic of a novel social target, but not themselves.
- This effect was limited to targets that were construed as potential friends.
- It occurred regardless of whether the potential friend was aware of the change.

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ABSTRACT

People have a fundamental need to belong that, when thwarted, can affect cognition and behavior in ways designed to regain social connection. Because one of the best predictors of social connection is similarity, the current investigation tests the *self-malleability hypothesis*, which predicts social exclusion encourages people to modify their self-concepts to increase similarity to others, presumably in pursuit of renewed affiliation. Five studies supported the self-malleability hypothesis. Excluded people expanded their self-concept to incorporate new attributes characteristic of a novel social target but which they did not originally perceive as characteristic of themselves (Study 1). This effect was limited to targets that were construed as potential friends (Study 2) and occurred regardless of whether the potential friend was aware of the change (Study 3). Additionally, after recalling an exclusion experience, people modified even existing self-views to increase similarity to a potential friend (Studies 4a and 4b). Thus, socially excluded people alter the self to gain social connection.

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"The gift of making friends …it involves many things, but above all, the power of going out of one's self and appreciating whatever is noble in another."

[Thomas Hughes]

Given the fundamental importance of social connections to well-being, few gifts trump that of making friends. People possess a basic need for social belonging and connection, are motivated to engage in behaviors that promote others' inclusion, and are driven to regain social acceptance whenever they feel excluded (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Fortunately, an arsenal of affiliation-driven cognitions and behaviors seem available to assist excluded people to regain social connection.[1] Social exclusion can heighten attunement to others (e.g., Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2008, Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2010; Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000), bias evaluations of others (e.g., Mallott, Maner, DeWall, & Schmidt, 2009; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007), and encourage the outward expression of affiliative behavior such as mimicry, ingratiation, or prosociality (e.g., Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008; Maner et al., 2007; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Thus, in a variety of ways people attempt to reach out to others and regain acceptance when belonging has been threatened. The current research examines a previously unexplored strategy in pursuit of acceptance, one that focuses upon changes within

* Corresponding author at: Westminster College, New Wilmington, PA 16172.
E-mail address: richmasb@westminster.edu (S.B. Richman).

[1] In the current article, we use the terms social rejection, social exclusion, and ostracism interchangeably.

the self-concept rather than toward perceptions of others. Specifically, by going "out of one's self" when trying to enhance social connection, we hypothesized that one path to this affiliation might be a willingness to mold the self to be more similar to others—a process we have termed *self-concept malleability*.

Exclusion-induced self-concept malleability may take the form of expanding the self-concept to take on new characteristics (self-expansion), or even of modifying existing self-views to become more similar to a potential friend (self-modification). Because perceived similarity is a robust predictor of liking and relationship benefits in a variety of social contexts (e.g. Amodio & Showers, 2005; Byrne, 1971; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), self-concept malleability may be an effective means through which socially excluded people can earn acceptance.

To test this self-concept malleability hypothesis, we conducted five experiments. Specifically, we tested whether exclusion motivates people to attempt affiliation with another person by taking on new attributes of this person (Study 1). We also examined whether this motivation applies only to others with whom there is the potential for friendship and thus the opportunity to regain social connection (Study 2). Additionally, we investigated whether this effect occurred above and beyond concerns with self-presentation, specifically to situations in which potential friends were unaware of the change (Study 3). Finally, we examined whether excluded people would modify their existing self-views, (for example, views of themselves as risky or cautious, or as financially risky or cautious), to be more similar to a potential friend (Studies 4a and 4b).

The stable and malleable self-concept

The self-concept is a person's sense of "me:" the physical appearance, material belongings, set of roles, prototypes, scripts, attitudes, beliefs, and attributes that a person thinks or feels are characteristic of who he or she is (James, 1890; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Often thought of as a self-theory more than a self-concept (Epstein, 1973), it consists of a variety of cognitive generalizations about the self, each of which is supported by relevant "data" such as episodic memories. Like any theory built from a large store of prior data, the self-concept is relatively stable, resisting change unless faced with a preponderance of new evidence. Moreover, existing self-beliefs bias the processing of new information in ways that support self-consistency (Markus, 1977), and even allow for the rejection of explicit feedback inconsistent with prior self-views (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Shrauger, 1975; vanDellen, Campbell, Hoyle, & Bradfield, 2011). Finally, because the self is inherently socially created and maintained (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), people often craft social environments that stabilize and support their self-views (Swann, 1990).

