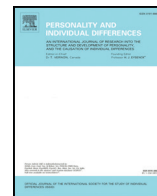




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## Threat and opportunity: The impact of social inclusion and likeability on anonymous feedback, self-esteem, and belonging

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to extend previous research on feedback giving behaviour by investigating whether (a) recalling a previous experience of social inclusion or exclusion prior to providing performance feedback to a likeable or less likeable feedback recipient impacts on anonymous performance evaluations, and (b) people experience a change in self-esteem and belonging after providing anonymous feedback. Two hundred and forty-one participants took part in the online study. Participants were asked to either recall a previous experience of social inclusion, social exclusion, or what they had eaten in the past 48 h (control). They were then asked to evaluate a book review attributed to either a likeable or relatively less likeable target. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were not supported such that performance feedback was not positively modified regardless of feedback recipient likeability. Hypothesis 3 was not supported such that self-esteem and belonging did not increase after providing performance feedback. However, subsequent analyses demonstrated that there is a complex interaction between the social inclusion manipulation and feedback recipient likeability on changes in self-esteem and belonging after providing feedback. The theoretical implications of the findings as well as the practical implications will be discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The need to belong (belonging) is the desire to form and maintain relationships with other people or groups and is a basic psychological need as well as an important motivator of behaviour (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When a person is rejected by others this can result in poor psychological outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Indeed, people will go to great lengths to maintain existing relationships and avoid being excluded (Leary, 2012). Various lines of research have found that when a person is rejected they experience decreases in belonging and self-esteem (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004).

According to Sociometer Theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), individuals possess a 'sociometer' that provides an evaluation of relational value thus providing information about belonging appraisal. A person's self-esteem is used as the 'sociometer' that gauges the degree to which others consider the relationship valuable or important (Leary, 2012; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Therefore if an individual senses a threat to a valued relationship, their self-esteem would drop thus alerting the individual to behave in ways that would restore their relational value (Leary, 2012; Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

### 2. Feedback, likeability, and the need to belong

It is well documented that people are reluctant to deliver negative feedback in order to avoid negative evaluations by others (see Jeffries & Hornsey, 2012). Not only are people reluctant to give negative feedback, but they will modify feedback so that it is less negative or even avoid giving feedback entirely (Harber, Stafford, & Kennedy, 2010). Indeed, giving feedback is more difficult when individuals are concerned with how other people will evaluate them, and the possible negative consequences this will have on their relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, 2012; London, 2003). For instance, London (1995) suggested that giving negative feedback may be perceived by others as not being nice (a socially desirable characteristic), and that individuals were concerned that others may think less of them, which may then potentially impact affect their relational value. Given the pressure that feedback may place on interpersonal relationships, it would be expected that anonymous feedback might alleviate those concerns and reduce social pressure. The key issue with this premise is that research has found that providing anonymous feedback invites more critical or negative comments, compared to when feedback is identifiable (Lu & Bol, 2007). However, it is unclear whether socially desirable characteristics such as likeability could influence the process of providing anonymous feedback.

Upon a first encounter with another person, an individual will generally make a judgement regarding that person's social worth and

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calculate whether a relationship with them will be a positive experience (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). A socially desirable characteristic that can assist in evaluating others is likeability. A likeable individual would have qualities such as kindness or helpfulness, and be highly sought after as a relational partner (Judd et al., 2005). Indeed, London (2003) discussed how characteristics such as likeability can impact on the type of feedback given. For example, supervisors were reluctant to give negative feedback to employees they liked but were more willing to give negative feedback to employees they disliked (London, 2003). Thus, it appears that being perceived as likeable might have an impact on the feedback that is given. Brown (1993) demonstrated that individuals with low self-esteem increase their self-worth by their affiliations with others, in particular those with socially desirable characteristics, such as likeability. This suggests that for people searching for social connection, likeable individuals may provide a boost to their own relational value. Indeed, it would appear that a connection with someone perceived as unlikeable would not fulfil the need for self-worth and social connection. Therefore, consistent with Sociometer theory, communicating more positive feedback to a likeable feedback recipient, would diffuse the threat of social exclusion and by aligning themselves with this person, an individual would have an opportunity to increase their self-esteem and belonging. However, it is unclear, whether anonymous feedback would produce the same changes to self-esteem and belonging.

