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FlashReport

Social rejection and self- versus other-awareness

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ABSTRACT

Recent research (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003) demonstrated decreased self-awareness among socially-rejected individuals as a defensive strategy designed to buffer the self from the acute distress of rejection. In the present study, we sought to demonstrate that this decreased self-awareness among socially-rejected individuals is: (a) primarily evident in social domains, as opposed to non-social domains and (b) accompanied by increased awareness of others' behavior. Using a social memory paradigm, we found that rejected participants exhibited better memory for other-related social behaviors, but poorer memory for self-related social behaviors in comparison to accepted participants. These data provide evidence for a two-pronged response to social rejection characterized by both self-protective strategies and strategies aimed at regaining and maintaining social relationships.

Introduction

A state of objective self-awareness is one in which individuals experience heightened awareness of their internal feelings and beliefs. This state of self-awareness can be aversive when there is a discrepancy between people's internal feelings and beliefs and their external behavior (Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Silvia & Gendolla, 2001). In a recent study, Twenge, Catanese, and Baumeister (2003) proposed that social rejection can lead to the desire to avoid self-awareness because of the discrepancy generated between people's generally positive views of themselves (Taylor & Brown, 1988) and the experience of being rejected by others. This response is thought to be a defensive reaction to what would otherwise be an acutely distressing experience.

In a clever experimental demonstration, Twenge et al. (2003) gave participants acceptance, rejection, or control feedback and offered them a choice of two chairs to sit in. One chair faced a wall and the other faced a mirror. Results revealed that participants in the rejection condition were significantly less likely to choose the chair that faced the mirror compared to participants in the other conditions. This study provided evidence that social exclusion leads individuals to avoid awareness of the self, thereby relieving rejected individuals of a potentially unpleasant confrontation with their social shortcomings and failures.

Although avoidance of self-awareness may provide psychological refuge to the socially excluded, these individuals need to move forward and forge new social connections if they are to satisfy their fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Thus, an adaptive response to social-inclusion threat may be two-pronged. Individuals need to defend the self from the immediate pain of rejection (Williams, 2009), while at the same time engaging the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms that can aid in the formation and maintenance of social relationships. Unfortunately, within the social rejection field, researchers tend to study categories of responses (e.g., pro-social versus anti-social responses) within separate studies, often across different research laboratories. This has led to a dearth of studies that demonstrate both defensive and affiliative responses to the same exclusion experience. Such studies would help provide a more complete picture of the complex nature of reactions to exclusion and would also help answer the question of how individuals are able to regain inclusion despite behavior that would seem to work against that goal (e.g., aggression, anti-social behavior). The purpose of the current study was to fill this gap in the literature.

To do so, we selected Twenge et al.'s (2003) finding that social rejection leads to self-awareness avoidance and sought to demonstrate that rejection can lead to both a lack of self-awareness and increased other-awareness – a response likely to aid in re-establishing social connections. In prior research, Gardner, Pickett, and their colleagues argued that social rejection triggers a social monitoring system designed to attune individuals to socially-relevant cues in their environment (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000; Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). Similar findings have been obtained in studies examining early-stage interpersonal perception (e.g., Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2008; DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009; Wilkowski, Robinson, & Friesen, 2009). Being able to accurately decode verbal and nonverbal cues to acceptance and rejection should allow individuals to

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adapt their behavior in ways that are likely to meet with the approval of others and may lead to greater social success.

Thus, our primary hypothesis was that rejection would lead to both decreased awareness of the self and increased awareness of the behavior of others. Furthermore, we predicted that these effects would be manifested most clearly in socially-relevant domains. As noted by Twenge et al. (2003), rejected individuals avoid self-awareness because self-awareness would bring their social failure and its implications into relief. This line of reasoning implies that rejected individuals are primarily motivated to avoid socially-relevant aspects of the self and that non-social aspects of the self would not be threatening and therefore would not require avoidance. By the same token, being attuned to the social behavior of others would be most useful in terms of ensuring social success. Therefore, we predicted that rejection would increase awareness of the social behavior of others, but decrease awareness of the social behavior of the self. To test these hypotheses, we chose to use the social memory paradigm developed by Gardner et al. (2000). A benefit of using the social memory paradigm is that it allowed us to examine attunement to social versus non-social domains and use identical stimuli for the self and other target conditions.

