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Suddenly included: Cultural differences in experiencing re-inclusion

Michaela Pfundmair[1], Verena Graupmann[2], Hongfei Du[3,4], Dieter Frey[1], and Nilüfer Aydin[5]

[1]Department of Psychology, Ludwig-Maximilians University of Munich, Munich, Germany
[2]Department of Psychology, DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA
[3]Department of Pediatrics, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA
[4]Department of Psychology, University of Macau, Macau, China
[5]Department of Psychology, Alpen-Adria University of Klagenfurt, Klagenfurt, Austria

Abstract

In the current research we examined whether re-inclusion (i.e., the change from a previous state of exclusion to a new state of inclusion) was perceived differently by people with individualistic and collectivistic cultural backgrounds. Individualists (German and Austrian participants) but not collectivists (Chinese participants) experienced re-inclusion differently than continued inclusion: Whereas collectivistic participants did not differentiate between both kinds of inclusion, individualistic participants showed reduced fulfilment of their psychological needs under re-inclusion compared to continued inclusion. The results moreover revealed that only participants from individualistic cultures expressed more feelings of exclusion when re-included than when continually included. These exclusionary feelings partially mediated the relationship between the different states of inclusion and basic need fulfilment.

Keywords: social inclusion; social re-inclusion; social exclusion; culture

Suddenly Included:

Cultural Differences in Experiencing Re-inclusion

Many high school movies follow a similar plot: The protagonist is introduced as being different from the other kids, making her or him a natural choice for the "outcast." During the course of the film a number of events lead the others to realizing the protagonist's value. The outcast becomes popular and is included by the "cool kids." This scenario can also be observed in human history: After the fall of the wall in 1989 East Germans were re-included into West German society; after the Chinese Cultural Revolution intellectuals and literati were reintegrated to the Chinese society in 1976. Being suddenly included after having been in an outsider position happens frequently on the individual and the collective level. With exclusion being a negative experience (Williams, 2009), how do people feel after re-inclusion? Can re-inclusion restore feelings of belongingness? As cultures differ in how much they focus on social connections, we suggest that cultural background might play a role in how transitions from exclusion to inclusion are experienced.

The need to belong and being excluded

Humans have a fundamental desire to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Being included comes with protection; being excluded, however, often has negative consequences – in our evolutionary history, excluded group members died, whereas inclusion was associated with security and reproductive opportunities within the group (Gruter & Masters, 1986). Negative consequences of a failed inclusion are powerful and immediate (see Williams, 2009). Regardless of how irrational such a negative reaction is (e.g., if people are explicitly told that they will be ostracized by a computer or scripted interaction partners; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004), people report lower levels of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. The need to belong is even suggested to be comparably important to our mind as hunger or thirst to our body (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

As postulated by the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the fact that every culture is based on living together, the importance of being included should be a cultural universal. How people live together, however, varies depending on the context. We know from a broad range of intercultural research that the cultural background has profound implications for our thoughts and behaviors (Heine, 2008). That the need to belong relates to aspects of the self that are shaped by culture is also indicated by the sociometer theory (Leary, 1999): It suggests that the pervasive drive to maintain significant interpersonal relationships is associated with self-esteem – the definition of the self, however, is dependent on the cultural background.

The culturally determined self-construal

Culture-based variations in self-construal lead to differences in how securely bonded people need to be and how strongly attached to others they feel. The culturally determined self-construal is strongly defined by independent and interdependent aspects of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While people with a more independent self set their priorities on individual uniqueness, personal autonomy, and independence, people with a more interdependent self focus on group harmony, interpersonal relations, and interdependence. The definitions of independent and interdependent selves are strongly related to the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980). Evolutionarily, the respective selves emerged in those geographical areas where their attributes were politically and socially beneficial: Individualistic cultures which are mainly located in North America and Western Europe developed a more independent self-construal as self-reliance and freedom were crucial for survival in hunter or information societies with open frontiers. Collectivistic cultures which are located in Asia, Africa, or South America developed a more interdependent definition of the self as conformity and obedience were crucial to survive in nomadic or agricultural societies with low mobility (Barry, Child, & Bacon, 1959).

