The dark side of inclusion: Undesired acceptance increases aggression

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Abstract
It is generally assumed that being accepted by others should have universally positive effects. The present research questions this assumption and shows that acceptance can sometimes arouse aggressive thoughts and feelings when people have a low desire to belong to the accepting group. In Study 1 (N = 61), international students who had low, compared to high, desire for inclusion in a host society behaved more aggressively when informed that the host society accepted them. Study 2 (N = 57) replicated this finding on attributions of aggression to members of the host society. In Study 3 (N = 76) individuals accepted into a workgroup showed more implicit aggressive cognitions when they did not desire inclusion compared to individuals who desired inclusion. The findings reveal a potential limit to the positive effects of acceptance and highlight the importance of considering group members’ motives for inclusion when investigating the effects of group acceptance.

Keywords
acceptance, aggression, group processes, rejection

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As most introductory psychology textbooks state, humans have a powerful and pervasive need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 1997, 2001). So strong is this desire for belonging and acceptance from others that rejection in all forms is painful and leads to a variety of detrimental personal and social outcomes (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Leary, 2001; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Giarocco, & Bartels, 2007; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). But is the opposite true also? If rejection is always negative, is acceptance always positive?

It is often implicitly and sometimes explicitly assumed that acceptance is always welcomed and has universally positive effects. We make the point in the present article that this assumption has stymied research addressing the potential limits of inclusion. In particular, research has failed to consider situations in which people are
accepted when they have a relatively low desire to belong to a group. We contend that acceptance may not always be welcomed, and may even have detrimental outcomes when people for various reasons do not "need to belong." To test this logic, we investigate aggression as one possible reaction to experiencing undesired acceptance into groups.

Can Acceptance Lead to Aggression?

Rejection affects individuals in a variety of ways, but one particularly common finding is that rejection makes people aggressive. Rejection has been found to increase aggressive cognitions (DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009), affect (e.g., Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004), and behavior (Twenge et al., 2001) even towards innocent bystanders (Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006), although its effects can be dampened when a competing drive for survival is activated (van Beest, Williams, & van Dijk, 2011). Being rejected also promotes a hostile cognitive bias, making individuals more likely to perceive aggression in the neutral behavior of others (DeWall et al., 2009; Reijnjies et al., 2011).

The logic is that individuals have a fundamental need to belong, and when this need is thwarted, they become frustrated and lash out at available targets (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 1997, 2001). For this reason, being accepted dampens the tendency to aggress because it meets people's need to belong (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). For instance, DeWall, Twenge, Bushman, Inm, and Williams (2010) found that acceptance by even one individual reduces rejection-related aggression by half, and for every additional accepting individual, aggression decreases in a linear fashion.

This finding confirms lay intuitions that being accepted is a positive experience that is unlikely to provoke aggression and hostility. Indeed, the idea that acceptance might lead to aggression, or that an individual might reject a group that wants to accept them, may seem foreign to many researchers interested in group belonging. In the present research we extend previous work that has considered the desire to belong as a generic need and suggest that, in particular group contexts, individuals might have a competing desire for independence. More specifically, we argue that people vary in the degree to which they want to be included in particular groups. This leads us to suggest that people with a lower desire for inclusion in a group are likely to react differently after being accepted by such groups than people with a higher desire for inclusion.

In the present research we take a perspective that distinguishes the "wants" of the individual from the "wants" of the group, and argue that these two desires may sometimes be in conflict. By addressing the interplay between the two it is possible to examine a possibility that has been neglected in the extant literature: situations where a group accepts an individual even when the individual has a relatively low desire to belong to this group. We do not attempt to invalidate previous work that has shown the benefits of acceptance, nor attempt to deny that acceptance is generally a positive experience that people generally seek out. However, we make the novel point that there are boundary conditions to this effect, suggesting that people do not always desire to be included in groups and may in certain circumstances react negatively to acceptance.

When (and Why) Does Acceptance Lead to Aggression?

Although group inclusion is typically thought of as a positive experience, there are situations when such acceptance and inclusion may be unwelcome. For example, researchers have theorized about the threat of being categorized as a member of a group against one's will as one of many possible threats to social identity (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). Similarly, people may be reluctant to think of themselves as being fully immersed in the group and interchangeable with other group members when they feel this implies they have to give up some of their personal uniqueness or cannot maintain ties to other preferred group identities (Barreto &
Ellemers, 2009). Being categorized as a group member in such a circumstance is likely to be frustrating and potentially aggravating.

If we are open to the idea that people do not always want to fully belong to the groups they are accepted into, the question arises of how people negotiate their own inclusion needs and the inclusion the group offers? Ellemers and Jetten (2013) developed the Marginality as Resulting From Group and Individual Negotiation About Inclusion (MARGINI) model to address this question. They suggest that group membership is the outcome of a dynamic interplay between a group’s goal for including an individual and an individual’s goal for inclusion in the group. According to the model, group and individual goals for inclusion may converge—resulting in a comfortable psychological “fit”—or they may diverge. For instance, the individual may desire to be included while the group has no desire to include the individual. Alternatively, the group may desire for the individual to be included while the individual does not. The latter form of “undesired acceptance” forms the focus of the present research. We define undesired acceptance as the experience of being accepted as a core member of a group when an individual does not desire to be a core member of that group.

