



# The way I make you feel: Social exclusion enhances the ability to manage others' emotions



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined potentially enhanced emotional intelligence after social exclusion.
- Excluded participants showed a heightened tendency to manage others' emotions.
- Exclusion enhanced emotion-management strategies, but not non-social strategies.
- This enhanced tendency to manage others' emotions may promote reconnection.
- Excluded participants were rated as more likable by coders and interaction partners.

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## ABSTRACT

Original conceptions of social exclusion focused upon the negative impact of exclusion on intelligent thought (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002). We propose that although exclusion may impair cognitive forms of intelligence, exclusion should enhance more socially relevant forms of intelligence, such as emotional intelligence. Specifically, we examined whether exclusion would enhance performance in one branch of emotional intelligence: the ability to manage others' emotions. Social exclusion heightened the number and breadth of strategies that participants used for managing others' emotions when responding to hypothetical scenarios (Study 1) and when responding to online pen pals (Studies 3 and 4). Furthermore, excluded participants were more effective at energizing an interaction partner in a face-to-face coaching interaction (Study 2) and were rated as more effective at managing their pen pal's emotions in an online pen pal exchange (Studies 3 and 4). Although exclusion heightened the number and breadth of emotion management strategies generated in a social task, exclusion did not heighten the number or breadth of nonsocial strategies (creative uses for common household items) generated in a comparison task (Study 4). Lastly, we found preliminary evidence suggesting that this enhanced emotion management after exclusion may serve to facilitate reconnection; excluded participants were liked more by their interaction partners (Study 2) and were rated to be more likable by objective coders (Studies 3 and 4). Altogether, these findings suggest that individuals may be more effective at managing others' emotions following social exclusion, and this greater effectiveness may promote reconnection.

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## 1. Introduction

Given the evolutionary importance of social connection for survival (Caporael, 2001) and contemporary importance for physical and psychological wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968), it is not surprising that people experience social exclusion as a painful experience they are motivated to avoid (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Accordingly, when people are confronted with social exclusion (e.g., ignored by a friend, not invited to a social event), they are often motivated to engage in behaviors

that restore social bonds and a feeling of social connection (Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005; Molden & Maner, 2013; Pickett & Gardner, 2005).

However, one ironic consequence of social exclusion is that it has been found to deplete both cognitive and self-regulatory resources — the very resources that would be essential for navigating a complex world alone. For instance, Baumeister, Twenge, and Nuss (2002) found that participants who received feedback that they would likely end up alone in life showed impaired performance on IQ and Graduate Record Examination tests. Furthermore, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, and Twenge (2005) found that participants who were made to feel socially excluded (either through receiving feedback that they would likely end up alone in life or feedback that no one in their group wanted to work with them) subsequently showed decrements in performance on

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self-regulation tasks. Why might social exclusion impair these abilities at a time when they might be especially important for ensuring survival?

We propose that this impairment in cognitive and self-regulatory functioning may be best understood through a resource-conservation explanation (Muraven, Shmueli, & Burkley, 2006). Specifically, given the depleting consequences of exclusion for cognitive and self-regulatory resources, excluded individuals may be careful about conserving the diminished resources that remain. Excluded individuals may be particularly motivated to limit the allocation of their resources to acts that could serve the broader goal of reconnection. Consistent with this explanation, prior research has found that performance on self-regulatory tasks was spared for excluded individuals when those tasks were framed as diagnostic of their social ability (DeWall, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2008); the social framing of the task motivated excluded individuals to use regulatory resources they were unwilling to use with a nonsocial frame. Rather than framing a task as socially diagnostic, the present investigation focuses on tasks that are directly related to social ability. Specifically, we examine whether social exclusion enhances performance on emotional intelligence tasks (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). We posit that whereas social exclusion may impair cognitive forms of intelligence, social exclusion should enhance socially relevant forms of intelligence, such as emotional intelligence.

In their model of emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer et al., 2004), Mayer and colleagues have divided the construct of emotional intelligence into four branches of interrelated abilities: (1) the ability to accurately perceive emotion, (2) the ability to utilize emotion to facilitate thought, (3) the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge, and (4) the ability to manage the emotions of oneself and others. We believe that the four-branch model of emotional intelligence may provide a useful framework for informing the strategies that people may marshal after social exclusion, as some of these facets of emotional intelligence have been linked with positive social outcomes, such as having more satisfying social interactions (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Lopes et al., 2004, 2011) and superior performance in leadership roles and organizational settings (for reviews, see Côté, 2014; Mayer et al., 2004). Although emotional intelligence has typically been studied as a stable individual difference, it is likely that performance in each of these four branches also varies as a function of their social motivation. Indeed, there has been a recent call by emotional intelligence researchers to understand the factors that determine both “when” and “why” people apply their emotional intelligence skills (see Ybarra, Rees, Kross, & Sanchez-Burks, 2012; Ybarra et al., 2013). In the current work, we sought to answer this call and examine whether social exclusion may actually heighten the more socially relevant facets of emotional intelligence.

