

Implications of Rejection Sensitivity for Intimate Relationships

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People who are sensitive to social rejection tend to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to it. This article shows that this cognitive-affective processing disposition undermines intimate relationships. Study 1 describes a measure that operationalizes the anxious-expectations component of rejection sensitivity. Study 2 provides experimental evidence that people who anxiously expect rejection readily perceive intentional rejection in the ambiguous behavior of others. Study 3 shows that people who enter romantic relationships with anxious expectations of rejection readily perceive intentional rejection in the insensitive behavior of their new partners. Study 4 demonstrates that rejection-sensitive people and their romantic partners are dissatisfied with their relationships. Rejection-sensitive men's jealousy and rejection-sensitive women's hostility and diminished supportiveness help explain their partners' dissatisfaction.

The desire to achieve acceptance and to avoid rejection is widely acknowledged to be a central human motive (Horney, 1937; Maslow, 1987; McClelland, 1987; Rogers, 1959; Sullivan, 1937; see Baumeister & Leary, 1995, for a review). Consistent with this claim, social rejection is known to diminish well-being and disrupt interpersonal functioning. Responses to perceived rejection include hostility, dejection, emotional withdrawal, and jealousy (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Coie, Lochman, Terry, & Hyman, 1992; Coyne, 1976; Dodge & Somberg, 1987; Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Lefkowitz & Tesiny, 1984; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rohner & Rohner, 1980; Salovey & Rodin, 1986).

However, people differ in their readiness to perceive and react to rejection. Some people interpret undesirable interpersonal events benignly and maintain equanimity in their wake. Others readily perceive intentional rejection in the minor or imagined insensitivity of their significant others and overreact in ways that compromise their relationships and well-being. We have proposed that the latter people's readiness to perceive and overreact to rejection is facilitated by a tendency to anxiously expect rejection by the significant people in their lives. We have applied the term *rejection sensitive* to people who anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection (Downey, Feldman,

Khuri, & Friedman, 1994; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Our prior research has documented a link between rejection sensitivity and exposure to rejecting parenting in childhood (Feldman & Downey, 1994). In this article, we test the proposition that rejection sensitivity fosters difficulties in intimate adult relationships.

Conceptualizing Rejection Sensitivity

The Psychological Legacy of Rejection

The assertion that rejection sensitivity, originating in childhood rejection, underlies interpersonal difficulties has precedents in classical interpersonal theories of personality (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Erikson, 1950; Horney, 1937; Sullivan, 1953). Horney (1937) attributed maladaptive orientations to relationships to "basic anxiety" about desertion, abuse, humiliation, and betrayal. She viewed this anxiety as underlying a painful sensitivity "to any rejection or rebuff no matter how slight, [for example,] a change in an appointment, having to wait, failure to receive an immediate response" (Horney, 1937, pp. 135–136). Erikson (1950) proposed that a basic mistrust of others would compromise the possibility of personal and interpersonal fulfillment. Sullivan (1953) claimed that generalized expectations or "personifications" of significant others as meeting needs or as punitive, disapproving, or rejecting form the basis for how people perceive and relate to others.

Bowlby's attachment theory is the most elaborated model of the psychological mediators linking early rejection with later interpersonal functioning (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Bowlby proposed that children develop mental models of themselves and of relationships that influence their future relationships. At the core of these models are expectations about whether significant others will satisfy their needs or be rejecting. These expectations derive from the reliability with which their primary caretaker meets their needs in early childhood. When caretakers tend to meet children's needs sensitively and consistently, children develop secure working models that incorporate the expectation that others will accept and support them. When caretakers tend to meet children's needs with rejection, children de-

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velop insecure working models that incorporate doubts and anxieties about whether others will accept and support them. Insecure working models are thought to underlie mistrustful or ambivalent orientations to adult relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

As Bretherton, Ridgeway, and Cassidy (1990) have noted, when Bowlby introduced the internal working model "it was little more than a metaphor with useful connotations" (p. 275). The task of clarifying, elaborating, and operationalizing the working model is currently being approached in two ways by researchers interested in applying Bowlby's ideas to adult relationships (Bretherton, 1985; Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Main & Goldwyn, 1984; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). One approach has focused on establishing how the quality of early caretaking is represented in memory. This approach is exemplified in Main's use of the detail, coherence, affective tone, and content of childhood memories as a basis for inferring people's working models (e.g., Main & Goldwyn, 1984). A second approach has been to characterize the interpersonal styles of adults presumed to differ in the security of their working models. This approach is exemplified in Hazan and Shaver's profiles of secure, ambivalent, and avoidant attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; see also Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Conceptualizing Rejection Sensitivity as a Cognitive-Affective Processing Disposition

Although attachment researchers view working models as guiding current information processing, they have paid little attention to directly investigating how early rejection experiences shape the moment-to-moment cognitive and affective processes that generate behavior in specific social situations. These immediate psychological antecedents of behavior have been the focus of much contemporary research from a cognitive-affective information-processing perspective (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Higgins & Kruglanski, in press; Mischel, 1973; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Ready links can be made between the ideas of Bowlby and the other early interpersonal theorists about the psychological legacy of parental rejection and key information-processing variables (Feldman & Downey, 1994). These variables include expectancies about the outcomes of one's actions, the subjective value placed on different outcomes, attributional biases, and scripts for regulating one's affective and behavioral response to various experiences (Bandura, 1986; Mischel, 1973; Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

In our research we have conceptualized the psychological legacy of early rejection in cognitive-affective processing terms. Specifically, we have sought to establish how early rejection experiences shape (a) the expectations, values and concerns, interpretative biases, and self-regulatory strategies that underlie behavior in particular interpersonal contexts and (b) the dynamic relations among these cognitive-affective variables and interpersonal behavior (Downey et al., 1994; Feldman & Downey, 1994).

Drawing on Bowlby (1980), our model proposes that when parents tend to meet children's expressed needs with rejection, children become sensitive to rejection. That is, they develop the

expectation that when they seek acceptance and support from significant others they will probably be rejected, and they learn to place a particularly high value on avoiding such rejection. They thus experience anticipatory anxiety when expressing needs or vulnerabilities to significant others.

These anxious expectations of rejection make them hypervigilant for signs of rejection. When they encounter rejection cues, however minimal or ambiguous, they readily perceive intentional rejection and experience feelings of rejection. The perceived rejection is then likely to prompt both affective and behavioral overreactions, which may include anger and hostility, despondency, withdrawal of support, jealousy, and inappropriate attempts to control the significant other's behavior.

In sum, we draw on a rich theoretical tradition to propose that early rejection experiences leave a psychological legacy that emerges in the disposition to be sensitive to rejection by significant others. In support of this claim, we have previously found that childhood exposure to family violence and rejection is associated with heightened sensitivity to rejection (Feldman & Downey, 1994; Downey, Lebolt, & Rincon, 1995). We now consider the potential implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships in adulthood.

Impact of Rejection Sensitivity on Intimate Relationships

Whereas rejection sensitivity may originally develop as a self-protective reaction to parental rejection, this system may prompt behaviors that are poorly adapted to adult circumstances (see Bowlby, 1973). When activated in a relatively benign social world, rejection sensitivity may lead people to behave in ways that undermine their chances of maintaining a supportive and satisfying close relationship.

Our model suggests that people who enter a relationship disposed to anxiously expect rejection from significant others should be likely to (a) perceive intentional rejection in their partner's insensitive or ambiguous behaviors, (b) feel insecure and unhappy about their relationship, and (c) respond to perceived rejection or threats of rejection by their partner with hostility, diminished support, or jealous, controlling behavior. When unjustified and exaggerated, these behaviors are likely to erode even a committed partner's satisfaction with the relationship.

There is a basis for some of our predictions in prior research. First, the prediction that anxious expectations of rejection underlie a readiness to perceive rejection has general support in findings that people's attributions are driven at least in part by expectations (see Olson, Roesse, & Zanna, in press). More specific support is provided by Dodge and Somberg's (1987) finding that experimentally manipulated explicit threats of peer rejection prompted a substantial increase in aggressive children's hostile attributions to their peers' behavior.

Second, the prediction that rejection sensitivity undermines people's relationships finds support in research from both an attachment perspective and an attributional perspective. Adult attachment researchers have shown that insecurely attached people, that is, people who are generally mistrustful of others or who worry about their partner's commitment, find their relationships unsatisfactory, and their romantic partners agree with

this assessment (Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1994; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Simpson, 1990). There is also some evidence that insecurely attached adults behave toward their partner in ways that may undermine the relationship (Kobak & Hazan, 1991).

