Cognitive consequences of perceiving social exclusion

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ABSTRACT

Although a great deal is now known about how people mentally represent individuals and groups, less attention has been paid to the question of how interpersonal relationships are represented in memory. Drawing on principles of categorization, this paper reports an investigation into how we mentally represent the relationships of others. In three experiments, evidence for assimilation effects following social exclusion (and subsequent categorization) is found. Experiment 1 uses a judgment paradigm to demonstrate that social exclusion influences the perception of interpersonal closeness. Experiments 2 and 3 employ a memory confusion paradigm to establish that representations of relationship partners are assimilated following the exclusion of a third party.

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Introduction

Human nature is inherently social, but it is not indiscriminately so. As people navigate through their social lives, they embrace some relationships and forego others. As social perceivers, we are aware of this selectivity. We know that, to the extent that they are able to do so, people pick and choose the individuals with whom they develop relationships. Because few people have an infinite capacity for investing time and energy in new social relations, being selective in building one's social network is a necessity for most humans.

One by-product of being socially selective is that people must, at times, reject potential relationships and exclude prospective relationship partners. How do we, as social perceivers, interpret and represent the social relations that result from the inclusion of some people and exclusion of others? A long tradition of research has examined how we mentally represent individuals and groups (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Srull & Wyer, 1989). Surprisingly, there has been comparatively little research into the question of how we process information about the social relationships of others.

From the perspective of social perceivers, the ability to identify the nature of others' social relationships is critical. Knowledge regarding others' social relations allows perceivers to more accurately predict the consequences of their behavior. If Jeff knows that Jill has a relationship with Jack, but mistakenly perceives it as a platonic friendship, he may erroneously conclude that Jill is receptive to his romantic overtures. Similarly, if Keith is angry with Karl, but knows that Karl's good friend is Kevin, a 200-pound body-builder, he may sensibly decline to confront Karl.

The way in which we understand others' relationships was recognized, in earlier years, as an important issue within social per-

ception. Heider (1946) suggested that people are inclined to perceive balance in social relations. Given a triad of persons (Anna, Barbara, and Caroline) if Anna has positive relationships with both Barbara and Caroline, people tend to assume a positive relationship between Barbara and Caroline as well. However, if Anna is positively associated with Barbara but negatively associated with Caroline, people assume a negative relationship between Barbara and Caroline. Thus, Heider's balance theory suggests that people are motivated to perceive social relationships as consistent with each other. Although this important observation is now widely accepted (Abelson, 1983), little has been done to further our understanding of how we mentally represent the social relationships of others.

One important exception to this rule is a model proposed by Sedikides, Olsen, and Reis (1993) in which they conceptualized relationships as natural categories. This conceptualization implies that social perceivers may use relationships to organize information in memory, just as they do for group-related information. In building the case for relationships as categories, Sedikides et al. (1993) reported a series of experiments which demonstrated that participants' recall of information they had learned about a number of individuals was organized around relationships—items associated with two people were more likely to be retrieved in sequence if the individuals were identified as members of a married couple than if they were identified as acquaintances, fans of the same football team, or randomly paired individuals. Moreover, participants were more likely mistakenly attribute information about one member of a couple to the other member than they were to make similar errors about individuals who were not identified as belonging to the same couple.

The results reported by Sedikides et al. (1993) suggest that information about close or interdependent relationships may be processed in a similar manner as information about other types of categories. In their studies, the perceived closeness of relationships was manipulated by identifying some individuals as married cou-

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ples. However, as noted by the authors, other cues may be equally important in determining whether members of a relationship are viewed in categorical terms: 'the interesting question here is not which characteristics define a close relationship, but rather which qualities lead observers to spontaneously connect relationship partners in memory' (p. 81). In other words, what leads social perceivers to treat some relationships (but not others) as categories?

Properties of categorization

When it comes to social categories, the way a target group is perceived is profoundly affected by the presence of other groups in the same social context. For example, the salience of intergroup comparisons may lead to increases in the perception that members of the same group are similar (Castano & Yzerbyt, 1998; Corneille & Judd, 1999; Rothbart, Davis-Stitt, & Hill, 1997) and that members of different groups are dissimilar (Doosje, Haslam, Spears, Oakes, & Koomen, 1998; Judd & Park, 1993).

Such effects can be attributed to the operation of two related processes that result from categorization (Corneille & Judd, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). First, categorizing others into groups leads to *between-group contrast*—that is, members of one group are viewed as more different from members of another group than they would in the absence of categorization (Doise, 1990; Long & Manstead, 1997). Second, categorization leads to *within-group assimilation*—that is, members of the same group are seen as more similar to each other than if they had not been categorized (Simon & Brown, 1987). Research on these categorization effects has, logically enough, been limited to the study of social groups—groups varying in size but typically consisting of at least four individuals (Taylor et al., 1978) or of indeterminate size (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004). Yet, the same processes of assimilation and contrast may equally apply to interpersonal relationships in which categorization occurs.

