THE EFFECT OF REAPPRAISING SOCIAL EXCLUSION ON EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Michael B. Kitchens
The University of Mississippi

Carol L. Gohm
The University of Mississippi

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to examine whether reappraisal, which is a strategy where the personal meaning of an event is reevaluated, would influence participants' emotional reactions to social exclusion feedback. It was expected that reappraising this event would reduce the emotional distress that accompanies social exclusion, but engaging in this strategy would impair subsequent psychological processes associated with social success. The results showed that reappraising the feedback as an invalid threat reduced the emotional distress; however, there was no evidence that the reappraisal strategy impaired subsequent impression management. This work has theoretical implications for research in emotion and social exclusion.

INTRODUCTION

People have an innate drive to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When this need is thwarted (e.g., via social exclusion), people experience a variety of negative consequences. For example, people feel worse than if they were not excluded, and they become more motivated to be accepted. In short, threats to belongingness have significant effects on the self.

The purpose of this experiment was to examine whether reappraisal, which is a coping strategy in which threats are evaluated as irrelevant to the self, effectively reduces the emotional impact caused by social exclusion. We also investigated whether this strategy impacts subsequent psychological processes associated with interpersonal success (e.g., impression management).

The Effects of Social Exclusion

Social exclusion has two primary effects relevant to the present study. First, social exclusion causes emotional distress (e.g., Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009a). To be more precise, researchers find that social exclusion produces more emotional distress than comparison groups, but literal readings of reported levels of distress fall near the midpoints,

rather than the extreme negative end (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009). One explanation for these lower levels of distress than would be expected is that social exclusion activates defensive systems that reduce the emotional impact. (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). However, little work has directly investigated the effectiveness and consequences of engaging in emotion regulation following social exclusion.

A second relevant effect of social exclusion is that people become particularly motivated to establish social relationships. Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, and Schaller (2007) found that socially excluded participants were more motivated to form social relationships than socially accepted participants. Furthermore, DeWall, Baumeister, and Vohs (2008) showed that socially excluded participants engaged in more self-regulation than socially accepted participants, but this pattern only occurred if they believed that the acts of self-regulation were indicators of social success. Together these findings suggest that social exclusion influences subsequent psychological processes associated with interpersonal success. It is not clear, however, whether reappraising social exclusion feedback as invalid will reduce the motivation to engage in processes associated with social success.

Reappraisal

Lazarus (1991) asserts that emotions result from the *appraisal* of events. *Reappraisal*, however, is a process whereby people *re-evaluate* an event, sometimes in a way that distances a threat from the self. Thus, Lazarus (1991) asserts that reappraisal "is distinguished from appraisal only by coming later" (p. 134). For example, a person who rides a rollercoaster may appraise the event and then experience fear, but a further evaluation (i.e., reappraisal) of the experience may alter the experience of a subsequent ride on the rollercoaster, such that it is experienced as "thrilling" rather than "scary."

This distinction between appraisal and reappraisal is important because examining the effect of reappraisal (not appraisal) of a social exclusion episode is ecologically valid. It seems less likely that one would anticipate and evaluate future social exclusion feedback than one would react to the event, re-evaluate its meaning, and in turn, alter responses to future episodes of social exclusion.

Despite the fact that reappraisal is a response process, some researchers conceptualize reappraisal as an anticipatory strategy (Gross, 2002). While this line of work distinguishes itself in where reappraisal takes place, these studies are important because they find that reappraisal effectively reduces emotional distress and is accompanied by fewer social (Butler et al, 2003) and cognitive (Richards & Gross, 1999; 2000) consequences than other emotion regulation strategies.

Reappraising Social Exclusion

Research shows that reappraisal is both an effective and an efficient strategy in the context of films (Gross, 1998) and slides (Ochsner, Bunge, Gross, & Gabrieli, 2002) that elicit negative emotion, but few paradigms have examined this strategy in the context of personally threatening

events (see Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2003 for an exception). This is important because unique challenges arise in reappraising social exclusion.

First, social exclusion reduces the motivation to engage in self-regulation. Researchers found that in the absence of monetary reward and stimulated self-awareness (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco & Twenge, 2005) or the belief that the self-regulation task is associated with developing social relationships (DeWall et al., 2008), socially excluded individuals were less likely to engage in self-regulation than comparison groups. Therefore, socially excluded people may be unmotivated to regulate their emotional response by reappraising the event.

Second, social exclusion may impair cognitive processes required for reappraisal. To be sure, Ochsner et al. (2002) found that reappraisal is associated with areas of the prefrontal cortex involved in working memory, and Baumeister, Twenge, and Nuss (2002) demonstrated that social exclusion impairs reasoning abilities. Taken together, it may be that cognitive processes required to reappraise social exclusion are impaired by the event.