Marital attribution researchers have found that spouses who attribute their partners' behaviors to negative intent and, in particular, to lack of love, dislike, or lack of consideration for their needs, are more dissatisfied with their relationship than are spouses who interpret their partners' behavior more benignly (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990, for a review; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Epstein, Pretzer, & Fleming, 1987; Fincham & Beach, 1988; Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987; Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). Negative attributions have also been found to predict the type of negative interactions that typify unsatisfactory relationships (for a review, see Fincham, 1994).

Overview

Our two main goals in the research described in this article were (a) to operationalize and validate the construct of rejection sensitivity, and (b) to demonstrate its impact on intimate relationships. To accomplish the first of these goals, we began with the development of a measure of rejection sensitivity. This measure is described in Study 1. Because our model proposes that anxious expectations of rejection by significant others are at the core of rejection sensitivity, rejection sensitivity is operationalized as anxious expectations of rejection in situations that afford the possibility of rejection by significant others.

To validate our construct, we tested the proposition that anxious expectations of rejection fuel a readiness to perceive intentional rejection in the ambiguous behavior of others. In Study 2 we tested whether people with anxious expectations of rejection are more likely than others to perceive intentional rejection in the ambiguous behavior of someone with whom they have just finished a friendly conversation. In Study 3 we used longitudinal data to assess whether people who enter romantic relationships with anxious expectations of rejection tend to attribute hurtful intent to their new partner's insensitive behavior. In Study 3 we also assessed whether the impact of anxious expectations of rejection on attributions of hurtful intent can be distinguished from the impact of related constructs, including social anxiety and adult attachment style.

To accomplish the second goal, we investigated the impact of rejection sensitivity on romantic relationships. Specifically, we used data from couples in committed dating relationships to test the hypotheses that rejection-sensitive people and their partners have less satisfying relationships and that rejection-sensitive people's hostile, jealous, and unsupportive behaviors contribute to their partners' dissatisfaction.

Study 1

Study 1 describes the development of the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ). This measure operationalizes rejection sensitivity as generalized expectations and anxiety about

whether significant others will meet one's needs for acceptance or will be rejecting. Thus, situations that involve expressing a need to a significant other should be particularly likely to activate generalized rejection anxieties and expectations, thereby revealing the extent of a person's sensitivity to rejection.

On the basis of this assumption, the RSQ presents respondents with a range of situations in which they must make a request of a significant other. They are asked whether they would be concerned or anxious about the response to their request and whether they would expect the other person to honor or reject the request. Insofar as they are anxious about the outcome and also expect a rejecting outcome, they are considered to be sensitive to rejection. The measure incorporates situations involving parents, friends, teachers, romantic partners, potential romantic partners, and potential friends. We conducted pilot work to identify pertinent situations in the lives of young adults, the target population of this study.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Participants were 321 female and 263 male undergraduates. Posters seeking participants for a study of interpersonal relationships for pay were placed around a college campus. Participants received \$5 for completing a survey that included the RSQ and basic demographic questions. Participants received and returned surveys through the campus mail system.

The participants' mean age was 18.7 years ($SD = 1.6$). The racial and gender composition of the sample was representative of the undergraduate population. Fifty-four percent of the participants were Caucasian, 26% were Asian-American, 7.5% were Hispanic, 6.5% were African-American, and 6% were from other ethnic backgrounds. The majority of participants were in their first or second year of college.

A subsample of 166 women and 127 men completed three additional surveys over the academic year. Participants received \$7, \$5, and \$5, respectively, for completing the surveys, which included measures used to assess the reliability and predictive utility of the RSQ (see Study 3). This subsample did not differ from the original sample in racial composition, age distribution, or mean level of rejection sensitivity.

Measures: RSQ

The RSQ was developed from open-ended interviews with 20 undergraduates. These students were presented with 30 hypothetical interpersonal situations generated by a different group of undergraduates. The 20 undergraduates were asked for detailed descriptions of what they thought would happen and how they would feel in each situation. The situations were selected to represent a broad cross-section of interpersonal situations that young adults encounter in which rejection is possible. Sample situations included "You ask a friend to do you a big favor"; "You call your boyfriend/girlfriend after a bitter argument and tell him/her you want to see him/her"; and "You ask your parents to come to an occasion important to you."

Answers to the hypothetical situations varied along two dimensions: (a) degree of anxiety and concern about the outcome and (b) expectations of acceptance or rejection. Responses along these two dimensions did not covary systematically. For example, some people would be anxious about asking their parents to come to an important occasion but would not expect them to refuse. Other people with a similar level of anxiety would expect their parents to refuse. Of theoretical interest to us were people who both expected rejection and were concerned about this outcome in various interpersonal situations.

Table 1
Factor Loadings for Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ) Items and Mean RSQ Score for the Sample

Item	Total sample	Men	Women
1. You ask someone in class if you can borrow his/her notes.	.42	.38	.43
2. You ask your boyfriend/girlfriend to move in with you.	.44	.34	.56
3. You ask your parents for help in deciding what programs to apply to.	.33	.34	.35
4. You ask someone you don't know well out on a date.	.54	.50	.54
5. Your boyfriend/girlfriend has plans to go out with friends tonight, but you really want to spend the evening with him/her, and you tell him/her so.	.55	.47	.59
6. You ask your parents for extra money to cover living expenses.	.42	.38	.43
7. After class, you tell your professor that you have been having some trouble with a section of the course and ask if he/she can give you some extra help.	.44	.37	.52
8. You approach a close friend to talk after doing or saying something that seriously upset him/her.	.53	.49	.55
9. You ask someone in one of your classes to coffee.	.62	.57	.66
10. After graduation you can't find a job and you ask your parents if you can live at home for a while.	.42	.44	.39
11. You ask a friend to go on vacation with you over Spring Break.	.68	.68	.68
12. You call your boyfriend/girlfriend after a bitter argument and tell him/her you want to see him/her.	.59	.53	.63
13. You ask a friend if you can borrow something of his/hers.	.54	.47	.61
14. You ask your parents to come to an occasion important to you.	.41	.49	.38
15. You ask a friend to do you a big favor.	.67	.56	.72
16. You ask your boyfriend/girlfriend if he/she really loves you.	.55	.47	.58
17. You go to a party and notice someone on the other side of the room, and then you ask them to dance.	.58	.52	.59
18. You ask your boyfriend/girlfriend to come home to meet your parents.	.50	.41	.56
Mean score on RSQ	9.66	9.73	9.60
<i>Mdn</i>	9.55	9.56	9.44
<i>SD</i>	3.03	2.71	3.28
Minimum score	2.40	2.70	2.40
Maximum score	23.50	18.60	23.50
<i>N</i>	584	263	321

We reduced the initial set of situations by eliminating situations that did not generate variance in responses along both dimensions. The RSQ is based on the remaining 18 situations (Table 1 gives the items).¹ We developed fixed-choice responses to each situation to assess rejection anxiety and rejection expectations, the two dimensions identified in the pilot interviews. The RSQ first asks people to indicate their degree of concern or anxiety about the outcome of each situation (e.g., "How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your friend would want to help you out?") on a 6-point scale ranging from *very unconcerned* (1) to *very concerned* (6). They are then asked to indicate the likelihood that the other person(s) would respond in an accepting fashion (e.g., "I would expect that he/she would willingly agree to help me out.") on a 6-point scale ranging from *very unlikely* (1) to *very likely* (6). High likelihood of this outcome represents expectations of acceptance, and low likelihood represents expectations of rejection.

Reflecting our adoption of an expectancy-value model (Bandura, 1986) of anxious expectations of rejection, computation of the RSQ scores was as follows: First, we obtained a rejection sensitivity score for each situation by weighting the expected likelihood of rejection by the degree of concern over its occurrence. Specifically, we reversed the score on expectancy of acceptance to index expectancy of rejection (expectancy of rejection = 7 - expectancy of acceptance). We then multiplied the reversed score by the score for degree of anxiety or concern. Second, we computed a total (cross-situational) rejection sensitivity score for each participant by summing the rejection sensitivity scores for each situation and dividing by 18, the total number of situations.

