The Desire to Be With Others: Exploring Social Rejection and Gender

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Social relationships are a big part of human life and threats to such relationships have vast implications. This study tested the contention of social monitoring system (SMS) suggesting that socially rejected individuals experience higher need to belong. A 2 (men/women) by 2 (acceptance/rejection) experimental design was conducted to explore gender's role in the need to belong after a rejection experience. Participants (N = 68) wrote rejection or acceptance stories and responded to a Need to Belong Scale. Two-Way ANOVA results showed that felt rejection elicited heightened need to belong especially among women, F(3, 64) = 5.78, p = .019, partial eta = .083. This provides evidence in the SMS literature pointing to the role of gender in the need to belong of rejected individuals. Implications and limitations of the study were further discussed.

Keywords: Rejection, Social Monitoring System (SMS), Need to Belong

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Introduction

Human beings basically need social relationships. Belongingness satisfies our psychological need whereas food and water our physical needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). With this, threats to our social belongingness can be painful. One dominant peril to our need for belongingness is social rejection. The experience of social rejection stimulates the same part of the brain as with the experience of physical pain (Kross, Berman, Mischel, Smith, & Wager, 2011). In the theory of social monitoring system, a rejected individual may be motivated to eliminate the pain by socially reconnecting with others (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000). However, the theory of social monitoring system has not pointed into the role of gender in a rejected individual's need to belong. With this, the current study investigated the differences in the need to belong between men and women who experienced social rejection.

SMS and the Relevance of Belongingness

SMS, a relatively new theory, can be observed as having similarity with sociometer theory in their perspective regarding the motivation to reconnect after threats to one's belongingness. Sociometer theory suggests that individuals have an automatic psychological system constantly adjusting to the social environment; when one's social acceptance is threatened, an individual experiences decline in self-esteem and increase in negative affect, which then motivates the individual to preserve or uplift his/her relational value (Leary,

2006; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995). Thus, self-esteem is seen as an indicator of the quality of relationships in the social environment; that is, lowered self-esteem signals low quality of such relationships. On the other hand, Pickett and Gardner (2005) postulated that the social monitoring system involves regulatory processes starting from attending to one's belonging need as triggered by threats of social rejection, attuning to one's social environment, and using these social information to attain social inclusion and thus meet belonging need. When there is no threat to one's belonging, the social monitoring system (SMS) may be stable and remains within the periphery (Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005). Under the SMS perspective, therefore, low self-esteem (a sociometer of low relational value) may also be similar with heightened belonging need in indicating threats to social acceptance. The main difference is that this belonging need continues to escalate a rejected individual's interpersonal sensitivity (see SMS regulatory process; Pickett & Gardner, 2005) whereas self-esteem serves as a meter (see Leary, 1999) whether social acceptance is experienced or not. Lastly, although these two theories differ in processes of indicating threats to belonging need, both agree to the idea that a rejected individual is motivated to experience social acceptance. These emphasize the relevance of affiliation and/or belongingness especially in the experience of rejection.

The relevance of affiliation has been emphasized in numerous studies. Maslow (1955) even theorized that our need for belongingness should be satisfied in order to function in our society (i.e., increase self-esteem, attain self-actualization). In an evolutionary perspective, attaining this need for social belongingness provides an affordance to enhance reproductive fitness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, &Twenge, 2007). This preference for being in a group also forms affection among the members which is vital for human survival (Bowlby, 1969; Brewer & Caporael, 2006). Lack of social relationships, for example, may lead to illnesses and other impaired functioning such as loneliness, depression, jealousy, and anxiety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, 1990) as well as weak immune system (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Bernston, 2003).

