

Attachment Theory as a Framework for Understanding Responses to Social Exclusion

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Abstract

We argue that attachment theory may provide a useful framework for understanding individuals' reactions to social exclusion. Attachment theory suggests that social exclusion should prompt an individual to seek comfort from an accepting attachment figure. However, most experimental studies constrain individuals from seeking out an attachment figure to quell their distress, and may interfere with the process of recruiting internalized attachment figures. When the goal of recruiting attachment figure support is blocked, individuals may adopt deactivating strategies, such as emotional numbing, to reduce their distress. Alternatively, individuals may adopt hyperactivating strategies, such as ingratiating behaviors, to seek proximity to attachment figure substitutes. We conclude with recommendations for future avenues of exclusion research stemming from attachment theory.

Recently, there has been a surge of research within social psychology examining how individuals respond to experiences of social exclusion. Feelings of exclusion may arise in situations of explicit rejection or devaluation from others (e.g., Buckley et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2000) as well as in instances where desired social rewards are lost or not obtained (Molden et al., 2009; Spielmann et al., 2012). Studies have found that exclusion can elicit a spectrum of responses ranging from the seemingly prosocial (e.g., seeking new friends; Maner et al., 2007; cooperating in social dilemmas; Ouwerkerk et al., 2005; working harder and agreeing with others in order to fit in; Williams et al., 2000; Williams & Sommer, 1997) to the seemingly antisocial (e.g., sabotaging an individual's opportunity to get hired for a job; DeWall, Twenge et al., 2009; administering more hot sauce to someone who does not like spicy foods; Warburton et al., 2006; noise blasting an innocent stranger; Twenge et al., 2001). How can we make sense of the fact that experiences of social exclusion can lead to such disparate reactions? In this paper, we argue that attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) may provide a useful framework for organizing the incongruent findings of social exclusion research and for suggesting important directions for future work. Moreover, we argue that past research studies have not been well-positioned to capture the primary responses to exclusion predicted by attachment theory.

Understanding social exclusion from an attachment perspective has been an underexplored avenue of research. Sommer and Benkendorf (2009) introduced the utility of applying concepts from attachment theory to understand social exclusion. In their review of the exclusion literature, Sommer and Benkendorf provide convincing evidence that social exclusion can elicit competing goals of seeking connection and self-protection. They highlight how an individual's appraisal of others as accepting or rejecting (similar to the attachment concept of working models of self and other) will inform whether the individual tries to seek connection, or tries to protect themselves from further rejection. We take a different approach, focusing more on normative attachment processes, especially seeking

proximity to an attachment figure. We propose that the distress caused by social exclusion should activate an individual's attachment system, motivating the recruitment of support from an attachment figure. However, because most social exclusion paradigms do not provide the opportunity to seek proximity to attachment figures and may limit the opportunity to draw on internal representations of attachment figures by putting demands on participants' cognitive resources, the observed responses in the social exclusion literature may reflect attachment system deactivating and hyperactivating strategies (Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Normative Attachment Processes

The biologically-based attachment system is designed to promote bonding between infant and caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). However, researchers argue that the evolutionary advantages of close relationships have led this same system to continue to operate in adult relationships (Fraley et al., 2005; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The attachment system is designed to become activated in times of threat and distress in order to motivate approach of support and security from an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment figures are characterized as being supportive, comforting, and accepting as well as being available and responsive when an individual requires reassurance and protection (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). An ideal attachment figure fulfills two basic functions. When one is not distressed, the attachment figure serves as a *secure base* from which to safely explore with the knowledge that she/he will be available for support should a source of threat arise. When one is distressed, the attachment figure serves as a *safe haven* – a source of comfort and security that helps one effectively soothe distress. In childhood, attachment figures are typically the child's primary caregivers, but during adolescence, the role of primary attachment figure is transferred to peers (including close friends and romantic partners; Fraley & Davis, 1997; Markiewicz et al., 2006). In adulthood, romantic partners are often primary attachment figures; however, friends, children, parents, and siblings can also serve this function (Doherty & Feeney, 2004). In addition to a primary attachment figure, an individual may have a network of other attachment figures, who she/he relies on to varying degrees (Doherty & Feeney, 2004). The extent to which an individual can be characterized as an attachment figure is contingent on the degree to which one relies on this figure as a secure base and safe haven, seeks proximity to them, and experiences separation distress in their absence (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Tancredy & Fraley, 2006; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997).