Results

Factor Analysis and Norms

We conducted a principal-components factor analysis on the scores for each item (situation) of the RSQ to establish whether

a single cross-situational factor could be extracted from the data. The analysis yielded five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, but only one factor was retained by the scree test. This factor accounted for 27% of the variance, compared with only 10% and 7% for the second and third factors, respectively. The factor loadings of the items on the first factor are given in Table 1. Seventeen of the 18 RSQ items loaded at greater than .40, and all 18 loaded at greater than .30. Separate factor analyses were conducted for men and for women. Table 1 shows similar factor loadings for the two sexes. Table 1 also gives the mean, median, standard deviation, and range of RSQ scores for the total sample and for male and female participants. The mean RSQ scores of men and women did not differ significantly, $t(582) = 0.61$. The distribution of RSQ scores for male participants did not differ significantly from normality (Shapiro-Wilk statistic, $W = .98, p > .98$). Because of the presence of a few high-scoring women, the distribution of RSQ scores for women differed significantly from normality (Shapiro-Wilk statistic, $W = .96, p < .01$). When the 5 highest scoring women were dropped from the sample, the distribution of the RSQ for women no longer differed significantly from normality. Studies of the distribution of other measures of anxiety have also found that the presence of a few high-scoring women accounted for positively skewed data (e.g., Leary, 1993).

Internal and Test-Retest Reliability of the RSQ

The RSQ shows high internal reliability ($\alpha = .83$). All items correlated above .30 with the corrected item total, and we could

¹ A complete copy of the questionnaire is available on the World Wide Web at website: <http://www.columbia.edu/~gd20/>.

not improve the reliability by deleting any individual item. The RSQ also shows high test-retest reliability. Two to 3 weeks after the first administration, we readministered the RSQ to a subsample of 104 participants randomly selected from the larger sample to examine the RSQ's short-term test-retest reliability. For this sample, the correlation between Time 1 and Time 2 scores was .83 ($p < .001$). Another nonoverlapping subsample of 223 participants was readministered the RSQ 4 months after the first administration, and for this sample, the correlation was .78 ($p < .001$).

Discussion

This study describes the development of the RSQ and reports its psychometric properties. Principal-components factor analysis supported averaging across the different request-making situations in order to construct an overall rejection sensitivity score. The factor structure was similar for men and women. This factor structure was also replicated in a sample of high-school students (Downey, Lebolt, & O'Shea, 1995). The RSQ shows good internal consistency and test-retest reliability, which suggests that the RSQ taps a relatively enduring and coherent information-processing disposition. The test-retest correlations compare favorably with those reported for other inventories that assess relationship dispositions (e.g., Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). In sum, these results indicate that the RSQ is a reliable measure of the anxious-expectations-of-rejection component of rejection sensitivity.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to test the assumption that anxious expectations of rejection predict a readiness to perceive rejection in interpersonal situations. We designed an experiment to assess whether rejection-sensitive people were more likely than others to feel rejected in a situation that was ambiguous but that could be perceived as intentionally rejecting. Participants were introduced to an opposite-sex stranger, a confederate, with whom they were going to converse during two short sessions (of 10 and 5 min, respectively). Following a pleasant initial interaction, however, the participant was informed that the confederate did not want to continue with the experiment. No explanation was given for the confederate's decision. We expected that high rejection-sensitive people would be more likely than low rejection-sensitive people to report heightened feelings of rejection in response to the confederate's action.

Half of the sample was exposed to this experimental condition, and the other half was exposed to a control condition in which they were told that the interaction had to end early because of time constraints. The control condition provided participants with an explicit impersonal explanation for the outcome of the interaction. This condition was not expected to induce feelings of rejection in either high or low rejection-sensitive people.

Participants completed self-report assessments of mood before the interaction and after the experimental manipulation. The dependent variables in the study were change in self-reported feelings of rejection from pre- to postinteraction and be-

haviorally manifest emotional reaction as rated by the experimenter. Pre- and postinteraction assessments of other dimensions of distress were also obtained. These assessments permitted us to test whether the experimental manipulation induced rejection rather than generalized distress in rejection-sensitive people. We expected that in the experimental condition, rejection-sensitive people would report a specific increase in feelings of rejection and would show a more negative emotional reaction to being told that the confederate did not want to continue with the experiment.

Method

Sample

Participants were 23 women and 24 men randomly selected from the Study 1 sample. Their mean rejection sensitivity ($M = 9.93$) and standard deviation ($SD = 3.45$) did not differ significantly from those of the total sample, $t(640) = 0.24, ns$, and $F(46, 594) = 1.30, ns$, respectively. Women and men did not differ significantly on mean rejection sensitivity, $t(45) = 0.63, ns$. Participants were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group. The two groups did not differ significantly by gender composition, $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 0.86$, or mean rejection sensitivity, $t(45) = 0.81, ns$.

Experimental Procedure

On reporting to the laboratory, the participant was brought into a room with a table and two chairs and told that the other participant had not yet arrived. Minutes later, the experimenter reentered the room with the opposite-sex confederate and introduced the participant and confederate by name.

The experimenter and confederate were blind to the participants' level of rejection sensitivity, and the confederate was blind to the experimental condition. The same experimenter and the same male and female confederates were used throughout the study. The participant and confederate were told that this was a study about how people form initial impressions of others. They would have two brief sessions to "get to know one another" that would last 10 and 5 min, respectively. After each session, the interaction partners would be asked to complete questionnaires evaluating how the interaction had gone. Both the participant and the confederate were asked to read and sign a consent form describing the purpose and structure of the experiment. The experimenter then verbally summarized the information in the consent form, noting that either person was free to withdraw from the study at any point.

After describing the study, the experimenter asked the participant and confederate to complete a mood scale. When they had both completed the scale, the experimenter explained that she would knock on the door when 10 min had elapsed. She then left them alone in the room. To help ensure that the interaction was a positive experience and that its premature termination would not be viewed with relief, the confederate had been instructed to be congenial and to allow the participant to lead the conversation. After the 10 min had elapsed, the experimenter knocked and reentered the room with a general questionnaire on how the interaction was going (interaction questionnaire) for each of the interaction partners to complete. She asked the confederate to follow her to a separate room to complete the questionnaire, and they left the participant alone with the door ajar.

Once the participant had completed the questionnaire, the experimenter reentered the room and introduced the manipulation. In the experimental condition, she told the participant, "[The confederate] does not want to continue with the second part of the experiment." In the control condition, she told the participant, "There is not enough time for the second interaction." The experimenter then left the room

and recorded the participant's response to this information. On returning to the room, the experimenter assured the participant that he or she would be able to complete the rest of the study as planned and asked the participant to fill out a second mood scale. On finishing this questionnaire, the participant was informed of the confederate's true identity and the nature of the experimental manipulation. The experimenter reassured the participant that the confederate had not known what the experimenter was going to tell the participant after the interaction, and the confederate was reintroduced to the participant. Any remaining concerns were addressed and the participant was thanked and paid \$5.

Measures

Mood Scale. The items used to assess negative mood were drawn from the Anxiety, Anger, and Depression subscales of the Affects Balance Scale (Derogatis, 1975). Additional adjectives descriptive of feelings of rejection (i.e., unaccepted, rejected, hurt, disliked, discouraged) and positive items were added to the scale to make 38 items in total. Participants were asked to circle the number that best described how much they were experiencing each of the feelings right now, on a 4-point scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*very much*). Besides the standard anxiety, anger, and depression indices, we calculated a rejection index by taking the mean of the relevant rejection items. The internal consistencies, calculated separately for the first and second administrations, were above .8 for each subscale. We calculated change on each negative mood scale by subtracting the score on the first administration from that on the second. Thus, a positive change score indicated an increase in the particular mood subsequent to the interaction and experimental manipulation. The average intercorrelation among the four change-in-negative-mood scores was .48.

Interaction questionnaire. This questionnaire was administered after the interaction and before the experimental manipulation. It consisted of two open-ended questions designed to check that the interaction with the confederate was viewed positively by the participant and to reinforce expectations of a second meeting. The questions were as follows: "Overall, how well do you feel the first interaction period went?" and "Are you looking forward to meeting the other person again?"

Experimenter observation of reaction to manipulation. The experimenter answered the question "Which of the following adjectives is most descriptive of the participant's response to being told the second interaction would not take place?" For each participant, the experimenter circled one of the following answers: *upset*, *angry*, *happy*, *confused*, or *no reaction*. None of the participants were rated as having been angry, and only one (a control) was rated as having been happy. A dichotomous variable was constructed with a value of 0 indicating no emotional reaction and a value of 1 indicating a negative emotional reaction (*upset* or *confused*).