Therefore, this study sought to examine the impact of inclusion status and feedback recipient likeability on anonymous performance evaluations and feedback delivery on self-esteem and belonging. More specifically and in line with Sociometer Theory, we predict that participants who recall experiences of social exclusion will provide more positive feedback compared to participants who recall experiences of social inclusion (Hypothesis 1). This effect will be stronger when faced with a feedback recipient high in likeability compared to a feedback recipient low in likeability (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore, we predict that participants who recall experiences of social exclusion will report an increase in self-esteem and belonging after delivering feedback to a feedback recipient rated high in likeability (Hypothesis 3).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants and design

Two hundred and forty-one participants (201 females; age range 16–71 years) comprising of undergraduate students at a regional Australian university and external participants recruited from the community were randomly assigned to a 3 (Inclusion status: Inclusion vs. rejection vs. control)  $\times$  2 (feedback recipient likeability: high vs. low) between-group design. The dependent variables included belonging, self-esteem, and performance feedback. Belonging and self-esteem were assessed before and after delivery of feedback as a repeated-measures factor. Student participants who volunteered to take part in the experiment received course credit, while community volunteers were eligible to enter a cash prize draw.

#### 3.2. Procedures and measures

Data were collected via an online survey accessed through a link and ethics approval was received before data collection commenced.

Participants were initially told the study was investigating impression formation and evaluating others. Participants read the terms of consent and withdrawal, confirming their consent to participate before being allowed to continue. Participants were randomly allocated into one of three experimental groups: inclusion, rejection, or a control group. Participants in the inclusion group were asked to write for 5 min of a time they felt accepted by others. Participants in the rejection group were asked to write for 5 min of a time they felt excluded by others while participants allocated to the control group had to recall

and record all the food consumed for the past 48 h. The aim of this manipulation was to generate feelings of heightened or lowered social inclusion and had been used in previous research (see Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000). Following this a manipulation check item was included: “How do you feel at this moment?” (*Inclusion status manipulation check*) rated by participants on a Likert scale of 1 (*accepted*) to 9 (*rejected*).

To assess participant belonging and self-esteem, six items taken from Zadro et al. (2004) were rated on a Likert scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The three belonging items were “I feel poorly accepted by others”, “I feel as though I had made a connection to another person/s”, and “I feel like an outsider” (Pre-feedback belonging;  $\alpha = 0.71$ ). The three self-esteem items were “I feel good about myself”, “I feel that other people fail to perceive me as worthwhile and likeable”, and “I feel inadequate” (Pre-feedback self-esteem;  $\alpha = 0.76$ ). Two belonging items were reverse scored indicating higher scores represented higher belonging. Two self-esteem items were reverse scored indicating higher scores represented higher self-esteem. These alpha coefficients were comparable to Zadro et al. and thus deemed adequate.

Participants then received information about a fictitious student such as initials (LR), age (19) and a description of the student supposedly based upon what others had said. This information was provided in order to manipulate the likeability of the feedback recipient. Participants received different descriptions of the student based on which likeability condition the participant was randomly allocated to (high vs. low). An example of a descriptor in the high likeability condition was “LR spent hours with a friend after the friend's dog died” whereas an example of a descriptor in the low likeability condition was “LR often doesn't respond when their colleagues say hello at work”.

The Reysen Likeability Scale (RLS; Reysen, 2005) was used to measure whether the student was perceived as being more or less likeable. The RLS (Reysen, 2005) was adapted as the original version contained items regarding the appearance and the knowledge of an individual. Due to participants completing the survey online, the item addressing appearance was excluded. The item addressing knowledge was excluded as it addressed competence more than likeability (see Judd et al., 2005 for a complete list of characteristics associated with likeability versus competence). The RLS contained nine items and responses were rated on a Likert scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). An example item was “This person is friendly”. Higher scores on the RLS represented higher likability. Cronbach's alpha for the adapted version of the RLS was 0.97 which was acceptable (Field, 2009).

Participants were then instructed they would be required to read and evaluate a book review written by the same student previously described. The book review was described to participants as an assignment for a first year introductory literature course, which the student had spent several weeks preparing. Participants also asked to confirm their understanding of the information by indicating whether the student previously described was the same student that wrote the book review (*Yes* or *No*). Participants were informed they would be required to provide feedback on the book review which would be given to the student; however their identity would remain anonymous. To confirm understanding of the instructions, participants were asked whether their identity as the feedback source would be anonymous (*Yes* or *No*). Participants were also asked “To what extent do you think that the author of the essay will be able to identify you as the marker of the essay” on a Likert scale of 1 (*Not at all – the author won't be able to identify me*) to 7 (*Very much so – the author will be able to identify me*).

Participants were then provided with the book review that was poorly written in order to obtain greater variability in evaluations of the review. The book review had been previously used by Jeffries and Hornsey (2012). After reading the book review participants then rated the book review on the following criteria using a Likert scale from 1 (*very poor*) to 7 (*excellent*): grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, written expression, overall structure, clarity, persuasiveness, originality, coherency, thoroughness, engagement, interest, and elegance. These criteria were averaged to form a scale of *performance*

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