

# Rejected and alone

**T**HE tribe has spoken.' 'You're fired.' 'You may now leave the Big Brother house.' The language and storylines of reality television focus relentlessly on rejection. Apparently the spectacle of people being evicted from some group or event appeals to the watching public in myriad, multifaceted ways. People find rejection as interesting as sex. Why is it so fascinating?

The answer, I suspect, lies in the power of the human need to belong. Human beings are fundamentally, extensively social, and indeed they are social in ways that other animals cannot imagine. Most animals learn about their worlds from their five senses, but humans mainly learn about the world from each other. Social connection is the bread and butter of human life, and rejection strikes at its very core.

It took me a long time to appreciate the central importance of belongingness and rejection. Before psychology, my intellectual background was a mixture of humanistic, Presbyterian upbringing and existentialist philosophy, and so I had a severely individualist view of human life. Despite the term 'social', most social psychologists likewise emphasise individualistic approaches such as exploring a single person's cognitive processes in reaction to social events. For me, this approach changed only in the early 1990s when Mark Leary and I reviewed extensive research findings for our article 'The need to belong', which brought home to both of us (with something of a shock) that people are relentlessly guided by the drive to connect with others and that the majority of their thoughts, emotions, impulses and behaviours are at least indirectly rooted in that drive.

Most likely the roots of the human need to belong are deep, perhaps even deeper than those of other social animals. In my recent book, *The Cultural Animal*, I tried to assemble the picture of human nature that is painted by the many research studies in social psychology. To me, that picture was of a creature shaped by nature specifically to create and sustain culture. (Culture means highly flexible and complex social systems based on information and role differentiation.) Nature made us specifically for culture. We get our food, our shelter, our romantic partners, and much else from the social network. The way people think, act, feel and want are deeply linked to this overarching goal of



*Nobody likes you... what now?* **ROY BAUMEISTER** describes some surprising experimental effects, in the final contribution for the Society's 'Year of Relationships'.

connecting us up to the cultural system. In that context, social exclusion or rejection is not simply one misfortune among many, nor just a bit of sad drama – it strikes at the heart of what our psyche is designed for.

In the late 1990s my colleagues and I started doing laboratory studies on the effects of social exclusion and rejection. We had a rather simple theory. Belongingness is important, and so social exclusion thwarts that need. It should therefore cause emotional distress, and this distress in turn will wreak havoc on the person's behaviour.

This first theory (rejection causes emotion, which in turn causes behaviour) has not held up under the weight of several dozen experiments. Rejection affects behaviour, sure enough – indeed the behavioural effects are statistically among the largest I have found in my entire career. But the emotion never showed up. Often the manipulations of rejection and exclusion failed to bring much in the way of immediate emotional reaction. And even when our measures did yield some signs of emotion, these never mediated the behaviours. Thus, social exclusion does have powerful effects on people, but these effects do not depend on emotional distress. This has been something of a shock to many of us and has even led us to question some widely held assumptions about the purpose of emotion and its relationship to behaviour.

## How to study rejection

We have three laboratory procedures for manipulating social exclusion. In one, a group of research participants engages in a get-acquainted conversation for about 10 minutes. The experimenter then announces that it will be necessary to pair off for the next task and everyone should write down the names of the two people with whom he or she would most like to work. Participants then go to separate rooms, and the experimenter comes around to each one individually. The experimenter explains that the study is actually based on having people work with someone they did versus

did not select, and this has ostensibly created a problem. By random assignment, half the participants are told that everyone else in the group wanted to work with them. The others are told that 'nobody chose you'. Thus in both cases there is an excuse to have the participant go do something other than the pairing-off task, but the excuse is based on being either universally accepted or universally rejected.

The second main procedure has people take a personality test and then receive feedback on it. To build credibility, we give people their correct scores on extraversion versus introversion. Then, however, the experimenter adds some further news, ostensibly based on the test but in fact randomly assigned. In the crucial condition, participants are told that their test profile indicates that they are likely to end up alone in life. Their friends will drift away and not be replaced, and they may even have a brief marriage or two, but in the long run the person will be spending more and more time alone. For comparison purposes, we use several control groups, one of which promises a lifetime

PAUL BALDESARE (PHOTOFLUSION)

'surrounded by people who like you and care about you', another (the so-called misfortune control, designed to be bad but not linked to social exclusion) predicts a painful, accident-prone career of injuries and hospital stays, and another offers no feedback or forecast whatsoever.