The interplay of self-concept and social exclusion vs. inclusion

Cultures differ in their experience of social exclusion. Recent research has shown that U.S. participants with a more interdependent self-construal experience social exclusion as less negative, reporting less negative mood, higher self-esteem, and less aggressive behavioral intentions compared to U.S. participants with a more independent self-construal (Gardner, Knowles, & Jefferis, 2012). Similarly, an interdependent self-construal in Chinese participants has been showed to facilitate the recovery for belonging and meaningful existence after exclusion (Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2013). It has further been observed that individualistic individuals were affected both in their basic needs belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence and in their physical well-being (operationalized by heart rate) to much greater extents than collectivistic individuals who did not show the high degrees in negative reaction to social exclusion in their basic need fulfilment and physical comfort observed in individualists (Pfundmair, Aydin, Du, Yeung, Frey, & Graupmann, 2014a). In congruence with this, only participants with a more independent self and individualistic cultural background reacted to social exclusion with active coping behavior; participants with a more interdependent self and collectivistic background did not show differential behavioral intentions (Pfundmair, Graupmann, Frey, & Aydin, 2014b). Likewise, an examination of workplace bullying in 15 countries revealed that people with more individualistic cultural backgrounds were less likely to find bullying behaviors acceptable (Power et al., 2009). These findings indicate that bullying – similar to social exclusion – has more *negative* effects on individualistic individuals than on collectivistic individuals. People with an individualistic cultural background seem to be more psychologically vulnerable when facing an instance of social exclusion whereas people with a collectivistic background do not seem to be as threatened by the exclusions studied in the current paradigms. This collectivistic advantage has been interpreted as a protection through social representations that are more readily available to collectivists (Gardner et al., 2012), suggesting that reminders of social

connections following exclusion have the power to eliminate negative outcomes (Twenge et al., 2007); or by lower relevance of individual-based incidents for collectivists (Pfundmair et al., 2014a) as the individual social standing does not affect the core of the interdependent self.

How do these culture-specific effects translate to the experience of social inclusion? Different cultures value social support differently (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Luca, 1988): Affiliation is central for collectivistic, whereas self-reliance is core for individualistic people. Collectivists, striving for harmony and avoidance of conflicts (Takahashi, Ohara, Antonucci, & Akiyama, 2002), seem to focus more on positive aspects of social interactions than individualists. Different cultures might therefore also differ in how they experience transitions from exclusion to inclusion. People with individualistic cultural background might benefit less from a transition to inclusion than people from collectivistic cultures.

Re-inclusion and self-definition

Re-inclusion happens when a person who has been excluded from a group of people in the past is suddenly included and accepted (i.e., the person moves from exclusion to inclusion). Research on social exclusion has primarily focused on how people deal with exclusion as a change from a baseline state of being included. Therefore, most research designs examining exclusion use inclusion as a control condition (e.g., Ren et al., 2013), counterbalancing the impact that previous inclusion or exclusion experiences might have regarding the evaluation of the inclusion experience evoked in the laboratory by random assignment. Looking at previous exclusion experiences systematically, however, should be of particular importance when being included by a group of people one has been excluded from before. Regarding the profound psychological impact that exclusion has on individual experiences of belonging, self-esteem, control and meaning in life, re-inclusion to a particular group should have different psychological quality than a simple maintenance of inclusion.

Why should re-inclusion be different than continued inclusion? On the one hand, people facing re-inclusion might not be able to integrate the previous exclusionary experience with the acceptance that follows it; this could be related to a preference for consistency in interaction partners (Cialdini, Trost & Newsom, 1995). On the other hand, with the previous exclusion in mind they might not trust the new situation. Taking into account the theory of hypothesis testing in social perception (Bruner & Postman, 1949; Lilli & Frey, 1993), the singular positive incident might not be able to disprove their negative hypothesis about this particular social situation.

As people with different cultural backgrounds differ in their experience of social exclusion and therefore have different feelings towards the state of exclusion, we hypothesize that they also have different feelings towards re-inclusion. On the basis of individualists' greater sensitivity to exclusion (Power et al., 2009) and, in particular, their greater propensity to experience *negative* feelings in this context (Gardner et al., 2012; Pfundmair et al., 2014a; Ren et al., 2013), we predict that individualists will show a tendency to react resentfully to re-inclusion rather than appreciate the new state of inclusion. On the basis of collectivists' lower psychological susceptibility to experiencing exclusion as negative (Gardner et al., 2012; Pfundmair et al., 2014a; Ren et al., 2013) and their greater focus on positive aspects of social interactions (e.g., Takahashi et al., 2002; Triandis et al., 1988), we predict, on the other hand, that collectivists will react more positively to re-inclusion.