With this, social rejection as a threat to one's belongingness can lead to a variety of implications. Though other evidence pointed to the retaliatory reactions (e.g., aggression towards the perpetrator, social withdrawal, decreased empathy and prosocial behavior) following social rejection (e.g., DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; Richman & Leary, 2009; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001), social rejection also leads to socially inclined thoughts and behaviors (e.g., conformity to opinions of others, desire to form relationships) aimed at attaining social inclusion (Gardner et al., 2005; Maner, DeWall,

Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). These studies about the desire to reconnect following rejection test the assumptions of SMS. It has to be noted, however, that studies on SMS anchoring on the contention that rejection increases one's need to belong still do not specifically point to the role of gender in the process.

Gender Differences in Responses to Social Rejection

There have been several studies, although not anchored in the perspective of SMS, which have shown that there are gender differences in the reactions toward negative social experiences such as social rejection. For example, an experiment suggested that women tend to be more reactive against social rejection than men (Stroud, Salovey, & Epel, 2002).There seems to be ways in which individuals pacify their reactions following social rejection. One way to pacify this pain is to think of positive social information. Studies on neuroscience found that rejected individuals initially ruminate about positive social information and this serves a function of dodging the distressing social environment (Powers, Wagner, Norris, & Heatherton, 2011).

Other studies suggest that gender difference in the reactions against social rejection may be likely due to different self-regulatory processes. An fMRI study showed that men were more efficient in cognitive emotion regulation (McRae, Ochsner, Mauss, Gabrieli, & Gross, 2008). Experience of social rejection triggers negative emotions (e.g., decreased self-esteem; Leary & Baumeister, 2000) and this entails cognitive emotion regulation in the part of a rejected person. Given the difference in cognitive emotion regulation, it seems that rejected men and women may differ in their desire to reconnect with others. This indicates that gender may play a role in the rejected individual's need to belong. Using an experimental design, the present study investigated the roles of social rejection and gender in the need to belong.

This study hypothesized that socially rejected individuals will report higher belonging need. Specifically, as indicated by the studies on cognitive emotion regulation, rejected women may exhibit greater need to belong. This heightened need to belong among women may serve as one of the ways to pacify the pain of social rejection. A 2 (acceptance/rejection) by 2 (men/women) experimental design was used to test these hypotheses.

Methods

Participants

Participants were Cebuano college students (*Mean age = 18.5 years, SD = 1.6 years*). The total participants in the study comprised 50% men and 50% women (*N = 68*). There were four conditions (accepted men, rejected men, accepted women, rejected women) in the experiment and each condition had 17 participants randomly assigned in the rejection/acceptance condition.

Procedure

Participants signed an informed consent about an experiment ostensibly on autobiographical memory. Through random assignment, they went into activities under social acceptance or rejection condition. In social acceptance condition, participants wrote a story about an experience wherein they felt accepted by others. Similar instructions were given to the participants in the rejection condition but they wrote a story on rejection experience. No time limit was given for writing the stories. This method of asking participants to write a story about their acceptance or rejection experience was similar with the methods used in the studies of DeWall and Baumeister (2006) and Pickett, Gardner, and Knowles (2004). After writing, they responded to a 10-item Need to Belong Scale (NTBS; Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2005, as cited in Leary et al., 2013; see Appendix A). Higher scores indicate high belonging need. In this study, NTBS demonstrated accepted reliability coefficient ($a = .573$). After completing NTBS, participants responded to a separate sheet of paper asking them to rate (from 1 to 50, 50 as the highest) their feelings of acceptance ("I felt accepted while writing the story.") or feelings of rejection ("I felt rejected while writing the story."). This final task served as a check if the experimental manipulation was able to effectively induce feelings of acceptance or rejection. As expected, independent samples t-test (*$t(66) = -7.72, p < .0001$*) indicated that participants in the rejection condition (*M = 37.85, SD = 8.88*) felt more rejected than those in the acceptance condition (*M = 16.24, SD = 13.71*). Moreover, participants in the acceptance condition (*M = 41.21, SD = 9.14*) felt more accepted than in the rejection condition {*M = 18.5, SD = 10.53; $t(66) = 9.49, p < .0001$*}. Finally, participants were debriefed about the true nature of the study and given incentives.