The key point of Ellemers and Jetten’s (2013) theorizing is that inclusion is a process that is negotiated between the individual and the group. While alignment of individual and group goals for inclusion leads to harmony, misalignment of these goals leads to stress. Thus far, the literature has focused on one form of misalignment that results when the individual desires inclusion and the group does not (i.e., rejection). In investigating reactions to undesired acceptance, the present research explores another, theoretically novel type of misalignment in which the group desires inclusion while the individual does not.

Because this is a theoretically undeveloped area, it is unclear exactly how individuals will react when the group’s desire for inclusion is at odds with their own desire to be independent. One clue to how people might react can be taken from the literature on rejection, in which people often respond to thwarted attempts at inclusion with enhanced aggression (e.g., DeWall et al., 2009; Twenge et al., 2001). This leads to the prediction that asymmetry between the inclusion goals of the group and the individual is likely to become a source of tension and hostility and may therefore provoke aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior, regardless of whether this asymmetry is experienced as thwarted desire for acceptance or thwarted desire for independence. That is, just as being rejected against one’s will makes people aggressive, so too may being accepted against one’s will provoke aggression.

There are several possible reasons for why undesired acceptance might lead to enhanced aggression. First, being accepted against one’s will might reasonably create feelings of negative affect, which may be expressed in the form of aggression as people attempt to regulate the experience of negative emotions. Second, aggression might be prompted by a disidentification process whereby people psychologically distance themselves from the accepting group and therefore feel licensed to aggress against the group.

It is also possible that aggression may simply act as a signal to group members that the individual does not desire to belong to the group. In this context, aggression may be a strategy individuals use to regulate inconsistencies between group and personal goals for inclusion. Active displays of aggression would send a clear message about the individual’s goal to remain separate from the group. This would also help to regulate the group’s desire to include the individual, thus restoring social distance in line with the individual’s desire for independence. We tested these explanations for the effect to determine whether negative affect or disidentification, or neither process, explained an increase in aggression following undesired acceptance.

The Present Research

The present research advances previous work by revealing specific circumstances under which acceptance can fuel rather than dampen aggression. This work thus highlights a potential dark
side to inclusion—a novel idea in a literature that has so far emphasized the positive outcomes of acceptance. We suggest that people do not always desire inclusion, and that being accepted against one’s will may cause people to feel and behave aggressively.

In this research we conceptualize aggression as negative thoughts and behavior resulting in readiness to attack or confront. This conceptualization is drawn from work on the general aggression model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), which considers aggressive cognitions to mediate aggressive behavior. Aggression therefore depends on the availability of aggressive cognitions (a) within the individual and (b) about how other people will behave. These cognitions create a readiness for individuals to react aggressively given provocation. We assessed aggressive cognitions in three ways and using three measures sourced from previous research on rejection and aggression, via: Aggressive interpersonal evaluations (Study 1), perception of aggression in others (Study 2), and implicit aggressive cognitions (Study 3). These measures reflect the activation of aggressive cognitions when people experience undesired acceptance.

Support for predictions was examined at the group level, with members of one group receiving undesired acceptance from another group (Studies 1 and 2). In addition, we tested the generalizability and boundary conditions of the effect by examining whether support for our predictions is also found at the individual level, when an individual receives undesired acceptance from a group (Study 3).

Study 1

Study 1 tested our hypothesis that undesired acceptance may provoke aggressive behavior in a group of international students. International students reported their desire for inclusion in a host society and received feedback that host students were accepting or rejecting of international students. We measured aggressive evaluations as a potential response to being accepted when one has a lower desire for inclusion. We expected that people with a higher desire for inclusion would be less aggressive after being accepted compared with being rejected. However, we anticipated that people with a lower desire for inclusion would show no such difference in aggression. Indeed, we were open to the finding that they might even become more aggressive after being accepted than after being rejected.

We also measured negative affect and disidentification with the accepting group and examined their role as potential mechanisms of the predicted effect (i.e., mediators). Research has found that rejection lowers people’s mood and makes them feel bad (Gerber & Wheeler, 2009; Leary, Tambor, Festu, & Downs, 1995; Williams, 2001; Williams et al., 2002). Being accepted into a group when one’s desire for inclusion is low might also be expected to make people feel angry, unhappy, or even helpless. If this were the case, it could represent one explanation for why undesired acceptance increases aggression, given that negative affect often goes hand-in-hand with aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Anderson & Carnagey, 2004; DeWall & Anderson, 2011). Relatedly, it may be the case that being accepted by a group when one has a lower desire to belong reduces identification with the accepting group. Such an effect might lead individuals to feel aggressive towards what is now perceived as the accepting “outgroup.” We tested both of these potential explanations for an increase in aggression throughout the three studies presented in this paper.

Method

Design and Participants

Participants were 61 international students (38 female) at a large Australian university ranging in age from 18 to 30 years (M = 21.51, SD = 2.27). Most participants were Asian (n = 53), and a minority were American (n = 2), European (n = 5), and African (n = 1). All participants were recruited through the university participant pool and received partial course credit or US$10.00 for their participation. The experiment employed a
two-cell design in which group inclusion was manipulated (acceptance vs. rejection) and desire for inclusion in Australian society was measured. Negative affect, identification with Australian students, and aggressive behavior were the dependent variables.