Overview of the present study

The present study was intended to answer the question whether re-inclusion, i.e. exclusion followed by inclusion, is experienced differently than continued inclusion and whether people with different cultural background differ in their experience. We compared participants from China with participants from Austria and Germany. State of inclusion was manipulated by asking participants to visualize a scenario about a workplace situation where an employee was not able to fit in with the co-workers or where the co-workers were good

friends; in the second part, the worker experienced to be included and accepted by the colleagues during an important presentation. We decided to use this manipulation, rather than asking people to write an essay on a past experience, to ensure that the manipulations were similar in valence[1]. Assessing thoughts and feelings about this scenario, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire. As individualists experience exclusion with more negative feelings than collectivists (e.g., Pfundmair et al., 2014a) and as collectivists set a bigger value on affiliation (e.g., Triandis et al., 1988), we hypothesized the following: German and Austrian participants would show more negative reactions to re-inclusion than to continued inclusion; Chinese participants would differentiate less between both states of inclusion.

Method

Participants

One-hundred-and-seven people participated in this study: 36 students who were approached at a university in mainland China (14 women and 22 men), 32 students from a German university (24 women and 8 men), and 39 students from an Austrian university (33 women, 5 men, and 1 who did not specify gender). They ranged in age from 19 to 30 years (M = 21.17, SD = 1.92) in the Chinese sample, from 18 to 77 years (M = 27.19, SD = 10.56) in the German sample, and from 17 to 30 years (M = 20.95, SD = 2.96) in the Austrian sample[2].

Design and procedure

The experiment was based on a 2 (*status:* re-inclusion versus continued inclusion) x 3 (*culture:* China versus Austria versus Germany) factorial design.

Participants were asked to take part in a study on perception and empathy in scenario descriptions; if they agreed they were requested to fill out a questionnaire via Internet in their respective language. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two scenario conditions: re-inclusion and continued inclusion. In each, subjects were asked to read the scenario carefully, and try to put themselves into the position of the individual in the story. They should visualize what they might think and feel in these circumstances. Prior studies have

shown that scenario descriptions induce responses that can be compared to those found using interpersonal methods for creating exclusion (e.g., Fiske & Yamamoto, 2005). Besides, the scenarios were validated in a previous design (Pfundmair et al., 2014a; Pfundmair et al., 2014b; based on Aydin, Fischer, & Frey, 2010). After reading the scenarios, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire consisting of an item to evaluate their exclusionary feelings and a basic needs scale. In the end, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Materials

Culture. We compared participants from China with participants from Germany and Austria to contrast cultures which have been found to differ in their level of individualism in previous intercultural work: According to Hofstede's country scores on the dimensions of national culture (based on a large database of comprehensive studies; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), China has an individualism score of 20, Germany and Austria have scores of 67 and 55. Conceptualizing individualism and collectivism as opposite poles of a single dimension, the score numbers are to be interpreted by relative comparisons: In our study, hence, China represents the more collectivistic culture and Germany and Austria the more individualistic cultures.

Status. Participants in the "re-inclusion" condition read the following scenario about a situation where a worker was not able to fit in with the colleagues:

> *Some time ago you were offered a job in a big company and you accepted the offer. Although you have been working in your new job for a while you have the feeling not to really relate to your colleagues. The colleagues stick together during the lunch break and do not make the effort to get to know you. Attempts to socialize on your part are almost always unsuccessful. You do not feel comfortable in the company and you feel that your colleagues have not become friends.*

Participants in the "continued inclusion" conditions were asked to read a scenario about a workplace situation with colleagues being good friends:

> *Some time ago you were offered a job in a big company and you accepted the offer. You have been working in your new job for a while now and you have the feeling to have a very good connection with your colleagues. There is always a lot of socializing during lunch breaks and the colleagues make efforts to get to know you. Attempts to socialize on your part are always successful. You feel comfortable in the company and you feel that your colleagues have become actual friends.*