Attachment System Activation

According to attachment theory, when an individual appraises a threat in her/his environment, attachment system activation ensues (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Activation of the attachment system motivates the individual to seek out an attachment figure for closeness and comfort (proximity seeking). When the attachment figure is available and responsive, proximity seeking and its associated reassurance from the attachment figure relieves the individual's distress. This allows the attachment system to cease activation, and the person can focus on other goals. In adulthood, even drawing on internal representations of an attachment figure may provide necessary comfort in the absence of actual contact (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2003).

However, if an individual perceives that her/his attachment figure is not immediately available, or is unresponsive, the individual's feelings of distress will be compounded. The individual then assesses whether seeking proximity to an attachment figure is a viable option, determined both by the situation, and the individual's disposition. If an individual perceives

that proximity-seeking behavior would be punished, or would not successfully reduce her/his distress, that person will engage in a deactivating strategy. Specifically, the individual will attempt to down-regulate distress and avoid the state of attachment system activation by distancing herself/himself from threat and attachment cues. On the other hand, if the individual perceives that seeking proximity to an attachment figure would successfully reduce distress, the person will engage in hyperactivating strategies. Hyperactivating strategies involve hyper-attunement to both threat- and attachment-related cues as well as behaviors designed to elicit support from the attachment figure.

After repeated failures to ease distress through proximity seeking, an individual may acquire a tendency to use deactivating and hyperactivating strategies on a consistent basis. Individuals whose attachment figures are consistently unavailable may come to adopt deactivating strategies in order to avoid desires to seek proximity. Deactivating strategies are characteristic of individuals high in attachment avoidance, who accomplish chronic deactivation of the attachment system by suppressing feelings of distress that would otherwise prompt them to seek comfort from others (e.g., Edelstein & Gillath, 2008; Fraley & Shaver, 1997; Spielmann et al., 2013). Avoidant individuals therefore strive for independence and emotional distance from others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In contrast, individuals who chronically receive inconsistent or unreliable care may come to rely on hyperactivating attachment strategies in order to ensure proximity when it is available. Hyperactivating strategies are characteristics of individuals high in attachment anxiety, who experience chronic activation of the attachment system, even when there is no explicit threat present (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2002). As a consequence, anxiously attached individuals tend to be clingy, controlling, and hypervigilant for signs of rejection or abandonment (e.g., Feldman & Downey, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Spielmann et al., 2013).

Attachment and the Experience of Exclusion

According to attachment theory, individuals should be motivated to seek proximity to responsive attachment figures following threats like experiences of social exclusion because doing so would relieve their distress (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2000). The only study to our knowledge to directly test the role of such normative attachment processes in response to social exclusion demonstrated that attachment figures can attenuate neural responses to rejection (Karremans et al., 2011). Specifically, when participants were excluded from an online ball tossing game (Cyberball; Williams et al., 2000), imagining an attachment figure led to less activation in the hypothalamus (a region associated with a stress-related response to exclusion; Eisenberger et al., 2007) and less self-reported distress compared to imagining an acquaintance. Additionally, the more secure the relationship with the imagined attachment figure, the weaker the participant's neural activation in areas associated with threat.

A somewhat more indirect test of the idea that attachment figures can reduce the distress from social exclusion comes from research by Twenge, Zhang, and colleagues (2007). Participants who were socially excluded (by receiving a future-alone forecast, Study 3 or by being told no one in a group wanted to work with them, Study 4) and then wrote about their favorite family member (Study 3) or best friend (Study 4) displayed lower levels of aggression than excluded participants who wrote about control topics. Although there was no direct rating of the attachment relevance of the family members or friends participants wrote about, these categories of individuals are relatively likely to represent attachment figures (e.g., Doherty & Feeney, 2004). (Participants' aggression following exclusion was also reduced after writing about their favorite celebrity (Study 3), a point which we will return to later). Taken together, these findings suggest

that people may be at least somewhat relieved from distress caused by social exclusion when they are able to recruit attachment figures.