Results

Interaction Check

Participants' ratings of how well they thought the interaction had gone (made before the experimental manipulation) ranged from *fairly well* to *very well*. As expected, interacting with the confederate was generally viewed as a positive experience. Only 1 person (a control) reported not looking forward to meeting the confederate again; of the remaining participants, 5 reported being indifferent and the rest reported looking forward to the second interaction. Responses to the two interaction check items did not vary systematically as a function of experimental condition or rejection sensitivity.

Self-Reported Change in Rejected Mood

To assess whether there were preexisting differences in mood as a function of experimental condition or rejection sensitivity, we conducted regressions with experimental condition and rejection sensitivity as independent variables and each of the four preinteraction mood scores derived from the mood questionnaire as dependent variables. Table 2 presents these results. None of the initial mood scores, including feelings of rejection, was significantly associated with experimental condition or rejection sensitivity. We also used regression analyses to assess whether initial mood scores differed as a function of the interaction of rejection sensitivity and experimental condition. Experimental Condition \times Rejection Sensitivity effects were nonsignificant except for anxiety, $b = -.17$, $t(43) = 2.86$, $p < .01$.

Next, we conducted regression analyses to assess changes in anxiety, anger, depression, and rejection as a function of rejection sensitivity, experimental group, and their interaction (see Table 2). The general lack of a significant association between initial mood scores and rejection sensitivity, experimental condition, and their interaction eliminated the need to control for initial mood in the analyses of change in mood. The one exception was the significant Rejection Sensitivity \times Experimental Condition interaction for anxiety. Controlling for initial level of anxiety did not alter the results of the regression analyses for change in anxiety.

We were interested specifically in whether changes in mood were restricted to increased feelings of rejection in high rejection-sensitive people in the experimental condition. There was a significant Experimental Condition \times Rejection Sensitivity interaction effect for change in rejection, $b = .06$, $t(43) = 2.46$, $p < .02$. As Table 2 shows, the interaction term was not significant for any of the other mood measures.

Figure 1 plots the predicted values of change in rejected mood for the experimental and control groups as a function of rejection sensitivity. Figure 1 shows that members of the control group showed a similar decrease in rejected mood from before the interaction regardless of their level of rejection sensitivity. In the experimental group, those who were highest in sensitivity to rejection showed the greatest increase in feelings of rejection following the manipulation. Thus, being told that the confederate did not want to continue the experiment induced increased feelings of rejection in people to the extent that they were sensitive to rejection.

Observed Emotional Reaction

Examination of the experimenter's rating of participants' reaction to the manipulation was restricted to members of the experimental group because the experimenter was not blind to whether people were in the experimental or control group when the rating was made. She was, however, unaware of participants' RSQ scores. The observed negativity of the participant's reaction to being told the confederate did not want to continue with the study was significantly associated with rejection sensitivity ($r = .52$, $p < .02$) and with self-reported increase in rejected mood ($r = .71$, $p < .001$). Controlling for premanipulation rejected mood did not alter this latter finding (partial $r = .72$, $p < .001$).

Table 2
Regression of Initial Mood and Change in Mood on Experimental Group and Rejection Sensitivity

Dependent variable	Intercept	Experimental group (= 1) vs. control (= 0)		Rejection sensitivity		Experimental Group \times Rejection sensitivity		F ratio
		<i>b</i>	β	<i>b</i>	β	<i>b</i>	β	
Initial level of anxiety	.58	-.14	-.10	.03	.16	—	—	0.88
Initial level of anger	.24	-.09	-.08	.01	.07	—	—	0.30
Initial level of depression	.27	-.10	-.09	.02	.13	—	—	0.63
Initial level of rejection	.12	-.15	-.13	.03	.17	—	—	1.15
Change in anxiety	-.43	-.22	-.26	.007	.05	.02	.30	0.56
Change in anger	-.14	-.15	-.22	.006	.06	.02	.31	0.70
Change in depression	-.08	-.02	-.04	-.003	-.04	.01	.21	0.40
Change in rejection	.16	-.26	-.36	-.002	-.02	.06*	.96	11.36

Note. $n = 46$; df for initial level analyses = 2, 44; df for change analyses = 3, 43.

* $p < .05$.

Discussion

Our purpose in Study 2 was to test the hypothesis that a person's RSQ score would predict the extent to which he or she would feel rejected in an ambiguous rejection situation. The results supported the hypothesis: Following the presentation of experimentally manipulated ambiguous rejection feedback after interaction with a confederate, high rejection-sensitive people reported greater feelings of rejection than low rejection-sensitive people. This effect was limited to feelings of rejection, rather than reflecting greater emotional distress in general, and was behaviorally manifest to the experimenter.

Furthermore, the results suggested that the increase in rejected mood experienced by people who were highly sensitive to rejection was contingent specifically on receiving the ambiguous

rejection feedback. High and low rejection-sensitive people did not differ in level of initial rejected mood. Nor did they differ in change in rejected mood in the control condition, in which the feedback was explicitly nonrejecting. Social interaction in itself, in the absence of any potential rejection cues, did not induce feelings of rejection in rejection-sensitive people. Thus, the results of this study support the theoretical assumption that rejection-sensitive people more readily perceive intentional rejection in the ambiguously rejecting behavior of others.

Qualitative data from the debriefings further support this conclusion. Rejection-sensitive people were likely to ruminate over what they had done to cause the confederate to reject them; for example, some of their comments were "I felt so badly. I wondered what I had done wrong" and "I was worried that I had bored him." People who were low in rejection sensitivity were not concerned with understanding why the confederate did not return. They were also less likely to perceive the confederate's behavior as a rejection, attributing it instead to nonpersonal causes, as in the comment "I thought maybe she was in a rush."

In summary, the results of this study support the proposition that rejection-sensitive people readily construe intentional rejection in the ambiguous or negative behavior of others. This cognitive-affective processing disposition has behavioral consequences: Rejection-sensitive people's feelings of rejection in the experimental condition were evident to the experimenter. Because the study was conducted with an initially unacquainted confederate, however, it is unclear whether these findings extend to rejection-sensitive people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior with people they know well. An advantage of observing interaction with a new acquaintance was that we could eliminate characteristics of an ongoing relationship as an explanation for participants' responses during the experiment. Instead, we could conclude that participants' reactions reflected the dispositions that they brought to the situation. Nevertheless, we are ultimately interested in the implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships.

Study 3

Accordingly, our purpose in Study 3 was to investigate the connection between anxious expectations of rejection and per-

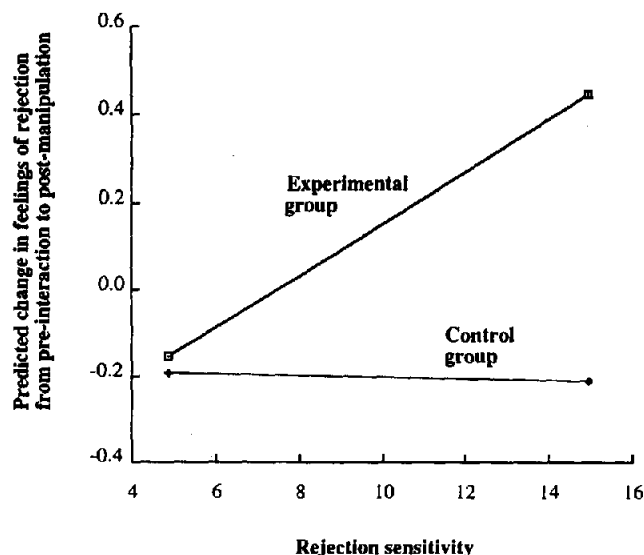


Figure 1. Predicted changes in feelings of rejection from pre-interaction to post-manipulation as a function of rejection sensitivity.

ceptions of rejection in the behavior of an intimate partner. We addressed this question in a prospective study of college students. We tested whether a person's RSQ score would predict attributions of hurtful intent to a subsequent romantic partner's insensitive behavior. By assessing an individual's RSQ score before the romantic relationship began, we ensured that any association found between anxious expectations of rejection and perceptions of the partner's behavior could not reflect the impact of dissatisfaction with the relationship or the partner's actual behavior on rejection sensitivity.

