



REJECT

THE SCIENCE OF BELONGING

PRESS KIT

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FILM SYNOPSSES

SHORT SYNOPSIS

REJECT examines the impact of social rejection. Weaving together expert findings from neuroscientists, social psychologists, early childhood educators, law enforcement experts and personal testimony, the film sheds new light on the universal human experience of rejection. From racial bias to parental neglect to school bullying, REJECT reveals the multidimensional link between interpersonal rejection and the neurological experience of physical pain. In so doing, it uncovers a path towards violence prevention and emotional recovery.

LONG SYNOPSIS

The feature-length documentary REJECT takes an in-depth look at the science of social rejection. The film was originally inspired by the work of the Director's father, Dr. Herbert E. Thomas, who wrote a book called *The Shame Response to Rejection*. During his thirty-year tenure as a resident psychiatrist in a maximum-security prison, he witnessed a clear connection between inmates' experiences of rejection and physical pain, and traced how these experiences often lead to acts of violence.

Throughout REJECT, experts in psychology, education, medicine, neuroscience and juvenile justice, all of whom have studied interpersonal rejection in their respective fields, offer powerful testimony to the link between social and physical pain. Experts include renowned early childhood expert Vivian Gussin Paley; youth violence expert James Garbarino; and some of the world's leading researchers in the study of ostracism and social exclusion. Using brain imaging and a simple ball-tossing game, researchers demonstrate that the brain looks like it's in actual physical pain when people are rejected, even when the person doing the rejecting is a total stranger. In contrast, pioneers in education show how models of acceptance in the classroom improve students' physical and mental health and self-esteem, and even boost IQ scores and kids' ability to stay in school.

Amid the scientific context are two personal stories. We meet the family of 17-year-old Eric Mohat, a boy from a town outside Cleveland, who was bullied in his math class every day for seven months until he took his own life. His parents, Jan and Bill, along with one of his best friends Brandon, try to piece together the chain of events that might have driven Eric to commit suicide. And across the country in Stillwater, Oklahoma, we meet 5-year-old Justin,

the son of Mexican immigrants. He has already been labeled a troublemaker at school, if not a "bully," landing in the principal's office every day until he is suspended and moved to a new kindergarten. He finds himself in a new classroom, under the watchful eye of teacher Terry Varnell, who understands that Justin needs to feel accepted socially in order to advance academically.

A science-based and solutions-oriented film, REJECT examines the roots of bullying and violent behavior against the self or others. Highlighting the serious and potentially lethal consequences of interpersonal rejection in its many forms, it speaks to all of us who are entrusted with influence over others—teachers, parents, coaches, mentors, employers—and urges us to consider the far-ranging and powerful effects of fostering social acceptance.

ABOUT THE FILM

Year: 2015

Formats: Blu-Ray, DVD

Versions:

- Full-length Educational Edition: 87 minutes
- Home-use Edition: 84 minutes
- Early Educators Edition - Inclusive Classrooms: 60 minutes
- College and Graduate Educators Edition - Rejection & Social Pain Theory: 38 minutes

SELECT FILM FESTIVALS

Cleveland International Film Festival

Heartland Film Festival

KidCinemaFest Film Festival

Greater Farmington Film Festival

Ethnografilm Festival

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

For many years, I heard my father speak of “the shame response to rejection.” It was his phrase for the idea that experiencing interpersonal and social rejection could cause someone to feel actual, physical pain and could be a precursor to intense anger or even violence. Now retired, my father was a psychiatrist, and he heard his patients speak of this phenomenon throughout his career. He also witnessed it firsthand during his 30 years serving as a consultant to a maximum-security prison. He wrote: “Learning the elements of rejection and understanding its consequence to the body allows us to see how rejection manifests itself in human relations.”

When my own children were in preschool, we parents were asked to read early childhood educator Vivian Paley’s book, *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play*, and the first page stopped me in my tracks. To my great surprise, she was also talking about rejection, but her focus was on early childhood. It turns out that understanding and addressing rejection is of crucial importance throughout our lives and across all social circumstances, from the play yard to the prison yard.