Materials and Measures

Desire for inclusion measure. Four items measured desire for inclusion in Australian society ("I want to talk to Australian students and know more about them"); "I like Australian culture and I will do my best to be part of it"); "For friends, I only want people from my own country" reverse scored; "I am not interested in Australian culture" reverse scored), $\alpha = .79$. All responses were recorded on a scale ranging from $1 = \text{strongly disagree}$ to $7 = \text{strongly agree}$.

Group acceptance manipulation. Participants read bogus research results supposedly from a survey conducted at the host university that described the attitudes of Australian students towards international students. Participants in the group acceptance condition read that Australian students were interested in interacting and developing close relationships with international students. Participants in the group rejection condition read that Australian students were not interested in interacting or developing close relationships with international students.

Negative affect and identification. Participants reported their level of negative affect by indicating the extent to which they felt 18 negative emotions, including unhappy, angry, weary, hopelessly, upset, nervous, and distressed (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), $\alpha = .91$. Three items measured identification with Australian students, ("I have a lot in common with Australian students"); "In general, I would be glad to be Australian"); "I would feel good if I thought about myself as an Australian student"), $\alpha = .82$. All the items were measured on a scale ranging from $1 = \text{strongly disagree}$ to $7 = \text{strongly agree}$.

Aggressive evaluations. Aggression was measured using an experimenter evaluation method adapted from DeWall et al. (2009). The evaluation was introduced as a method used by the School of Psychology to assess experimenter quality and to decide the allocation of paid research assistant positions. The outcome of the evaluation would then supposedly have implications for the experimenter's reputation and future financial security. Because the results of the evaluation would ostensibly be made available to representatives of the School of Psychology, a negative rating reflects aggressive intentions to undermine the experimenter.

The experimenter was Australian, and this group membership was identified at the beginning of the study. Participants indicated the extent to which they believed the experimenter to be competent, likeable, friendly, and intelligent, and the extent to which they would recommend the experimenter for a paid research assistant position on a scale ranging from $1 = \text{strongly disagree}$ to $7 = \text{strongly agree}$, $\alpha = .93$. The items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicated a more negative evaluation of the Australian experimenter.

Results

Process Measures

In a hierarchical regression, the dependent variables were regressed onto measured desire for inclusion and manipulated group acceptance vs. rejection in Block 1 and the interaction in Block 2. Together, the independent variables predicted identification with Australian students in Block 1, $R^2 = .30, F(2, 55) = 11.50, p < .001$. Only desire for inclusion was a significant unique predictor, $\beta = .55, t(55) = 4.73, p < .001$, with greater desire for inclusion in Australian society associated with higher identification with Australian students. The interaction was not significant in Block 2, $R^2 = .01, F(2, 54) < 0.01$, $\beta = .01, t(54) = 0.04, p = .969$. There was no significant association between identification and aggressive behavior, $r = .04, p = .788$. 
Together, the independent variables did not predict negative affect, $R^2 = .05, F(2, 55) = 1.40, p = .255$, nor was the interaction significant when entered in a second block, $R^2\Delta = .03, F(1, 54) = 1.57, \beta = -.18, t(54) = -1.25, p = .216$. There was a significant positive association between negative affect and aggressive behavior, $r = .30, p = .021$.2

**Aggressive Evaluations**

Together, the independent variables did not predict aggression, $R^2 = .04, F(2, 55) = 1.16, p = .322$. However, the interaction was significant when entered in a second block, $R^2\Delta = .17, F(1, 54) = 11.57, \beta = -.45, t(54) = -3.40, p = .001$ (see Figure 1). Participants who were higher in desire for inclusion were less aggressive when accepted than when rejected, $\beta = -.62, t(54) = -3.55, p = .001$, consistent with the general finding that acceptance reduces aggression. However, in contrast to previous work, but consistent with our argument that undesired acceptance can sometimes be as provoking as rejection, people with a lower desire for inclusion were equally aggressive toward an Australian experimenter when they were accepted as when they were rejected, $\beta = .32, t(54) = 1.61, p = .113$. Indeed, the trend was for increased aggression when people with a lower desire for inclusion were accepted.

Inspection of the alternative set of simple slopes showed that desire for inclusion did not systematically covary with aggression when participants were rejected, $\beta = .22, t(54) = 1.20, p = .243$, but low desire for inclusion was associated with significantly greater aggression when participants were accepted, $\beta = -.72, t(54) = -5.43, p < .001$.

**Discussion**

Study 1 demonstrated that acceptance did not dampen aggression when people had a lower desire to be included in the group. In fact, aggression levels were as high for those individuals when they were accepted as when they were rejected, and trended towards being higher, despite findings that rejection is a robust antecedent to aggression (Buckley et al., 2004; DeWall et al., 2009; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009; Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Twenge et al., 2001; Twenge & Campbell, 2003; Warburton et al., 2006), and acceptance has been shown to effectively reduce aggression in past research (DeWall et al., 2010). This well-known effect of acceptance reducing aggression relative to rejection was wiped out when people had a low desire to be included in the group. Although aggression levels were overall relatively low, it was still the case that undesired acceptance resulted in relatively greater aggression than desired acceptance.