We were also interested in establishing whether anxious expectations of rejection could be distinguished from conceptually and empirically related constructs in terms of their effects on attributions of hurtful intent to the partner. Particularly relevant is the construct of social anxiety, which we have previously found to correlate with rejection sensitivity (Feldman & Downey, 1994). Social anxiety refers to the anxiety that people experience when they anticipate being unable to make a positive impression on others (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Because of the salience of first impressions in social interactions with strangers, especially in public situations, these types of situations are thought to be particularly likely to trigger social anxiety in people so disposed. Thus, social anxiety is typically operationalized as anxiety or distress about encounters with strangers in public settings (e.g., Cheek & Buss, 1981; Leary, 1983; Watson & Friend, 1969). This type of anxiety is believed to motivate the avoidance of social interaction with strangers and, thus, to impede the development of new relationships.

Rather than focusing on anxiety about negative evaluation by strangers, we focused on anxiety about the willingness of significant others to meet an individual's needs in a relationship. Insofar as social anxiety and rejection sensitivity are correlated, there appears to be some overlap in people's anxiety about casual and intimate relationships. However, we expect that anxiety about emotional rejection by significant others should have a stronger influence on how people behave in intimate relationships than anxiety about making a negative impression on strangers.

We have also previously found that young adults with insecure attachment styles are more rejection-sensitive than young adults with secure attachment styles (Feldman & Downey, 1994). In theory, we would also expect RSQ scores to be associated with self-esteem, with people who are rejection-sensitive showing low self-esteem (Horney, 1937). Thus, we examined whether attachment style or self-esteem might account for any observed relationship between anxious expectations of rejection and perceptions of rejection by the partner.

Finally, it might be argued that sensitivity to rejection is a facet of a broader personality dimension like neuroticism or introversion. Anxious expectations might be subsumed by a general disposition to experience negative affect (i.e., neuroticism). Or, the social anxiety associated with rejection sensitivity might reflect introversion. Thus, it was important to establish whether anxious expectations of rejection had an impact on attributions of hurtful intent independent of the influence of these general personality dispositions.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 166 female and 127 male first-year students who participated in the longitudinal component of Study 1. This sample

was screened to identify people who had begun a new romantic relationship after completing the RSQ and before completing a questionnaire on their attributions for their current romantic partner's insensitive behavior approximately 4 months later. Thirty-five men and 38 women were identified as meeting this criterion. Eligible people were identified from a record they provided of the start dates of their romantic relationships over the course of the academic year. This record was completed at the end of the academic year. This sample and the larger sample from which it was drawn did not differ from the Study 1 sample in racial composition, age distribution, and mean level of rejection sensitivity.

Measures

Besides completing the RSQ, respondents completed the measures described below. The RSQ and the measure of attachment style were completed at the beginning of the academic year, about 4 months before the measure of attributions of hurtful intent. The remaining measures were completed 2 to 3 weeks after the RSQ by a somewhat smaller sample than completed the RSQ.

Attributions of hurtful intent. Participants were asked to indicate on a 6-point scale the extent of their agreement (6 = *agree strongly*; 1 = *disagree strongly*) with the following three statements: "If your boyfriend or girlfriend was being cool and distant, you would feel he or she was being intentionally hurtful to you"; "If your boyfriend or girlfriend was intolerant of something you did, you would feel he or she was being intentionally hurtful to you"; and "If your boyfriend or girlfriend began to spend less time with you, you would feel he or she was being intentionally hurtful to you." These items were adapted from Fincham and Bradbury's (1992) Relationship Attribution Scale to reflect behavior that was insensitive but that could have occurred for a variety of reasons besides the partner's desire to be hurtful. For example, a partner might appear cool and distant because of preoccupation with upcoming examinations. Responses were averaged across the three items ($\alpha = .72$).

Interpersonal Sensitivity subscale (IPS) of the Symptom Distress Checklist (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1984). The SCL-90-R is a reliable and valid instrument for assessing several dimensions of psychopathology (Derogatis, 1984). The IPS consists of nine items that assess on a 5-point scale the extent to which people are bothered by feelings of uneasiness in social situations (e.g., "feeling very self-conscious with others"), feelings that others are unfriendly or unsympathetic toward the person (e.g., "feeling that other people are unfriendly or dislike you"), and feelings of inferiority (e.g., "feeling inferior to others"). This measure is frequently included in studies of clinical disorders that have as a core symptom chronic oversensitivity to rejection, defined as extreme reactions to real or imagined rejection (i.e., social phobia, atypical depression; e.g., Liebowitz et al., 1988, 1992).

Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SADS; Watson & Friend, 1969). The SADS assesses people's distress or anxiety about public social situations and avoidance of social situations. The measure consists of 14 statements about nervousness or anxiety in public social situations or situations involving unfamiliar people (e.g., "I am usually nervous with people unless I know them well") and 14 statements about avoidance of social situations (e.g., "I try to avoid situations that force me to be sociable"). The social distress items are similar in content to those included in Cheek and Buss's (1981) shyness measure and Leary's (1983, 1993) Interaction Anxiousness Scale. The social avoidance items are similar in content to those included to tap lack of sociability in Cheek and Buss's (1981) measure of sociability. The statements used in the SADS are derived from college students' descriptions of interpersonal anxiety. Respondents are asked to indicate whether each statement is true or false of them. We obtained a summary social distress score by taking the mean of the distress items, after correcting for reverse-scored items. A summary social avoidance score was similarly obtained.

Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire—Continuous Version (Levy &

Davis, 1988). The continuous Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire (AASQ) was adapted from Hazan and Shaver's (1987) categorical measure of adult attachment style, which requires people to indicate whether their attachment style is secure, anxious-avoidant, or anxious-ambivalent. In common with the original questionnaire, the continuous measure consists of descriptions of three styles of attachment behavior adapted for adults from Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall's (1978) descriptions of patterns of infant behavior in the Strange Situation. Participants indicate the degree to which they feel each of the three descriptions is true of them on a 7-point scale from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (7). This approach yields separate scores for attachment security, anxious avoidance, and anxious ambivalence, which are reversed so that higher scores indicate greater agreement with the description. The AASQ scores show moderate test-retest reliability (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Levy & Davis, 1988). In the present study, avoidance and security were strongly negatively correlated ($r = -.69, p < .001$) and ambivalence and security were weakly negatively correlated ($r = -.17, p < .01$), whereas avoidance and ambivalence were uncorrelated ($r = .02, ns$). These correlations resemble those obtained in previous research (Levy & Davis, 1988; Shaver & Brennan, 1992). We expected that rejection sensitivity would correlate negatively with security of attachment and positively with both avoidance and ambivalence.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was measured with a 10-item Likert-format scale (Rosenberg, 1979) consisting of items such as "I take a positive attitude toward myself." Respondents indicate the degree to which each statement reflects their self-attitudes. In this study, a high score indicates high self-esteem.

Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964). Introversion was measured with responses to 24 EPI items. Each item used a yes-or-no format; each *yes* was scored 1 and each *no* was scored 0; thus, the total score could range from 0 to 24. A typical introversion item is "Generally, do you prefer reading books to meeting people?" Neuroticism was also measured with 24 EPI items, and the total score could range from 0 to 24. A typical neuroticism item is "Would you call yourself a nervous person?"

Results

Does the RSQ Predict Attributions of Hurtful Intent to a New Romantic Partner's Behavior?

People who anxiously expected rejection by significant others at Time 1 tended to report at Time 2 that they would attribute hurtful intent to a new romantic partner's insensitive behavior ($r = .39, p < .001$). As the partial correlations in the first column of numbers in Table 3 show, this relationship did not change appreciably when each of the following dispositional variables was statistically controlled: self-esteem, interpersonal sensitivity, social avoidance, social distress, attachment security, anxious avoidance, anxious ambivalence, neuroticism, and introversion. Controlling simultaneously for all eight dispositional variables also did not alter the relationship appreciably (partial $r = .38, p < .05$).

All of these dispositional variables were significantly associated with people's RSQ scores in theoretically expected directions. The second column of numbers gives the correlations between the RSQ and these dispositional variables for the subsample of respondents who began a romantic relationship after completing the RSQ. The third column of numbers gives the correlations between the same variables and RSQ for the larger sample from which the subsample of respondents was selected. Although each of the dispositional variables was significantly

related to the RSQ, none prospectively predicted attributions of hurtful intent to a new romantic partner, as shown in the last column in Table 3.

