

**The Effect of Social Exclusion on Attitude Moralization: Distress as a Moderator**

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### **Abstract**

Previous research on attitude moralization on understanding the process and how it works is fairly limited. In this paper we attempt to understand moralization further by examining the relationship between attitude moralization and social exclusion on issues relevant to a group. In particular, we hypothesize that socially excluded individuals will moralize further on issues relevant to a group of interest as means of regaining membership. Does social exclusion lead to attitude moralization? Furthermore, social exclusion can cause elevated psychological distress and moralization may be used as means to reduce it. We further hypothesize that distressed individuals who are socially excluded will moralize even more to cope with even more intense feelings of distress. Does psychological distress moderate the relationship between social exclusion and moralization? We conducted an online experiment, on the basis of a fictitious group using gender equality as the issue to moralize. The participants did not show any changes in moralization and distress did not show to moderate the relationship. Unfortunately our experiment yielded no significant results and did not support any of our initial hypothesis. Limitations and the theoretical implications of the study are discussed.

*Keywords:* attitude strength, moralization, social exclusion, ostracism, distress

## **The Effect of Social Exclusion on Attitude Moralization: Distress as a Moderator**

People have always enjoyed being part of a group and there is a good reason. According to research, there is a fundamental human need to form and maintain at least some meaningful interpersonal relationships, a need which is called the need to belong (Baumeister, 1995). One way, by which people satisfy this need is through group forming on the basis of common attitudes, sharing ideas, feelings and conceptions about life (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Higgins, 2019; Higgins & Pittman, 2008). An example by which people come together as a group is through sharing common moral beliefs. Moral beliefs or convictions are experienced by most people as intrinsic, robust and generic perceptions of what is right and wrong and are applicable to any type of context (Skitka, 2010). It is not unreasonable, therefore, to expect strong reactions in response to threats towards this need to belong.

A great threat to belongingness is social exclusion or ostracism (Williams, 2009), which is the experience of being ignored or excluded by a group of interest (Williams, 2007). Research suggests, a lot of people will experience social exclusion either as the victim or as the cause of it at some point in their lives (Faulkner, Williams, Sherman, & Williams, 1997). When facing social exclusion, people usually self-report the experience of negative, strong emotions such as anger, an intense feeling of pain equivalent to physical pain and an overall uncomfortable experience of distress, as research indicates (Eisenberg, 2003). Social exclusion triggers implicit coping mechanisms such as prosocial behaviour and an increased alertness for positive affective responses, as a way to reduce post-exclusion relevant distress by regaining what was lost (Dewall et al., 2011). When faced with exclusion on the basis of moral convictions, excluded individuals will attempt to modify their beliefs according to the group they want to belong in (Skitka, 2002). By engaging in a process called attitude moralization a belief becomes morally relevant and therefore more salient, thus making identification with a relevant group more likely (Skitka, 2002). We could, therefore, argue that

moralization can be conceived as a coping mechanism by which an excluded individual (or group) will engage in, in order to regain membership/acceptance. A moralized attitude is a good indicator that individuals will take action according to their morals (Skitka, 2005) and by identifying with a group which shares moral beliefs, this action becomes collective. It is very important to understand how moralization works in an intergroup context given how strong moral convictions may indicate engagement in collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2018; Zaal, Van Laar, Stahl, Ellemers, & Derks, 2011).

Moralization, therefore, can be triggered by social exclusion as part of post-exclusion distress coping mechanisms that are set in motion by the strong emotional responses it causes to the excluded (DeWall et al., 2011). In this paper, we hypothesize that social exclusion may lead to more attitude moralization. We further hypothesize that for individuals who score high on psychological distress, exclusion may lead to even more attitude moralization.

### **Moral Convictions and Attitude Moralization**

Moral conviction is the belief that an attitude represents a persons' fundamental perceptions of what is right and wrong (Skitka, 2002). The attitudes that people experience as moral differ from attitudes that are experienced as preferences or conventional norms as stated in the domain theory of attitudes (Nucci 2001, Nucci & Turiel 1978, Skitka 2014, Skitka et al. 2005). As the theory suggests, people tolerate others' preference attitudes as it is a matter of individual taste. Conventional attitudes may indicate generic guidelines as to what is widely considered right and wrong but will not call for action since they are more authority depended, while, on the other hand, moral convictions are experienced as very globally applicable, are absolute and unchangeable, may elicit strong emotions, are usually law independent and mandate action. (Skitka, 2005). An attitude becomes morally relevant through the process of moralization. (Skitka, 2002).

