It’s Not What You Might Expect: A Stranger’s Rejection May Hurt More Than That of a Close Other

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Background
Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) Need to Belong Theory suggests that generally, social rejection will be experienced negatively and acceptance experienced positively. However, very little research has explored how people are affected by rejection or acceptance from people of varying degrees of relational closeness. The present two studies sought to resolve past contradictory research by examining how reactions to being accepted and rejected differ depending on by whom one is rejected or accepted.

Participants
Study 1: n = 113 (52% women)
M_age = 21.39, SD = 6.56
Study 2: n = 116 (61% women)
M_age = 23.78, SD = 8.84

Measures
Mood Measure (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004): Positive mood, sadness, hurt feelings, anxiety, anger, and acceptance
Fundamental Needs Assessment (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004): Threats to belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence

Study 1
Method
Participants played Cyberball (a virtual ball-toss game) with either two close friends or two strangers and were randomly assigned to either be ostracized or included. After the game, participants completed measures that assessed mood, fundamental needs, and self-esteem.

Results
• Ostracized participants reported more negative emotions than included participants.
• Those accepted by strangers reported higher state self-esteem than those accepted by friends.
• Participants ostracized by strangers reported lower state self-esteem than those ostracized by friends.

Study 2
Method
Participants completed a dyadic problem solving activity with a close other or stranger. Afterward, participants completed questions with their backs to each other. In the control condition, both partners were asked to list things about their partner they did not like. In the rejection threat condition, both partners were asked to list things about their partner they did not like. In the rejection threat condition, one partner received this question, and the other was asked to list as many items as they could think of in their home. As a result, those in the rejection threat condition perceived that their partners were listing several things about them that their partner did not like.

Results
Participants rejected by strangers experienced less positive affect, more anger, more anxiety, and lower feelings of acceptance than those rejected by a close other.

Conclusions
The results of both studies were consistent with prior research showing that rejection is generally experienced more negatively than is acceptance. Furthermore, the studies produced novel findings which suggest that a stranger’s rejection will result in more negative emotions than a close other’s rejection. Additionally, the results of Study 1 suggest that inclusion by strangers may elicit more positive effects on self-esteem than inclusion by friends. Overall, the studies provide evidence that the effects of rejection and acceptance on an individual are influenced by the relationship one has with those rejecting or accepting them. Future research should examine whether reactions to rejection and acceptance differ depending on the type of close other relationship (e.g., romantic partners, family). Research may also focus on differences between immediate and delayed responses to rejection and acceptance by others of varying relational closeness.

References

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