The third challenge to reappraising social exclusion arises from the consequences of engaging in emotion regulation itself. If individuals effectively reappraise a social exclusion episode, the energy needed to engage in other forms of self-regulation required for establishing and maintaining social relationships may be impaired. The capacity or resources allocated to regulate numerous psychological processes are limited (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Therefore, allocating regulatory resources to manage one aspect of the self (e.g., emotion distress) impairs the management of other aspects of the self (e.g., impression management). To be sure, Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco (2005) demonstrated that individuals who regulated their expressive behavior to an emotional film scored lower on a measure of impression management than individuals who did not regulate their expressive behavior.

There is some indirect evidence, however, suggesting that reappraisal will effectively and efficiently reduce the emotional impact of social rejection. Zhou, Vohs, and Baumeister (2009) showed that socially excluded participants were less likely to experience distress if they had resources that signified future social success. That is, the belief that this threat was irrelevant to future situations of social acceptance altered their emotional response to the event. Also, reappraisal is a less depleting strategy than other emotion regulation strategies (Vohs & Schmeichel, 2003). Therefore, it may be accompanied with fewer costs to subsequent impression management, which requires self-regulation.

The Present Study

The need to belong is a fundamental drive, and threats to this need are typically associated with emotional distress and a desire to improve social success. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to determine (a) whether reappraisal would reduce the emotional impact of social exclusion and (b) whether this would impair subsequent impression management. This is important because social exclusion presents unique challenges to using reappraisal not yet fully examined in previous work.

To examine these questions, participants engaged in a first-impression interview conducted by a confederate and then received exclusion feedback. Following this threatening feedback, participants were randomly assigned to reappraise the event by either writing why they believe the feedback is a valid threat or an invalid threat or were assigned to a control condition, where they wrote about a typical day. To determine how the reappraisal of the event would affect subsequent responses to the event, participants engaged in another first-impression interview and subsequent social exclusion feedback. We predicted that participants would experience significantly less emotional distress after reappraising the interview as an invalid way to assess their friendship potential than after reappraising the event as valid way to assess their friendship potential or not evaluating the event. We also expected that participants who reappraised the feedback would score lower on a measure of impression management than participants in the control condition.

METHOD

Participants

Male and female undergraduates ($N = 252$) enrolled in psychology courses participated in exchange for partial course credit. Because of the sensitive nature of the negative feedback, we gave participants an opportunity to refuse the use of their data. Participants ($n = 5$) who requested that their data not be used were not included in the final analysis. To further ensure the integrity of the data, participants were probed for suspicion during the debriefing process. Participants ($n = 21$) were excluded if the experimenter and confederate agreed that they were aware of the true purpose of the experiment or false nature of the feedback, if participants ($n = 13$) did not follow instructions for the reappraisal task, or if participants ($n = 12$) violated the integrity of the experimental session (e.g., talked or text messaged during the experimental session, informed others of their friendship potential ratings, or failed to complete the experiment). Data from two participants were discarded because they participated in an ongoing study with similar exclusion feedback and because of a language barrier that may have influenced the understanding of instructions, respectively.

We were liberal in discarding data because this novel procedure required that participants (a) believe the feedback was real and (b) engage in the reappraisal process assigned. Furthermore, eliminating suspicious participants is done in social rejection research (see Gerber & Wheeler, 2009a). Using data from follow-up questions in the debriefing session revealed that participants whose data was discarded because of their suspicion of the feedback ($M = 6.90$, $SD = 2.15$) rated the social exclusion feedback as more fake than participants who were included in the final analysis ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 2.60$), $t(24.26) = 6.75$, $p < .001$ (equal variances not assumed).

Participants ($N = 199$; 129 female) included in the analysis had an average age of 19.37 ($SD = 2.02$). Of these participants, 75.9% identified their race as white or Caucasian, 20.6% identified their race as black or African American, and 3.5% identified their race as something other than these.

Materials

Relationship Closeness Induction Task (RCIT; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1999). The RCIT is a series of questions that progress from impersonal (e.g., "What is your first name?") to personal (e.g., "Tell me one thing about yourself that most people who already know you don't know."). We selected 20 of these questions to use across the two interview sessions in the experiment (i.e., 10 questions in each interview). In both interviews, the questions progressed from impersonal to personal. The same questions were asked in the same order to all participants. The confederate read each question in a neutral manner to each participant one at a time before moving to the next question. The confederate did not answer the questions.

Potential Friend Ratings & Social Exclusion Feedback. After each interview session, participants indicated the extent to which they believed each of their fellow participants (including the confederate) would make a good friend or acquaintance by rating them on a scale from 1 (*poor friend*) to 9 (*good friend*). After the experimenter ostensibly averaged the ratings for each of the participants (and confederate), they received feedback sheets that indicated their rank in the group based on their average potential friend rating. These feedback sheets contained the numbers 1 to 4 listed vertically. Participants were told that those who received the highest average rating would have the 1 circled; whereas, participants who received the lowest average ratings would have the 4 (or 3, depending on the number of participants) circled. In reality, everyone received feedback sheets indicating the lowest average rating.