Results

A 2 (acceptance/rejection) by 2 (men/women) analysis of variance was conducted in order to determine if there are significant differences in the need to belong. It was hypothesized that rejected women may exhibit greater need to belong. A significant interaction effect $\{F(3, 64) = 5.78, p = .019, partial\ eta = .083\}$ confirmed the hypothesis (see Table A). Rejected women ($M = 37.82, SD = 4.03$) exhibited higher need to belong than both accepted men ($M = 33.65, SD = 6.43$) and women (M = 33.88, SD = 1.14), and rejected men ($M = 32.12, SD = 4.99$). This reflects the idea that a rejected woman's desire to reconnect with others can help pacify her social pain.

Table A. *ANOVA summary table with social experience and gender as independent variables and need to belong as dependent variable (N=68).*

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Main Effects				
Social Experience	24.721	1	24.721	1.124[ns]
Gender	150.015	1	150.015	6.819*
Social Exp*Gender	127.191	1	127.191	5.782*
Total	1407.88	64	21.9982	

*p < .05; ns = not significant

Gender effect $\{F(3, 64) = 6.82, p = .011, partial\ eta = .096\}$ also indicated that women ($M = 35.85, SD = 3.81$) showed higher need to belong compared to men ($M = 32.88, SD = 5.72$). However, social experience showed no significant main effect $\{F(3, 64) = 1.12, p = .29\}$.

General Discussion

The current study explored the role of gender and social rejection in one's need to belong. Specifically, the aim was to determine the role of gender in SMS theory. The results showed that rejection's effect on need to belong was more pronounced among women.

Gardner and colleagues (Gardner et al., 2000; Gardner et al., 2005; Pickett et al., 2004) theorized that social rejection heightens one's belonging need. The results of this study supported this idea. Looking closely, however, the results specifically pointed to rejected women's heightened need to belong. Thus, the contention of SMS that rejection increases belonging need may be more salient among women.

There were several studies pointing to the idea that rejected women may have higher need to belong than men. Experimental results showed women exhibiting more negative reactions towards social rejection than men (Stroud et al., 2002). Rejection decreases one's self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) and increases belonging need (Gardner, et al., 2000). More specifically, social rejection can impair a rejected person's self-regulation (Baumeister et al., 2005). These findings imply that a rejected individual engages in emotion regulation to buffer the pain of social rejection. An evidence in fMRI study indicated that there is a gender difference in emotion regulation, with men having more effective cognitive regulation of emotions as well as less effort in emotion regulation than women (McRae et al., 2008). An individual has to regulate the negative emotions following the rejection experience. Since men are more efficient in regulating negative emotions, there may be no need to seek for reestablishing social connections. Men's efficient emotion regulation may already serve as a cushion against the negative emotions triggered by social rejection. On the other hand, women regulate their negative emotions with more effort and with difficulty (McRae et al., 2008). This indicates that a rejected woman's heightened need to belong can serve as a signal to ameliorate the negative emotions of the rejection experience. That is, an increased need to belong motivates them to reestablish social connections as this will pacify the rejection-triggered negative emotions. Taken together, this may explain why women, especially when rejected, exhibit higher need to belong compared to men. This contention is still speculative as there are no direct investigations yet regarding the association of need to belong, rejection-triggered negative emotions and emotion regulation using the methods of cognitive neuroscience. Thus, further investigation needs to be looked into.

However, there are recent theories explaining the overlap between physical pain and social pain. These theories may provide implications regarding gender differences in response to social rejection. Social pain theory, for example, suggests that the same neural structures between the experience of social and physical pain reflects an evolutionary adaptation so as social animals can respond to threats to one's belongingness (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Similarly, social pain/physical pain overlap theory (SPOT; Eisenberger, & Lieberman, 2005) holds the same idea and further suggests that the shared neural system of physical/social pain helps the individual recover from the experience of social pain (e.g., social rejection) and respond to the perceived threat to belongingness. These two theories point to the role of anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), along with ACC studies using human participants, in the experience of both physical and social pain. ACC is responsible for the experience of pain affect (Singer et al., 2004). Empirical evidence suggests that the