The second part of the scenario was the implementation of the subsequent social inclusion. Every participant read that the employee perceived to be strongly included and accepted by the co-workers during an important presentation:

> *Today you have to present your ideas in a team meeting. This presentation is very important for you; you have been preparing it for months. After giving the speech, both your colleagues and your boss react enthusiastic; they add good ideas and agree to your suggestions. You have the feeling that you are fully accepted as a member of the team and the company. You feel that you are taken absolute seriously from your boss and your colleagues and you do not feel left alone. You are feeling completely accepted.*

After participants had finished reading the complete scenarios, they had either experienced re-inclusion, when they changed their previous state of exclusion to a new state of inclusion, or they had experienced continued inclusion, when the previous state of inclusion remained a state of inclusion.

Extent of feeling excluded. Evaluating the extent of exclusionary feelings, participants were asked to rate the following item: "To what extent did you feel excluded in the described scenario?".

Basic needs. Evaluating the levels of the four fundamental needs, participants were asked to respond on 11 items (based on the items by Zadro et al., 2004) with regard to the overall story: three items on belonging (e.g., "I felt poorly accepted by the others" (recoded); $\alpha = .89$), three items on self-esteem (e.g., "I felt that the others failed to perceive me as a worthy and likeable person" (recoded); $\alpha = .78$), three items on control (e.g., "I felt that I was able to live my life as I wanted"; $\alpha = .86$), and two items on meaningful existence[3] (e.g., "I felt non-existent during the scenario" (recoded); $r = .68$). All items were rated on 9-point Likert scales from 1 (*not at all)* to 9 (*very much*), higher values indicating higher need fulfilment.

Results

Basic need fulfilment. As all four basic needs were highly intercorrelated (see Table 1), we calculated a 2 (status) x 3 (culture) MANOVA. The MANOVA revealed a significant multivariate main effect of status, Wilks's $\Lambda = .50$, $F(4, 98) = 24.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .50$, a significant main effect of culture, Wilks's $\Lambda = .66$, $F(8, 196) = 5.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$, and a significant interaction, Wilks's $\Lambda = .63$, $F(8, 196) = 6.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$.

Table 1

Intercorrelations between the dependent basic needs variables

		1.	2.	3.	4.
1.	Belonging	-			
2.	Self-esteem	.86*	-		
3.	Control	.83*	.83*	-	
4.	Meaningful existence	.85*	.82*	.79*	-

* $p < .001$.

Given the significance of the overall test, univariate effects were performed. Significant univariate main effects of status were obtained for belonging, $F(1, 101) = 95.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .49$, self-esteem, $F(1, 101) = 73.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .42$, control, $F(1, 101) = 49.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$, and meaningful existence, $F(1, 101) = 73.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .42$: Participants faced with re-inclusion generally experienced less feelings of belonging ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.95$ to $M = 7.40$, $SD = 1.64$), self-esteem ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.64$ to $M = 6.90$, $SD = 1.83$), control ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.78$ to $M = 6.96$, $SD = 1.68$), and meaningful existence ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 2.03$ to $M = 7.91$, $SD = 1.50$) compared to participants facing continued inclusion. For self-esteem (but not for the other needs), there was also a significant main effect of culture, $F(2, 101) = 8.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$: Bonferroni post hoc comparisons revealed that Chinese participants generally had lower levels of self-esteem ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 0.81$) compared to Austrian participants ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 2.49$), $p < .001$, but not compared to German participants ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 2.36$), $p = .53$; German participants showed lower levels of self-esteem than Austrian participants, $p = .04$.

Importantly, the univariate tests also revealed significant two-way interactions for each of the basic needs: belonging, $F(2, 101) = 23.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .31$, self-esteem, $F(2, 101) = 19.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$, control, $F(2, 101) = 14.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$, and meaningful existence, $F(2, 101) = 11.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$. An analysis of simple effects showed that Chinese participants did not differ between re-inclusion and continued inclusion with regard to their basic needs level. Both Austrian and German participants, however, showed a significant difference between re-inclusion and continued inclusion: They rated re-inclusion as more negative regarding their feelings of belonging (Austrians: $F(1, 101) = 99.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .50$; Germans: $F(1, 101) = 44.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .31$), self-esteem (Austrians: $F(1, 101) = 86.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .46$; Germans: $F(1, 101) = 30.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$), control (Austrians: $F(1, 101) = 49.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$; Germans: $F(1, 101) = 29.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .23$), and meaningful existence (Austrians: $F(1, 101) = 52.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .34$;

Germans: $F(1, 101) = 42.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$) compared to continued inclusion, see Figure 1. For descriptive statistics, see Table 2.