Moralization, is a process by which an attitude that is linked to a pre-established moral conviction increases (Roizing, 1999). Research suggests that people are able to recognize the moral characteristics of an issue and whether their morals are attuned with that issue (Skitka, 2010). Depending on how strong is the emotional response to the morally linked attitude, the individual experiences stronger identification with their moral convictions around that attitude (Skitka et al., 2021). People observe others behaviour and the more they feel that behaviour may cause them distress the more they judge it to be immoral in nature (Turiel, 1983). Given how moral convictions can be the basis to form social bonds (Ellemers et al., 2012) and how there is no space for compromise in their narrative, they may result in impasses and group polarization (Ditto et al. 2011, Feinberg et al. 2013, 2015). There is still a knowledge gap around how moralization works on a group level, which seems rather important when we try to understand how and why people form groups around shared moral convictions and how they moralize issues as a group.

### **Social Exclusion and Moralization**

People have a pervasive and intrinsic need to belong (Baumeister, 1995) and when this need is threatened the experience is similar to physical pain (Eisenberg, 2003). Besides belonging, people need to have a comfortable sense of self-esteem (Steele, 1988), a need for meaning in an existential sense (Greenberg, 1991) and the perception of control over their social environment (Bandura, 1997). Social exclusion is a direct threat to belongingness, self-esteem, social ability to connect, sense of meaning and is linked to excessive reported distress (Williams, 2007). It is defined as the experience of being ignored, feeling undesired and isolated. (Twenge et al., 2001). This experience causes an extremely strong desire to be accepted and liked by virtually anyone and this desire may affect the individual's perception on what is right and wrong (Williams, 2007). People with higher need to belong, experience the distress following social exclusion much more intensely (Leary et al., 2003) making them

even more eager to feel accepted (Leary et al., 2001). This high need to belong can make excluded people highly alert to social cues, in an attempt to regain group membership, as well display greater in-group bias overall (Van Bavel, et al., 2012). Therefore, socially excluded individuals, will behave in any way it feels like the shortest and fastest to be accepted again. We, therefore, argue that socially excluded individuals will modify their beliefs accordingly (by engaging in attitude moralization) in order to be accepted again and minimize the post exclusion distress.

In order to establish connections, people share their beliefs (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins & Pittman, 2008; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008) and by doing so they co-create a shared reality (Echterhoff et al., 2009) which in turn satisfies their respective needs to belong. It is sensible to argue that the more a person identifies with a group's values and morals prior to exclusion, the more eager that person will be to regain what was lost post exclusion. Research suggests, social exclusion decreases emotional sensitivity but unconscious coping mechanisms are initiated to help the individual cope and reduce the post exclusion distress (DeWall et., al. 2011). In this research we propose that socially excluded people will be more likely to moralize issues relevant to the group in order to re-establish recently lost connections and regain acceptance (Gardner et al., 2000) and we argue that distressed individuals who are being excluded will moralize even more, in order to cope with excessive distress.

### **The Moderating Role of Distress**

So far it is clear that social exclusion can cause increased psychological distress, a state which when experienced, the individual will attempt to reduce it by utilizing unconscious coping mechanisms (DeWall, et., al, 2011). Research on the experience of isolation indicates how a person who is already experiencing feelings of isolation would also report even more elevated levels of psychological distress (Taylor et al., 2018). We argue that distressed

individuals are already experiencing strong emotions and looking for ways to cope with them. Since moralization can be perceived as a coping mechanism to social exclusion, we believe that people who score high on a distress scale will experience even more distress when excluded and will engage in even greater attitude moralization than low-distressed and included individuals.

## **Overview**

Does social exclusion lead to attitude moralization and does psychological distress moderate this relationship? In this research we conducted an online experiment and used gender equality as the issue for moralization. More specifically, we hypothesize that psychological distress moderates the effect of social exclusion on attitude moralization in such a way that for individuals who score high on psychological distress, being excluded would trigger even more attitude moralization, on the issue of gender equality.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In total, 49 international first year psychology students studying at the University of Groningen participated in our online experiment. All participants were rewarded SONA credits for completing the experiment. Six of them failed our attention checks and were excluded. Therefore our final sample consisted of 43 participants (31 females, 12 males) aged between 18 and 26 years old (one participant did not agree to report their age,  $M= 19.98$ ,  $SD= 1.73$ ), The experiment was approved by the university's ethics committee before it became available to participants. We aimed to recruit over 200 students in order to establish 80% power to detect a Cohen  $d$ 's effect size 0.40 (Leal et al., 2021), but were unable to achieve the desired sample size due to lack of response from the participant pool. The study was examined and approved by the university's ethics committee.



