Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 46 (2010) 582–585

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

FlashReport

Being excluded by one means being excluded by all: Perceiving exclusion from inclusive others during one-person social exclusion

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 28 October 2009
Revised 6 January 2010
Available online 18 January 2010

Keywords:
One-person social exclusion
Rejection
Belonging
Cyberball

ABSTRACT

Although research has shown that social exclusion undermines well-being, past work has focused primarily on complete and unambiguous social exclusion in which all people in a situation exclude one individual. Might the presence of an inclusive other buffer individuals against the deleterious consequences of social exclusion? The present research investigates a novel situation, one-person exclusion, in which one person includes while another excludes. Participants played a virtual ball-tossing game in which they experienced two-person exclusion, one-person exclusion, or inclusion. Inclusive others did not buffer against the consequences of exclusion; experiencing one-person exclusion (vs. inclusion) led to perceived exclusion and lessened belongingness, similar to two-person exclusion. Moreover, instead of perceiving includers as a form of support, paradoxically, participants inaccurately believed that inclusive others had engaged in exclusion. These findings suggest that one-person exclusion is sufficient to elicit negative outcomes and that inclusive bystanders may be perceived as part of the exclusion.

Introduction

Imagine that you are having a conversation with two individuals you just met. One seems interested in what you have to say while the other only directs her attention to the other person. How do you interpret the behaviors of each of these individuals? Is the presence of the one inclusive person enough to minimize the discomfort of being ignored by the other? Do you begin to perceive both as being inattentive?

As social animals, humans are highly sensitive to cues of social exclusion. Experiencing exclusion leads to an array of unpleasant psychological outcomes (Williams, 1997; see Williams (2007, 2009) for reviews). In what has become a standard paradigm for manipulating social exclusion (Cyberball; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000), participants play a virtual ball-tossing game in which all other players stop throwing the ball to the participant but continue throwing to each other. Such exclusion manipulations lower feelings of belonging, positive mood, and self-esteem (Williams et al., 2000; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004).

The majority of past research has focused on situations involving complete and unambiguous exclusion, in which all members of a group consistently engage in exclusionary behaviors towards an individual. More recent work has investigated situations involving partial, and therefore ambiguous exclusion. For example, Jones, Carter-Sowell, Kelly, and Williams (2009) show that in "out-of-loop" situations, in which individuals are included in some information exchange, but excluded in others, individuals still report lowered feelings of belonging.

In the present work, we investigate a novel social situation—experiencing exclusion while in the presence of an inclusive individual—a situation we refer to as *one-person exclusion*. Such one-person exclusion situations are important not only because of their likely prevalence in day-to-day situations, but because they are able to address two theoretically important questions. First, does the presence of an inclusive other serve a protective role or does exclusion even in the presence of an inclusive other still negatively impact one's well-being? Second, how are inclusive others perceived during situations of exclusion?

Regarding the first question, past work points to two competing hypotheses. According to a large body of research on social support, positive interactions with others serve an important protective function for individuals during times of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Coyne & Downey, 1991; Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007; Vangelisti, 2009). Although significant others provide the most support, even unknown others protect individuals from threat (Coan, Shaefer, & Davidson, 2006), and even unnoticed support has positive consequences (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). Thus, the presence of an inclusive other may buffer individuals from the negative consequences of exclusion.

Research on social exclusion, however, suggests that individuals are highly attuned to limited signs of rejection (Jones et al., 2009;

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doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2010.01.004

Sommer & Baumeister, 2002). Indeed, individuals feel excluded despite being told they are playing against a computer or players whose responses are scripted (Zadro et al., 2004). Moreover, children as young as five are sensitive to abstract exclusion cues, even if they are not the ones being excluded (Over & Carpenter, 2009). Thus, exclusion, even in the presence of an inclusive person, may be sufficient to trigger negative responses.

A second aim of the present research was to examine perceptions of inclusive others: is an includer's behavior viewed as particularly positive against the backdrop of the excluder's behavior, or is an includer viewed as being exclusive as well? On the one hand, exclusion may lead to greater sensitivity to positive social signals (i.e., includer's behaviors; Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2008; DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009). On the other hand, given that social exclusion activates a hostile cognitive mindset that increases the tendency to view others as aggressive (DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009), inclusive individuals may be seen as excluding. Indeed, prolonged exposure to exclusion may lead one to view the whole world as threatening (Cacioppo & Hawkey, 2005). To date, no study has examined how social exclusion affects perceptions of inclusive people.