experience of social rejection activates ACC in a similar way as the experience of physical pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). Although there are gender differences with regards to activation of anterior cingulate cortex, these studies focused on ACC activation during a cognitive task (e.g., Butler et al., 2007). Thus, gender differences in ACC activation following social rejection warrants further study. Nevertheless, social pain theory and SPOT indicate that there is a neural system responsible for reacting with the experience of social pain (e.g., unpleasant feeling associated with the rejection experience) and that this system may involve not only physiological reactions but also cognitive and emotional reactions which may include emotion regulation. Further studies along this line may be able to delve deeper into the underlying neural mechanisms which may explain gender differences in emotion regulation following a social rejection experience.

Interestingly, it is also noteworthy to mention that even the manipulation of rejection experience by reliving it through writing was sufficient to induce feeling of rejection. Though other factors may be involved in actual rejection, the current study demonstrated that even imagining a rejection experience elicited a feeling of rejection and increased the need to belong especially among women.

Although the results of this study suggested that a rejected person has a need to reestablish social connections, other studies found detrimental effects to a rejected person's social well-being. Studies in brain activity following social rejection indicated a resemblance between physical pain and social pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Kross et al., 2011). More alarming were the findings that experience of severe rejection played a role in the shooting rampage among socially rejected youths (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003; Weatherby, Strachila, & McMahon, 2010).Thus, though it is plausible to argue that social rejection can make a person more conforming to the social situations, this has to be viewed with caution. This seemingly conforming or socially accommodating behavior of a rejected person may just well turn out to aggressive and retaliatory behaviors. Nevertheless, the present study indicates that women's experience of rejection leads to their desire to reestablish connection with others. Thus, this adds gender as an important factor in the growing literature of SMS. A rejected woman's desire to be with others serves as one of the ways in pacifying her social pain.

Conclusion

Rejection leads to heightened need to belong especially among women. This advances the knowledge on the role of gender in an individual's desire to be with other people in light of the social rejection experience. More specifically, the results of the study showed that the effect of social rejection in one's belonging need is an interplay of both the rejection experience and an individual's gender. Lastly, as an empirical test to SMS theory, taking into account the gender of the rejected individual calls for consideration.

As a relatively new theory, social monitoring system needs to be tested more outside the laboratory. Whether similar results may come out when actual social rejection was experienced needs further investigation. Though it was found that social rejection motivates an individual to reestablish social connections as reflected by the heightened need to belong, it has to be noted that there are other studies pointing to the detrimental effects of social rejection. Hence, the effects of social rejection need to be clarified and integrated for a more holistic view of its varying effects in both the rejected individual and the immediate social environment.

Women's less effective cognitive emotion regulation serves to explain their heightened need to belong following social rejection. The desire to be with other people may help them cope with the negative emotions triggered by the pain of social rejection. Although there are various ways for rejected women to pacify their hurt feelings, the present study showed that socially reconnecting as reflected by the increased need to belong is one of it.

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Appendix A.

Need to Belong Scale (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, &Schreindorfer, 2005, as cited in Leary et al., 2013)

Instructions: For each of the statements below, indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement by writing a number in the space beside the question using the scale below:

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Moderately disagree

3 = Neither agree nor disagree

4 = Moderately agree

5 = Strongly agree

_____ 1. If other people don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me.

_____ 2. I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me.

_____ 3. I seldom worry about whether other people care about me.

_____ 4. I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need.

_____ 5. I want other people to accept me.

_____ 6. I do not like being alone.

_____ 7. Being apart from my friends for long periods of time does not bother me.

_____ 8. I have a strong need to belong.

_____ 9. It bothers me a great deal when I am not included in other people's plans.

_____ 10. My feelings are easily hurt when I feel that others do not accept me.

Scoring Instructions: Reverse item 7 and get the sum of all the items. High scores indicate higher need to belong.