However, most studies on social exclusion do not provide participants the explicit opportunity to seek comfort from attachment figures to cope with the exclusion. Furthermore, many studies may disrupt participants' ability to seek solace through internal representations of attachment figures by keeping participants busy and distracted with other tasks (e.g., reading another person's essay; DeWall, Twenge et al., 2009; listening to unpleasant sounds; Warburton et al., 2006). As such, much research on social exclusion may involve participants whose primary drive to seek proximity in the face of threat is at least partially frustrated. Therefore, participants in experimental exclusion studies may be left with a primed but unmet goal to seek closeness with attachment figures, which may lead them to be drawn towards characteristics associated with attachment figures in subsequent tasks. Specifically, participants should be drawn towards individuals who appear to offer some ability to provide safe haven and secure base functions (i.e., those who are caring, accepting, responsive, and validating; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Indeed, socially excluded individuals have shown an attentional bias toward smiling and accepting faces, fixating greater attention, and identifying such faces more quickly, compared to nonexcluded participants (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009). Importantly, this attentional preference was specific to accepting faces and did not generalize to nonsocial positive stimuli or faces showing expressions of threat (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009). DeWall and colleagues also illustrated that, relative to social inclusion, social exclusion led to an automatic emotion regulation process of attuning to positive emotional information (DeWall et al., 2011) consistent with a goal of quickly identifying attachment figures. Importantly, drawing on such emotionally-comforting information in times of distress has important consequences for attachment processes. Beckes, Simpson, and Erickson (2010) found that photos of smiling faces paired with threatening primes promoted feelings of secure attachment, while nonsmiling faces did not. Taken together, these findings are consistent with the notion that in the absence of attachment figure availability, individuals may respond to exclusion experiences by being drawn toward features associated with attachment figures such as reassurance, acceptance, and comfort.

Further, a large body of studies suggests that, when given the opportunity by researchers, individuals gravitate toward connection with supportive others following experiences of exclusion. For instance, individuals who experienced exclusion in a game of Cyberball demonstrated more affiliative behavior than those who were included, showing a higher incidence of conforming to a new group's incorrect perceptual judgment (Study 2, Williams et al., 2000). Additionally, Lakin, Chartrand, and Arkin (2008) observed that socially excluded individuals were more likely than included individuals to unconsciously mimic the physical movements of a novel interaction partner, a behavior used to replenish social connection (Lakin & Chartrand, 2003). Specifically, participants who felt the most threatened by the rejection (because they were excluded by ingroup members) displayed more affiliative mimicking of an ingroup confederate, but not an outgroup confederate. This suggests a selective motivation to connect with familiar and safe individuals who can provide a sense of validation like an attachment figure.

Similarly, Maner, and colleagues (2007) showed that social exclusion prompts individuals to seek social connection, but only from available, accepting sources. Relative to a neutral control condition, social exclusion led participants to evaluate a new partner less favorably (by awarding the partner a lower monetary reward for the creativity of a drawing the partner ostensibly made) unless that partner was available as a possible interaction partner. When the target was a possible social outlet, excluded participants gave a more favorable evaluation than those in the control condition (Study 6). In a separate study, participants did not show

this affiliative behavior toward the person who had rejected them (Study 5). In both studies, individuals high in fear of negative evaluation (i.e., social anxiety), who worry that others will reject them, did not seek connection. Maner and colleagues' findings suggest that individuals are drawn towards others following exclusion, but only those who are perceived as available and likely to provide acceptance. These characteristics are shared by attachment figures.

