



Temporal perspective moderates self-reported responses to social exclusion



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Framing (past or present tense) of self-reports shapes responses to exclusion.
- Exclusion hurts more when reported in the past tense.
- Researchers should use care when assessing temporal effects of exclusion.

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ABSTRACT

Self-reported feelings of personal distress (i.e., thwarted needs for belonging, lowered self-esteem) following social exclusion are commonly used as the sole determinant of whether an event was experienced as rejection as well as whether a person has recovered from the experience (e.g., Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). However, the present research reveals that the temporal framing (past or present tense) of self-report measures shapes responses. In two studies, we manipulated social exclusion and the tense of self-report personal distress measures (i.e., basic needs satisfaction and self-esteem). The results suggest that differences based on tense are the result of biased self-reports (due to social desirability concerns or implicit theories of change over time), rather than representing actual recovery from exclusion. The present research highlights the importance of attending to question tense when assessing reactions to social exclusion.

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Introduction

Although people have many essential physical and psychological needs, the need for social belonging is high in motivational priority (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010). When this need is thwarted through social exclusion, rejection, or ostracism, people self-report lowered feelings of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence, as well as exhibit marked changes in behavior ranging from increased aggression to increased pursuit of social affiliation (e.g., Williams, 2007a). Researchers have begun to identify some of the contextual factors that moderate how people respond to social rejection (see Smart Richman & Leary, 2009, for a review), but one contextual factor that has not been explored is the temporal perspective taken when reflecting on the experience of social exclusion. Self-reported feelings of social exclusion are the most widely used measures assessing the impact of social rejection and ostracism (e.g., Bernstein, Sacco, Young, Cook, & Hugenberg, 2010; Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2006; Wirth, Sacco, Hugenberg, & Williams,

2010). In this paper we reveal that the temporal framing, or phrasing, of these self-report measures shapes people's responses.

Temporal theory of rejection

We propose that whether socially excluded people are asked to consider either their *current* feelings or their feelings *during* the exclusion event will influence the level of distress reported, with greater distress reported in the past than in the present. One potential explanation for this phenomenon is articulated in Williams' (2001, 2007a, 2007b) temporal theory of emotional responses to rejection. This theory stipulates that reactions to social exclusion can be separated into an immediate "reflexive" stage and a subsequent "reflective" stage. The reflexive stage is characterized by an immediate feeling of social pain, an experience akin to physical pain (e.g., Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). People in the reflexive stage also have a conscious experience of personal distress, which takes the form of feeling that important needs (including belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence) have been thwarted. In addition to thwarted needs, there has been mixed evidence that this experience of personal distress can also include feeling negative emotions

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like anger and sadness (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009; Williams, 2007a, 2007b). Williams (2007a, 2007b) argues that all people respond in the same way during the reflexive stage, as evidenced by studies showing that personality does not moderate the degree of distress participants remember feeling during the exclusion event (e.g., Zadro, Boland, & Richardson, 2006). However, it's important to note that this research has asked people to report how they felt during the exclusion event *after* the event has occurred. (In fact, personality factors have been found to moderate responses to social exclusion when affect is measured during ostracism instead of retrospectively; Wesselmann, Wirth, Mroczeka, & Williams, 2012.)

Williams (2007a) proposed that the reflexive stage is followed by a reflective stage during which the person appraises the exclusion experience, such as the reason for the exclusion. Williams posits that reactions to exclusion in the reflective stage are moderated by personality and the circumstances surrounding the exclusion. Because he believes people quickly move from the reflexive stage to the reflective stage, Williams argues that self-report measures of personal distress (e.g., lowered basic needs) should be phrased in the past tense to capture how participants felt when they were still in the painful reflexive stage. He writes:

This distinction becomes important because the available evidence suggests that the reflexive pain/distress signal is quickly followed by appraisals and coping mechanisms that direct the individual toward thoughts and feelings that alleviate the pain. To be included in this section, the subsequent dependent variable measures must, therefore, have been taken during or immediately following the ostracism experience and must pertain to their responses during the ostracism experience.

[Williams, 2007a, p. 432]

In other words, if participants report less distress when asked in the present tense than in the past, it is because the coping and appraisal processes of the reflective stage have reduced their distress. But what if framing self-report measures in the present tense does not merely reduce excluded participant's distress, but eliminates the effect of rejection altogether?