Emotion Measures. Participants' emotional reactions were assessed with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule – Expanded Form (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994). We analyzed the positive (Cronbach's alpha = .86) and negative (Cronbach's α = .85) affect subscales separately.

We also assessed emotional responses by including a novel, implicit procedure, in which participants indicated their perception of the positive emotion reflected in relatively neutral photographs twice during the experiment. The analyses of these data were uninformative. For parsimony, they will not be discussed further, but details on procedure and results are available upon request.

Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale –Short Version *(*MCSDS; Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972)*. The MCSDS assesses socially desirable responding (Cronbach's alpha = .59). Fischer and Fick (1993) demonstrated that this scale is strongly correlated with the original, full version of the scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Previous research has used social desirable responding as a self-report measure of impression management (Vohs et al., 2005).

Procedure

Same-sex participants arrived at the lab in groups of 2 to 3, along with a same-sex confederate. After signing consent forms, participants and the confederate were told that they were to participate in a get-to-know session with each other to determine whether they were perceived as a good friend or acquaintance. To select the moderator of the session, participants and the confederate drew one of four (or three, depending on the number of participants) papers from a box that indicated whether they were the moderator or a participant in the interview sessions. In reality, all papers said "participant," but the confederate always indicated that they drew the

"moderator" paper. To sustain the cover story that the purpose of the study was to identify qualities in individuals perceived as a good friend, participants and the confederate were led to a room where they completed demographic information and two short personality scales unrelated to the primary hypothesis.

After completing the questionnaires, the experimenter turned on a camera in view of the participants and left the room. The confederate individually asked 10 RCIT questions to the participants. The camera was turned off by the experimenter after the interview session was complete. Following the interview session, participants rated their perception of each other as potential friends, and then received individual feedback sheets from the experimenter, indicating that they had earned the lowest average potential friend rating. Participants, then, completed the picture-rating task.

To manipulate participants' reappraisal of the feedback, participants were told that these interview sessions were either an accurate or an inaccurate way to determine one's potential as a friend. These participants reappraised the event by writing two or three sentences why these sessions are either a valid or an invalid way of determining one's potential as a friend and listed as many aspects about the session that made it either valid or invalid. Control participants were not told anything about the validity of the interview sessions, and they wrote two or three sentences about themselves and listed as many aspects about themselves as they could.

To determine whether their reappraisal strategy would affect their emotional response to a future event, participants again responded to 10 RCIT questions asked by the confederate in another videotaped interview session. Following this second interview session, participants and the confederate rated each other as potential friends, and again, received feedback indicating they earned the lowest average potential friend rating.

Participants then completed the second picture ratings task, the PANAS-X, the MCSDS, and rated the extent to which they perceived the interview sessions was a valid method of determining their potential as a friend. Before debriefing, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed the feedback was false and the extent to which they were friends with their fellow group members before the study. Finally, participants were thoroughly debriefed.

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Debriefing Ratings. Analyses indicated no significant between condition differences in participants' perception that the feedback was false or the extent to which participants were friends with each other, Fs < 1, *ns*.

Validity Ratings. An ANOVA revealed a marginally significant difference in participants' validity ratings as a function of their reappraisal strategy, $F(2, 192) = 2.66$, $p = .07$. Moreover, the means were in the predicted direction (see Table 1). Valid-reappraisal participants gave the highest validity ratings, invalid-reappraisal participants gave the lowest validity ratings, and

control participants gave validity ratings between these extremes. Subsequent analyses showed that valid-reappraisal participants perceived the interview sessions to be significantly more valid than invalid-reappraisal participants, $t(123) = 2.29$, $p < .05$, $d = .41$. There were no differences between valid-reappraisal and control participants' validity ratings, $t(132) = 1.24$, $p = .22$, $d = .22$, or between invalid-reappraisal participants' and control participants' validity ratings, $t(129) = 1.14$, $p = .26$, $d = .20$.

Emotional Outcome

Separate ANOVAs were performed on the negative and positive subscales of the PANAS-X. The analysis of the negative subscale revealed a significant difference in participants' emotional response to the social exclusion feedback as a function of the reappraisal conditions, $F(2, 193) = 5.34$, $p = .01$ (see Table 1). This analysis violated the homogeneity assumption, $F(2, 193) = 8.86$, $p < .001$. To be conservative, we conducted follow-up analyses using t tests with equal variances not assumed. These analyses revealed that invalid-reappraisal participants felt significantly less negative affect than valid-reappraisal, $t(101.97) = 2.52$, $p = .01$, $d = .44$, and control participants, $t(118.17) = 3.50$, $p = .001$, $d = .57$. There was no statistical difference in negative affect between valid-reappraisal and control participants, $t < 1$, *ns*. The analysis of the positive affect subscale revealed no significant differences in participants' emotional response to the social exclusion feedback as a function of the reappraisal conditions, $F(2, 196) = 1.99$, $p = .14$ (see Table 1).