Furthermore, research suggests that excluded individuals also seek comfort from nonhuman sources that share characteristics of attachment figures; notably, those that are readily available to provide unconditional acceptance and support. For example, socially excluded individuals report stronger religiosity compared to socially included individuals (Aydin et al., 2010), suggesting that they may be turning to God as a substitute attachment figure (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Similarly, people who feel more socially disconnected are more likely to ascribe to their pets traits related to social connection (Epley et al., 2008), suggesting that individuals seek comfort from their pets in the absence of human attachment figures. In a similar fashion, turning to parasocial bonds, such as those with television characters or celebrities, may function to reduce negative feelings of exclusion (e.g., Gardner et al., 2005; Greenwood & Long, 2009; Greenwood & Long, 2011). Indeed, in the aforementioned Twenge, Zhang, and colleagues' study (2007), writing about one's favorite celebrity reduced participant's antisocial responses following exclusion. Importantly, participants in this study tended to select celebrities they particularly admired and felt socially connected to (Twenge et al., 2007). The bond these participants felt with celebrities may share important resemblances to a bond with an attachment figure, in that celebrities provide a sense of security because they are constantly available when sought for support, and are incapable of being rejecting.

Attachment theory predicts that, in real-world or relatively unconstrained conditions, excluded individuals are likely to choose to seek attachment figures, either through proximity seeking or recruitment of internalized representations (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The findings reviewed in this section are consistent with the prediction derived from attachment theory that excluded individuals will be primed to seek comfort from attachment figures, and thus be drawn to characteristics that are indicative of secure base and safe haven attachment functions such as care, acceptance, responsiveness, and validation. We expect that the social targets best embodying these sorts of characteristics are the most likely to draw approach from excluded individuals.

When An Attachment Figure is Not Available

The primary strategy for responding to exclusion – seeking proximity to actual or internalized attachment figures – may often be disrupted in experimental examinations of social exclusion. Attachment theory makes specific predictions as to how individuals are likely to respond with deactivating or hyperactivating strategies when the attachment system is activated but attachment figures are not available (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As such, framing responses to exclusion in terms of deactivating and hyperactivating strategies may be useful in understanding people's goals in these situations.

Deactivating Strategies

Deactivating strategies are implemented when seeking proximity to an attachment figure is not perceived as a viable option. When approach of comforting others is not possible as a means of eliminating distress, deactivating strategies lead to inhibiting feelings of distress and downplaying the importance of social connection. Deactivating strategies may be especially relevant to social exclusion paradigms in which there appear to be few avenues to achieve the goal of proximity to accepting others. For example, a commonly used method

of exclusion is to give participants false feedback that, based on their personality, they can expect a future without validating social interactions (Twenge et al., 2001). This feedback implies that seeking out others would be futile, as any relationships are doomed to fail. Perceiving relationships as doomed to fail is consistent with the outlook of avoidant individuals (Birnie et al., 2009) and as such may be particularly likely to be associated with deactivating strategies. Further, many studies do not offer an avenue for social contact at the level of the dependent variable (e.g., DeWall, Twenge et al., 2009; Twenge et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2002), which limits participants' options to find others who embody any features of attachment figures. These situations may push participants in the direction of deactivating strategies.

When seeking proximity is perceived as ineffective in reducing distress, one deactivating strategy is to blunt emotional reactions (Cassidy, 1994). There has been considerable debate regarding emotional reactions to social exclusion with one meta-analysis arguing that exclusion leads to worsened mood (Gerber & Wheeler, 2009), but another arguing that exclusion leads to low levels of positive and negative affect consistent with a numbed, neutral state (Blackhart et al., 2009). One unexplored moderating variable in these investigations of emotional response to exclusion is the viability of proximity seeking in the experimental context. Indeed, participants who were told they could expect a future completely alone (Bernstein & Claypool, 2012; DeWall & Baumeister, 2006) or who were faced with a cold and disengaged confederate (Borsook & MacDonald, 2010), showed a decreased sensitivity to physical pain consistent with emotional numbness. Arguably, these research paradigms do not make approaching a supportive other a realistic option, making deactivating strategies such as reduced emotional valence the best available option for diminishing distress.

Another deactivating strategy is the tendency to derogate or dismiss the importance of being socially connected. If social relationships are seen as unimportant, then the drive to approach supportive others motivated by attachment system activation should be reduced (Spielmann et al., 2013). Several studies have found that rejected individuals devalue relationships with those who have rejected them (e.g., Twenge et al., 2001, Study 1 and 2; Williams et al., 2002), which can serve to reduce the negativity of rejection (Bourgeois & Leary, 2001). Rejected individuals have also been found to devalue individuals who are not the source of the rejection. For example, after experiencing exclusion in the form of expecting a future alone, excluded participants attributed more hostility to another person's ambiguous actions than those who were not socially excluded, which was associated with greater derogation of that person on a subsequent employment suitability rating (DeWall, Twenge et al., 2009). By diminishing the importance of others, individuals may reduce the distress felt when others exclude them.