If there is a null effect of exclusion on self-reported present distress when feelings are reported immediately after the experience, to comport with Williams' temporal theory this would require that recovery from exclusion is near-instantaneous, a conclusion that contradicts the results of other research. A number of studies reveal that excluded participants are still reacting intensely to the exclusion at this time, as displayed by physiological and behavioral measures taken immediately after the exclusion manipulation or even after self-report surveys (e.g., Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Stroud, Tanofsky-Kraff, Wilfley, & Salovey, 2000; Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008; Zvolinski, 2012). In the sections below, we compare responses to exclusion recorded immediately after the event and after a delay.

Responses immediately following exclusion.

Several experiments support the claim that individuals still exhibit strong responses to social exclusion shortly after the ostracism experience. Physiological measures of emotional arousal taken immediately following social exclusion indicate elevated blood pressure and cortisol (a stress hormone; Stroud et al., 2000). Excluded people also embody the feeling of social isolation in the form of physical coldness, as measured by reporting colder room temperatures and desiring hot foods immediately following social exclusion (Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008). Additionally, social exclusion impairs performance on cognitive tests (Baumeister et al., 2002), which suggests that attention remains focused on or distracted by the exclusion experience.

Delayed responses following exclusion

These physiological effects can persist for an extended period of time as well. For instance, 20 min after a social inclusion or exclusion task,

women who were the targets of social exclusion still exhibited higher levels of cortisol than women who had been socially included 20 min earlier (Zvolinski, 2012). The same study found that 20 min following an exclusion manipulation, excluded men exhibited greater hostility than included men. It is important to note that while this finding has been corroborated by research demonstrating heightened cortisol levels at 30 and 45 min following social rejection (e.g., Blackhart, Eckel, & Tice, 2007), other research teams have found no cortisol increases after exclusion when examining women only (Zöller, Maroof, Weik, & Deinzer, 2010) and both women and men (Weik, Maroof, Zöller, & Deinzer, 2010). However, both studies that found a null-effect of exclusion on cortisol did obtain a significant exclusion effect on self-reported negative feelings (in Zöller et al., 2010, the affect measure was retrospective; the framing used in Weik et al., 2010, is unclear).

Interestingly, Weik et al. (2010) found evidence that women experience a delayed physiological effect of exclusion: Although women's cortisol levels did not increase immediately after exclusion, when they were subsequently placed in a situation that does reliably increase cortisol (public speaking), their cortisol response was blunted relative to included participants. The authors speculate that women's well-established "tend and befriend" response to social stress may include increased oxytocin and vasopressin, which are known to inhibit stress-induced cortisol (Weik et al., 2010). Critically, this cortisol-blunting response in excluded women was found over 1 h after the exclusion experience, suggesting that the effect of exclusion can be prolonged.

Collectively, these and other studies indicate that recovery from rejection is far from complete by the time self-reported feelings are assessed. Contrary to these findings, Williams' (2007a) earlier quote indicates that self-report measures administered after exclusion can only capture the reflexive stage if they ask participants how they *felt* moments before (when the ostracism occurred), whereas asking participants how they *feel* right now accurately captures current feelings, which may reflect differences in coping in the reflective stage. As support for this model, Williams (2007b) cites a study by Zadro et al. (2006) in which the personality factor of social anxiety did not moderate self-reported personal distress immediately after ostracism experienced via an online ball-toss game (Cyberball) whereas it did moderate continued personal distress 45 min later (i.e., everyone is upset at the reflexive stage, but individual differences in social anxiety shape coping during the reflective stage). However, a critical flaw with this study is that the time of measurement, which is intended to assess reactions at the reflexive and reflective stage, is confounded with the temporal phrasing of the questions. Their first self-report measure of personal distress asked participants "to answer the questions according to how they felt 'while playing the game'" (p. 693), whereas participants answered the "second test according to how they felt 'right now'" (p. 694). It is important to note that other research has also confounded item tense with time (using past tense immediately after ostracism and present tense after a delay) to capture the persistence of social exclusion (Goodwin, Williams, & Carter-Sowell, 2010; Wirth & Williams, 2009). We do not doubt that personality moderates recovery from exclusion (indeed, Wesselmann et al., 2012, found evidence for personality moderation *during* exclusion when feelings are measured currently and continuously), but we suggest that confounding tense with time can lead the magnitude of the effect of personality moderators to be overestimated.

What if both immediate and delayed measures were in the same tense, either past or present? Earlier we explained Williams' (2007a) argument for assessing personal distress in the past tense to capture the reflexive stage. If people don't report current (present tense) personal distress immediately after ostracism, we might conclude from Williams' theory that people are now in the reflective stage and have already coped with the exclusion or appraised it as meaningless. Yet our earlier review of past research clearly shows that most people haven't recovered from social exclusion by the time researchers administer their dependent measures. So if people do not report personal distress in the present tense immediately after social exclusion, another explanation

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