



FlashReport

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

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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.

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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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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.

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

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.

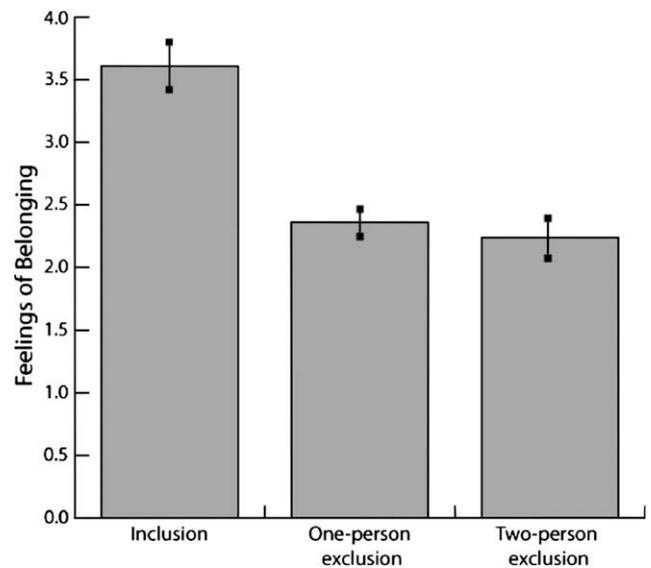


Fig. 1. Feelings of belonging as a function of exclusion condition (inclusion, two-person exclusion and one-person exclusion). Bars represent 1 standard error.

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,

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.

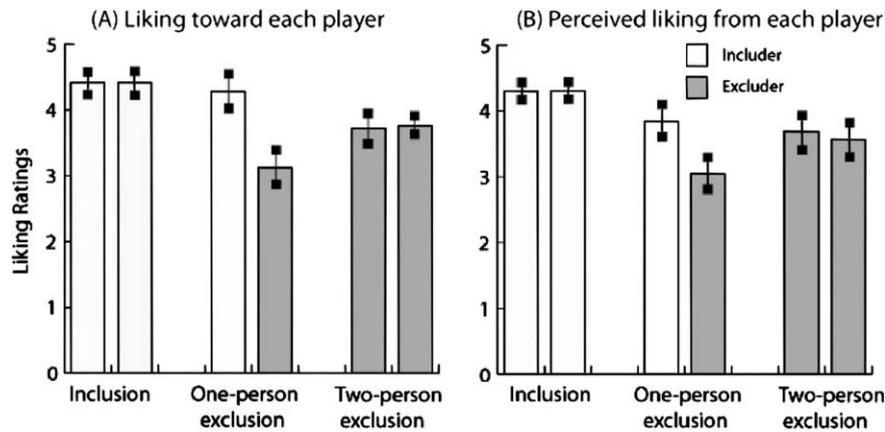


Fig. 2. Liking towards each player, and perceived liking from each player as a function of exclusion condition (inclusion, two-person exclusion, and one-person exclusion). Bars represent 1 standard error.

compared to inclusion, these participants also reported lower feelings of belonging, $t(49) = 5.52, p < .001, d = 1.56$ (Fig. 1), liked the other two players less, $t(49) = 2.54, p < .05, d = .70$ (Fig. 2A), and felt less liked by the other players, $t(49) = 2.56, p < .05, d = .72$ (Fig. 2B).⁵ Exclusion manipulation did not significantly affect the other three threatened needs or mood (all $ps > .30$; see Supplemental material).

These findings are consistent with Williams et al.'s (2000) original work, with the exception that two-person exclusion did not lower self-esteem or mood. This may have occurred because participants in two-person exclusion received 12 ball-tosses, compared to two ball-tosses received in Williams et al.'s (2000) total exclusion condition. This was necessary, however, to allow for comparisons with one-person exclusion. Additionally, we assessed threatened needs and mood *in general*, rather than how individuals felt *during* the game, which was the framing used in other work (e.g., Zadro et al., 2004).

Is one-person exclusion enough to lead to negative outcomes?

