



## Alone and without purpose: Life loses meaning following social exclusion

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### ABSTRACT

Four studies ( $N = 643$ ) supported the hypothesis that social exclusion would reduce the global perception of life as meaningful. Social exclusion was manipulated experimentally by having a confederate refuse to meet participants after seeing their videotaped introduction (Study 1) and by ostracizing participants in a computerized ball-tossing game (Study 2). Compared to control condition and acceptance conditions, social exclusion led to perceiving life as less meaningful. Exclusion was also operationalized as self-reported loneliness, which was a better predictor of low meaning than other potent variables (Study 3). Study 4 found support for Baumeister's model of meaning (1991), by demonstrating that the effect of exclusion on meaning was mediated by purpose, value, and positive self-worth.

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Where do people find meaning in life? In principle, people could find meaning in communing with nature or with divinity, engaging in philosophical or religious contemplation, pursuing scientific or artistic or technological innovation, or other potentially solitary pursuits. Life's meaning does not obviously or inherently depend on social relations. Yet in practice, it seems likely that people find meaning in their social relations. Unlike most other animals, humans obtain much of what they need from their social group, rather than directly from the natural environment. Consequently, the human capacity for sociality and for participation in culture likely evolved to facilitate survival (Baumeister, 2005; Dunbar, 1993, 1997). Hence social exclusion could threaten people at such a basic level that it would impair their sense of meaningful existence, as suggested by Williams (1997, 2002). A related prediction is made by Twenge, Catanese, and Baumeister (2003), who proposed that one effect of social exclusion is a retreat from meaningful thought. In the present investigation, we tested the hypothesis that social exclusion causes a global decrease in the perception of life as meaningful.

### Meaning

Literally, *meaning* refers to a nonphysical reality inherent in the relationship between a symbol or representation and that to which it refers. By meaning of life, however, people typically intend not a dictionary definition of life but rather a way to make sense of their existence. This subjective evaluation of the meaningfulness of

one's life is how meaning is traditionally assessed (e.g., Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006). For instance, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire asks participants to rate their agreement with statements such as "My life has a clear sense of purpose" (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006).

The belief that one is living a meaningful life is associated with positive functioning. This includes satisfaction with life (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988), enjoyment of work (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000), happiness (Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993), positive affect (Hicks & King, 2007; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006), and hope (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). Perceiving life as meaningful is even associated with physical health and general well-being (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Wong & Fry, 1998; Zika & Chamberlain, 1987, 1992). Higher levels of perceived meaning are also associated with lower levels of negative functioning, including psychopathology (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), stress (Mascaro & Rosen, 2006), need for therapy (Battista & Almond, 1973), suicidal ideation (Harlow, Newcomb, & Bentler, 1986), and depression (Debats et al., 1993; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). Steger (in press) provides a comprehensive treatment of the benefits of perceiving meaning in life.

Based on a review of empirical findings on a broad array of topics including love, work, religion, culture, suicide, and parenthood, Baumeister (1991) concluded that the human experience is shaped by four needs for meaning, which can be understood as four ingredients or criteria of a meaningful life. First, a sense of *purpose* is reached when people perceive their current activities as relating to future outcomes, so that current events draw meaning from possible future conditions. Second, people desire feelings of *efficacy*. People feel efficacious when they perceive that they have control

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over their outcomes and that they can make a difference in some important way. Third, people want to view their actions as having positive *value* or as being morally justified. That is, people are motivated to act in a way that reflects some positive moral value, or at least to interpret their behavior as conforming to ideals and standards of what is approved and acceptable. Fourth, people want a sense of *positive self-worth*. They seek ways of establishing that they are individuals with desirable traits. Finding some way of believing oneself to be better than other people seems to be a common form of this need for meaning.

All four of these needs for meaning must be based on one's daily experiences (Baumeister, 1991; Sommer, Baumeister, & Stillman, *in press*). In other words, satisfying these needs must be achieved through one's actual experience in life. Thus, the events that directly affect meaning in life – perhaps including social exclusion – will likewise affect one's senses of purpose, efficacy, value, and/or positive self-worth.

### Social exclusion

The formation and maintenance of positive close relationships can aptly be characterized as one of the primary motivations for human beings (Buss, 1990; Maslow, 1968). This pervasive drive has been described as the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We define social exclusion as a perceived deficit in belongingness.