Discussion

This study demonstrated that anxious expectations of rejection assessed before a romantic relationship began predicted the extent to which people would attribute hurtful intent to their new romantic partner's insensitive behavior. This relation was not an artifact of a variety of possible third variables including social anxiety (SADS social distress items and IPS), social avoidance (SADS social avoidance items), attachment style, self-esteem, neuroticism, and introversion. Although all of these dispositional variables were significantly related with RSQ, none was a significant predictor of attributions of hurtful intent for the insensitive behavior of a romantic partner. Thus, this study provides evidence for the distinctive predictive utility of the RSQ.

Study 4

The previous two studies showed that people who are disposed to anxiously expect rejection also readily perceive intentional rejection in the negative or ambiguous behavior of new acquaintances and romantic partners. This tendency to perceive and feel rejection combined with chronic anxiety about its occurrence are likely to compromise the quality of people's intimate relationships. In Study 4 we investigated this prediction in dating couples.

Specifically, we hypothesized that rejection-sensitive people would experience heightened concern about the possibility of being rejected by their partner and that their insecurity would be evident to their partner. We further hypothesized that their insecurity would compromise their satisfaction with the relationship, as well as that of their partner (Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Simpson, 1990). Finally, we hypothesized that they would show a predictable pattern of interactional difficulties with their partner. First, we expected that they would respond with hostility when they perceived hurtful intent in their partner's negative or ambiguous behavior (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). Second, we expected that they would behave in a jealous and controlling manner toward their partner, which would reflect their insecurities about the future of the relationship. Finally, we expected that they would stop being emotionally supportive to their partner because of their doubts about his or her commitment to the relationship. We examined whether these behavioral patterns would help explain the dissatisfaction of the partners of rejection-sensitive people with their relationships.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 80 heterosexual couples recruited through posted announcements on a university campus. The study was limited to couples who were in committed, nonmarital relationships. Couples were invited to come to a psychology laboratory to complete 45-min questionnaires on their relationship. Each partner received \$10 for par-

Table 3
Correlations Between Various Dispositional Variables and Rejection Sensitivity and Attributions of Hurtful Intent for the Behavior of a Subsequent Romantic Partner

Dispositional variable	Correlation of RSQ with attributions of hurtful intent, partialing out the relevant dispositional variable ^a	Correlation of dispositional variable with RSQ for current sample	Correlation of dispositional variable with RSQ for the large longitudinal sample (minimum $n = 192$)	Correlation of dispositional variable with attributions of hurtful intent
Neuroticism ($n = 52$)	.34*	.35**	.36***	.06
Introversion ($n = 52$)	.35*	.46***	.22***	.08
Self-esteem ($n = 52$)	.34*	-.43**	-.33***	-.13
Social avoidance ($n = 52$)	.30*	.44***	.26***	.17
Social distress ($n = 52$)	.31*	.49***	.39***	.16
Interpersonal sensitivity ($n = 52$)	.35**	.40**	.39***	.06
Secure attachment ($n = 73$)	.40***	-.30**	-.28***	.04
Resistant attachment ($n = 73$)	.42***	.24*	.24***	-.12
Avoidant attachment ($n = 73$)	.43***	.32**	.17**	-.07

Note. RSQ = Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire.

^a The zero-order correlation between RSQ and attributions of hurtful intent was .35 for $n = 52$ and .39 for $n = 73$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

participating in the study. The questionnaires were completed by 86 couples. However, the data from 6 couples were excluded because of suspicions raised about the veracity of their data by large discrepancies between partners' reports of facts about the relationship. The mean age of the female participants was 20.64 years ($SD = 1.98$), and that of the male participants was 21.30 years ($SD = 2.46$). Fifty-six percent of the women were Caucasian, 26% were Asian-American, 3% were Hispanic, 5% were African-American, and 10% were from other ethnic backgrounds. Fifty-five percent of the men were Caucasian, 23% were Asian-American, 9% were Hispanic, 3% were African-American, and 10% were from other ethnic backgrounds. The couples had been dating an average of 17 months ($SD = 13$).

Measures

Both members of the couple completed the RSQ and, in addition, provided information about themselves and about their partner. In the Results section, data are presented separately for men and women.

Concern about rejection by partner. Four items assessed participants' concerns that their partner might want to leave the relationship: "My partner often thinks of leaving our relationship"; "My partner does not feel very attached to me"; "My partner feels trapped in our relationship"; and "My partner thinks that his/her life would be better if he/she were in a relationship with someone else." These items were selected from a larger pool of items administered to a pilot sample of 113 people who were currently dating. Participants were asked to indicate how true they thought each statement was of their partner's feelings, from 0 (*not at all true of my partner's feelings*) to 8 (*completely true of my partner's feelings*). We computed the mean of these items to derive an overall rejection concern score. The scale was reliable for both men ($\alpha = .82$) and women ($\alpha = .78$).

Perceptions of partner's security with the relationship. Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they felt that the statement "My partner feels secure in our relationship" was true of their partners' feelings on a 9-point scale from 0 (*not at all true of my partner's feelings*) to 8 (*completely true of my partner's feelings*). For men, $M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.42$; for women, $M = 5.93$, $SD = 1.25$.

Commitment to the relationship. Participants answered the question "How much longer would you like your relationship to last?" They chose one of nine responses ranging from "0 days" (coded as 1) to "several years" (coded as 9).

Satisfaction with the relationship. Participants' satisfaction with

the relationship was assessed with the following three items: "I am satisfied with our relationship"; "Our relationship meets my expectations of what a good relationship should be like"; and "I could not be happier in our relationship." Participants indicated the extent to which each statement was true of their feelings on an 8-point scale from 0 (*not at all true of my feelings*) to 7 (*completely true of my feelings*). For men, $\alpha = .86$; for women, $\alpha = .82$. In a pilot sample of 148 people, scores on this scale correlated .73 ($p < .001$) with relationship satisfaction as assessed by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976).

Perception of partner's satisfaction with the relationship. A three-item scale assessed participants' perceptions of their partner's satisfaction with the relationship: "My partner is satisfied with our relationship"; "My partner feels positively about our relationship"; and "My partner feels we communicate well." Participants rated the degree to which they felt each statement was true of their partner's feelings, on an 8-point scale from 0 (*not at all true of my partner's feelings*) to 8 (*completely true of my partner's feelings*). For men, $\alpha = .70$; for women, $\alpha = .71$.

Reports of partner's behavior. Participants were presented with 37 positive and negative interactional behaviors drawn from a longer list developed by Kasian and Painter (1992) for use with college students. Participants were asked to indicate how often their partner had enacted each behavior toward them during the past month, on a 6-point scale from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*daily/always*). Factor analysis yielded three interpretable factors: Hostile Behavior, Jealous Behavior, and Emotionally Supportive Behavior. Items loading above .40 on only one factor were used to compute means for each of the three behaviors for each participant. Hostile behavior was indexed by the following items: "My partner insulted or shamed me in front of others"; "My partner called me nasty names"; "My partner treated me like I was an inferior"; "My partner sulked or refused to talk about a problem"; "My partner withheld affection from me"; "My partner treated me like his/her servant"; "My partner told me my feelings are irrational or crazy"; "My partner blamed me for causing his or her violent behavior"; "My partner tried to make me feel like I was crazy"; and "My partner blamed me when I had nothing to do with it" (men, $\alpha = .86$; women, $\alpha = .83$). Jealous behavior was indexed by the following items: "My partner was jealous of other men/women"; "My partner was jealous and suspicious of my friends"; and "My partner monitored my time and made me account for my whereabouts" (men, $\alpha = .70$; women, $\alpha = .65$). Emotionally supportive behavior was indexed by the following items: "My partner treated me as if my feelings were important and worthy of consider-

ation"; "My partner said things to encourage me"; "My partner praised me in front of others"; "My partner told me my feelings were reasonable or normal"; "My partner let me talk about my feelings"; "My partner was affectionate with me"; "My partner was sensitive to my sexual needs and desires"; and "My partner made requests politely" (men, $\alpha = .82$; women, $\alpha = .78$). Scores on this scale were reversed so that high scores indicated low emotional support.

Results

Relationship Security

To test whether rejection-sensitive people were concerned about being rejected by their partners, we computed correlations between people's rejection sensitivity and their perceptions of their partners' desire to leave the relationship. Rejection sensitivity was significantly related to being concerned about rejection by the partner for both men ($r = .44, p < .001$) and women ($r = .48, p < .001$). We tested whether this might simply be an accurate appraisal of the partners' feelings about the relationship by reestimating the correlations controlling for the partners' self-reported commitment to the relationship. The correlations were essentially unchanged (for men, partial $r = .43, p < .001$; for women, partial $r = .47, p < .001$). Thus, rejection-sensitive people showed heightened concern about being rejected by their partners, irrespective of their partners' commitment to the relationship.