Participants who experienced one-person exclusion recalled having received fewer ball-tosses ($M = 29.00\%$, $SD = 14.14\%$) than participants who experienced inclusion, $t(49) = 6.49, p < .001, d = 1.81$, but not those who experienced two-person exclusion, $t(48) = .56, p = 1.00, d = .17, 95\%CI = -5.06$ to 9.26 . This estimate did not differ significantly from the proportion of tosses participants *actually* received, $t(24) = 1.38, p = .18, d = .28, 95\%CI = -1.93$ to 9.78 . Most important, one-person exclusion led to lower feelings of belonging than inclusion, $t(49) = 5.55, p < .001, d = 1.57$, comparable to the effects elicited by two-person exclusion, $t(48) = .62, p = 1.00, d = .18, 95\%CI = -.27$ to $.51$ (Fig. 1). This suggests that the presence of an includer in one-person exclusion did not reliably buffer individuals from threat.

Moreover, participants in one-person exclusion reported liking the excluder less than the includer, $t(24) = 3.57, p < .01, d = .71$ (Fig. 2A) and feeling less liked by the excluder than the includer, $t(24) = 2.72, p = .01, d = .54$ (Fig. 2B). Liking of, and perceived liking by, the excluder in one-person exclusion were significantly lower than inclusion (liking of: $t(49) = 3.72, p < .01, d = 1.03$; liking by: $t(49) = 4.72, p < .001, d = .49$), and not significantly different from two-person exclusion (liking of: $t(48) = 1.24, p = .66, d = .35, 95\%CI = -.27$ to 1.15 ; liking by: $t(48) = 1.70, p = .29, d = .48, 95\%CI = -.11$ to 1.27). However, one-sample t -tests comparing liking ratings from each player against the midpoint (4.0) revealed

that participants both disliked, $t(24) = 3.38, p < .005, d = .68$, and perceived dislike from the excluder in one-person exclusion, $t(24) = 3.98, p < .005, d = .79, 95\%CI = -.65$ to $.33$. This was not the case for the two excluders in two-person exclusion, (liking of: $t(24) = 1.21, p = .24, d = .24, 95\%CI = -.76$ to $.20$; liking by: $t(24) = 1.57, p = .13, d = .31, 95\%CI = -.88$ to 1.12).

Liking of includers in one-person exclusion did not differ significantly from inclusion, $t(49) = .73, p = .100, d = .19, 95\%CI = -.83$ to $.39$; neither did perceived liking by includers, $t(49) = 1.78, p = .24, d = .46, 95\%CI = -1.00$ to $.06$. Interestingly, however, participants did not necessarily perceive the includer as a form of social support. One-sample t -tests comparing perceived liking from each player against the midpoint revealed that participants did not perceive more liking from the includer in one-person exclusion, $t(24) = .68, p = 1.00, d = .14, 95\%CI = -.65$ to $.33$, but did from the two includers in the inclusion condition, $t(25) = 2.48, p < .05, d = 0.51$.

These results extend past work by showing that even in the presence of an inclusive person, exclusion leads to decreased feelings of belonging, as well as decreased liking of and perceived liking by the excluder.

Does exclusion affect perceptions of the includer's behaviors?

To assess participants' recollection of the includer's behavior, we subtracted the actual proportion of ball-tosses participants received from the includer from participants' estimated proportion of ball-tosses. Negative numbers therefore reflect perceived exclusion. One-sample t -tests assessed whether this bias score was significantly different from zero.

Even though the includer had thrown participants the ball approximately 50% of the time (and 50% of the time to the other player), participants inaccurately recalled that the includer had thrown them the ball only 35% of the time, $t(22) = 4.11, p < .001, d = .86$ (Fig. 3).⁶ There was no such bias in recalling the includers' behavior in the inclusion condition, $t(25) = .61, p = .55, d = .12, 95\%CI = -3.81$ to 2.06 , even though the behavior was exactly the same as that of the includer in one-person exclusion. The difference between the two conditions in bias was statistically significant, $t(47) = 3.75, p < .001, d = 1.05$. Despite inaccurately recalling that the includer had engaged in exclusion, participants still accurately recalled that the excluder had excluded them to a greater degree, $t(22) = 3.03, p < .01, d = .67$. These findings suggest that one-person exclusion led to inaccurately recalling that the includer had engaged in exclusion.