When the idea struck to make a documentary on the theme of rejection, I discovered a group of dedicated scientific researchers studying the brain science behind social rejection. One well-known study finds that our brains look like they are processing physical pain when subjected to an experiment that mimics an experience of social exclusion. Another shows that in just four minutes of feeling ostracized, people feel a loss of control, a lowering of self-esteem, a diminished sense of belonging and even an altered sense of “meaningful existence.” In fact, no matter how they test it, researchers find that experiencing

rejection affects us deeply and has long-term impact on our lives. It seems that our response to ostracism, exclusion and rejection is hard-wired. And it is only the ways we cope and respond to these situations that varies among people.

My goal in making REJECT is to provoke an informed discussion about the serious—sometimes lethal—consequences of interpersonal rejection, which comes in the guise of bullying, parental neglect and abuse, racial bias, and other forms, across all age groups. My hope is that an exploration of the science of social rejection and an introduction to possible solutions can encourage educators, public agencies and others to institute policies and programs that promote behaviors of acceptance, tolerance and inclusion. These include improving child health and welfare in schools by adding social and emotional learning to common-core curricula and de-stigmatizing mental health problems. Scientific breakthroughs continue to reveal our fundamentally social nature, and show us we all have a profound human need to belong.

Ruth Thomas Suh



Ruth Thomas Suh
Director, REJECT

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- Butler University College of Education
- Center for the Study of Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection
- Central Missouri Community Action
- The Sudbury-Wayland-Lincoln Domestic Violence Roundtable
- EraseMeanness.org
- The NoBLE program, Beaumont Children’s Hospital
- One Heartbeat R.O.C.K.S.
- Performance Services, Inc.
- Purdue University Extension
- The Roeper School
- University of Missouri Extension
- Salvation Army, New York Region

WHY STUDY OSTRACISM AND SOCIAL REJECTION?

The pain of being left out or rejected is something we have all felt. And while a universal experience, social rejection appears in many forms. For many of us, it takes the everyday shape of an ignored text message or appears as the absence of eye contact during a conversational exchange. In more extreme cases, it manifests as a child's total social isolation from her peers, or the physical exile of one person from his neighbors or community. No matter its medium, social rejection and ostracism is found in all human societies across the globe, as well as in other species of social animals, from bison to bees.

What is the science behind this phenomenon? How might we use science and technology to map the neurological mechanisms through which we experience social exclusion and, by extension, the pain that comes with it? How can we use such a study to make sense of our world—one that seems to offer daily examples of exclusion and bullying, mass violence and retaliation?

Over the past three decades, neuroscientists and psychologists have grappled with these questions. In a number of groundbreaking studies, they've conducted research to better understand how the brain processes social rejection. Their research shows that feelings of social rejection resonate in the anterior cingulate cortex, the same region of the brain that plays a role in the distressing experiences of *physical* pain. This overlap suggests that the two experiences—social exclusion and physical distress—operate via similar underlying neural pathways. When we say our feelings have been hurt or our hearts have been broken, it is not just hyperbole or metaphor. Instead, such turns of phrase are shockingly reflective of how our brains work. Quite simply: we experience exclusion much like we do a slap in the face.

In turn, these findings fit with other research that reveals that social animals, humans included, need connection in order to stay alive. Perhaps we feel pain when we are rejected because it offers an evolutionary advantage: a powerful incentive to belong to and function within a group and, therefore, to survive.

Beyond merely understanding the brain science behind feelings of social pain, researchers have also used brain imaging to explore the ways in which social pain differs from physical hurt. Their research reveals that even seemingly insignificant incidents of exclusion can instantly lead to emotional distress, including feelings of anger and sadness. And unlike physical pain, simply recalling feelings of rejection—or thinking about future rejection—is often enough to induce the same painful feelings, making the impact of rejection far outlast the incident itself. Chronic or daily ostracism can have even longer-lasting psychological and behavioral impacts than a single instance of social exclusion. Indeed, people who are routinely ostracized may experience profound, ongoing anxiety and depression. In some cases, they may also react with hostility and violence—an effort to regain control and to become visible in a social world that has attempted to render them invisible.