Last, we have recently begun using a manipulation that compares a personal rejection against an essentially random abandonment. The participant comes in and exchanges personal information with a confederate, ostensibly in preparation for a future interaction. Then the experimenter returns and says that the confederate (posing as another participant) will not be doing the next task or interaction together with the participant. The reason is given as either that the confederate refused to continue once he or she found out who the participant was, or as the result of having had to rush off for another appointment.

These three procedures are effective at manipulating the sense of being included and accepted or excluded and rejected. Upon hearing them described, most people assume intuitively that they would elicit strong emotional reactions, but we have not found these. One possible reason is that the rejection is sprung on the participant with little warning. We do think that rejection can make people unhappy and distraught in various ways, but emotions take time to build, and so they do not show up on our measures that come right after the unexpected rejection. But the behaviour

changes do show up immediately, and so emotion is not required to produce the behavioural effects.

### **Exclusion and behaviour**

Let's now consider the large behavioural effects of rejection. Our first major project showed that rejected people became more aggressive toward others. Child psychologists have long observed that aggressive, violent kids are often outcasts, but they mainly concluded that aggressiveness leads to rejection. Our findings indicate that the causal arrow can point strongly in the opposite direction too: rejection does cause an increase in aggression.

Nor is the aggression limited to attacking the people who rejected you. Our manipulations of social exclusion have led to increases in aggression toward a new person who criticises or insults or otherwise provokes the rejected person. Aggression even increases toward a neutral, innocent third party. The only exception we found was that if a new person comes along and treats the rejected person favourably, offering friendly praise, then there is no increase in aggression. (No decrease either, compared with non-rejected controls, but at least no increase.) Apparently rejection prepares you to view the world with suspicion and hostility, and you walk around constantly ready to lash out. Only if someone clearly comes across as a friend is this aggressive attitude suspended.

Aggression was not the only behaviour to increase. We found rises in other forms of antisocial behaviour. Socially excluded people were more likely to cheat on a test by working past the signal to stop. Prosocial behaviour, meanwhile, was correspondingly reduced. Rejected people were less likely to help others in a variety of ways – donating money to the Student Emergency Fund, cooperating with another participant on a Prisoner's Dilemma game, granting a favour (to fill out another questionnaire) specifically requested by the experimenter, or even just bending over to help pick up pencils after the experimenter had accidentally spilled a jar of them onto the floor.

As elsewhere, the helping effects are large. Consider the pencil-spilling procedure, for example. In the control conditions, including the one in which the experimenter had just finished telling the participant to expect a future filled with

accidents and injuries, participants got right down on the floor and picked up eight or nine pencils on average. In contrast, the socially excluded participants averaged less than one measly pencil apiece. Most of them sat there and did nothing.

Does rejection merely make people selfish? In some ways, but not others. We found that exclusion led to significant increases in self-defeating behaviours. Excluded people were more likely than control participants to take foolish, long-shot risks instead of playing it safe. They procrastinated more. They made more unhealthy choices, such as preferring a fattening snack over a more nutritious option.

The combination of findings presented a puzzle. Why would rejected people become both selfish and self-defeating? Clearly, self-interest is not a full explanation. This combination did however provide a first cue that we should look at self-regulation as a crucial inner process. Self-regulation helps people overcome selfish, antisocial impulses and do what is socially desirable. It also helps prevent self-defeating behaviour, which often comes as a result of impulsively taking short-term gains that bring big delayed costs. A breakdown in self-regulation might therefore produce both the antisocial and the self-defeating behaviour patterns.

### **Rejection makes you stupid**

Our studies on intellectual performance provided dramatic evidence of the harmful nature of rejection and also provided hints that self-regulation might be important. We had failed to find emotion and yet were finding these patterns of impulsive risk-taking and similar behaviours. We began to think that social rejection is a bit like getting knocked on the head with a brick. If emotion wasn't the key, perhaps cognition? And so we started giving intelligence tests after our exclusion manipulations.

One might have predicted or hoped that social exclusion would improve intelligent thought. In nature, after all, a creature can survive with help from others or by dint of its own wits and efforts. If you are enmeshed in the group you can benefit from what others know and do. In contrast, if you can't count on others, you need to be that much smarter to get by. An increase in intelligent thinking would be an adaptive response to rejection.

Alas, our research subjects do not seem

to respond to rejection in adaptive ways. In no study did we find that rejection led to any improvement in intelligent performance. Sometimes people got worse, and sometimes there was no difference, but there were no positive changes.

Social exclusion led to substantial drops in intellectual performance when the task required the self to actively guide or supervise the thinking process. Hence we saw large drops in logical reasoning, and in extrapolating from a known to an unknown quantity, and in the ability to read a passage and then make inferences or draw conclusions from the information contained in it. In contrast, rote memory (as in a standard nonsense syllable learning task) was unaffected, as was answering questions based on general knowledge.