## Design and Procedure

Participants had to first read and agree to a consent form before beginning. Participants were told the purpose of the experiment was to study the different attitudes students have about current societal issues. The experiment consisted of three parts. In the first part, we introduced three societal issues to measure our participants attitudes. Participants read information on gender equality, animal testing and diversity in the workplace and reported their attitudes, moral convictions and attitude strength about each one of the three issues at time 1. The main target issue was gender equality.

In the second part, we presented our fictitious student association called ‘‘Speak Up Groningen’’, an association which is involved, in advocating gender equality and other issues. We created an association that participants (i.e. university students) would want to be part of; for example we mentioned that members can participate in events and social activities that are organized by the association. After reading the information, the participants were given two attention check questions (e.g. ‘‘Please indicate whether each of these sentences is true or false’’: *SpeakUp Groningen supports international students’ social life by organizing social events and activities. SpeakUp Groningen is motivated to promote social justice and cultural diversity by advocating for minority students’ rights, and fighting against gender and racial discrimination*). Following the attention checks, we asked the participants to answer filler questions about their opinions on the association (e.g. ‘‘What do you think about SpeakUp Groningen?’’ *I think SpeakUp Groningen is important for all students, I think SpeakUp Groningen deals with important societal issues (e.g., gender equality), I think SpeakUp Groningen is a nice association*).

After completing the filler questions, we introduced our manipulation. Participants completed a questionnaire which would determine if they are a good fit to join the association.

They were then assigned to be on either the exclusion or inclusion condition. In the social inclusion condition, participants read a message stated: ‘‘Congratulations! We are happy to announce that you fit into SpeakUp Groningen. Based on your responses, you seem to be a good match for this new student group and its members. This means that you can become a part of SpeakUp Groningen from now on! At the moment, the student association focuses on addressing diversity, sustainability, and gender equality issues and wants to give opportunities to those who seem to represent and care about these values. We encourage you to get in touch with them and to voice your opinions. Perhaps there may still be another opportunity to join more student associations in the future’’. In the social exclusion condition, they read the message: ‘‘ We are sorry to announce that you do not fit into SpeakUp Groningen. Unfortunately, based on your responses, you do not seem to be a good match for this new student group and its members at this time. This means that you currently cannot become a part of SpeakUp Groningen. At the moment, the student association focuses on addressing diversity, sustainability, and gender equality issues and wants to give opportunities to those who seem to represent and care about these values. We would not encourage you to get in touch with them and to voice your opinions. Perhaps there may still be another opportunity to join the student association in the future’’. Then we introduced the participants to our manipulation check to see if exclusion was indeed induced.

For the third and final part, participants were asked to again report their attitudes, moral convictions and attitude strength about each one of the three issues of gender equality, animal testing and diversity in the workplace at time 2, and were asked to report their overall psychological distress level. Then participants completed an attention check and a demographic questionnaire about their gender and age; they were debriefed, rewarded their credits and thanked for participating.

## Measures

### *Manipulation Check*

To measure belongingness participants responded to three items (e.g. ‘‘Please indicate the feelings you are experiencing right now’’ – *I feel disconnected* (Williams, 2009),  $a = .90$ ), three items for self-esteem (e.g. ‘‘Please indicate the feelings you are experiencing right now’’ – *I feel good about myself*, (Williams, 2009),  $a = .83$ ) and three items for meaningful existence (e.g. ‘‘Please indicate the feelings you are experiencing right now’’ – *I feel invisible*, (Williams, 2009),  $a = .90$ ) on a 5 point scale (1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *Extremely*). To measure overall mood we used eight items (e.g. ‘‘I feel’’ - *Good*, (Williams, 2009),  $a = .86$ ) on a 5 point scale (1 = *Not at all*, 5 = *Extremely*). To measure the overall feelings of exclusion, we combined our measurements to create the manipulation check for exclusion ( $a = .94$ ).