As we better understand the science of social rejection, it's critical for parents, educators, psychologists and counselors to be aware of these lasting impacts—and alert to the insidious ways that social rejection and ostracism can exist in group settings without detection. Studies suggest that children and adolescents in schools may be particularly at risk for long-term negative outcomes due to chronic ostracism. And because social disconnection is marked by an absence of communication and attention, rather than an outward display of behavior, it is often overlooked entirely—sometimes until it's too late.

It is for this reason that in schools and other social spaces, educators must be intentionally, proactively inclusive if they wish to build a culture of acceptance and belonging in their classrooms and school yards. Here, the research offers a hopeful fact: Even a single person committed to acceptance and inclusion within a group is enough to reduce the damaging impacts of ostracism. In offering this guide to REJECT, we aim to arm individual students, parents, teachers, mentors, coaches and leaders of all stripes to be that single person—and to inspire a culture of inclusion where rejection might otherwise take root.

SOCIAL REJECTION BY THE NUMBERS

- Just a few minutes experiencing ostracism or rejection causes people to report a reduced sense of their self-esteem, self-control, belonging and meaningful existence.
- People report experiences of rejection, exclusion or ostracism at least once a day.
- 28% of 12- to 18-year-old students reported being bullied at school.
- 160,000 kids stay home from school every day because of bullying.
- 1 in 10 students in the U.S. drop out of school because of repeated bullying.
- Rejection creates surges of anger and aggression. Correlations exist between peer rejection and higher rates of delinquency, arrest, violent behavior and substance abuse.
- Loneliness and social isolation are just as much a threat to longevity as obesity, smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being an alcoholic.
- Every year, 1 out of 12.5 high school students in the U.S. will attempt suicide.

FILM TEAM



RUTH THOMAS-SUH, DIRECTOR

Ruth graduated from Middlebury College and began her career in marketing. She held senior positions at Time Warner, J. Walter Thompson and Agency.com, where she worked with clients including *The Wall Street Journal* and British Airways. She later earned her Masters in Journalism at NYU and directed the short film *Daniel: Where Faith Meets Science*, about a boy's recovery from traumatic brain injury. Excerpts from the film were featured in the PBS programs *Reading Rainbow* and *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. Her inspiration to make a film about social rejection came from the book *The Shame Response to Rejection*, written by her father, Dr. Herbert E. Thomas.



KURT ENGFЕHR, PRODUCER

Kurt is an award-winning director, editor and producer who has done work for HBO, MSN-BC, CBS and ABC. He was editor and co-producer on the acclaimed documentary films *Trumbo*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and the Academy Award-winning *Bowling for Columbine*. He also won the American Cinema Editors Award for Best Documentary Editing for his work on *Bowling for Columbine*. Most recently, Kurt co-directed the films *The Yes Men Fix the World* and *Fat, Sick and Nearly Dead*. He also edited *A People Uncounted*, a 2012 Producers Guild of America nomination for Best Documentary.



PETER BRAUER, EDITOR-PRODUCER

Peter is a documentary producer, director, editor and cinematographer. After graduating from NYU's Tisch School of Film in 2003, he traveled to Mexico to direct and edit the award-winning training film *Return to Life After Spinal Injury*. Peter went on to produce *Second Skin*, a documentary about the online gaming community, which premiered at SXSW and went on to play at HotDocs, Sheffield Doc/Fest and the Camden Independent Film Festival. He has produced and edited for a range of corporate clients, from The Blue Man Group to Samsung. He also founded Abby's Acres organic farm in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2015.