We found no evidence that people who were accepted, despite a lower desire for inclusion, felt more negative affect or were less identified with the accepting group than people who desired and received acceptance. Indeed, aggressive evaluation was found to be unrelated to people’s affective state or level of identification. We suggest, therefore, that feelings of aggression after experiencing undesired acceptance may not merely reflect an emotion regulation strategy designed to deal with the unpleasant reality of not getting one’s own way. Nor does it appear to be a simple matter of disidentifying with—and
thus feeling licensed to aggress against—the accepting group.

**Study 2**

Desire for inclusion was measured in Study 1, and we therefore cannot infer causation. To address this issue we experimentally manipulated desire for inclusion in Study 2. We were thus able to compare people who had a high desire for inclusion and were accepted (desired acceptance) with people who had a low desire for inclusion and were accepted (undesired acceptance). Study 2 also sought to replicate the undesired acceptance effect using a different measure of aggression. DeWall et al. (2009) have found that rejection creates a hostile cognitive bias that increases the tendency to attribute aggressive intentions to others. This hostile cognitive bias leads participants to see hostility in others, increasing the tendency to act aggressively and thus create a hostile cycle through which aggression is perpetuated and reinforced. Rather than measuring aggressive behavior directly, our measure of aggression in Study 2 was the degree to which participants attributed aggressive intentions to a member of the group responsible for the acceptance. We anticipated that participants who experienced undesired acceptance would show a greater hostile cognitive bias than participants who experienced desired acceptance.

**Materials and Measures**

**Desire for inclusion manipulation.** Participants were randomly assigned to a condition designed to prime a high or low desire for inclusion in Australian society. Participants in the high desire for inclusion condition read about bogus research findings claiming that international students generally desire to be accepted by Australian students. We asked participants to shed light on these research findings by reflecting on and writing about why they themselves desired inclusion in Australian society. Participants in the low desire for inclusion condition read bogus research findings that international students generally preferred not to integrate with Australian students. We asked participants to reflect on and write about why they themselves did not desire inclusion in Australian society. All participants were exposed to the same acceptance condition as in Study 1 in which they read bogus research results indicating that Australian students were interested in developing close relationships with international students.

**Dependent variables.** Participants reported their level of negative affect ($\alpha = .95$) and identification with Australian students ($\alpha = .65$) as in Study 1. Attribution of aggressive intentions was measured using a procedure adapted from DeWall et al. (2009). Participants read an essay that was ostensibly written by an Australian student in a previous study, in which the author described performing ambiguous behaviors that could be perceived as assertive or hostile. The behaviors included refusing to engage with a salesperson, lying to avoid donating blood, and returning an item to a grocery store. Participants then rated the author on the degree to which the author appeared unfriendly, dislikeable, angry, and hostile on a scale ranging from $1 = \text{not at all}$ to $7 = \text{very much}$. Hostility was the core measure of interest to determine whether participants specifically perceived aggression, rather than general negativity, in the author.

**Method**

**Design and Participants**

Participants were 46 international students (36 female) at a large Australian university ranging in age from 19 to 27 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.83$, $SD = 1.90$). Most participants were Asian ($n = 40$), and a minority were American ($n = 3$), European ($n = 2$), and African ($n = 1$). Participants were recruited through the university participant pool and received partial course credit or US$10.00 in exchange for their participation. The experiment employed a between-subjects design that compared the experience of desired acceptance ($n = 20$) and undesired acceptance ($n = 26$).
Results

Proces Measures

A one-way ANOVA was applied to identification with Australians, $F(1, 44) = 1.10, p = .299$, $\eta^2_p = .024$. There was no difference in identification depending on whether people experienced desired acceptance ($M = 4.18, SD = 1.04$) or undesired acceptance ($M = 4.47, SD = 0.84$). There was no significant association between group identification and aggressive attributions, $r < .01, p = .986$.

A one-way ANOVA was applied to negative affect, $F(1, 44) = 0.02, p = .902, \eta^2_p < .001$. There was no difference in negative affect depending on whether people experienced desired acceptance ($M = 1.99, SD = 0.91$) or undesired acceptance ($M = 2.02, SD = 0.94$). There was no significant association between negative affect and aggressive attributions, $r = .14, p = .357$.

Aggressive Attributes

A one-way ANOVA was conducted on the aggressive attribution measure, $F(1, 44) = 5.19, p = .028, \eta^2_p = .097$. Participants who experienced undesired acceptance attributed more hostility to the author of the essay ($M = 4.69, SD = 1.59$) than participants who experienced desired acceptance ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.64$; see Figure 2). There was no significant effect of the acceptance manipulation on attributions of unfriendliness, $F(1, 44) = 1.58, p = .215, \eta^2_p = .035$, dislikeability, $F(1, 44) = 0.13, p = .721, \eta^2_p = .003$, or anger, $F(1, 44) = 0.50, p = .482, \eta^2_p = .011$.

Discussion

The findings of Study 2 demonstrated experimentally that undesired acceptance creates an aggressive bias relative to desired acceptance. Participants who had a high desire for inclusion and had that desire met through acceptance attributed fewer hostile intentions than participants who experienced undesired acceptance, although there was no difference on general negativity ratings. The effect therefore appeared to be specific to attributions of aggression. Once again, there was no difference in negative affect or group identification depending on whether people experienced desired or undesired acceptance.