Of course, self-concepts can and do change, often as a result of changes in the social environment. For example, children's self-concepts are most likely to change when their social network changes (e.g. Harter, 1993). In adults, self-concepts are most likely to change in the context of a life transition (Kling, Ryff & Essex, 1997), or in close interpersonal relationships (Aron, 2003). In romantic relationships, people's self-concepts often expand to incorporate characteristics of the relationship partner's self into their own sense of identity (e.g., Aron, 2003; Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). The shared time together, resources, and self-disclosure that occurs in close interpersonal relationships contributes to people expanding their self-concepts to incorporate characteristics of the partner that they did not previously possess. For example, married people experience self-other confusion when asked to differentiate between traits characteristic of the self and traits characteristic of the spouse (Aron et al., 1991). Participants showed longer response latencies when rejecting characteristics that described their spouse but not themselves, compared to characteristics that described neither their spouse nor themselves. These findings demonstrate that participants had expanded their self-concept to include their spouse and therefore had a difficult time separating out which attributes belonged to whom. Crucially, self-expansion over time in romantic contexts is associated

with a variety of beneficial relationship outcomes (e.g., Aron, 2003; Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995).

Research on self-concept expansion in romantic contexts showed that the mere motivation to affiliate with another was sufficient to facilitate self-concept malleability. Single participants were slower to reject characteristics that described a potential romantic partner but not themselves, compared to characteristics that described neither the potential romantic partner nor themselves (Slotter & Gardner, 2009). This effect was limited to targets that participants believed were open to potential relationships. The same effect was not found when participants were responding to characteristics of targets presented in a non-relational context. Self-expansion to include attributes of a potential romantic partner was also increased by a participant's liking for and desire to date the potential romantic partner, further suggesting that participants unconsciously expanded their self-concepts for the purpose of romantic affiliation. Thus, romantic desire is sufficient to evoke self-concept malleability.

But why? Given the benefits of perceived similarity in relationships, changing the self to increase similarity to the potential partner may increase likability, facilitate affiliation, and ease interactions. These benefits should not be limited to romantic relationships, however, as perceived similarity is a robust predictor of liking across romantic and non-romantic contexts (e.g., Byrne, 1971). Therefore self-concept malleability may represent a pathway to affiliation more generally. Situations in which people especially desire affiliation may also evoke self-concept malleability. Social exclusion represents a strong candidate for one such situation.

The need to belong

People have a fundamental need for social belonging and connection, specifically termed the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Copious research demonstrates that not having one's need to belong met negatively impacts health, adjustment, and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). More recent evidence shows links between a lack of social connection and negative emotional functioning (e.g. Leary, 2010; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004), reduced cognitive performance (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002), poor self-regulation (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005), and increased self-defeating behavior (Twenge, Cantanese, & Baumeister, 2002).

Given the consequences of thwarting the need to belong, experiencing social exclusion or rejection should motivate people to engage in behaviors aimed at satisfying it (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gardner et al., 2000). People who have recently experienced social exclusion are highly sensitive to potential sources of social acceptance and generally engage in attempts to restore their sense of social belonging (e.g. Gardner et al., 2000). These attempts can be consciously (e.g. purposefully seeking out new friends) or unconsciously (e.g. viewing people in a more favorable light) driven.

Consistent with these ideas, exclusion can motivate people to consciously change their behavior to gain renewed affiliation. For example, excluded people, compared to their non-excluded counterparts, have been shown to be willing to buy social acceptance. Compared to accepted participants, excluded participants awarded more money to a partner based on their partner's average drawing—even when doing so meant they were less likely to win the money back (Maner et al., 2007; see also Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Additionally, compared to people in a control condition, excluded people are more willing to spend money to buy products that potential friends or groups favor or even to try illegal drugs if doing so would boost their chances for reconnection (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011). In other words, excluded people willingly choose to behave unwisely or even illegally in the pursuit of social connection.

After being socially excluded, people are generally more interested in forming new connections with others and even view potential sources of reconnection in a more positive light. For example, people who have been excluded prefer working with others instead of alone