Next, we examined whether participants' self-reported insecurity about the relationship was apparent to their partners. Participants' rejection sensitivity was significantly negatively related to their partners' ratings of participants' security, for both men ($r = -.29, p < .01$) and women ($r = -.29, p < .01$). These correlations confirm participants' self-reports of greater insecurity about the continuity of the relationship. Moreover, they suggest that rejection sensitivity is evident in interpersonal behavior. We return to the second point later in the Results section.

Relationship Satisfaction

To examine whether participants' rejection sensitivity influenced the quality of the relationship, we estimated the correlations between the RSQ and self and partner reports of satisfaction with the relationship. Both rejection-sensitive men and women reported significantly less relationship satisfaction ($r = -.39, p < .001$, and $r = -.45, p < .001$, respectively). Their partners also reported being less satisfied (men, $r = -.28, p < .01$; women, $r = -.39, p < .001$). Moreover, rejection-sensitive men and women perceived that their partners were less satisfied ($r = -.35, p < .001$, and $r = -.45, p < .001$, respectively). Because partners' rejection sensitivity scores were significantly related ($r = .22, p < .05$), we recomputed all of these correlations while controlling for partners' rejection sensitivity. The original correlations were not altered appreciably.

Although rejection-sensitive people's reports that their partners are less satisfied with the relationship are confirmed by partner reports, high rejection-sensitive people might still exaggerate their partners' level of dissatisfaction. To test this hypothesis, we recomputed the correlations between participants' rejection sensitivity and their appraisals of their partners' satisfac-

tion while controlling for their partners' reports of their own satisfaction. The partial correlations remained significant for both men (partial $r = -.25, p < .05$) and women (partial $r = -.35, p < .001$). Thus, rejection-sensitive people appear to magnify their partners' dissatisfaction with the relationship.

Partners' Reports of the Interpersonal Behavior of High Rejection-Sensitive People

Given rejection-sensitive people's insecurity about their relationships, it is not surprising that they were less satisfied with them and perceived their partners to be dissatisfied as well. Their partners' independent reports of being less satisfied, however, suggest that rejection-sensitive people may behave in ways that jeopardize the quality of their relationships. To investigate this possibility, we assessed the correlation between participants' rejection sensitivity and their partners' reports of the participants' behavior in the relationship. Rejection-sensitive men were reported by their partners to show more jealousy ($r = .22, p < .05$). Rejection-sensitive women were reported by their partners to be more hostile ($r = .26, p < .05$) and more emotionally unsupportive ($r = .31, p < .05$). For women, the correlation between rejection sensitivity and jealousy was nonsignificant. For men, the correlations between rejection sensitivity and both hostility and emotional support were nonsignificant. None of these results changed appreciably when we recomputed the correlations while controlling for the partners' own levels of rejection sensitivity.

Next, we conducted a path analysis to assess the extent to which rejection-sensitive people's behavior toward their partners might account for their partners' dissatisfaction with the relationship. For men, we examined the mediational effect of jealousy. For women, we examined the mediational effect of hostile and unsupportive behavior. With a series of regression analyses, the relationship between rejection sensitivity and partner's dissatisfaction with the relationship can be divided into two parts: (a) a part mediated through behavior (the indirect effect of rejection sensitivity on partner's dissatisfaction) and (b) a part unrelated to behavior (the direct effect of rejection sensitivity on partner's dissatisfaction; see Cohen & Cohen, 1983, chap. 9).

To test the mediational role of jealousy for men, we first regressed their female partners' self-reported dissatisfaction on men's rejection sensitivity ($\beta = .28, p < .01$; $b = .11$). We then added men's jealousy to the basic regression model. The results are presented in Figure 2. The β for men's rejection sensitivity fell from .28 to .20. This latter coefficient is the direct effect of men's rejection sensitivity on their partners' dissatisfaction. The indirect effect of men's rejection sensitivity on their partners' dissatisfaction is $.28 - .20$, or .08. Thus, jealous behavior accounts for 29% (.08/.28) of the effect of men's rejection sensitivity on their female partners' relationship dissatisfaction.

To test the mediational role of hostile and unsupportive behavior for women, we first regressed their male partners' dissatisfaction on women's rejection sensitivity ($\beta = .39, p < .001$; $b = .22$). We then added women's hostile and unsupportive behavior to the basic regression model. The results are presented in Figure 3. The β for women's rejection sensitivity fell from .39 to .23. This latter coefficient is the direct effect of women's

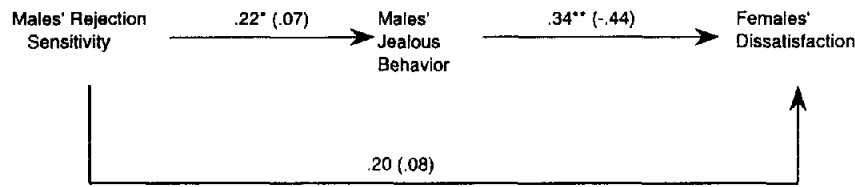


Figure 2. Test of whether males' jealous behavior mediates the link between their levels of rejection sensitivity and their partners' dissatisfaction with the relationship. The numbers above each arrowed line give the standardized regression coefficients and, in parentheses, the unstandardized regression coefficients for the model. The standardized coefficient for the original association between male rejection sensitivity and female dissatisfaction with the relationship was .28** (.11). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

rejection sensitivity on their male partners' dissatisfaction. The indirect effect of rejection sensitivity on partner dissatisfaction is .39 - .23, or .16. Thus, hostility and lack of support account for 41% (.16/.39) of the effect of women's rejection sensitivity on their male partners' relationship dissatisfaction. Although not shown in the figure, women's hostile behavior alone accounted for 32% of this association and their lack of support alone accounted for 23% of it.

Discussion

As hypothesized, rejection sensitivity was found to undermine romantic relationships. It led people to feel insecure and dissatisfied with their relationships and to exaggerate their partners' dissatisfaction and desire to leave the relationship. Moreover, the partners of rejection-sensitive individuals found the relationship less satisfying because of rejection-sensitive men's jealous and controlling behavior and rejection-sensitive women's hostility and diminished emotional support. Thus, the specific hypotheses outlined in the introduction to this study were generally supported, with the unexpected finding of gender differences in the behaviors of rejection-sensitive people that undermined partner satisfaction.

General Discussion

In this research we had two goals. The first was to describe and validate the construct of rejection sensitivity, which we defined as the disposition to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection. The second was to establish whether rejection sensitivity undermined intimate relationships.

Describing and Validating the Construct of Rejection Sensitivity

We operationalized rejection sensitivity in terms of the moment-to-moment cognitive and affective processes that guide social interaction. Study 1 describes the development of a measure of anxious expectations of rejection by significant others, which we view as at the core of rejection sensitivity. We reasoned that the expression of important needs to significant others should trigger anxious expectations of rejection in people so disposed. Thus, the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire asks people whether they would (a) be concerned or anxious about a significant other's response to an important request, and (b) expect a significant other to honor their request.

In our efforts to validate our conceptualization of rejection sensitivity, we had two objectives: (a) to document support for

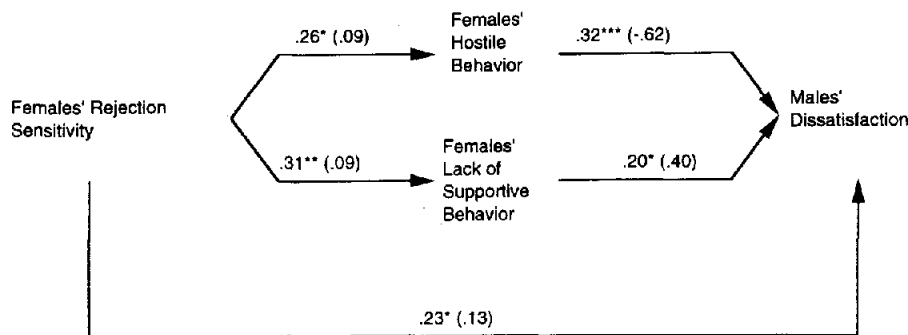


Figure 3. Test of whether females' hostility and diminished support mediate the link between their levels of rejection sensitivity and their partners' dissatisfaction with the relationship. The numbers above each arrowed line give the standardized regression coefficients and, in parentheses, the unstandardized regression coefficients for the full model. The standardized regression coefficient for the original association between male rejection sensitivity and female dissatisfaction with the relationship was .39*** (.22). * $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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operationalizing rejection sensitivity as anxious expectations of rejection by showing that anxious expectations activate perceptions of, and overreactions to, rejection, and (b) to demonstrate that rejection sensitivity captures a distinctive cognitive-affective processing disposition.