These findings indicate that when people are frustrated in their goals for inclusion by being accepted against their will, aggression can result. This appears to be independent of negative feelings people may experience generally or towards the group in question as a result of being frustrated in their inclusion goals. In Study 2, people perceived more aggression in others, possibly as part of a psychological mechanism that activates cognitions of aggression to react against unwanted group categorization. Seeing others as aggressive enhances independence and distance from the group. In this way, the individual desire for independence can ultimately be preserved.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that undesired acceptance primes aggression when experienced at the group level. That is, people with a low desire for inclusion reacted aggressively when their group was accepted by another group. In Study 3 we tested the effect on the individual level by manipulating individuals' desire for inclusion in a work group. In this way we are able to test whether the group-level effects in Studies 1 and 2
generalize to the individual level. In addition we included a manipulation of acceptance versus rejection to investigate whether experiencing undesired acceptance increases aggression to a similar degree as when people are rejected. This design essentially experimentally replicates the two-way interaction observed in Study 1, although at the individual level rather than the group level.

Although we hypothesize that undesired acceptance among individuals will play out in much the same way as undesired acceptance among groups, there are reasons to expect that the effects may differ. A person can afford to spurn overtures of acceptance by outgroups when they know they are already accepted by fellow ingroup members, much in the same way that group-based rejection has been found to bolster ingroup identification and so protect against the full force of rejection (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). This psychological "safety net" is not available when one is accepted or rejected as an individual. As such, it is possible that group members may experience undesired acceptance differently than individuals.

This time we tested the full crossed design that manipulated both the individual's desire for inclusion and the group's actual level of inclusion. Aggression was measured in Study 3 in the form of implicit aggressive cognitions, assessed via a word completion task. In this task, participants complete a series of words by filling in missing letters. The words can be completed in an aggressive manner or a neutral manner and the task thus measures the degree to which aggressive concepts are activated in people's minds (Anderson et al., 2004). We expected that undesired acceptance would produce the same level of aggression as rejection, and that participants in the desired acceptance condition would show the least aggression. We therefore conducted planned contrasts to compare the undesired acceptance condition to the two rejection conditions and to the desired acceptance condition. Planned comparisons are appropriate when there are a priori hypotheses about the direction of the effects and provide more power and precision in detecting effects (Howell, 2007; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

**Method**

**Design and Participants**

Participants were 76 students (47 female) at a large Australian university ranging in age from 17 to 35 years (M_{age} = 21.13, SD = 3.51). Most participants were Australian (n = 42), although the remainder were international students from Asian countries (n = 28) or America (n = 4), and two participants declined to provide information about their nationality. Participants were recruited through the university participant pool and received US$10.00 for their participation. The experiment employed a 2 x 2 design that experimentally manipulated desire for inclusion (high vs. low) and actual inclusion (acceptance vs. rejection). Negative affect, identification, and aggressive cognitions were the dependent variables.

**Materials and Measures**

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions designed to prime a low or high desire for inclusion by other participants in the study. Participants were informed that they would take part in a group task and engage in a get-to-know-you exercise ostensibly to facilitate group performance. Participants were asked to describe themselves in a few short sentences then read the descriptions of other participants. They were then asked to rate each person in terms of likability and desire to work with them on the subsequent group task. In reality all participants read the same descriptions, which were created by the research team.

**Desire for inclusion manipulation.** Participants in the low desire for inclusion wrote a short essay about why they did not want to be included in the study workgroup. Participants in the high desire for inclusion condition wrote a short essay about why they wanted to be included in the study workgroup.

**Group acceptance manipulation.** Participants were then informed that not everyone could take part in the group task because there were an uneven
number of participants in the session. Participants were led to believe that people with the highest likeability ratings would be chosen to take part in the group task. Participants in the acceptance condition were informed that they had been selected to work on the group task. Participants in the rejection condition were informed that they had not been selected to work on the group task (Twenge et al., 2001).

Planned contrasts were conducted comparing the undesired acceptance condition (coded as 2) to the desired acceptance condition (coded as 0) and the two rejection conditions (coded as −1, −1).5

**Dependent variables.** Negative affect was measured as in Studies 1 and 2, α = .94. Four items measured identification with other participants in the study (e.g., “I identify with the other participants in this study”), α = .87. The items were scored on a rating scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

To measure aggressive cognitions, participants performed a word completion task created by Anderson et al. (2004). The task consisted of an A4 page of 74 words that could be completed by adding letters. Participants were given 1 minute to complete as many of the words as possible. Half of the words could be completed to form aggressive or neutral words (e.g., k i _ _ _ could be completed as kill or kiss) and the other half could only be completed to form neutral words (e.g., t _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ e could be completed as tune or tone). The proportion of completed aggressive words relative to completed neutral words was calculated, such that higher scores indicate relatively more aggressive cognitions.

**Results**

**Process Measures**

A one-way ANOVA using the planned contrast revealed a significant effect on identification with other participants, F(2, 73) = 20.07, p < .001, ηp² = .355. Inspection of the means revealed that levels of identification of participants who experienced undesired acceptance (M = 4.74, SD = 1.17) was rather similar to participants who experienced desired acceptance (M = 5.00, SD = 1.05) but higher than participants who experienced rejection (M_{desired rejection} = 3.06, SD = 1.14 and M_{undesired rejection} = 3.41, SD = 1.21). Identification was unrelated to the number of completed aggressive words, r = .15, p = .196.