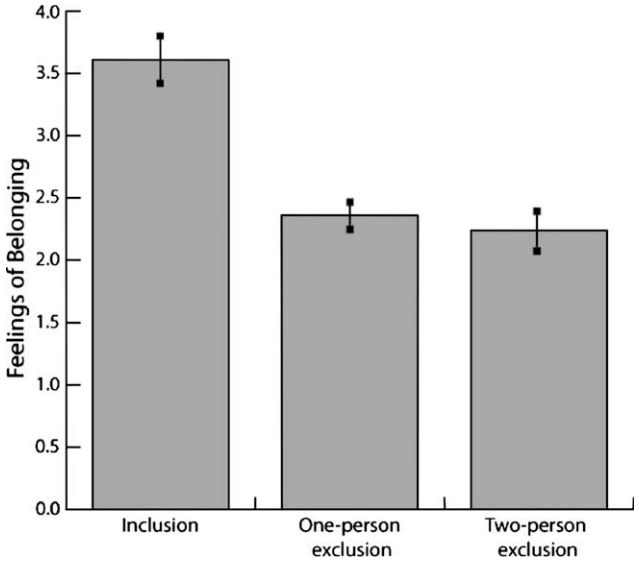

Fig. 1. Feelings of belonging as a function of exclusion condition (inclusion, two-person exclusion and one-person exclusion). Bars represent 1 standard error.

Method

Participants

Seventy-six Cornell University affiliates (41 females) completed the experiment.

Cyberball

We created a version of Cyberball using Inquisit 3.0.1.1. (Inquisit, 2008) following procedures used in Williams et al. (2000). Participants were told they would be playing a computerized ball-throwing game against two people. The two other players (actually computerized confederates) were represented on the computer screen by a blue or green smiley face along with their respective label ("Player A" or "Player C"). Participants were always assigned to be "Player B" and represented by the label "you." Using a mouse, participants indicated to whom they would like to throw the ball.

Participants were randomly assigned to *two-person exclusion*, *one-person exclusion*, or *inclusion*.[1] In *two-person exclusion*, participants received 12 (of 60) ball-tosses before being completely excluded by both players for the remainder of the round. Receiving 12 ball-tosses ensured that participants received approximately the same number of tosses as participants in one-person exclusion, thereby enabling comparison across conditions.[2] In *one-person exclusion*, one player (excluder) never threw the ball to the participant, while the other player (includer) threw the ball 50% of the time to the participant and 50% of the time to the other player. Whether the excluder was player A or C was counterbalanced across participants. Because participants' own behavior could affect the number of ball-tosses they receive, all participants were instructed that the first round was practice, and that they should throw the ball to each player equally. Analyses confirmed that all participants adhered to the instructions. Finally, in *inclusion*, both players threw the ball 50% of the time to the participant and 50% of the time to the other player.

Measures

To assess their recollection of the game, participants were asked: (a) "What percentage of the time did Player A throw the ball to you vs. Player C?" (b) "What percentage of the time did Player C throw the ball to you vs. Player A?" and (c) "What percentage of the time did you throw the ball to Player A vs. Player C?"

To assess threatened needs (Williams et al., 2000), participants responded to the following items using a five-point scale ("not at all" to "extremely"): "How much do you feel you belonged to the group?" (belonging), "Life is meaningless" (meaningful existence; reverse scored), "I am in control of my life" (personal-control), and "To what extent do you think the other participants value you as a person?" (self-esteem). Participants also indicated how much they liked each of the other players using a seven-point scale ("I don't like Player A at all" to "I like Player A a lot"), how much they felt each of the players liked them, and how much they believed each player liked one another. Finally, participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; Cronbach's alphas were .94 (positive) and .88 (negative)).

Results

Does two-person exclusion lead to negative outcomes?

As expected, those who experienced two-person exclusion recalled receiving fewer ball-tosses from the other players ($M = 31.10\%$, $SD = 10.83$),[3] than those who experienced inclusion ($M = 48.92\%$, $SD = 6.58$), $t(49) = 7.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.99$.[4] Moreover,

[1] Participants played two rounds of Cyberball and completed self-report measures after each round. In round 2, all participants were included by the other players and participants were not constrained to throw the ball evenly to both players. Exclusion condition in round 1 did not significantly impact self-report measures following round 2. In round 2 (and round 1), participants who had experienced one-person exclusion tended (Bonferroni corrected: $.05 < p < .15$) to throw more ball-tosses to the excluder. Additionally, approximately one day prior to the experimental session, participants completed an online version of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brenner, 2000) questionnaire. These data will not be discussed.

[2] Participants received 14 ball-tosses in one-person exclusion (and 12 ball-tosses two-person exclusion). Although participants in one-person exclusion experienced less exclusion, they still showed effects comparable to those elicited by two-person exclusion.

[3] The two estimates assessing how much each player threw the ball to the participant were averaged to form an overall perception of inclusion score.

[4] All reported *p*-values are Bonferroni corrected. *t*-values, effect sizes, and confidence intervals are uncorrected.