### *Moral Conviction and Attitude Strength*

We measured attitude moralization in time 1 and 2. Participants were asked to rate their overall support towards gender equality to indicate their attitude strength. Then, they completed a 3 items measurement of moral conviction (cf. Skitka et al., 2009; Wisneski & Skitka, 2017) where they reported how much the issue of gender equality was part of their core convictions (e.g. ‘‘How much is your opinion on gender equality’’ – *a reflection of your core moral beliefs and convictions?*), connected to their beliefs of right and wrong (e.g. ‘‘How much is your opinion on gender equality’’ – *connected to your beliefs about fundamental right and wrong?*) and a basis of their moral principle (e.g. ‘‘How much is your opinion on gender equality’’ – *based on moral principle?*) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We measured attitude moralization (the changes in moralization from time 1 to time 2) by subtracting the average scores of moral conviction in time 1 from time 2 ( $atime1 = .90$  and  $atime2 = .86$ ). We also measured the participants attitude strength in time 1 and 2 using a 2

items measurement which measured the importance of the issue of gender equality on a 7point scale, (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*), (e.g. ‘‘How much is your opinion on gender equality important to you as a person’’?) and how strongly the participant is feeling (e.g. ‘‘How strongly do you feel about gender equality’’?) ( $r_{time1} = .79$ ,  $r_{time2} = .72$ ). We measured the change in attitude strength by subtracting the average scores in time 1 from time 2.

### ***Distress***

Participants responded to questions about their psychological distress. They responded on three items of the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2003; e.g. ‘‘In the past 4 weeks, about how often did you feel nervous?’’, ‘‘In the past 4 weeks, about how often did you feel hopeless?’’, ‘‘In the past 4 weeks, about how often did you feel that everything was an effort?’’,  $\alpha = .80$ ) on a 5-point scale (1 = *All of the time*, 5 = *None of the time*).

## **Results**

### **Manipulation Checks**

We tested several 2 (social inclusion vs. social exclusion) x 2 (high vs. low moderator) on the three needs-threat (i.e., belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence), mood (Williams, 2009), and general feeling of exclusion. We found a main effect of social exclusion on belonging,  $t(39) = -2.528$ ,  $p = .015$ ,  $d = .78$ , lack of self-esteem,  $t(39) = -3.570$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 1.09$ , meaningful existence,  $t(39) = -.99$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = .30$ , negative mood,  $t(39) = -2.84$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = .90$ , and general exclusion,  $t(39) = -2.88$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = .90$  and we found no significant effect on the moderator distress  $t(39) = -.29$ ,  $p = .78$ ,  $d = .09$ . Participants in the social exclusion condition reported higher levels of need to belong ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ), lack of self-esteem ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .73$ ), meaningful existence ( $M = 1.95$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ), negative mood ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .74$ ), and overall feelings of exclusion ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) than those in the social inclusion condition ( $M_{belong} = 1.82$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ;  $M_{self-esteem} = 2.61$ ,  $SD = .72$ ;  $M_{existence} =$

1.65,  $SD = .9$  m6;  $M_{\text{mood}} = 2.06$ ,  $SD = .58$ ;  $M_{\text{exclusion}} = 2.04$ ,  $SD = .67$ ). We found significant interactions between distress and all dimensions ( $t(39) = -2.77$ ,  $p = .01$ ), between distress and belongingness ( $t(39) = -2.85$ ,  $p = .01$ ), between distress and self-esteem ( $t(39) = -2.71$ ,  $p = .01$ ), between distress and meaningful existence ( $t(39) = -2.34$ ,  $p = .03$ ) and a marginal interaction between distress and mood ( $t(39) = -1.89$ ,  $p = .07$ ), suggesting a reverse relationship between the moderator distress and each dimension.

### **Main Analyses**

Before testing our hypotheses, we first tested whether there were effects of condition on moral convictions about gender equality at time 1. A  $t$  test revealed no significant effects of condition on moral conviction about gender equality at time 1,  $t(41) = -.22$ ,  $p = .83$ . Then, we tested whether attitudes about gender equality became moralized (i.e., attitude moralization) and stronger (i.e., strengthening of attitude) from time 1 to time 2, without considering the condition. A paired-sample  $t$  test showed no significant evidence for attitude moralization of gender equality,  $t(41) = .07$ ,  $p = .94$  ( $M_{\text{time 1}} = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ;  $M_{\text{time 2}} = 6.12$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) from time 1 to time 2, regardless of condition. Moreover, another paired-sample  $t$  test indicated that attitudes did not become significantly stronger for gender equality,  $t(41) = -.72$ ,  $p = .47$ , from time 1 ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) to time 2 ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ), regardless of condition.

Before running our main model, we first centered the variables distress, attitude strength at time 1 and time 2, and computed an interaction between condition and centered distressed. To test our hypotheses, we ran one linear regression to test whether condition, distress (centered), and the interaction between condition and distress predicted attitude moralization controlling for attitude strength at time 1 and time 2 (both centered). We controlled for attitude strength to remove any effect of attitude strengthening from the moralization of attitudes (e.g., Wisneski & Skitka, 2017).