NARA GARBЕR, DIRECTOR OF CINEMATOGRAPHY

Nara has worked full time in film and video production since 1998. Starting out primarily as an editor of independent features, Nara gradually shifted her focus to directing, producing and cinematography. She is the cinematographer of the Peabody Award-winning documentary *Best Kept Secret* and co-directed and produced *Flat Daddy*, described by *Variety* as providing "a unique perspective on the cost of war." She is currently directing a feature documentary about grassroots revitalization efforts in Braddock, PA. Nara holds an MFA in Film from Columbia University.



SIMONE GIULIANI, COMPOSER

Simone is a music producer, film composer, keyboard player, string arranger and music director. He has worked with an array of international artists including Beyoncé, Wu-Tang Clan and Bebel Gilberto. He has written original music for shows including *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and *True Blood*, as well as soundtracks for films including *Facing Forward*, currently airing on PBS. He is the Director of Programs for Moment NYC, a visiting music history program for New York City schools.



BRYAN SARKINEN

Bryan Sarkinen is a graduate of New York University, where he created the movie review show “The Inside Reel” that aired on college networks nationwide. Since then, he has produced a range of projects, from capturing four seasons of Discovery Channel's hit show “Moonshiners” to documenting children in Bangladesh, Yemen and Burkina Faso for the United Nations Population Fund documentary “Too Brief a Child: Voices of Married Adolescents.” Bryan has recently served as director of photography for the documentaries “Ivory Tower” (CNN) and “The First Monday in May” about the Met's Costume Institute, which premiered at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival.



TINA DIFELICIANTONIO AND JANE C. WAGNER, CONSULTING PRODUCERS

From cinema vérité to impressionistic documentaries, Tina DiFelicianantonio's and Jane C. Wagner's critically acclaimed work has tackled a wide range of subjects—including AIDS, sexuality, child abuse, rape, social justice, art and science. Their work has garnered dozens of top honors, including two Emmys and the Sundance Grand Jury Prize for the film *Girls Like Us*. Their films have been seen on PBS, Sundance, TLC, SciFi, USA, HBO and foreign television. DiFelicianantonio and Wagner have served on the Board of Directors of such organizations as ITVS, Women Make Movies, Frameline, Foundation of Independent Film and Videomakers and Independent Filmworks, Inc.



DEBORAH KRISHNAN, RESEARCHER

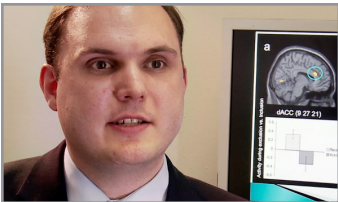
Deborah holds a Masters degree in Psychology from NYU and a PhD in Clinical Psychology from Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology at Yeshiva University. She has worked for the University of Michigan, Columbia University, NYU, Fordham University and other institutions, helping to conduct research projects related to social-emotional learning; literacy and science education; and emotional and behavioral problems among youth. She also worked for three years at Operation Respect, a nonprofit organization founded by Peter Yarrow (of Peter, Paul & Mary), which is dedicated to creating respectful, safe and compassionate learning environments for children that are free of bullying, ridicule and violence.

FILM EXPERTS



NAOMI EISENBERGER, PH.D.

is assistant professor of Social Psychology at UCLA and director of UCLA's Social and Affective Neuroscience Laboratory. She conducted the 2003 breakthrough experiment supporting the connection between interpersonal rejection and physical pain. (Science, "Why Rejection Hurts: A Common Neural Alarm System for Physical and Social Pain.") Her work examining the neural basis of social rejection and the impact of relationships on emotional and physical well-being has been featured in the scientific journals *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* and *Biological Psychiatry*, as well as by Newsweek, CNN, BBC and Edge.org.



C. NATHAN DEWALL, PH.D.

is professor of Social Psychology at the University of Kentucky. His research focuses on the fundamental human need for positive and lasting relationships and how this need influences emotion, self-control, aggression, pro-social behavior and physical pain. His work has been featured in *Psychological Science*, *The New York Times* and on NPR.