⁵ Liking estimates for the two players were averaged to form an overall liking score. Perceived liking estimates for the two players were averaged to form an overall perceived liking score.

⁶ Two participants did not respond and were excluded from these analyses.

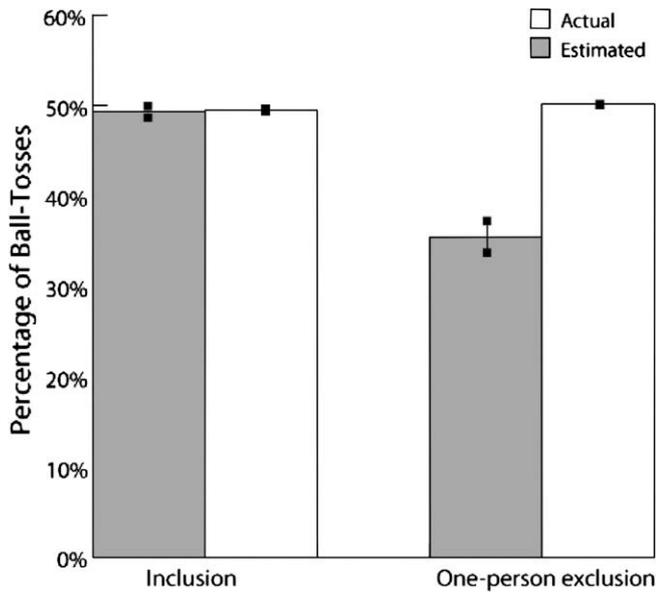


Fig. 3. Actual vs. estimated percentage of throws received by the includer as a function of exclusion condition (inclusion and one-person exclusion). Bars represent 1 standard error.

Discussion

Past research on social exclusion has focused on situations in which everyone present in the situation excludes one person. However, as illustrated by the hypothetical conversation with which we began the paper, some dynamics are not this clear. What are the psychological consequences if one experiences exclusion in the presence of an inclusive individual? The present research is the first to investigate the affective and cognitive effects of such situations.

The results indicate that one-person exclusion (compared to inclusion) led to perceptions of exclusion and negatively impacted feelings of belonging. Instead of viewing the includer as an ally and source of support, participants inaccurately recalled that the includer had excluded them to some degree. That is, even though the includer's behavior in the one-person condition was identical to the includer's behavior in the inclusion condition, it was construed in light of the excluder's behavior. This finding is surprising from a motivational and evolutionary perspective. Excluded individuals should be highly motivated to be accurate about who is engaging in exclusion and who is a potential ally. One possibility is that the impoverished stimuli used to represent the players, or the procedure of having to treat both players equally, led participants to confuse which player initiated the exclusion. However, three findings argue against this interpretation: participants estimated more ball-tosses from the includer than the excluder, reported liking the includer more than the excluder, and reported feeling more liked by the includer than the excluder.

One explanation for why includers were perceived as engaging in some exclusion is that participants may have inferred a relationship between the two players (Wyer, 2008). As an initial test of this possibility, we assessed the degree of perceived relationship between the two players by averaging how much the two players liked each other. Compared to inclusion, participants perceived a greater relationship between the two players in both one-person exclusion, $t(49) = 3.91, p < .01, d = 1.10$, and two-person exclusion, $t(49) = 3.71, p < .01, d = 1.05$. Interestingly, one- and two-person exclusion did not differ from one another, $t(48) = .30, p = 1.00$,

$d = .08, 95\%CI = -.62$ to $.46$. Although this suggests that participants' perception of a relationship between the two players may have contributed to perceiving the includer as being excluding, this possibility warrants further investigation.

The present work thus supports the idea that individuals are highly sensitive to any signs of rejection (Jones et al., 2009; Over & Carpenter, 2009; Sommer & Baumeister, 2002), and extend past work by showing that this sensitivity occurs even in the presence of an inclusive person. Importantly, in such ambiguous one-person exclusion situations, inclusive bystanders may be perceived as engaging in exclusion. These findings have implications for how the negative effects of social exclusion may spread throughout one's social world in a cascading manner.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2010.01.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.01.004).

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