A similar contrast analysis revealed a significant effect on negative affect, F(2, 73) = 5.87, p = .004, ηp² = .139. Participants who experienced undesired acceptance showed no difference in negative affect (M = 1.96, SD = 0.82) compared to participants who experienced desired acceptance (M = 1.90, SD = 0.92), although they reported less negative affect than participants who experienced rejection (M_{desired rejection} = 3.22, SD = 1.17 and M_{undesired rejection} = 3.22, SD = 1.17). Negative affect was unrelated to the number of completed aggressive words, r = −.13, p = .283.6

**Aggressive Cognitions**

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of the planned comparison on aggressive word completion, F(2, 73) = 4.29, p = .017, ηp² = .105. Participants who experienced undesired acceptance completed more aggressive words (M = 0.34, SD = 0.24) than participants who experienced rejection, (M_{desired rejection} = 0.23, SD = 0.19 and M_{undesired rejection} = 0.14, SD = 0.14; see Figure 3). Participants who experienced undesired acceptance also completed more aggressive words than participants who experienced desired acceptance (M = 0.23, SD = 0.10), p = .049.

**Discussion**

As expected, aggressive cognitions were higher among individuals who experienced undesired acceptance than among individuals who experienced desired acceptance. This result conceptually replicates the effect from Study 2 that undesired acceptance can provoke aggression. We also found that undesired acceptance produced the same level of negative affect and
identification as desired acceptance, thus ruling out emotion regulation and disidentification as potential mechanisms of the aggression effect.

In this study on individual-level acceptance, rejection was shown to reduce group identification and increase negative affect relative to acceptance—both when desired and undesired. In addition, undesired acceptance trended towards producing more aggression than all of the other conditions. This slight difference in effects of individual-level versus group-level acceptance or rejection will be discussed next.

**General Discussion**

The present research shows that acceptance provokes aggression when it is undesired. In three studies, people who were accepted into a group despite a lower desire for inclusion behaved more aggressively (Study 1), perceived more aggression in others (Study 2), and had more aggressive cognitions (Study 3) than people who desired and received acceptance. This research advances a literature on inclusion and belonging that has generally assumed acceptance to have universally positive effects. Providing a more nuanced perspective on these findings, we show that acceptance is not always experienced in a positive way and can provoke aggression when people have a low desire to be included in a group.

Over the course of the studies we assessed negative affect and disidentification as potential mediating mechanisms mediating the undesired acceptance aggression effect, finding no evidence for mediation. This suggests that people do not engage in aggressive behavior after experiencing undesired acceptance to resolve negative feelings in general or toward the accepting group specifically. On reflection, it may not be surprising that these processes did not account for the increase in aggression following undesired acceptance. Some researchers theorize that negative feelings can be experienced in parallel to aggressive behavior, rather than acting as mediating mechanisms (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007). Certainly we found that the most consistent reaction participants had after experiencing undesired acceptance was of heightened aggression rather than negative affect or disidentification.

So why does this effect occur? One possibility is that aggression serves as a behavioral signal that individuals do not wish to be included in a group. Through the activation of aggressive cognitions after experiencing undesired acceptance, individuals become primed and ready to behave aggressively to defend their individuality. Such a function would be consistent with theorizing by Ellemers and Jetten (2013) about marginal group membership as a negotiated process. In this model, individual and group goals for inclusion may converge or diverge and when they do diverge, individuals and groups must each manage the interaction to resolve the conflict. Displays of aggression may be one way that individuals can use both to signal their own goal for independence and regulate the group’s goal to include them.

Another possibility is that participants may be reacting to a loss of control brought about by undesired acceptance. When individuals are accepted into a group they do not wish to belong to, they are denied their individual freedom to choose how they are categorized and perceived by others. Loss of control has been found to increase aggressive responding (Warburton et al., 2006), which may account for the link between
undesired acceptance and aggression observed in the present research. Alternatively, it may be that undesired acceptance violates expectations about one’s relationship with a group, thus increasing feelings of anxiety and inspiring aggressive reactions. These mechanisms would be consistent with theorizing by Ellemers and Jetten (2013) and await empirical investigation.

In Study 3 we note that individuals who experienced undesired acceptance showed even more aggressive cognitions than those who were rejected; responses of the latter conditions were not significantly different from individuals who experienced desired acceptance. This finding seems to be inconsistent with much of the research demonstrating that rejection provokes aggression (Buckley et al., 2004; DeWall et al., 2009; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009; Leary et al., 2006; Twenge et al., 2007; Twenge et al., 2001; Warburton et al., 2006). The nature of the manipulation of rejection in Study 3 might account for this inconsistency. We propose that the rejection of the individual in Study 3 could arguably be considered more severe than the rejection of one’s group in Study 1. In the first study, participants were informed that their group as a whole was rejected. While still an unpleasant experience, individuals can turn to their own group members as a source of support in this situation and thus remain comparatively protected from the full force of rejection (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Indeed, research has shown that exclusion in groups mitigates the negative effect of rejection on self-reported needs (van Beest, Carter-Sowell, van Dijk, & Williams, 2012). In contrast, individuals in Study 3 were rejected solely based on their personal tastes and characteristics. It was implied that they received the lowest liking ratings of all the participants in the session and were in essence ostracized from the group. Without an ingroup to bolster feelings of agency and collective action, participants may have reacted to rejection with passivity and depression rather than active aggression.