JAMES GARBARINO, PH.D.

is the chair of Humanistic Psychology at Loyola University. He has written and spoken extensively about issues related to emotional aggression and bullying, and he studies the root causes of violence in children and how to rehabilitate them. He serves as consultant or adviser to many organizations, including the National Institute for Mental Health, American Medical Association, National Science Foundation and the FBI. He is the author of sixteen books, the most recent—*Listening to Killers: Lessons Learned from My Twenty Years as a Psychological Expert Witness in Murder Cases*—was published in 2015.



AMANDA HARRIST, PH.D.

is a professor at Oklahoma State University at the Center for Family Resilience. Her research centers on the development of children's social competence, specifically the antecedents of children's competence and maladjustment in the early school years. She has explored the relation of children's behavior in the peer group to early family interactions, observed both naturalistically and in the laboratory. She is interested in interventions for children at risk in early social settings, and has pursued this via several funded projects, most recently in a longitudinal study of the family and rural school contexts of child obesity.



ETHAN KROSS, PH.D.

is associate professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan, director of The Emotion and Self Control Lab and Faculty Associate at the Research Center for Group Dynamics, Center for Cultural Neuroscience, and Depression. His research on social pain overlap theory, connecting the experience of social pain and physical pain, has been published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* and *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*. His work is regularly featured in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Harvard Business Review*.



MATTHEW LIEBERMAN, PH.D.

is professor of Social Psychology at UCLA and director of UCLA's Social Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory. He is the author of *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*. His TED Talk "The Social Brain and its Superpowers" explains how the human need to connect is greater than our need for "food, water, shelter." Together with Naomi Eisenberger, he co-authored the 2003 interpersonal rejection and pain study. His work has been featured in *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* and *Psychological Science*. His research in social neuroscience is cited regularly in *The New York Times*, on NPR and other national and international media outlets.



VIVIAN GUSSIN PALEY

is the only kindergarten teacher ever to receive the MacArthur Fellowship "genius" grant. Author of *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, she explains how teacher-sanctioned rejection in the classroom affects children. She taught for forty years at the University of Chicago Lab School, authored thirteen books published by Harvard University Press and University of Chicago Press and has received numerous awards from organizations such as the Erikson Institute and the National Council of Teachers of English.



RONALD ROHNER, PH.D.

is a professor emeritus of Family Studies and Anthropology at the University of Connecticut and director of the Center for the Study of Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection. The center is devoted to understanding interpersonal relationships, especially parent-child relationships and intimate adult relationships, and their long-term effects. He received the American Psychology Association's Award for Distinguished Contributions to the International Advancement of Psychology (2004) for his profound theoretical and practical contributions to the advancement of knowledge and skills relating to cross-cultural parenting and healthy human development worldwide.



HERBERT THOMAS, M.D.

is a retired psychiatrist and author of *The Shame Response to Rejection*. He developed his theory connecting the experience of rejection to physical pain while consulting at a maximum-security prison in Pittsburgh, where he was the chief consulting psychiatrist for thirty years. He coined the phrase "the shame response to rejection" to describe the physical pain that is felt when people experience rejection. At the University of Pittsburgh, he was a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the School of Medicine and an Adjunct Professor of Psychiatry and Law at the School of Law. He is a founding member and past president of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law.



KIPLING WILLIAMS, PH.D.

is professor of Psychological Sciences at Purdue University. He is a leading expert on the social and psychological dynamics of ostracism. His studies indicate that the initial reaction to social rejection is pain, which is similarly felt by all individuals regardless of personality or social/situational factors. He is the author of *Ostracism: The Power of Silence* and the editor of nine books. He has published over 140 articles and chapters in *Science*, *Scientific American-MIND*, *Psychological Science* and other leading journals. He has received funding from the Australian Research Council and the National Science Foundation, and he was a 2012 Lorentz Fellow of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies.