The deactivating strategy of devaluing others, combined with emotional numbness, may also explain the lower prosocial behavior observed among excluded individuals. Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, and Bartels (2007) demonstrated that receiving a forecast of a future alone led participants to display lower levels of prosocial behavior compared to included or control participants (e.g., donating less money, cooperating less in a prisoner's dilemma game, picking up fewer pencils for the experimenter). The authors found evidence that this lower degree of prosocial behavior could be explained by lower empathic concern for others, noting that emotional numbness leads to less emotional responsiveness to others (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006). A lower concern for others, and the corresponding lower prosocial behavior, may also reflect the deactivating strategy of devaluing connection (i.e., seeing no need to reach out to others because others are of little value). Indeed, low empathic concern is characteristic of avoidant individuals (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2001). By seeing social relationships as less important, excluded individuals may not only reduce the distress

of being rejected by lowering the value of the rejector, but they may also reduce the frustration that would arise from attachment figure unavailability by devaluing the worth of attachment relationships.

If emotional numbness and devaluing connection arise after exclusion because proximity seeking is not seen as viable, we should see evidence of these behaviors in individuals high in attachment avoidance, who characteristically adopt deactivating strategies. Although little research has examined attachment avoidance in response to social exclusion, the existing evidence is consistent with this claim. DeWall, and colleagues (2012) examined how neural activation in response to Cyberball exclusion was moderated by participants' dispositional attachment avoidance. Attachment avoidance predicted decreased neural activation in the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) and anterior insula (regions previously linked to rejection-induced distress; DeWall et al., 2010; Eisenberger et al., 2003) when participants were excluded in Cyberball, relative to when they were included. These findings suggest that avoidant individuals were protecting themselves from the threat of exclusion. In sum, when seeking out others seems hopeless, a range of findings is consistent with the notion that individuals recover from an exclusion experience by adopting deactivating strategies including attenuating the threat of exclusion, dulling emotional reactions, and devaluing others.

Hyperactivating Strategies

Hyperactivating strategies arise when the comfort of an attachment figure is not immediately available, but the individual perceives that such attention may be won with sufficient effort. Accordingly, activation of the attachment system is heightened to motivate more fervent attempts at approach. Notably, hyperactivation of the attachment system is associated with feelings of ambivalence, whereby the person strongly desires comfort and support from an attachment figure while simultaneously worrying that such support will be unavailable (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2010). Hyperactivation leads individuals to work hard to gain attention and a sense of security from attachment figures, while also remaining hypervigilant to signs of rejection or abandonment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Hyperactivation can be seen as emerging from – and analogous to – the protest response infants initially display when separated from caregivers (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This protest response involves the individual engaging in intense proximity-seeking behaviors aimed at capturing the attention of an attachment figure.

Some of the aggressive behaviors observed in response to social exclusion, such as administering hot sauce to someone who does not like spicy food or blasting someone with irritating loud noise, may be a result of a protest response to attachment figure unavailability. When an individual feels threatened as a result of exclusion, but cannot regulate her/his distress by seeking comfort from an attachment figure, she/he will become frustrated. These feelings of frustration may be transferred to whoever becomes an easy target for these emotions. For example, Twenge et al. (2001) observed that participants who were told that no one in a group wanted to work with them administered longer and more intense aversive noise blasts to another person (even someone who was not the perpetrator of the exclusion) relative to those who had been accepted (Studies 4 and 5). Such seemingly aimless aggression may reflect a protest response, with frustration channeled through the opportunity to administer noise blasts provided by the researchers. Further, just as children may act out to gain a caregiver's attention, participants' aggressive actions may have been motivated by a desire to gain attention, consistent with what Williams and colleagues describe as a desire to reclaim a sense of meaningful existence (e.g., Williams, 2009) and control (e.g., Warburton et al., 2006). The attention-seeking behaviors characteristic of hyperactivation are normally directed

towards the attachment figure; however, when the attachment figure is unavailable, perhaps these behaviors are channeled towards others.