Alternatively, the different aggression levels in the two studies may be explained by dissimilarities in the dependent measures. Rejection has been shown to cause temporary decrements in self-regulation, which manifests as impaired attention and a disinclination to exert effort on challenging tasks (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005). This effect may account for the particularly low levels of aggressive cognitions in Study 3. In this study our measure of aggression was a word completion task—a task that would have required a relatively high degree of attention and self-regulation. This is in comparison to the relatively simple heuristic judgement participants made in the behavioral measure used in Study 1.

Notwithstanding the slight differences in the effects of rejection we observed in Study 1 versus Study 3, the main contribution of this research is that it documents the negative consequences of undesired acceptance. These findings gel with interpersonal relations research showing that acceptance and belonging may not always be of paramount importance to individuals. Baumeister and Leary (1995) hypothesized that acceptance satiates a need to belong, resulting in a temporarily reduced drive for acceptance. DeWall, Baumeister, and Vohs (2008) provided empirical evidence for this phenomenon: individuals showed reduced motivation on a task supposedly diagnostic of interpersonal attraction when they had been accepted compared to when they had not. The studies presented here complement and extend these findings by showing the negative consequences of undesired acceptance in intergroup (Studies 1 and 2) and intragroup contexts (Study 3). Future research may consider adding a control condition to assess the direct effect of desire for inclusion independent of whether participants receive acceptance or rejection information.

It is important to be mindful of the factors that affect individuals’ desire for inclusion. In particular at the group level, an individual’s desire for inclusion may be determined in important ways by their membership in other groups. For example, research on multiple group membership leads us to suggest that, because people belong to many groups, they have multiple opportunities for acceptance (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009; Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, &
Haslam, 2009; Jones & Jetten, 2011). From this observation, it follows that it is not necessary that individuals feel a strong need to belong and be included in all of these groups to the same extent. It is more plausible that when people have multiple opportunities for acceptance, they may seek inclusion in some groups more than in others. Indeed, it might even be the case that to the extent that inclusion needs are fully met by certain groups, a person may have a relatively low need to belong to other groups.

A reasonable question to ask given our focus on individual goals for inclusion is whether the negative effects of rejection would be reduced if individuals had a low desire to belong to the group rejecting them. It is worth noting that we found no differences in aggression between people who were rejected from a group to which they did or did not desire to belong (Studies 1 and 3). This finding is consistent with research showing that exclusion is painful even at the hands of a trivial group (Bernstein, Sacco, Young, Hugenberg, & Cook, 2010), strangers (Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler, & Williams, 2012), or an undesirable group such as the Ku Klux Klan (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007). It suggests that rejection has negative effects even if people are rejected from a group to which they did not wish to belong. However, a closer look at the findings of Gonsalkorale and Williams shows that the effects of rejection were partially dampened when people were rejected from an undesirable compared to a desirable group. As such, it might be the case that the effects of rejection can be reduced but not necessarily eliminated by taking into account individual goals for inclusion. Such a perspective would be consistent with research showing that introducing competing survival concerns can dampen, but not reduce, the negative effects of ostracism (van Beest et al., 2011).

Conclusions

By distinguishing between inclusion goals of the individual and inclusion goals of the group the present research offers a new lens through which to view the literature on belonging. The literature to date has tended to focus either on the individual experience of being rejected, or the group experience of rejecting. Insofar as acceptance has been considered, it has typically been conceptualized as a comparison condition to rejection and as having universally positive effects. The present research has contributed theoretically first by considering acceptance in its own right rather than in comparison to rejection, and second by distinguishing the individual's desire for inclusion from the group's desire for inclusion. By acknowledging that individuals may differ in their desire to be accepted into groups, the present research affords a more complete understanding of the dynamics of belonging and how it is regulated and negotiated between individuals and groups.

This work highlights the need to take into account individual motives for inclusion in groups. Until now, researchers have tended to assume that people have an unmitigated desire for inclusion. Our findings show that people do not always desire inclusion in groups, and can have negative reactions when accepted into such groups against their will. Although we do not deny the need to belong as a fundamental human motive, nor do we discount research demonstrating the positive qualities of acceptance (e.g., DeWall & Bushman, 2011; DeWall et al., 2010), we have sought to bring a more nuanced perspective to the literature on inclusion and belonging. By taking into account that individual and group goals for inclusion do not always match, we are better placed to understand the group dynamics of acceptance and rejection. It turns out that just as exclusion from groups can be provoking and painful, inclusion too can have a dark side.