Although all four branches of emotional intelligence are interrelated and have been shown to be beneficial in different circumstances (see Côté, 2014; Mayer et al., 2004; Ybarra et al., 2012, 2013), the two that appear most directly relevant for facilitating social reconnection are the first branch (accurately perceiving emotion in others) and the fourth branch (managing emotions in the self and others), as these two branches are interpersonal in nature, directly involving the emotions of others. The first branch, the ability to accurately understand how others are feeling, is clearly socially adaptive, as accurate perception can help people navigate their social world in a way that enhances social outcomes (Elfenbein, Marsh, & Ambady, 2002; McArthur & Baron, 1983). Prior research examining responses to social exclusion strongly suggests that social exclusion enhances performance on this first branch of emotional intelligence. Specifically, when people feel insufficient levels of social inclusion (e.g., after a laboratory-induced exclusion, chronically-lonely individuals, individuals with dispositionally-high belonging needs), they show heightened attention to and accuracy in understanding both facial and vocal expressions of emotion (e.g., Bernstein, Sacco,

Brown, Young, & Claypool, 2010; Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2008; Gardner et al., 2005; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004; Sacco, Wirth, Hugenberg, Chen, & Williams, 2011). Accurately perceiving others' emotions may not be enough to ensure successful reconnection, however. People must also respond appropriately to others' emotions in a manner that promotes liking and rapport – or in other words – demonstrate skills from the fourth branch of emotional intelligence: managing others' emotions.

The fourth branch of emotional intelligence encompasses this notion of sensitive and appropriate responsiveness. However, unlike the relatively automatic perceptual processes underlying the first branch of emotional intelligence, emotional perception, the deployment of the skills that underlie the fourth branch may require the very self-regulatory resources that were likely to have been depleted by the prior exclusion (Baumeister et al., 2002). Indeed, regulatory deficits resulting from social exclusion may underlie maladaptive, anti-social, and self-defeating responding (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002). Thus, the current research seeks to test the extent to which social exclusion may heighten versus hinder the skills associated with the fourth branch of emotional intelligence. To the extent that excluded individuals marshal their remaining regulatory resources toward social tasks (DeWall et al., 2008), this motivation may be sufficient to enhance the ability to manage others' emotions, because skill in managing others' emotions can facilitate social connection.

## 2. Managing others' emotions facilitates social connection

Managing others' emotions involves our ability to influence and change the emotional experience of others (Niven, Totterdell, & Holman, 2009). We use this ability in our day-to-day lives to help us form new relationships and strengthen current social bonds. For instance, we help our significant others savor the good news when they get a promotion at work, and likewise we cheer them up when they find out this promotion does not include a pay raise.

We expected that the managing others' emotions branch of emotional intelligence to be an especially promising branch for facilitating reconnection, as the ability to manage others' emotions seems to play an important role in impacting the quality of our social relationships. For instance, people who score higher on the managing emotions (in the self and others) subscale of the Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotion Intelligence Test (MSCIET; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002) tend to have higher quality interactions with their friends (Lopes et al., 2004; Lopes, Salovey, Côté, Beers, & Petty, 2005), and less conflict in their social relationships (Lopes et al., 2003).

In addition to influencing social outcomes in the context of peer relationships, the ability to effectively manage others' emotions also influences social outcomes in workplace contexts. For instance, medical students who scored higher on the managing emotions branch of emotional intelligence showed superior performance in courses on communication and interpersonal sensitivity (Libbrecht, Lievens, Carette, & Côté, 2014). Moreover, the ability to effectively manage others' emotions is considered to be an important component of effective leadership (for reviews, see Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2014; Humphrey, 2002; Pescosolido, 2002). Indeed, leaders who tend to be more skilled at managing others' emotions tend to have more positive interactions with their subordinates and tend to create workplaces that have more positive emotional climates (see Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2014).

Furthermore, the act of managing others' emotions seems to play an important role in both the formation and deepening of social bonds. For instance, Beckes, Simpson, and Erickson (2010) have theorized that the process of managing others' emotions may underlie the formation of social bonds. Specifically, they demonstrated that people may, in part, develop social attachments through a conditioning process whereby novel others become associated with the down-regulation of distress and the up-regulation of feelings of comfort.

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