

Who Is The Social Outcast?

Social Outcasts and Vicious Cycles of Exclusion

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Do social outcasts have shared features or dispositions that cause them to become a social outcast? Or do social circumstances cause people to become outcasts?

In the previous article about social outcasts, we explored the evolutionary roots of our need to belong to a group. We concluded that group membership is, and always has been, crucial for our survival. We are deeply social creatures and social banishment is exceedingly threatening to our welfare. The desire to belong to a group, to know and to be known is universal. The ways in which this desire is enacted might differ according to culture, but these differences apply only to the ways in which the desire is enacted. Desire to belong; fear of rejection and the pain that accompanies social rejection is universal, shared by us all.

The question I will explore this week, is *who* gets socially rejected? Do social outcasts have shared features? Are there certain events or dispositions that can predispose us to become a social outcast- or not? In this article, we will explore this question. Who is the social outcast? How and why has she or he become a social outcast?

Categories of Social Isolation

In their book "Social Isolation in Modern Society", Roelof Hortulanus, Anja Machielse and Ludwien Meeuwesen (2006) identify four levels of social isolation or connectedness. These levels are based on the amount of social contacts people have (or, the size of their social networks) as well as on their self-described feelings of loneliness. The four levels these authors distinguish are:

- 1-The socially competent. They have a large social network and don't feel lonely.
- 2-The socially inhibited. They don't feel lonely but have a small social network.
- 3-The lonely. They feel lonely despite having a large social network.
- 4-The socially isolated. They feel lonely and have a small social network.

The Socially Isolated: A Vicious Cycle of Loneliness

The last group, that of the socially isolated, is the worst off. They are the outcasts who are less socially confident than the others. Their lack of competence leads to more loneliness. And loneliness leads; you guessed it, to a further weakening of self-confidence. The socially isolated are caught in a vicious cycle. They need informal practical and emotional support and help more than most others, but it's just not there. They miss the companionship from which many of us draw help and support. And in the absence of this

informal support from friends, family members or neighbours, they end up appealing extensively to all sorts of formal and professional resources for help and support (Hortulanus, Machielse, Meeuwesen, 2006).

Becoming a Social Outcast

But let's go back a few steps. How did they get there? By what processes have the socially isolated become just that, and how did they get stuck in that vicious cycle? Most of us experience some levels and variants of rejection or bullying- there are supposedly 32 ways in which we can be socially rejected (Juvonen and Gross, 2005, p. 156). But while most of us have some familiarity with those 32 ways, few of us experience repeated rejection or lasting bullying. These are neither random nor universal phenomena.

Becoming a Social Outcast?

Many studies show that in youth, for example, aggressive and withdrawn adolescents are most likely to be cast from the group. Kids who are shy or aggressive are seen as "different from other kids" and when this deviates from the group norm, which it quite often does, shyness and aggression can be a reason for rejection. Juvonen and Gross (2005) point out that in that sense, social rejection is a way in which we socialize others to conform to the norms of the group. Rejection is the way in which the group expresses its disapproval of violation of those norms. Aggression and withdrawnness are behaviors that, more often than not, violate the group norm and are as such, reasons for exclusion and hostility from the group. And so, youth who are aggressive and or withdrawn will be more likely to be socially rejected than others. And since withdrawal is a common response to social rejection, there is once again the vicious cycle in which the social outcast is caught.

Things that Help the Outcast- Or Not

As always, it is not as simple as that. Social and personal factors that cause people to become outcasts interact in complex and convoluted ways, ways that are not easily unraveled. Some social circumstances can add or ease the grief of the outcast for example. Having even one friend, for example, will go a long way in preventing the sense that one is an outcast (Juvonen and Gross, 2005). People with friends, even only one, are more likely to think of the rejection as not the result of their own doing. Furthermore, Juvonen and Gross (2005) suggest that the social pain that accompanies rejection is eased if the person who is socially rejected sees others being rejected or bullied as well. Personal dispositions can help as well - or not. Children, who are withdrawn, tend to blame themselves for the exclusion, and as a result, become more depressed and anxious- feelings that promote withdrawal. Children who are aggressive tend to just get more angry and hostile. In both cases, the problem is only advanced (the vicious cycle once more).

What's the Answer?

So who is the social outcast? There is, of course, not one simple answer. Social and personal factors that cause people to become outcasts interact in complex and convoluted ways, ways that are not easily unraveled. But one of the insights that emerged from the research, is that social rejection has a lot to do with the degree of similarity or "fit" between the person and the group. If a person "fits in" well, there is no problem but when a person does not "fit in", when there is little similarity between an individual and the members of the group, then he or she is at risk of becoming an outcast. And once a person has become a social outcast, he or she is caught in a vicious cycle of loneliness that is very hard to break.

References

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