The desire to seek proximity to reduce strong feelings of distress should be particularly evident in individuals whose dispositions make them inclined to adopt hyperactivating strategies. This notion is supported by research from Romero-Canyas et al. (2010) who allowed participants the opportunity to ingratiate themselves with the source of rejection (and new sources of connection) and examined how this behavior was moderated by an individual's trait rejection sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity assesses an individual's tendency to anxiously expect and react strongly to rejection and is highly related to attachment anxiety (Downey & Feldman, 1996); thus rejection-sensitive individuals should have a dispositional tendency to use hyperactivating strategies. In Romero-Canyas and colleagues' studies, participants had the opportunity to gain proximity to others who were available as a potential source of support (with such actions as allocating money to the rejector and helping the experimenter). Individuals high in rejection sensitivity tried harder than their less rejection-sensitive counterparts to ingratiate themselves to their rejectors (Study 1) and the experimenter (Study 2), despite feeling hostility toward the group who rejected them. These findings are consistent with the combination of desire for proximity and sensitivity to threat theorized to mark attachment system hyperactivation. Individuals who were highly threatened by the exclusion appeared eager to form social connections even as their hostility suggested doing so was potentially dangerous.

If proximity seeking is not an option following rejection, a perpetuation of distress may occur among individuals who tend to employ hyperactivating strategies. For example, during Cyberball exclusion, those higher in attachment anxiety (and thus likely to use hyperactivating strategies) showed a pattern of neural activation that suggested an ineffective ability to regulate distress (greater activation in both the dACC and ventrolateral prefrontal cortices; DeWall et al., 2012). This suggests that hyperactivating strategies may be associated with poor distress regulation following exclusion. Overall, the evidence suggests that individuals become agitated when their attachment figure is not immediately available to provide comfort, leading the individual to intently seek attention and connection if proximity seeking is viable.

Conclusion

The idea that turning to an attachment figure for comfort is a fundamental response to distress has the potential to provide new insight into the experience of social exclusion. We have reviewed the small body of evidence available suggesting that seeking closeness to an accepting attachment figure is a normative response to social exclusion, and that when this goal is frustrated, responses to social exclusion may be reflective of deactivating or hyperactivating strategies. To conclude, we will briefly examine how our perspective can add to other attempts to integrate the social exclusion literature and suggest directions for future research.

Integrating Perspectives

Smart Richman and Leary (2009) propose a compelling multi-motive model for understanding prosocial, antisocial, and withdrawal responses to exclusion. They argue that an individual's construal of a rejection experience determines which of these three responses an individual will be motivated toward. They consider six aspects of an individual's construal of the rejection experience: how costly the rejection is perceived to be, the chronicity of the rejection, the perceived unfairness of the rejection, the possibility of alternative relationships,

an individual's expectations of relational repair, and the value of the damaged relationship. From our attachment perspective, these construals are an important aspect of evaluating the initial level of threat, determining the availability of an attachment figure, and assessing the viability of proximity seeking when an attachment figure is not available. Arguably, the cost of rejection, chronicity, and perceived unfairness may inform the level of threat and distress experienced. In the context of experimental exclusion research, the perceived possibility of alternative relationships, expectations of relational repair, and value of relationships would inform assessments of the viability of proximity seeking.

DeWall and Richman (2011) provide another useful approach to resolve past inconsistencies in responses to rejection. They propose that the determinant of an individual's response to rejection is her or his prospect of being accepted. When acceptance is likely, individuals are prone to display prosocial responses aimed at garnering connection. When acceptance is unlikely, however, individuals may become selfish and antisocial. DeWall and Richman's theory aligns with predictions from attachment theory such that exclusion will lead individuals to seek out others if proximity seeking is perceived as viable. Indeed, an attachment figure should be the most certain source of acceptance possible. Further, our perspective offers a somewhat more precise prediction such that individuals should seek out others most specifically who share characteristics of attachment figures. Thus, whereas acceptance should be important, a social target who is not only accepting but also responsive, supportive, and validating should be relatively more sought after. In addition, the attachment perspective offers systematic predictions about what will happen when seeking out attachment figures or attachment substitutes is not possible (deactivating versus hyperactivating strategies).