Table 1
Mean (SD) Validity Ratings and Emotional Response as a Function of Reappraisal Condition in Experiment 1

	Control Condition	Valid-Reappraisal	Invalid-Reappraisal
Validity Ratings	3.84 (2.04)	4.28 (2.04)	3.43 (2.15)
Negative Emotion	1.56 (.54)	1.50 (.55)	1.30 (.33)
Positive Emotion	2.85 (.82)	2.73 (.73)	2.58 (.81)

Impression Management

An ANOVA performed on the MCSDS scores was performed to see if reappraisal influenced participants' impression management. Analysis did not reveal any statistically significant differences between valid-reappraisal ($M = 1.44$, $SD = .19$), invalid-reappraisal ($M = 1.45$, $SD = .21$), and control ($M = 1.48$, $SD = .22$) conditions, $F < 1$, *ns*.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We expected that reappraising social exclusion feedback would reduce the emotional distress that accompanies this event. The data supported this hypothesis. Reappraising social exclusion as an invalid threat reduced subsequent emotional distress. There was no between condition differences in positive affect, but this should not diminish the effectiveness of reappraisal. The PANAS-X is based on Watson and Tellegen's (1985) view of the structure of emotion, in which positive and negative emotions are separate dimensions. Therefore, one could experience low levels of negative emotion without necessarily feeling high levels of positive emotion. This

finding is also consistent with some studies that found social exclusion influences negative, but not positive affect (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2002).

These findings contribute to the discrepant interpretations regarding the extent to which social exclusion causes emotional distress. Some researchers (Gerber & Wheeler, 2009b) suggest that social exclusion produces emotional distress; whereas, others (Baumeister, DeWall, & Vohs, 2009) interpret the data as an affectively neutral response. While our work does not directly offer a solution, it did show that reappraisal reduced the experience of emotional distress, and therefore, provides an initial step for further work into the role emotion regulation plays in this process.

As discussed, using reappraisal in this context was a particular important strategy to investigate because social exclusion presented challenges unique to reappraisal not yet fully examined in previous work. For example, social exclusion impairs the motivation to engage in self-regulation, and social exclusion impairs reasoning abilities that may be needed to reappraise the event. Despite these challenges, we found evidence that reappraisal effectively reduced the emotional distress that accompanied this event.

Complimentary to this investigation was an analysis of how impression management would be influenced by reappraising the social exclusion feedback as invalid. We found no evidence that reappraising the event as irrelevant to the self influenced impression management, which is an important psychological process in developing and maintaining social relationships. These null results may be best understood in the context of previous work, showing that reappraisal does not impair self-regulation capacity (Vohs & Schmeichel, 2003) or other social processes (e.g., Butler et al., 2005). However, it is also possible that the measure used to assess impression management was inappropriate. Even though others have used the Marlowe-Crowne scale to assess impression management (Vohs et al., 2005), this measure is often used to assess defensiveness rather than impression management (Weinberger, Schwartz, & Davidson, 1979). Other measures of impression management (e.g., Paulhus, 1984) may be more appropriate to use in future research.

Beyond its theoretical implications to previous work, this work also has practical applications. For example, social exclusion has profound psychological (see Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002) and social (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003) consequences. In this experiment, participants were led to believe that the feedback had broad implications for their overall interpersonal success. Our study showed that reappraising this single occurrence as irrelevant to their overall interpersonal success influenced the emotional outcome. These findings suggest that therapeutic techniques that target the way people evaluate the events in their lives (e.g., cognitive-behavior therapy) may be particularly effective with people who have been socially excluded, and in turn, it may reduce some of its profound emotional and social consequences.

In short, this work provided evidence that reappraisal effectively reduced the emotional distress caused by an event that threatened the fundamental need to develop and maintain social relationships. Overall, this provides an initial step in assessing the role emotion regulation plays

in social exclusion events, and therefore, this work has important theoretical implications, as well as practical applications.

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AUTHORS NOTE

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Michael B. Kitchens is now an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Lebanon Valley College. Correspondence should be addressed to Michael B. Kitchens, Department of Psychology,

Lebanon Valley College, 101 North College Avenue, Annville, PA 17003-1400. Email: kitchens@lvc.edu

Carol L. Gohm is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Mississippi. Her email address is cgohm@olemiss.edu