Put another way, rejected people seem poor at controlled mental processes, whereas their automatic information processing is relatively unaffected. (Not incidentally, this speaks against the view that rejected people are distracted by ruminating about their rejection. If they were, they wouldn't take in new information as well as they do.) Thus, social exclusion mainly impairs intellectual performance on tasks where the self is needed to regulate the thinking process. Thus again we began to suspect self-regulation was central to understanding the impact of rejection.

### Self-regulation out the window

By this point multiple findings had

suggested that the most relevant inner process to be affected by rejection was self-regulation. The combination of selfishness and self-defeating behaviour, the decrements on controlled but not automatic information processing, and even just the greater impulsive aggressiveness of excluded people all pointed in that direction. Emotion had continued to disappoint as a potential mediator, and so we began to examine self-regulation.

A recent series of studies found strong and consistent decrements in self-regulation among socially excluded people. They ate more snack food, consumed less of a healthy but bad-tasting medicine, and gave up faster on a task requiring them to hold their hand submerged in ice water. Asked how they would advise a friend choosing between two jobs, they took the short-term gain (high starting salary but poor prospects for career advancement) over the long-term one (lower salary but better long-range prospects). They also showed substantial drops in attention control. The latter was measured with an established procedure in which the participant dons two headphones and hears different information spoken in the two ears, so that success requires screening out some of the incoming verbiage to focus on the important stimuli coming in the other ear.

Does rejection make people unable or merely unwilling to self-regulate? In one follow-up study we offered people money to perform well on the attention control task. In that condition, rejected people performed just fine. Thus, they could regulate their attention if given a good and selfish reason to do so, but they don't exert themselves to self-regulate on behalf of someone else.

In another study, we sat people in front of a mirror after giving them acceptance versus rejection feedback. An earlier study had shown that after rejection, people avoid mirrors, probably because they don't want to think about themselves in case their thoughts would drift toward the recent rejection and 'What's wrong with me?' But self-awareness is important for self-regulation. It is hard to regulate anything without paying attention to it! And sure enough, the mirror led to improvements in self-regulation, even among people who had just been socially excluded. Perhaps the reluctance to focus on the self is part of the reason for the poor self-regulation that is caused by social exclusion.

### The social contract reconsidered

As I said, we started with the assumption that social exclusion would mainly lead to emotional upset, and that this distress would affect behaviour. The accumulated weight of our research findings made that theory untenable. We hardly ever found emotional distress, and in any case the behavioural effects came without any mediation by emotion. Instead, self-regulation failure seemed to be crucial. Hence we gradually pieced together a new theory.

Let me return to the 'cultural animal' view of human nature. People have all the selfish impulses of animals, yet if they can restrain these so as to follow rules, cooperate, and the like, they can gain the



immense rewards of belonging to a cultural group. Human self-regulation is probably shaped by nature for the primary purpose of enabling people to restrain themselves so as to gain social acceptance. Self-regulation requires both effort and sacrifice, but these are normally compensated by the benefits of belonging to a group. That is the essential social contract.

The bargain can break down on either side. Certainly there is ample evidence that people who fail to self-regulate end up being rejected and excluded by others. Their spouses and lovers dump them, their employers fire them, their peers shun them, and in serious cases society expels them by throwing them into prison. (Low self-control may be the single biggest predictor of criminality.)

Conversely, our results show that if belongingness is withheld, then people cease to self-regulate. They lose the willingness to make the efforts and sacrifices to alter their behaviour according to the prescriptions of others.

## DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Given the dramatic short-term effects of rejection, what do you think would be the long-term effects of chronic rejection?

Are there some people who won't mind being rejected or excluded, and if so, what traits mark them out? Or is the aversion to social rejection universal?

Has modern, Western culture intensified the problems of social exclusion and rejection? Do collectivist cultures reduce those problems? If so, why has our culture evolved in this way?

Why are the effects of rejection and exclusion greater than those of acceptance and inclusion?

These lab studies mostly investigate rejection by strangers. Is there a practical and ethical way to study rejection in long-term relationships?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. Send letters page to [psychologist@bps.org.uk](mailto:psychologist@bps.org.uk) or contribute to our forum via [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk).

This new theory may have implications far beyond the laboratory. My colleagues in sociology have pointed out that minority groups who feel excluded show many of the same patterns that our laboratory manipulations elicit: high rates of aggression and antisocial behaviour, decreased willingness to cooperate and obey rules, poorer intellectual performance, more self-destructive acts, short-term focus, and the like. Possibly if we can promote a more inclusive society, in which more people feel themselves to be accepted as valued members, some of these tragic patterns could be reduced.

