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Social Exclusion and its Effects on Physical Vulnerability



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Humans feel a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The argument that belonging is a need is based on several perspectives and findings within the social exclusion literature, all of which emphasize the interconnection between our need for belonging and physical security. First, researchers argue that our evolutionary ancestors needed to form and maintain social bonds because their physical safety depended on their inclusion in a social group (Wesselmann, Nairne, & Williams, 2011). Second, the absence of belonging has a number of negative consequences (DeWall & Bushman, 2011) including physical consequences such as erratic sleeping, decreases in blood pressure and possibly even early death (see Park & Baumeister, 2015). Third, because exclusion is experienced as negative and threatening, such threats evoke powerful psychological processes aimed at identifying threats and regaining a sense of connection (e.g., Molden, Lucas, Gardner, Dean, & Knowles, 2009). The current study contributes to this research by focusing on the motivational processes involved in regaining a sense of physical safety. Specifically, we hypothesized that social exclusion would motivate behavior aimed at achieving physical safety or preventing physical vulnerability.

One hundred and two participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) website participated in this study (i.e., 50 females, 52 males, M age = 32.05). Participants were paid \$2.00 for completing the 25-minute survey. For the experimental manipulation, participants were randomly assigned to either the social exclusion or the social acceptance condition. Those in the social exclusion condition received a prompt in which they were asked to imagine they were beginning a new job and their coworkers openly rejected them. Those in the social acceptance condition received a similar prompt only they were asked to imagine that their new coworkers openly accepted them. After rating their emotional reaction to the scenario and feelings

of exclusion (as manipulation checks), participants completed questionnaires assessing general security orientation (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002) and the degree to which they perceived a variety of social and physical activities as risky (Blais & Weber, 2006). Participants also completed measures of physically protective behavior. For the valuation task, participants indicated how much they would pay for consumer products that conferred a sense of physical safety. For the scenario task, participants imagined themselves making a series of decisions (i.e., 15 total, including social, financial, and physical risk decisions) between risky and safer options.

In general, the results that emerged were contrary to my hypothesis. Although general security orientation did not differ as a function of condition, excluded (vs. accepted) participants were less likely to perceive a situation as risky. Only two out of sixteen items on the valuation task were valued less by participants who imagined an exclusion (vs. acceptance); however, excluded (vs. accepted) participants made more risky choices in general and more physically risky choices in particular. Discussion centers on alternative explanations for these findings and future directions.