

Social Rejection

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People conform to gain social acceptance and avoid rejection. It is believed that people carry a strong, instinctive need to form social bonds and avoid the consequences of rejection. Even individuals who prefer to be alone still tend to have a few close friends. Rejection is one of the main obstacles faced by many individuals in their attempts to fulfill this need. Being rejected by social groups can be distressing to the individual, as the consequences of rejection can be catastrophic. However, those who feel rejected can also behave in a manner that can either strengthen their remaining social bonds or that aims to create new ones.

Studies of rejection in children have found that rejection is mainly a result of three concepts: aggression, isolation, and deviance. Being aggressive against others goes against social norms and usually leads to avoidance by other children. Children who isolate themselves are then avoided by other children as a response to their original withdrawal. In other words, children may think the isolated child is rejecting them, and they respond by rejecting the isolated child in return. Deviance from the average is another common reason for rejection in children. This is because similarity leads to attraction and dissimilarity leads to rejection. Children who are different in any way (e.g., appearance, disabilities, behaviors, beliefs, etc.) are likely to experience rejection. This also holds true for both extremes of intellectual ability, being too low or too high on this spectrum is enough to cause rejection.

Studies of long-term consequences of childhood rejection have found that children who were rejected by their peers in elementary school displayed more behavioral problems in high school, were more likely to drop out of school, and were also more likely to get in trouble with

the police. Individuals who experience social rejection are also more likely to suffer from mental and physical illnesses when compared to people who feel like they belong. Studies have shown that poor mental or physical health is also a predictor and consequence of rejection. Mortality rates are higher among people who are rejected or otherwise alone. Researchers have found a link between rejection and self-esteem, as self-esteem has been closely associated with feelings of belongingness. Some researchers claim that self-esteem can be used to gauge an individual's social bonds, with high self-esteem being generally linked to feeling socially accepted.

The outcomes of rejection can be better understood by looking at its behavioral, motivational, self-regulatory, and emotional consequences. Studies have shown that individuals who experience rejection by others become aggressive towards that group. The behavioral consequences are so strong that rejected individuals become aggressive even toward those who were not directly rejecting them. Additionally, rejected individuals show a decrease in prosocial behavior – that is, any action that is intended to help others. Studies have found that rejected individuals donated less money, were less likely to do a favor, and were less likely to cooperate with others.

Research has also shown, however, that rejected individuals may become interested in creating new social bonds. These individuals may look for groups who seem likely to accept them, demonstrating their need for acceptance, while cautiously avoiding being rejected again. Some studies suggest that rejected individuals recognize that in order to be accepted they would have to self-regulate and behave appropriately. If they do not see the benefits of belonging in exchange for their efforts (e.g., self-regulating), then they will lose motivation and become uncooperative until a new opportunity to be accepted is presented again.

Rejection is one of the most common causes of anxiety and depression. Researchers have found that when people report their feelings being hurt, the hurt feelings are usually a result of being rejected or excluded. The emotional consequences are so strong that it has even been linked to physical pain. Brain imaging studies have shown that feeling rejected and being physical pain produce a similar activation in specific areas of the brain.

It seems that social groups naturally prefer members who are fundamentally similar. This explains why some members of the group are rejected for being different, as rejection is used to strengthen the group. It also functions to motivate its members to conform to the group norms and avoid being rejected. From this perspective, rejection serves to solidify the group by filtering out those who do not fit and to motivate prosocial behaviors in its members.

Further Readings:

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