### Feeling no pain

The absence of emotion continued to puzzle us. Most reviewers seemed to think we must have measured it wrong, but by now we have tried over half a dozen different measures, including some aimed at nonconscious feelings and a wide range of self-report measures. Our rejected people really don't seem upset. If anything, they are sometimes quite clear in stating they aren't feeling anything.

An important clue came from a recent article by MacDonald and Leary. They showed that in the animal literature, social rejection seems to elicit reactions akin to physical injury and pain. Panksepp had proposed for some time that as animals evolved to become more social, they used the same old physiological systems to monitor social events as for physical events. And recent brain-imaging work by Eisenberger, Lieberman and Williams suggested that the brain's response to pain and to rejection is quite similar.

When first hit with a severe and painful injury, the body seems to create a state of shock that brings numbness (such as by releasing opioids). Might the lab manipulations of rejection have that effect, and might that explain the apparent lack of emotion?

We purchased a pain machine and began testing participants after our rejection manipulations. Sure enough, social exclusion reduced pain sensitivity, both in terms of higher pain thresholds (when it first hurts) and higher tolerance (when you can't stand it). Social exclusion makes people less sensitive to physical pain.

Further studies indicated that the numbness to physical pain can explain the emotional numbness that we had observed over and over. In one study, we asked

students to forecast how they would feel next month if their college won, or lost, the big football game against its closest rival. We reasoned that people answer such a question by imagining the event and seeing how they start to feel, and if their emotional system has shut down then they would get little or no reading. Sure enough, people who had experienced our social exclusion manipulation predicted they would have little emotional reaction to a football win or loss (as compared with control condition participants who predicted strong responses). And the insensitivity to pain mediated the forecast of emotional indifference. That is, the physical numbness was linked to the emotional numbness.

In further studies, we asked people to sympathise with another person who had just suffered a romantic breakup or someone who had broken a leg and was having difficulties getting around campus. Participants who had undergone one of our social exclusion manipulations had less sympathy than others. While our control participants felt badly for the plight of the other student, our excluded ones shrugged it off. One of them used the expression 'Tough shit!'

Thus, the lack of emotion in our studies is not simply a result of people denying their feelings or being too embarrassed to admit them. Rather, it appears that their emotional system has genuinely shut down. They seem emotionally numb, not just to their recent rejection experience but also to the sufferings of others and to irrelevant events in the future.

### Any hope?

Thus far we have painted a mainly dismal picture of the impact of rejection. Let me close on a more optimistic note. Yes, social exclusion contributes to a broad range of maladaptive, pathological and antisocial patterns. But if the rejection experience is followed by an apparent opportunity to make a new friend, then rejected people seem extra willing to exert themselves to respond positively. We have found that under promising circumstances, previously excluded people are more likely than others to choose to work with someone, to allocate praise and cash rewards to a new partner, to self-regulate, and to view others as potentially friendly and accepting.

We had hoped for such findings all along. If the need to belong is a basic and powerful motivation, then when it is

thwarted, people should try extra hard to find new ways to fulfill it. Rejected people should try harder than others to secure acceptance. Apparently it's not that simple, and in many cases rejection makes people suspicious, hostile and antisocial. But when a reassuringly safe prospect of forming a new bond does present itself, people who were recently excluded seem willing and even eager to take it.

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### No references? An editors' note

You may have noticed that this article has no references. It was submitted and reviewed in this format, and we thought it should stay this way. We would like to know whether you agree.

Psychology, when compared with other social science disciplines, such as ethnography, tends to be rather conservative in its approach to the reporting of its findings. The default mode of presentation is the conventional journal format conforming to APA style rules. Polkinghorne (1997) makes the point that journal articles tend to be written primarily for the audience of the editors and the expert reviewers who will decide on the validity of the claims contained within the article and on whether it will be published. However, he argues that this is not necessarily the best format for communicating the general findings to practitioners and others who may be more interested in the usefulness of findings and their significance in the world beyond the laboratory.

It could also be argued that formal referencing is less necessary in these days of internet search engines and literature databases. Even more helpfully, as here, we can provide the conventional references on the *Psychologist* website (visit [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk) and find the article in December 2005).

So what do you think? Has the lack of references enhanced your enjoyment of this article, or prevented you using it in the ways you normally would? Write to us, e-mail me with your comments on [jonsut@bps.org.uk](mailto:jonsut@bps.org.uk), or contribute to the forum discussion at [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk).

*Jon Sutton (Editor) and John Smith (Associate Editor)*

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