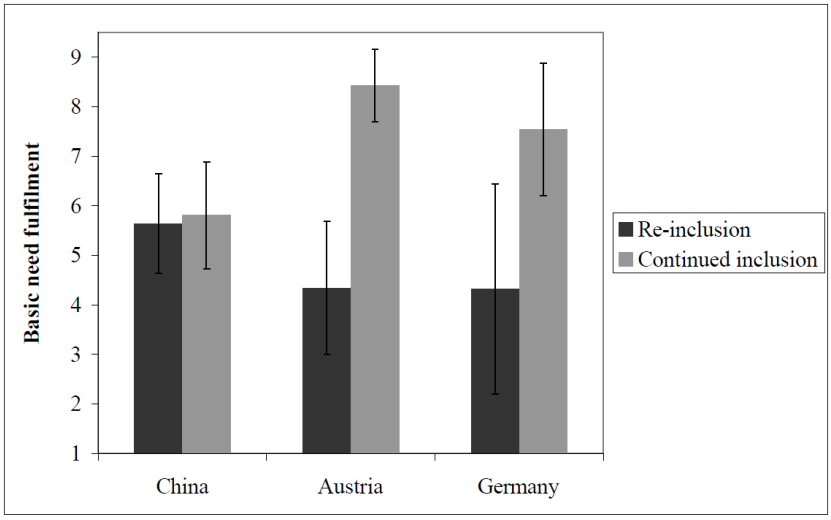

Figure 1. The effect of status x culture on self-reported levels of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (combined); error bars represent ± 1 *SE*.

Table 2

Means and standard deviations (in parenthesis) of variables as a function of status and culture

	China		Austria		Germany	
	Re-inclusion (n = 17)	Continued inclusion (n = 19)	Re-inclusion (n = 20)	Continued inclusion (n = 19)	Re-inclusion (n = 17)	Continued inclusion (n = 15)
Belonging	6.00 (1.12)	6.19 (1.41)	3.57 (1.46)	8.42 (0.86)	4.02 (2.25)	7.62 (1.76)
Self-esteem	5.04 (0.83)	5.15 (0.80)	4.37 (1.66)	8.54 (0.83)	4.27 (2.13)	7.02 (1.68)
Control	5.65	5.54	4.65	8.09	4.39	7.33

	(1.15)	(1.44)	(1.54)	(1.08)	(2.33)	(1.31)
Meaningful	5.97	6.58	5.00	8.76	4.74	8.50
existence	(1.47)	(1.43)	(1.80)	(0.69)	(2.58)	(1.18)
Extent of						
feeling	4.00	3.26	6.00	1.37	5.59	1.87
excluded	(1.80)	(1.66)	(2.18)	(0.83)	(2.27)	(1.96)

Note. The score represents one, two or three items presented on nine-point scales (1 = not at all, 9 = very much).

Feeling excluded. We hypothesized that the individualist's strong differentiation between both kinds of inclusion would be due to lasting feelings of exclusion causing a more resentful reaction. We therefore conducted a 2 (status) x 3 (culture) ANOVA with the dependent variable "extent of exclusionary feelings". The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of status, $F(1, 101) = 72.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .42$, such that re-inclusion was generally leading to more feelings of exclusion compared to continued inclusion ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.71$ to $M = 5.24$, $SD = 2.23$). There was no significant main effect of culture, $F(2, 101) = 0.02$, $p = .98$. Additionally and importantly, there was a significant culture x status interaction, $F(2, 101) = 11.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$: Similar to the results for basic needs, a simple effects analysis indicated that Chinese participants did not show a difference in their exclusionary feelings between re-inclusion and continued inclusion. Austrian and German participants, however, felt significantly more excluded during re-inclusion than during continued inclusion (Austrians: $F(1, 101) = 62.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .38$; Germans: $F(1, 101) = 32.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$). A further analysis of simple main effects by pairwise comparisons showed that German and Austrian participants did not differ in their extent of exclusionary feelings, neither during re-inclusion, $p = .50$, nor during continued inclusion, $p = .43$. For descriptive statistics, see Table 2.