The attachment perspective also extends these frameworks by shedding some light on traits that may moderate an individual's construal of a rejection experience, and her/his assessment of possible acceptance. How individuals construe a rejection experience, and how likely they perceive acceptance to be, is greatly influenced by their past histories of receiving acceptance and care, as reflected in trait attachment anxiety and avoidance. Exploring dispositional attachment moderators may be valuable in future research for understanding responses to exclusion (e.g., DeWall et al., 2012). Experimental contexts that suggest proximity seeking is possible may be particularly likely to elicit strong behavior from anxious individuals; whereas, if proximity seeking is not possible, avoidant individuals may be particularly likely to display muted reactions. Thus, an individual's trait attachment may help explain how individuals react to the same instance of exclusion in very different ways.

Future Directions

More direct evidence for our central proposition that social exclusion leads to seeking comfort from attachment figures in order to relieve distress is needed. To our knowledge, no social exclusion studies have simply left participants unconstrained in their response as a means of examining naturalistic coping strategies. Similarly, no studies have had attachment figures present such that excluded participants can seek proximity. Studies that have encouraged participants to think about attachment figures provide evidence of their distress relieving properties (Karremans et al., 2011; Twenge, Zhang et al., 2007). Writing about a friend or family member (Twenge, Zhang et al., 2007), or imagining the presence of an attachment figure (Karremans et al., 2011), decreased the negative impact of social exclusion. These findings suggest that many of the effects of social exclusion in experimental research may arise in part because participants have been constrained from seeking closeness to attachment figures or from having the cognitive resources to fully engage with internalized representations.

Indeed, if attachment figure proximity seeking is successful following rejection, the motivation for both antisocial and prosocial responses toward others may be eliminated. Arguably, having the support of an attachment figure could satiate participants' belongingness needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DeWall et al., 2008), and thus, participants would not be motivated to vent frustration (e.g., by delivering noise blasts or devaluing others) or gain acceptance from others (e.g., by helping an experimenter pick up pencils or allocating greater reward to others, etc.). Of course, attachment theory suggests that successful proximity seeking is likely to lead to feelings of relief eventually followed by environmental exploration (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), so prosocial responses are still possible. Thus, examining prosocial responses to social exclusion from an attachment perspective may be particularly interesting.

Generally, attachment theory predicts that the benefits of allowing attachment system activation to progress naturally, including reduced aggression and possibly greater prosociality, should be particularly reaped by those with trait attachment security (e.g., Florian et al., 1995; McGowan, 2002). Future work should specifically examine whether, consistent with the results of Karremans, and colleagues (2011), the more secure one's bond with an attachment figure, the better able that attachment figure is to quell one's distress following exclusion. Research can explicitly test the attachment theory prediction that those with whom one has the strongest bonds (i.e., those who are most extensively relied upon as a safe haven, secure base, and to whom proximity is sought, and separation is avoided) will more successfully reduce distress compared to others who do not fully embody these characteristics.

Overall, this very brief review highlights the potential value of attachment theory for understanding reactions to social exclusion, while simultaneously highlighting the paucity of work that has allowed for natural attachment dynamics to unfold. As such, attachment theory offers not just a potentially important framework for organizing the research literature on social exclusion but also offers an exciting multitude of ideas for future research.

Short Biography

Jessica Maxwell is a graduate student at the University of Toronto. She received a BA in psychology from Queen's University and an MA in psychology from the University of Toronto. She is currently working on her PhD under the supervision of Geoff MacDonald. Her research interests include attachment processes in romantic relationships, social rejection, and empathic accuracy.

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Samantha Joel is a graduate student at the University of Toronto. She holds a BSc and an MA in psychology from the University of Toronto and is currently working on her PhD under the supervision of Geoff MacDonald. Her primary research goal is to better understand how people make decisions about their romantic relationships. Her work is funded by the Joseph Armand Bombardier Doctoral Scholarship from the Social Sciences and

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Endnote

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