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Notes

1. Some additional participants (n = 42) were run by a visiting Dutch experimenter whose identity as an international student was made salient at the beginning of the study. These participants showed no interaction between desire for inclusion and actual inclusion on aggressive behavior, R²Δ = .01, F(2, 41) = 0.34, β = −0.09, p = .565, although the three-way interaction between desire for inclusion, actual inclusion, and experimenter nationality was also not significant, β = 0.36, p = .240. This null effect is consistent with the interpretation that aggression following undesired acceptance serves as a signal to the accepting outgroup, insofar as aggression was not directed against a fellow ingroup member (international student). It also fits with research demonstrating that perceived allies typically do not become targets of aggression following social inclusion versus exclusion manipulations (Tweneg et al., 2001).

2. In the interests of full transparency, we would like to acknowledge that some other variables were also measured in the study. Although our main focus was on aggressive reactions, we included these additional variables to rule out potentially plausible alternative explanations (e.g., reduced identification), and/or explore whether additional effects might be visible on a broader range of outcomes (e.g., well-being or motivation).

There were no significant interactions on prevention and promotion regulatory focus (β = .342 and .555), ingroup identification (β = .400), ingroup and outgroup loyalty (β = .925 and .702), negative attitudes toward the outgroup (β = .736), and willingness to allocate (hypothetical) money to the ingroup and the outgroup (β = .509 and .824). There was a significant interaction on life satisfaction, R²Δ = .11, F(3, 44) = 5.95, β = .37, p = .006, and positive affect, R²Δ = .08, F(2, 52) = 5.31, β = −.31, p = .025. People with a lower desire for inclusion reported significantly less life satisfaction after experiencing acceptance relative to rejection (β = −.70, p = .001), although not significantly less positive affect (β = −.30, p = .146). Participants who were higher in desire for inclusion showed no difference in life satisfaction when accepted than when rejected (β = .66, p = .727), but did tend to show higher positive affect (β = .35, p = .055). These findings indicate that taking a nuanced perspective that considers the interplay of individual and group desires for inclusion may show effects beyond aggressive behavior, extending to consequences for individual well-being.

3. Sixteen participants were collected who were exposed to a rejection condition after reflecting on why they did or did not desire acceptance in Australian society, making these “desired rejection” (n = 5) and “undesired rejection” (n = 11) conditions. The cell sizes were determined to be too small to analyze and as such these participants were excluded from analysis.

4. There was no significant effect of the acceptance manipulation on life satisfaction (β = .946), positive affect (β = .160), prevention and promotion regulatory focus (β = .558 and .705), ingroup identification (β = .064), ingroup and outgroup loyalty (β = .248 and .227), negative attitudes toward the outgroup (β = .378), and desire to expose members of the ingroup and the outgroup to negative sounds (β = .869). Although we found no significant differences in desire to subject ingroup and outgroup members to negative sounds, no time limit was applied to participants’ decision and participants took longer to set the sound level for outgroup members (M = 72.45, SD = 37.21) than ingroup members (M = 12.21, SD = 8.80), r < .001. As a result, participants may have had the opportunity reconsider instinctive aggressive reactions to outgroup members.

5. A 2 x 2 ANOVA revealed no significant interaction between individual desire for inclusion and group acceptance on identification with other participants, F(1, 72) = 0.03, p = .866, 78.5 < .001, negative affect, F(1, 72) = 0.13, p = .722, 78.5 < .002, or aggressive word completion, F(1, 72) = 0.03, p = .867, 78.5 < .001.

6. There was no significant effect of the planned comparison on personal identity strength (β = .635), group loyalty (β = .293), and negative attitudes toward the group (β = .469). There was a significant effect on state self-esteem, F(2, 73) = 4.60, p = .023, 85.7 < .001, positive affect, F(2, 73) = 4.49, p < .001, 85.7 = .206, and willingness to work on behalf of the group, F(2, 73) = 4.68, p = .012, 85.7 = .114. Participants who received undesired acceptance reported higher state self-esteem (M = 4.90, SD = 0.98) than participants who received rejection (Mself-rejection = 4.92, SD = 1.14 and Mdesirabled rejection = 4.29, SD = 1.09), but not higher self-esteem than participants who received desired acceptance (M = 4.45, SD = 0.93).
The same pattern was observed for positive affect. Participants who received undesired acceptance reported greater positive affect \( (M = 5.02, SD = 0.97) \) than participants who received rejection \( (M_{\text{undesired rejection}} = 4.08, SD = 0.94 \) and \( M_{\text{desired rejection}} = 3.91, SD = 0.85) \), but not greater positive affect than participants who received desired acceptance \( (M = 4.85, SD = 0.92) \). These findings indicate that acceptance in general makes people feel good about themselves, consistent with a large literature highlighting the positive consequences of acceptance. However, our other findings indicate that parallel to these positive feelings, undesired acceptance specifically can be associated with a simultaneous increase in aggression.

The same pattern was also observed for willingness to work for the group. Participants who received undesired acceptance reported greater willingness to work for the group \( (M = 5.32, SD = 0.97) \) than participants who received rejection \( (M_{\text{undesired rejection}} = 4.25, SD = 1.59 \) and \( M_{\text{desired rejection}} = 4.60, SD = 1.19) \), but not greater willingness than participants who received desired acceptance \( (M = 5.19, SD = 1.92) \). This finding shows that people can still experience a desire to help a group after experiencing undesired acceptance, indicating that aggressive reactions in this context are not borne out of ill will toward the accepting group. Rather, we propose that aggression may act as a signal to the group that an individual desires to remain independent.

References