To test whether exclusionary feelings mediated between the various kinds of inclusion and basic need fulfilment, we calculated a mediation analysis. Using procedures recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008), we treated the interaction term between the two independent variables, status and culture, as the predictor, exclusionary feelings as the mediator and basic needs as the criterion. The four analyses revealed significant indirect effects, with a point estimate *a*b* of -.38 for belonging (bias corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval using 5000 bootstrap samples = -.66 to -.10), of -.30 for self-esteem (-.54 to -.09), of -.30 for control (-.56 to -.09), and of -.37 for meaningful existence (-.69 to -.11). Inclusion of the mediator reduced the uncorrected experimental effect (belonging: $b = -.97$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.60$, $p = .0002$; self-esteem: $b = -.87$, $p < .001$ to $b = -.57$, $p = .0004$; control: $b = -.75$, $p = .0001$ to $b = -.45$, $p = .004$; meaningful existence: $b = -.66$, $p = .002$ to $b = -.29$, $p = .07$); however, it was still significant and thus indicated a partial mediation. The reduction in the regression weight itself was also significant (belonging: $z = -2.59$, $p = .01$; self-esteem: $z = -2.53$, $p = .01$; control: $z = -2.54$, $p = .01$; meaningful existence: $z = -2.58$, $p = .01$). Hence, exclusionary feelings accounted for some of the relationship between status and basic need fulfilment in dependence of culture.

Discussion

A transition from exclusion to inclusion was experienced differently than maintenance of the state inclusion – but only for people with an individualistic cultural background, i.e. Germans or Austrians: During re-inclusion they felt less fulfilment of their four basic needs. However, people with collectivistic cultural background, i.e. Chinese, did not differentiate between both kinds of inclusion: They experienced the same level of need fulfilment regardless of the previous state. This suggests that people with collectivistic cultural background, seemingly unaffected by the previous state of being excluded, appreciated both types of inclusion equally, whereas people with an individualistic cultural background reacted resentfully to re-inclusion. Our results also revealed that only participants from individualistic

cultures had a higher extent of exclusionary feelings after re-inclusion than after continued inclusion. These feelings, moreover, partially mediated basic need fulfilment. Thus, the individualists' lasting feelings of exclusion appeared to affect the experience of re-inclusion, resulting in a resentful reaction. Collectivists, on the other hand, did not appear to carry over feelings of being excluded, resulting in a more positive experience of being included.

Recent research has suggested that people from individualistic cultures experience exclusion as personal attack, while people from collectivistic cultures are not threatened by instances of exclusion (Gardner et al., 2012; Pfundmair et al., 2014a; Pfundmair et al., 2014b; Ren et al., 2013). This corresponds well with our findings suggesting that the individualists' remnant feelings of exclusion prevent positive reactions to social inclusion while the collectivists' more neutral response to exclusion manipulations are associated with equally positive outcomes when experiencing re-inclusion versus continued inclusion. Viewing this from a different – Gestalt-psychological – angle, with people from collectivistic cultures experiencing relationships as the figure and individuals as the background (Triandis & Gelfand, 2012), an inclusion might represent a more relevant event. Accepting change and contradictions as natural aspects of reality (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001) might allow collectivists to focus on the latter, uniformly positive social feedback.

Limitations and future research

Did participants with an individualistic cultural background not acknowledge the new information of re-inclusion (and thus experience primarily the state of exclusion) or were they particularly unhappy about or suspicious of the re-inclusion itself? The mediation of need fulfilment via feeling excluded suggests that for them, re-inclusion involved carrying over exclusion-oriented thinking. If re-inclusion was experienced more negatively due to a sense of precaution and uncertainty about the status of re-inclusion itself, exclusionary feelings (directly tapping into the state of being excluded) might not have been so clearly related to the need fulfilment outcomes. Therefore, we assume that the individualists' more negative

experience of re-inclusion was due to the overbearing salience of the initial status of exclusion. However, we have not tested this directly in the current study. It would thus be worthwhile to further examine the specific underlying mechanism driving the individualists' response. Taking the collectivists' response into account, we could imagine that a positive reaction can only be maintained as long as the situation is not perceived as threatening. Exclusion from multiple or highly important social sources might cause a similar shift as the individualists' one. Future research testing explanations and limits of our findings is needed.