Method

Participants

One hundred-sixty-two undergraduate students (51 males, 111 females) took part in the research in exchange for partial course credit.

Materials

Cyberball

The study utilized the virtual ball-tossing game, Cyberball (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). In the Cyberball paradigm, the participant plays a computer game with virtual players who are preprogrammed either to accept the participant by throwing the participant ball throughout the game or to exclude the participant by not tossing the ball to the participant after a few cursory throws (one from each of the other players).

Journal entries

A list of 28 journal entries was adapted from Gardner et al. (2000) for use in the social memory task. The list included a mix of neutral, non-social, and social events. The four neutral entries entailed mundane events, such as "I went online and updated my bank information." The eight non-social entries concerned both positive and negative events that involved only the journal author such as "I took a long and peaceful walk since the weather was beautiful today." The sixteen social events concerned both positive and negative events that involved either a dyadic event such as "I totally forgot about my mother's birthday" or a collective event such as "My intramural soccer team won its final game in regular season."

Procedure

Participants were told they would be participating in two different studies involving visualization. For the ostensible first study, participants were told they would engage in an online ball-tossing game with students from other universities. Participants were instructed to visualize the game as if it were happening in real life. Through random assignment, half the participants were accepted and half were excluded during the course of the Cyberball game. Upon completion, participants answered questionnaires assessing their visualizations, as well as manipulation checks derived from prior research on the effects of ostracism (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). Participants answered three items measuring the degree to which they felt excluded from the game (e.g., "What percentage of throws do you think you received during the Cyberball game?"). Participants also completed three items assessing how the Cyberball experience affected their feelings of belonging (e.g., "I felt I had made a "connection" or bonded with one or more of the other participants during the Cyberball game"), and four items assessing their mood with opposing anchors at each end of the scale (sad/happy, tense/relaxed, bad/good, aroused/not aroused). All questions were answered using 9-point Likert response scales.

For the "second" study, participants were informed they would be reading a series of journal entries. Participants were instructed to visualize that the author of the journal was either a typical college student (Stranger condition), their same-sex best friend (Friend condition), or themselves (Self condition). In all conditions, a photograph of the purported author appeared at the bottom of each journal entry. Those in the Stranger condition saw a preselected photograph of a Caucasian or Asian stranger (matched to the participant's gender). These photos were selected because the majority of participants in the sample and within the university are either Caucasian or Asian. Participants assigned to the Friend or Self conditions were asked prior to the Cyberball game to provide a photograph of their best friend or of themselves, respectively, and this photo appeared at the bottom of each journal entry.

Following the presentation of the journal entries (which was self-paced), participants engaged in a 5-min distractor task (completing a series of anagrams). After this task, participants were instructed to list as many of the journal entries as they could remember. An assumption of this paradigm is that the entries that are given greater attention and encoded more deeply are more likely to be recalled (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Finally, participants viewed each entry again and indicated how easy it was to imagine this event happening (to the college student, their best friend, or themselves) and how likely it was that this event would have happened (either to a college student, their best friend, or themselves). These items were averaged into a single measure assessing the journal's believability. All participants then completed a demographic questionnaire and were fully debriefed.

Results

Manipulation checks

The three items assessing exclusion were combined into a single index ($\alpha = .89$). Consistent with a rejection experience, participants in the exclusion condition reported higher levels of exclusion ($M = 7.82, SD = 1.01$) than those in the acceptance condition ($M = 4.13, SD = 1.36$), $t(159) = -19.48$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .71$. The three items assessing feelings of belonging and the four items assessing mood were also combined into two indexes with items scored such that higher values represent greater belonging and more positive mood ($\alpha = .77$; $\alpha = .61$, respectively). Participants in the rejection condition reported significantly lower levels of belonging ($M = 2.68, SD = 1.36$) than those in the acceptance condition ($M = 6.00, SD = 1.46$), $t(159) = 14.94$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .58$. Finally, participants in the exclusion condition reported less positive mood ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.46$) than those in the acceptance condition ($M = 6.48, SD = 1.22$), $t(159) = 5.50$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$.[1]

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[1] Although rejection affected mood, social and non-social memory did not vary as a function of mood.