Social exclusion and categorization

It is proposed here that social exclusion is an important cue that may determine whether a relationship is viewed in categorical terms. Although perceivers may categorize relationship partners on the basis of a number of cues (e.g., an explicit commitment to each other, see Sedikides et al., 1993), social exclusion may be among the most salient. The observation that members of a relationship have actively excluded others may serve to highlight the boundary between outsiders and the relationship itself. Just as the mere presence of a second group within a social context influences the extent to which a target group is subject to categorization effects (i.e., assimilation and contrast), the mere presence of non-members of a relationship may similarly lead to relationship members being perceived as a category.

Although this possibility has not yet been explored in the context of perceptions of interpersonal relationships, recent theorizing by Pickett and Brewer (2005) supports the view that exclusion leads to categorization effects when it comes to intergroup relationships. In particular, Pickett and Brewer suggest that an important reason that some members of a group may socially exclude others is to maximize their own feelings of inclusion in the group. The exclusion of other 'marginal' group members allows individuals to assert their own established position within the group (see also Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, 2002). Similarly, individuals who identify with a social group are more likely exclude others from the group than are those who belong, but do not identify with the same group (Castano, Yzerbyt, Bourguignon, & Seron, 2002). This 'in-group over-exclusion effect' (Yzerbyt, Leyens, & Bellour, 1995) refers to the tendency to exclude from the in-group any individuals whose group membership is in doubt and is thought to be linked to in-group identification (see also Blascovich, Wyer, Swart, & Kibler, 1997). Thus, in managing their perceptions of an important in-group, individuals may use social exclusion as a way of maximizing in-group solidarity and distinctiveness from other groups. In other words, social exclusion contributes to within-group assimilation and between-group contrast.

Social exclusion plays an important role in drawing group boundaries and hence in determining how social groups are perceived. When it comes to dyadic relationships, exclusion may operate in a similar way. Current theories do not address the possibility that categorization effects occur when social exclusion takes place on an individual rather than a group level. There are, however, reasons to suppose that contrast and assimilation effects may follow from social exclusion. For example, according to Aron's Self-Expansion Model (Aron & Aron, 1986), individuals in close relationships develop overlapping (or assimilated) representations of themselves and their relationship partners (a process referred to as self-expansion). While SEM does not go into detail about the cognitive mechanisms through which another person is assimilated to the self, research stemming from the model has identified factors associated with self-expansion. For example, shared experiences that are novel (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000), humorous (Fraley & Aron, 2004) or defined by mutual self-disclosure (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997) are all associated with greater interpersonal closeness. What these studies have in common is that factors that lead to increased feelings of closeness are those that increase the perception of uniquely shared knowledge and experiences.

Why does uniquely shared experience generate interpersonal closeness, whereas more mundane or commonplace experiences do not (Aron et al., 2000)? One possibility is that awareness that a shared experience is unique creates a category boundary. That is, those who have shared an unusual experience may view themselves as members of a different category than those who have not had that experience. Two strangers who meet in Chicago and learn that they were on the same island in Thailand during the 2004 tsunami may feel a bond based on that experience, particularly when surrounded millions of people who do not share it. By spontaneously categorizing people into those who shared the experience and those who did not, the tsunami survivors find themselves within the category boundary, and therefore may assimilate each other into their self-concepts.

Likewise, sharing personal information (e.g., self-disclosure) has been identified as a key factor contributing to closer interpersonal relationships (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994). Indeed, research by Aron et al. (1997) suggests that self-disclosure plays a *causal* role in producing feelings of closeness between individuals with no prior connection to each other. Conveying personal information about others (i.e., gossip) plays a similar role in building social bonds (e.g., Fine, 1977). As when people share unusual experiences, sharing personal information that is not commonly known may lead to categorization based on uniquely shared knowledge.

Thus, categorization may be critical in producing effects described by SEM. Perceiving a relationship as unique may lead to categorization, which in turn results in assimilation of individuals within the relationship. In the preceding examples, 'outsiders' are not explicitly excluded from the relationship, but a distinction is drawn between those within the relationship and those outside of it. If such distinctions produce assimilation between self and other representations, the extent of assimilation should be even greater when exclusion is intentional and explicit.

This analysis may apply equally well to the issue of how we represent social relationships to which we do not belong. When social perceivers observe that social exclusion has occurred in a relationship, they may draw a category boundary between the members of