FILM REVIEWS AND ENDORSEMENTS

TheFilmYap.com

“A fascinating, heartbreaking documentary that offers real perspective.”

The Independent Critic

“One of the most intellectually astute and heartfelt documentaries I've witnessed to address the concept of social rejection. ...actually empowers the viewer to act by providing tangible facts and tools.”

AltOhio

“REJECT is an excellent documentary that highlights the tragic results bullying and ostracism can have on children and adults alike. ...the discussion was incredibly moving, with some of the audience questions being asked through tears.”

Cellar Door Cleveland

“This is a terrific documentary about bullying and the effect that rejection has on our brain.”

PRESS LINKS:

LAFAYETTE JOURNAL & COURIER

A feature article on REJECT and bullying by rejection.

http://rejectfilm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Lafayette_Journal_-011.pdf

http://rejectfilm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Lafayette_Journal_-012.pdf

THE SOUND OF IDEAS, WCPN

REJECT producers Ruth Thomas Suh and Kurt Engfehr discuss the film (minute 18:40).

<http://www.ideastream.org/programs/sound-of-ideas/intolerance-and-rejection>

STATE IMPACT, WCPN

An interview with ostracism expert Kipling D. Williams about his research, featured in REJECT:

<http://www.ideastream.org/stateimpact/2013/04/10/why-being-left-out-hurts-so-bad/>

WRITER'S VOICE WITH FRANCES RHEANNON

Interview with director Ruth Thomas-Suh and her father Dr. Herbert E. Thomas.

<http://www.writersvoice.net/2014/02/ruth-thomas-suh-reject-herbert-thomas-the-shame-response-to-rejection-john-cushman-on-kxl/#more-7004>

THEFILMYAP.COM

Joe Shearer interviews director Ruth Thomas-Suh.

<http://www.thefilmyap.com/2013/10/18/ruth-thomas-suh-reject>

THE POST AND COURIER

REJECT emphasizes the science behind ostracism and rejection.

<http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20140120/PC16/140129970>

ENDORSEMENTS:

INDIANA YOUTH INSTITUTE

We had the privilege of showing Reject to a packed room of 300 of our attendees to our 2014 Because KIDS COUNT Conference presented by Pacers Foundation. The raw power of the film made an extraordinary impact on this crowd of youth-serving professionals. Thank you for making us pause and re-think how we all should play a role in preparing our youth to live a life of acceptance and positive behavior.

PAT LYDEN

FORMER CEO, SUICIDE PREVENTION EDUCATION ALLIANCE

If we train children to be inclusive and kind, we will, quite literally, change the world. REJECT is a must-see film.

ANN CAINE

RETIRED SUPERINTENDENT, STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

For the first time, I have viewed a documentary film that addresses bullying in a refreshingly honest manner, while at the same time offering a solution.

AUSTIN SHADLE

DEPUTY PROSECUTING ATTORNEY, INDIANAPOLIS, IN

From a crime prevention perspective, I hope this film (and its very important message), is shared and implemented everywhere as we work to prevent bullying, teen suicide, child maltreatment and domestic violence. It is only through a strong coalition of law enforcement, faith and community groups, schools, businesses and individuals that we can “gather in” and help those who have experienced the pain of rejection, and as a result, are bent on harming themselves or others.

HEATHER STUART

QUEENS UNIVERSITY, CANADA

This is a powerful and impactful movie that unravels how to promote social inclusion and social acceptance by investing in children. It is a must see for students in the behavioural and health sciences.

JIM MINTERT

DIRECTOR AND PROFESSOR

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS, PURDUE UNIVERSITY

This film has the potential to change the very culture and fabric of American communities.

JOHN HALLIGAN

RYAN'S STORY

It addresses a point that I think has never been so well explained before to the general public. This has to be...shared with the world. I see this being watched in classrooms around the world.

For more press coverage, visit www.RejectFilm.com/reviews.