

*The Pain of Being Unseen: The Multifaceted Impact of Social Exclusion*

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The Neighborhood Academy

Senior Seminar 2025-2026

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Have you ever been in school with all of your friends and they're all talking about a birthday party next week? You feel stumped because you never received that invite to that party. You do some digging and find out it was one of the popular kids' parties, and they invited everyone—except you. You believe there has been a mistake, and you mistakenly believe your own delusions that you'll soon receive that magical invite—maybe in the mail or even in person! But that dreamt day never comes, and soon it is the day of the party. As the school day ends, you start packing up and leave the classroom. Roaming through the halls, you hear all about this picture-perfect party that is scheduled for later that day, and that bums you out even more.

Hours later, you're at your house scrolling through social media, looking at stories. You soon start to see everyone posting stories at the party. You watch all the stories, feeling jealous that everyone but you went to the party. You felt your heart break—you felt isolated, like you weren't as good as everyone else. This feeling began to grow more intense as you continued to look at the posts of this amazing—lit party. You felt extremely excluded. This feeling grew more for the past couple of days. Everyone is still chatting about the party you missed! As days become weeks, you start to feel less excluded from social opportunities and events. This experience of being excluded is causing you not only mental pain but physical pain as well. You started to have more stress responses, acute pains like headaches, and you even felt a generalized discomfort within your body in social places. This overlooked sense of disconnection is called Social exclusion.

Social exclusion is the process of individuals/groups being prevented from fully participating in a society. This can be social, political, economic, or even cultural parts of life. “Social exclusion appears everywhere: in schools, jobs, elderly homes, and even in public

places” (Bergen). Social exclusion is driven by many factors, such as poverty, discrimination, or even lack of access to certain resources. This completely throws off an individual’s ability to participate fully in society, leading to long-term negative impacts on mental health or social engagement (Bergen). Social exclusion can be caused by several different matters. Exclusion can be caused because of bullying, peer rejection, social pressure, and identity struggles. According to Williams, exclusion can be produced because of an exclusion from people important to you. “These studies revealed that even subtle, artificial or ostensibly unimportant exclusion can lead to strong emotional reactions. A strong reaction makes sense when your spouse’s family or close circle of friends rejects or shuns you” (Williams). This disconnection to these people gives an experience of peer rejection which leads to a strong emotional reaction which can lead to social exclusion.

Then social pressure and identity struggles.

The type of exclusion being focused on is social exclusion within the age range of being a teen. Social exclusion is described as a complex, multidimensional issue driven by social, economic, and institutional factors that causes significant psychological and emotional harm, ultimately limiting individuals’ ability to participate fully in society. Factors of exclusions include Poverty, Disabilities. Gender, and even sexuality.

Social exclusion is seen as more than poverty for multiple reasons, and the biggest reason is how it separates one from life and people entirely. The disconnection between a person and the world is huge. Joanna Mack, an author for *Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE)*, defines social exclusion as a “lack of participation in decision-making, civil, social and cultural life” (2013).

This lack of participation can have extremely long-term consequences on a person's mind and body. Poverty is less than social exclusion because one can be financially unstable but still be included, while if one is financially stable, one can still be excluded. Poverty isn't a multi-dimensional matter like social exclusion, while it only affects physical resources, it doesn't affect the mind as social exclusion does. "People who are socially excluded are generally also poor, particularly if poverty is defined in a multidimensional way" (Khan). While poverty is a show of suffering from lack of resources it doesn't reach as deep as social exclusion. Social exclusion implies the processes needed to reach this level.

Exclusion is about systems and power; it affects someone's visibility within a community and can change their basic rights, like the ability to vote or even to make valued decisions in their community. Social exclusion isn't a short-term issue; it builds over time. According to Van Bergen et al., it is a multidimensional, multi-step process within the person. It has four dimensions: "lack of social participation", "material deprivation", "lack of normative integration", and "inadequate access to basic social rights" (Bergen et al., pg #, year of publication). These dimensions also add up to the contributions that lead to exclusion.

These factors are age, disability, gender, and even ethnicity (*Social Exclusion Task Force*). The Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix(B-SEM) breaks down exclusion into three key aspects: Resources, Participation, and Quality of Life. Each of these components has a subfactor as well, like health, education, or access to service(s). This also applies to all ages of life, starting from childhood to old age. These factors lead to the denial of any participation in social, cultural, or even political life. This multidimensional idea of social exclusion isn't just a short term issue. It doesn't stop when one wants it to, nor even if one needs it to. Social exclusion is an increasingly significant issue that continues to grow. The multi-layered models of social

exclusion involve cumulative disadvantages in the social, economic, cultural, and political domains (Bergen).

The Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix(B-SEM) breaks down exclusion into three key aspects: Resources, Participation, and Quality of Life. To start with resources, social exclusion can be started by a lack of items such as money, goods, and even physical possessions like phones, shoes, fancy clothes, and more (SETF). This lack of items can also be referred to as material deprivation. Material deprivation is “the enforced lack of essential goods, services, and living standards—such as nutritious food, adequate heating, or clothing—due to a shortage of financial resources (Naveed Z.)” Lacking these goods create barriers between oneself and others as well. Resources like food, housing, and clothing are reasons that people are able to live a “normal life” in their communities. Without access to these resources, it becomes significantly harder to participate within society.

Bracketing off of resources, having limited access to those items limits a person's participation in society. Whether that be social events or even having normal relationships in general. The inability to participate in one's society creates a new barrier in itself, forming a new perspective in the person's mindset. Some changes in their mindset would be anxiety, nervousness, or even being scared of social interaction. Lacking social interaction with other people affects both the self-esteem and the quality of life of the individual. When experiencing social exclusion it takes a heavy toll on one's quality of life. Different phases pass by as the individual experiences exclusion. Humans rely on connection with others and the lack of that can affect their way of life, this includes opportunities. Being able to communicate with others and build relationships provide a big role in being able to live a good life. Without being able to

connect with others your social networks diminish and prevent you from accessing beneficial systems like job opportunities, education, and healthcare.

From an outside perspective, social exclusion is seen as a mental problem. Being excluded can lead to terrible mental health. As social exclusion worsens, it eventually will lead to real emotional and physical pain. Even when the person isn't being physically touched or even hit, the effect of social exclusion can generate different kinds of "physical" pain. This is caused by activation of the Dorsal Anterior Cingulate Cortex (DACC). Being rejected triggers a response in that part of the brain. That trigger is a neurological response that is very similar to physical pain/injury. The DACC is a region in the frontal part of the brain that plays a central role in cognitive control, decision-making, and emotional regulation. The DACC processes the psychological pain of being left out in a way that is similar to how the brain processes physical pain. This part of the brain plays an important role in experiencing exclusion, so it was tested in studies of social exclusion.

In the study, there was a game called "cyberball." In this experiment conducted by Kipling D. Williams, participants toss a virtual ball or disk against what they believe are two other human players, represented as animated characters on a computer screen. When the ball is thrown to the participant, represented on screen by an animated hand, he or she throws it back to one of the other players by clicking that player's cartoon icon. Some of the participants are "ostracized." They receive the ball once or twice at the beginning of the game, but never again. The other participants—the included ones—get the ball one third of the time, as you would expect in a perfectly egalitarian game of toss. As soon as students began to feel ostracized, the scanners during the game registered a flurry of activity in DACC, showing emotional and

physical pain. According to Williams, “Together the findings suggest that social rejection and physical injury are not such different experiences and share underlying neural pathways” (pub year, pg#).

Physical pain and mental pain are seen as equals and share the same connection. When you experience one type of pain, you will experience the other, leading to long-term damage. These two types of pain use the same neurological mechanisms/systems. The onset of physical pain also leads to mental pain. Pain from social exclusion affects people of all personality types, no matter how “tough” they seem to be (Williams, 2011, pg. 8). These effects lead to a form of long-term emotional damage and different types of mental disorders like depression, anxiety, or even low self-esteem.

A story about these long-term effects is about a kid named Massimo. Massimo was just a kid in the second grade, and he was diagnosed with ADHD and Autism. He was socially outcast because of this, and he was also unable to really connect with any of the other kids at school. His mother, Anissa Melborune, had noticed the long-term effects that were happening to Massimo. He has never received invitations to birthday parties or anything of the sort. If Massimo weren't suffering from two mental issues, this exclusion wouldn't be hitting as hard as it is for this kid. The long-term social exclusion Massimo was receiving had a devastating impact on his mental health, even more because of his diagnosis. To start, Massimo was ostracized because of his actions, but he couldn't really behave the way he should because of his adhd and autism. He was described as “Aggressive and Hyperactive,” basically a misbehaved kid. Whenever his peers ostracized him, Massimo suffered deep down. Physical and mental pain isn't always visible to the people around you, and this is what he experienced. A disconnection from his peers at

school, he was “troublesome”, misunderstood, and disconnected from others around him. Nobody could see his true personality due to being shunned by social circles.

