Expectations of Social Exclusion and Self-regulation

New research from the field of social psychology suggests that being excluded or rejected causes a decline in self-regulation. The research found, across six discrete empirical studies, that social exclusion is substantially impaired among people who have just received news of future rejection or social exclusion.

Published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, the findings go beyond previous research investigating the behavioural and/or emotional effects of social exclusion, to suggest that self-regulation – defined as “the capacity to change oneself and ones responses” - functions as the mediator between social exclusion and its (negative) behavioural consequences.

Past work has indicated that social exclusion or rejection has negative behavioural consequences at the individual and societal level. Research has shown that, at the individual level, socially excluded people exhibit increased aggression, poorer intellectual performance, a loss of prosocial behaviour and a tendency to engage in self-defeating behaviour. At the societal level, groups of people who have felt excluded by the dominant culture have shown similar patterns, as reflected for example in high crime rates and withdrawal from positive contributions to the general societal good. Past research, however, has not illuminated the inner processes that mediate the behavioural effects of social exclusion. Importantly, the possible alternative hypothesis to that proposed by Baumeister et al. (below), that emotional distress mediates behavioural effects, has not been consistently supported. On the contrary, it has been more consistently disconfirmed by previous empirical social-psychological research.

Self-regulation is hypothesised as a possible mediating mechanism between the experience of social exclusion and the behavioural outcomes with such experience is associated. Self-regulation is considered to be a vital mechanism for producing adaptive and socially desirable behaviour. According to the logic of Baumeister et al.’s hypothesis therefore, the socially undesirable behaviours associated with the experience or expectation of social exclusion are the product of the process of impairment of self-regulation in the experience/expectation of social exclusion.
Six discrete experiments were used to test the hypothesis. In order to provide converging evidence and rule out alternative explanations, two distinct manipulations of social exclusion were employed (not being chosen by anyone in a group and getting bogus feedback that one will end up alone) and four different procedures were used to measure self-regulation. In the light of the theoretical possibility (mentioned above) that social exclusion could produce emotional distress or bad moods, mood and emotion were tested in all the studies. This allowed for an assessment of whether such reactions may contribute to the hypothesised impairment of self-regulation.

In Experiment one, participants were given bogus feedback that they would be likely to either end up alone, without a partner, family or friends, be surrounded by people who cared for them, or have a future marred by a tendency to be accident prone. Following this, they were encouraged to drink a healthy but bad-tasting beverage. It was assumed that because the drink tastes bad, self-regulation would be required to force people to consume it. Experiment two involved a different manipulation of social exclusion and different measure of self-regulation. Participants were told that no one in their group wanted them as an interaction partner before being given a bowl of pleasant-tasting biscuits and asked to taste-test the biscuits, eating as many as was needed to make a judgement. Biscuit abstention was used as a measure of self-regulation. In Experiment three the same manipulation of social exclusion was used as used in Experiment one, while testing self-regulation in another sphere, specifically perseverance with unsolvable puzzles, was assessed. In this experiment giving up in the face of failure or difficulty was interpreted as an indication of poor or depleted self-regulation. Cognitive control is considered, by the researchers, to be an important sphere of self-regulation and this was tested in Experiment four with a dichotic listening procedure. The same manipulation of social exclusion as that of Experiments one and three was used. Participants were played audio recordings of information in both ears simultaneously and asked to ignore the material presented in one ear and screen the list of words presented to the other ear. It was predicted that socially excluded participants would be less successful at this task.

Experiments five and six were follow-ups to Experiment four. They used similar procedures to the latter experiment and assessed whether manipulations of self-interest based incentives (financial reward) and self-awareness might improve self-regulation among rejected participants and counteract the effect found in Experiment four.

The research found that, consistently across the six studies, self-regulation was substantially impaired among people who had just received news of social rejection or future exclusion, compared to those who had received news of social inclusion by their peers, or future inclusion/a future in which misfortune, as a result of their own tendency towards accidents, was highly likely. Instead of stimulating the seemingly adaptive and socially desirable response of better self-regulation therefore, social rejection seems to elicit the
opposite. Experiments five and six, designed to illuminate why the self-regulating behaviour of socially excluded people may be compromised, suggested that they become unwilling rather than unable to self-regulate. It seems, therefore, that the capacity for self-regulation remains intact after social exclusion, however the excluded person is unwilling to put the effort in or make the sacrifices that self-regulation often requires. Self-regulation involves focusing on the self's short-comings in order to remedy them, curbing selfish impulses and therefore not getting what wants and exerting effort in order to alter one's behaviour. An individual must therefore be persuaded to exercise self-regulation by the expectation that they will get something in return. Experiment six indicated that self-awareness may be an important contributing factor to an individual's disinclination to self-regulate in the face of exclusion. Effective self-regulation, according to the researchers, requires a certain degree of self-awareness. However, in the light of the findings of Experiment six it is suggested that rejection makes self-awareness less likely because it would direct thought towards the deficiencies in the self that may have elicited rejection. The findings suggest that excluded people are therefore disinclined to think about themselves and the avoidance of self-awareness undermines self-regulation.

The authors conclude that, although the findings are inadequate to prescribe social change, they do lend support to the view that “promoting a more widely inclusive society, such that fewer groups or individuals feel left out, would reduce the extensive harm and heartbreak that often result from self-regulation failure”.

Reference