A regression analysis showed no significant effect of condition on attitude moralization of gender equality,  $\beta = -.08$ ,  $t(39) = .50$ ,  $p = .62$ ,  $d = .80$ , 95% CI = [-.59, .36]. That is, results did not support our hypothesis that participants in the social exclusion condition would moralize the issue of gender equality more ( $M = -.06$ ,  $SD = .63$ ) than those in the social inclusion condition ( $M = .05$ ,  $SD = .80$ ). There was no significant association between moderator and moralization of gender equality,  $\beta = .04$ ,  $t(39) = .16$ ,  $p = .87$ ,  $d = .01$ , 95% CI = [-.37, .43]. Finally, we found no significant interaction between condition and moderator,  $\beta = -.03$ ,  $t(42) = -.11$ ,  $p = .91$ ,  $d = .04$ , 95% CI = [-.57, .51].

### **Discussion**

In this paper we examined the relationship between social exclusion, attitude moralization and psychological distress. We hypothesized social exclusion would lead to attitude moralization of a group relevant issue (gender equality in our experiment). We further hypothesized that distressed individuals would moralize even more on group relevant issues. We conducted an online experiment within the context of a fictitious students association with gender equality as the issue to moralize.

Unfortunately, our data did not support either hypotheses. In particular, socially excluded individuals did not seem to moralize more than socially included individuals on the issue of gender equality. We found no support for our moderating hypothesis that highly distressed individuals would moralize even more. It must be noted that there was a lack of response by the participants pool resulting in low statistical power, therefore, interpreting the results requires caution and attention.

### **Theoretical Implications and Limitations**

Although no significant findings were gathered from our research, there were some theoretical implications worth mentioning. To begin with, our research is part of a first wave

of studies on the effects of social exclusion on attitude moralization, where a group relevant issue was operationalized (gender equality). Looking past the lack of significant results, this research provides additional information around the process of moralization in relation to how individuals and groups moralize issues. We are still away from understanding how exactly social exclusion changes moralization (DeWall et al., 2011), especially on a group level, but we can argue that our research approaches that question. Secondly, our study was based and extends further on how socially excluded individuals are more likely to moralize on issues relevant to the group they were excluded from in order to gain acceptance (Gardner et al., 2000) and that people who have a high need to belong would do virtually anything to belong including modifying their morals (Leary et al., 2003). Furthermore, our moderator, psychological distress, is related to the experience of isolation (Taylor, et al., 2018) which is one of the immediate results of social exclusion. Although, psychological distress can be caused by multiple factors (DeWall et al., 2011), according to our findings, distress caused by social exclusion does not lead to more attitude moralization. Provided the necessary care in interpreting these findings, future research should take them into account, as excluding factors when studying distress, social exclusion and attitude moralization.

Beyond theoretical implications, our study has some limitations. One considerable limitation was the experiment's low statistical power, which was due to a general lack of response from our participants pool ( $N=43$ ). This lack of response could be explained by the age range of our participants (18 to 26) which might not have been diverse enough. In the future, interested researchers should consider using a more diverse and larger sample size to achieve desired statistical power when researching on exclusion, moralization and group morals. Another significant limitation that we came across was that the participants were already moralized enough (given their high moralization score on gender equality at time 1) on the issue of gender equality. This was problematic because even though our manipulation

was successful, the participants did not show the increase in moralization we hoped to observe. This is indicative for the need of a better, more diverse and more neutral (on the moral issue at hand) sample for future research.

Finally, a limitation regarding the moderator psychological distress, was the moderator itself. Since distress can be caused by multiple factors which then set in motion coping mechanisms to reduce it (DeWall et al., 2011), already distressed individuals may already be looking for ways to cope besides moralizing. Therefore we can argue that additional distress caused by social exclusion was not significant enough to turn the affected individuals focus on it and so to moralize further as a way to cope. Future research on moralization should consider our findings with care given these few limitations.

### **Conclusion**

Our study is an addition to the research done to understand when does attitude moralization happen and how. Our hypothesis that social exclusion would lead to more attitude moralization and that psychological distress moderates this relationship was not supported by our experiments results. We found no evidence that excluded individuals would moralize further on group relevant issues such as gender equality. We also found no supporting evidence that psychological distress moderates the relationship between social exclusion and moralization, not even as a coping mechanism to the extensive psychological distress caused by the exclusion, as initially hypothesized. Our findings, although not supporting to our hypothesis, indicate, considering our experiments limitations, the need for more conclusive results and further understanding of the process of moralization. Untangling moralization may help us understand what motivates people to take action over their beliefs and form groups on their basis.



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