Being cast out and separated from social connections drastically affected Massimo, but this drastically changed everyone. As humanity evolves, we tend to need more and more connection to society. This can be proved by the aftermath of a “torture” method used in prison. This method is called solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is a form of incarceration where a person is kept in a small, closed cell for 22 to 24 hours a day with little to no meaningful human contact. This use of torture is challenging the nature to need for a social connection with society. Solitary confinement is an example of what Massimo faced when socially outcast by his classmates. This little to no interaction with other people gave Massimo a mental breakdown. His behavior at home, his independence, and his reactions were very limited. Massimo’s mentality was very low, according to his mother. He was very down in the dumps and seen as a weird, misbehaving kid. This identity formed around him was the reason he was lost. The amount of social isolation he experienced changed his mindset entirely. His mom described his behavior as him not being himself, and he wasn’t the bright and jolly kid he used to be. This social rejection during his time in school gave Massimo different types of symptoms, such as anxiety and depression. Massimo’s experience is one example of exclusion. Two other extreme examples of exclusion are solitary confinement and long-term isolation.

The most widely discussed exclusion between these two examples is solitary confinement. This mostly takes place only in prison. In this practice, a person is kept alone in a small cell. Often for 22 to 24 hours a day, with very little to no interaction with people at all. Meals are passed through a slot in the door, and opportunities for conversation, physical activity, or sunlight are extremely limited. Some prisoners remain in solitary confinement for weeks,

months, or even years. This has led to extreme side effects that psychologists have studied. Psychologists documented extreme effects from this prolonged isolation, including anxiety, depression, hallucinations, memory problems, and even emotional breakdowns. These effects result from human nature's need for social interaction. This absence of normal interaction can slowly erase a person's sense of individuality, identity, and reality as well.

The second example spoken of was long-term social isolation. This is most evident in prisons or even detention centers/camps. This process is when individuals may be physically separated from their family and community for decades. Even when prisoners are not technically in solitary confinement, they may be housed in highly controlled environments. These environments usually have strict control over movement, communication, and even a person's identity. Over time, this extreme isolation can deeply affect individuals both psychologically and socially. This can often contribute to long-term exclusion. This long-term exclusion can also be started by social rejection during childhood. This relates to the aforementioned example from Massimo's story about being socially isolated and cast out for differing from others. With this information, it becomes increasingly more apparent that social exclusion is multifaceted and more complex than originally believed.

While most people believe that social exclusion is only a personal matter, it can also stem from systemic factors. Social exclusion is often portrayed as a personal issue, stemming from individual choices, behaviors, or even traits such as disease or physical appearance (SETF). This view overlooks the broader systems that shape people's opportunities—the system. While personal factors like confidence, self-esteem, and social skills do play a significant role in this case, they are also strongly influenced by structural factors and conditions, such as poverty,

unemployment, poor health, and even a lack of education. These barriers make it much harder for an individual to fully participate in society, regardless of their effort or ability.

These deeply interconnected factors can push individuals towards social exclusion by limiting opportunities and participation in everyday life. People living in poverty often lack access to stable housing, transportation, and even social activities. These barriers make it harder to stay connected with their communities. Unemployment is not reducible, but it can end a person's sense of identity and belonging. In societies where work is closely tied to social status, having no job often represents having no social life. Getting treated as an outcast based on how much money you make and what type of job you have contributes to the further deterioration of one's health.

Another barrier causing exclusion is poor health. This can be both physical and mental; examples of this would be depression and anxiety. These mental crises of depression and anxiety can restrict energy, determination, and the ability to engage and communicate with others. Mental crises also cut into your physical self, which is also energy, appearance, age, gender, and even disabilities. One source states, "Some people, most at risk of social exclusion, are omitted entirely from household surveys. They include all of the population living in institutions, such as some children in local authority care or in young offenders' institutions; disabled children in residential care; disabled adults; those hospitalized or in prison" (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007). The *SETF* explains how differences in disabilities and even appearance in society are at an even greater risk of experiencing social exclusion than regular people. This isn't just because of the way they look or even how they act, but more because of the barriers society creates. These are all due to stereotypes placed on these people. The stereotypes describe the people suffering from disabilities as wasted potential, and they are seen as weaker than regular

people (Bogart). These disabilities can vary from a severed limb or even a mental disability like adhd. These negative stereotypes and misunderstandings about people with disabilities can lead to discrimination and even avoidance from people and society entirely. These social barriers make it even more difficult for people with disabilities to access the same opportunities, especially in education and connections, as others, which unfortunately increases their risk of suffering from exclusion. Therefore, a major part of reducing exclusion is access to education.