Past research has used two main approaches to studying social exclusion, and the present investigation used both. One research approach has centered on experimentally administered social rejection, in which participants are led to believe that others have rejected them (or will reject them) as social interaction partners (e.g., Bushman, Bonacci, Van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003; DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007; Williams, 2002; Williams & Sommer, 1997). The other approach has used individual differences in chronic loneliness. Most such work relies on self-ratings and self-reports (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 2006). Both approaches have merits. The experimental approach can use controlled manipulations to test a causal hypothesis, while the loneliness approach uses feelings of exclusion as experienced out of the laboratory and thus has greater external validity than the laboratory manipulations. In the present work, we tested the effect of exclusion on meaning using both loneliness and social rejection as operationalizations of exclusion.

To be sure, the difference between loneliness and rejection is not simply methodological; people who are generally lonely can experience moments of inclusion and people who experience rejection are not necessarily lonely. Yet there are important similarities between rejection and loneliness, the most salient of which is that they are both deficits in belongingness; loneliness is a protracted and negatively valenced feeling of social exclusion (Peplau & Perlman, 1982), whereas rejection is a pointed, specific instance of social exclusion. The overlap between rejection and loneliness has been demonstrated empirically by research showing that social rejection often results in feelings of loneliness (Boivin, Hymel, & Burkowski, 1995; Cacioppo, Hawkey, & Berntson, 2003; de Jong-Gierveld, 1987). We consider both loneliness and rejection important forms of social exclusion, such that the assessment of both provides a more complete understanding of the effects of belongingness deficits than assessing either one alone. Convergence across different methods and measures provides valuable confidence that conclusions are not artifacts of one method but rather reflect general patterns. If both laboratory-administered rejection and chronic feelings of loneliness converge in predicting a low sense of meaningfulness in life, then one may have confidence that the hypothesis linking meaning to belongingness has broad validity.

### Social exclusion and meaning

Why should social exclusion reduce the sense of life as meaningful? The pervasive reliance on social connection as humankind's biological strategy entails that people are deeply motivated to connect with other people as a fundamental aspect of nearly all human striving. Meaning itself is acquired socially. Hence to be cut off from others is potentially to raise the threat of losing access to all socially mediated meanings, purposes, and values.

Prior work suggests that social exclusion reduces some meaningful thought, though this has generally not extended to the broad sense of whether life itself is meaningful. Twenge et al. (2003) found that social exclusion caused people to seek refuge in a state of cognitive deconstruction, characterized by decreased meaningful thought, as well as lethargy, altered time flow, the avoidance of emotion, and decreased self-awareness. In one study, participants who were told they were exceptionally well-liked and popular responded more favorably to a single item about life being meaningful than participants who were socially rejected, though the design of that study lacked a neutral control and so there was no way of knowing whether the difference was due to acceptance or rejection.

Williams (1997, 2002) theorized that being ostracized (a repeated form of social exclusion) impairs multiple psychological needs, including the need for a meaningful existence (as well as belongingness, self-esteem, and control). He and his colleagues have provided evidence that being ostracized reduces the ratings of meaningfulness of specific events (Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco, & Baumeister, 2001; Van Beest & Williams, 2006; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). In particular, when confederates gradually cease to throw the ball to the participant as part of a ball-tossing game, participants tend to rate their participation in the game as relatively less meaningful, as compared to participants who continue to be included in the game (e.g., Zadro et al., 2004). Although such findings suggest some loss of meaning, they may reflect participants' accurate perception that they were not involved in the game.

Recent work using the computerized ball-tossing procedure (dubbed *Cyberball*) took a step toward assessing whether exclusion affects global perceptions of meaning in life by assessing meaning both immediately following social exclusion and again after a delay (Zadro, Boland, & Richardson, 2006). Immediately following exclusion, there was a reduction in a composite measure of well-being that included a meaning dimension (e.g., feeling non-existent while playing the game) as well as the three other proposed needs. Forty-five minutes later, participants responded to similar questions, except that they were asked to provide their current feelings – those not tied directly to the exclusion experience (e.g., feeling non-existent right now). Although exclusion did not have a significant effect on the composite measure, there was an interaction between social anxiety and experimental condition, such that those high in social anxiety reported significantly lower composite scores than those low in social anxiety following social exclusion. These findings suggest that exclusion may affect meaning in a global way rather than in reference to the exclusion event, and that the effects of exclusion on meaning are most likely to be observed immediately following the exclusion event. The present research sought to build on these findings and to extend them.

### Present research

We conducted four methodologically diverse studies to test the hypothesis that social exclusion decreases global perceptions of meaning in life. Studies 1 and 2 were experimental. Both studies included exclusion, neutral, and acceptance conditions, which

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