Some limitations in terms of methodology should also be addressed: Based on our design, we cannot be sure that the differences we see in the responses are only due to the individualists' stronger reactions. Accordingly – from the current data – we cannot conclude with certainty whether individualists were still bothered from the previous exclusion or whether collectivists had simply recovered from a similar (or maybe worse) state. However, recent research has consistently found that only individualists show an active (viz. negative) response to social exclusion in similar paradigms (Pfundmair et al., 2014a; Pfundmair et al., 2014b) on various levels of psychological and even physiological measurement. Therefore, the observed differences in the current result pattern are very likely to be due to the individualists' stronger and more lasting feelings of exclusion. To examine lasting feelings of exclusion, we embedded a single-item mediator variable. As one-item variables usually have low reliability, the use of a multi-item mediator in future research would allow for more confidence in the conclusions drawn here. Furthermore, our re-inclusion resulted from a positive work-related performance. In future studies, it would be a valuable addition to also investigate the effects of re-inclusion arising from neutral/ambivalent or negative situations and to differentiate between different causes of inclusion. Finally, although prior studies have shown that scenario manipulations induce comparable responses (e.g., Fiske & Yamamoto, 2005), having employed a hypothetical prospective scenario, we cannot be certain that the observed effects would be found similarly in in-vivo manipulations.

Implications

One particular contribution the current research makes to the existing body of research is taking a closer and, in particular, intercultural look at the impact of previous states on subsequent inclusion. Usually, social exclusion research uses inclusion as a control condition (e.g., Ren et al., 2013). Only few studies have investigated how this condition might be influenced by previous exclusion systematically. For instance, Zadro et al. (2010) compared the cooperative behavior of excluded, included, and excluded-then-included participants. While excluded participants behaved more antisocially, and included participants in an ingratiating manner, re-included participants showed neither of these behaviors. These results also indicate that re-inclusion contrasts more negatively against inclusion. Our finding that individualistic participants already experience re-inclusion differently than continued inclusion could have important implications regarding the long-term effects of exclusion. If previous exclusion taints later experiences of inclusion, making interdependent aspects of the self-concept salient in individualists (cf. the malleability of self-construal: Oyserman & Lee, 2008) could be a way to cope with the rollercoaster of re-inclusions, and potentially prevent individuals from entering into a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies regarding their inclusion-exclusion experiences.

The findings also have important practical implications, regarding, for example, workplace contexts in which people of different cultural background collaborate. Misunderstandings might arise in varying situations of inclusion: People with individualistic background might not appreciate sudden instances of inclusion and react coldly to re-inclusion, thereby affronting more collectivistic colleagues who have reached out. On the other hand, people with collectivistic cultural background might see more value in any kind of inclusion, and might be more expecting re-inclusion that individualists, judging from their own perspective, might be less likely to initiate. Individualists might therefore not emphasize

a transition from exclusion to inclusion while collectivists will, which could further lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

Conclusion

Positive social feedback is not always experienced positively. The negative experience of exclusion seeps through even instances of subsequent inclusion. Finding that this applies to people from individualistic cultures more than to people from collectivistic societies aligns with findings of people with more interdependent social self-definitions being less threatened by social exclusion manipulations. Focusing on relationships with others rather than on the status of one's unique persona, does not only seem to make individual exclusion less threatening while it is happening, but also leaves people more prepared to enjoy future inclusion.

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Footnotes

[1] To handle the problem of incommensurability caused by the vignette technique used cross-culturally, we designed them as recommended by Soydan (1996) with a high level of representativeness and closeness to reality.

[2] The current data is derived from a larger experiment which included more conditions than the currently reported ones which, however, where independent from each other.

[3] We adapted each item of Zadro et al.'s (2004) basic need questionnaire to our scenario manipulation, except for one item from the meaningful existence subscale ("I felt that my performance [e.g., catching the ball, deciding whom to throw the ball to] had some effect on the direction of the game") that was not suitable for the used manipulation.