The lack of education, closely linked to poverty, is another factor that shows this is not just personal but systemic. Poor education can create a cycle of barriers, whether psychological, economic, or social. These barriers prevent individuals from fully participating in a society. Building on these barriers, an individual can shift from experiencing being shunned to a broader issue: long-term exclusion or even marginalization. Individuals who experience marginalization are often and persistently pushed to the "edge" of society (Williams). This can result in various difficulties when trying to connect with others. It can give people a vision of them lacking power, voice, or even access to resources.

While structural barriers are significant to this case, it is equally important to consider the role of time, Autonomy, and emotional responses being subjective. To start with time, it is seen that social exclusion can be 'temporary'. This rarely occurs due to the fact that social exclusion functions as a cycle. An argument from Williams admits that personality traits do influence how well a person is able to cope against social exclusion. This suggests that some individuals are better equipped than others to handle such experiences of exclusion. An example of this would be people with a strong self-esteem or emotional stability. People with these personality traits will be more suited to handle a situation of being excluded. Instead of being shunned away and being outcasted, unlike a person without these traits. To rebut this claim, social exclusion isn't

temporary. It comes with long-term effects that last for years. According to the Social Exclusion Task Force, Barnes gave an analysis that spoke about long-term disadvantage as disadvantage in at least seven out of nine years. These disadvantages that come with exclusion are long-term unemployment, the struggle with basic skills, and even struggle leading to poverty (SETF).

Social exclusion is a neglected topic spoken about all over the world, it should be a more discussed topic because it affects people more far than their social life. It shapes their overall well being as well as their opportunities, and also their ability to participate fully in a society. When individuals are excluded, they tend to be more vulnerable to experience loneliness, poor mental and physical health and also a diminishing self-esteem. All of these experiences can have lasting consequences, turning from weeks, months and even to years. Far beyond the personal level, social exclusion can turn into an issue that limits opportunities. This can be the access to education, jobs, support networks, or even resources as well. Social exclusion can affect an individual down to the personal level to the point where being excluded can influence one's quality of life. This aspect of life being influenced by social exclusion can change not only how people feel about themselves, their identity, but also what they are able to do and accomplish. Social exclusion not only impacts mental health but it can also lead to impacts to one's physical health as well. Losing opportunities due to how exclusion affects the individual can be challenging for that person. There are experiences similar to Massimo in Agostino's story and how social exclusion can reach everybody and isn't limited to a certain age group or a certain type of individual. This is an issuing matter and there may be possible solutions to help prevent social exclusion from parttaking within our society. A few different ways of preventing it are Therapy which talking to a therapist could help with the healing process. Giving the person someone to talk to, giving them a human connection and helpful advice. Empathy, which can

help by learning what the person is going through and give them a chance to explain and help find themselves and their identity. Another way is social exposure, this can give individuals environments where they can talk and connect with various people, to get back into social, cultural, or even just life in their society. This also links with learning which helps others understand what exclusion feels like. Teach them what it means and ways to prevent it. And finally, Daily kindness. Being kind to the person struggling with exclusion. Give them a hope in returning back into the social life of their society. Help them participate more in their society leading to a reduced chance of experiencing social exclusion. “People may search for meaning in many places. The current results suggest, however, that people find meaning from each other. Across four studies, we found that when belongingness needs are threatened— either by an instance of social rejection or ongoing feelings of loneliness— people perceive less meaning in their lives compared to when belongingness needs are met (PMC).” This shows the need for social interaction between people, without it individuals began to feel a sense of isolation and identity loss whenever experiencing exclusion.

To conclude, Social exclusion is not just a moment of being and feeling left out but its a complex and deeply rooted issue that shapes a person’s entire quality of life. It can be seen as a multidimensional process that stops individuals from fully participating in social, economic, and cultural aspects of life and their society. This ultimately leads to the limitation of their opportunities and also their sense of belonging. Exclusion affects people psychologically by contributing to their anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and their long-term emotional distress, while also impacting these people emotionally through the feeling of loneliness, rejection, and being outcasted. Socially, this disrupts any relations and weakens any systems of support this person has. It also cuts off important needs an individual needs like education, healthcare,

employment, and also community involvement. These effects work as a building pressure and often build over time. It creates cycles of disadvantage that are difficult to escape for most. More importantly, social exclusion shouldn't be viewed as a personal failure, but instead as a result of system, structural and societal failures. This includes poverty, discrimination, and an unequal access to resources such as food, money, housing, etc. Because of this, social exclusion requires a collective effort to get rid of it. By being more responsible we can include policies, bring greater awareness, and build a stronger community through support rather than placing any burden on that sole individual to overcome being ostracized on their own.

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