Anxious Expectations of Rejection Predict a Readiness to Perceive and Overreact to Rejection

The results of Studies 2 and 3 validate our operationalization of rejection sensitivity as anxious expectations of rejection by demonstrating that individuals' anxious expectations of rejection promote a readiness on their part to perceive and overreact to rejection. Study 2 showed that people who were high in rejection sensitivity felt rejected following experimentally manipulated ambiguous rejection feedback from a new acquaintance. When exposed to the same feedback, people who were low in rejection sensitivity did not feel rejected. Study 3 showed that people who were highly sensitive to rejection when they entered into a romantic relationship were prone to interpret their new partner's negative behavior, such as being distant or inattentive, as motivated by hurtful intent. Besides validating our conceptualization of rejection sensitivity, our findings support calls for greater attention to the expectations and concerns that people bring to relationships in efforts to understand cognitive-affective processes in relationships (Berscheid, 1994; Fincham, 1994). In particular, the findings suggest the importance of extending research on relationship attributions in order to examine how generalized expectations about relationships influence attributions for specific interpersonal events.

Rejection Sensitivity Is a Distinctive Cognitive-Affective Processing Disposition

Study 3 provided evidence that rejection sensitivity has a unique predictive utility. We were particularly interested in whether the impact of rejection sensitivity on attributions of hurtful intent to a new romantic partner's insensitivity could be distinguished from the impact of social anxiety. It could. Social anxiety did not account for the impact of anxious expectations of rejection on attributions of hurtful intent. Moreover, it did not independently predict attributions of hurtful intent to a romantic partner. This was also true of social avoidance.

Rejection sensitivity also is not redundant, in terms of its predictive utility, with established trait personality constructs to which it is conceptually and empirically related. These include trait measures of introversion and neuroticism, general attachment style, and self-esteem. This finding provides further support for claims that the predictive precision of personality measures can be enhanced considerably by attending to people's characteristic behavior in particular situations (Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

Impact of Rejection Sensitivity on Intimate Relationships

Our second goal, to establish the implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships, addressed the following questions: How do rejection-sensitive people think about and

behave toward their romantic partners? How does their behavior affect their partners' feelings about the relationship?

Regarding the first question, Study 3 provides clear evidence that people who enter relationships disposed to anxiously expect rejection more readily perceive rejection in their romantic partner's insensitive behavior. Study 4 showed that rejection-sensitive people exaggerated their partner's dissatisfaction with and lack of commitment to the relationship and behaved in ways that reflected their expectations and perceptions of rejection. Rejection-sensitive men were jealous and suspicious and sought to control their partner's contacts with others. Rejection-sensitive women tended to blame their partners unjustly and to be hostile and unsupportive toward them. Regarding the second question, hostile and unsupportive behaviors by rejection-sensitive women and jealous, controlling behaviors by rejection-sensitive men helped explain their partner's dissatisfaction with the relationship.

Issues for Future Research

Besides supporting our conceptualization of rejection sensitivity and demonstrating its unfortunate implications for intimate relationships, our findings raise several questions that warrant consideration in future research.

Why Do Rejection-Sensitive People Pursue Intimate Relationships?

Given that intimate relationships appear to afford rejection-sensitive people considerable opportunities for feeling rejected, why do they continue to pursue them? The clinical literature suggests that they view relationships as opportunities for acceptance and, in the initial stages, work hard to ingratiate themselves with partners (Horney, 1937). Their initial consideration and attentiveness are likely to evoke a positive reaction from their partner. Such a reaction is likely to reinforce the rejection-sensitive person's belief that this relationship will provide the acceptance that is so strongly desired.

Even in relationships that begin well, however, transient negativity, insensitivity, and waning enthusiasm are inevitable as the relationship progresses. Rejection-sensitive people should be particularly adept at interpreting these occurrences as omens of impending rejection, and defensive action may supplant ingratiating behavior. Defensive action may entail giving up on the relationship or engaging in coercive efforts to prevent the partner from leaving the relationship. However, the sense of hopefulness and acceptance that rejection-sensitive people experience early in their relationships may help maintain their belief in the power of relationships to meet their needs: It may simply be a matter of selecting the right partner—someone without the hidden flaws that emerged as the relationship progressed; or, it may be a matter of convincing (or coercing) the partner to remain in the relationship in the belief that the relationship will improve.

What Conditions Trigger Anxious Expectations of Rejection?

To better understand the processes through which the relationships of rejection-sensitive people begin to unravel, it is es-

sential to identify with increasing precision the situations that trigger and reinforce concern about rejection. Conflicts may be particularly good candidates. Rejection-sensitive people are likely to perceive them as opportunities for the partner to reject them rather than as opportunities for resolving difficulties in the relationship. Thus, their anxiety about rejection combined with their tendency to overreact to perceived rejection should promote behaviors that compromise successful conflict resolution (e.g., blaming, threatening harm, or refusing to discuss the problem). Arguments will probably end with the instigating issue unresolved and both partners feeling distressed and dissatisfied. Such feelings should fuel further conflict, providing new opportunities for the rejection-sensitive person to feel rejected and for partners to reassess their commitment to the relationship.

These predictions could be tested using daily reports of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of rejection-sensitive people and their partners before, during, and after naturally occurring conflict. This approach, of course, is limited by its reliance on the self-reports of couples. A complementary approach would be to use procedures developed by marital interaction researchers (e.g., Gottman, 1979; Weiss & Summers, 1983) to observe couples' behavior as they discuss a topic of ongoing conflict. Such an approach would allow independent assessment of the rejection-sensitive person's reactivity to the partner's behavior during social interaction and of the partner's behavior.

What Underlies Gender Differences in the Behavior of Rejection-Sensitive People?

Study 4 revealed unexpected gender differences in the behavior of rejection-sensitive people toward their romantic partners. The jealous and controlling behavior of rejection-sensitive men may be a manifestation of men's general tendency to cope in active ways with failure and adversity (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). The negativity and diminished positivity of rejection-sensitive women may be a consequence of women's general tendency to cope with adversity and failure with rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). Rumination about perceived rejection is likely to foster the belief that the partner has given up on the relationship and that one is helpless to do anything about it. This belief pattern may promote hostile retaliation against the partner, which may account for the increased negativity of rejection-sensitive women. It may also lead rejection-sensitive women to stop investing in the relationship, which may account for their decreased positivity.

It is noteworthy that the jealous, controlling behavior characteristic of rejection-sensitive men is common in physically abusive relationships (Walker, 1984). Abusers are described as attempting to control and minimize their partners' contacts with perceived rivals in the misguided belief that this approach will prevent their partner from leaving them (Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg, & Walker, 1990; Walker, 1984). Thus, in men, rejection sensitivity may be a risk factor for being physically abusive toward a romantic partner. In fact, there is some evidence that physically abusive men are particularly reactive to perceived threats of rejection (Downey, Feldman, & Fletcher, 1995; Dutton & Browning, 1988; Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993).

Finding that rejection-sensitive women are hostile and un-supportive because they feel helpless to avert rejection by their partner would suggest that they are at risk for depression. Consistent with this suggestion is the finding that atypical depression, which is characterized by extreme sensitivity and emotional reactivity to perceived rejection, is more common in women than men (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Are Anxious Expectations of Rejection Fulfilled?

We have shown that people who enter relationships anxiously expecting rejection feel more rejected than other people because of their readiness to perceive intentional rejection in partner behaviors that others would interpret more benignly. Our research did not directly address whether they were also more likely to be rejected by their partners and thus have their expectations fulfilled. However, the finding that their partners are more dissatisfied suggests that this may be the case. There is considerable evidence that dissatisfied partners are more likely to reciprocate negative behavior and to end a relationship (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Simpson, 1990). Moreover, research from an interpersonal perspective on depression (Coyne, 1976) has shown that excessive concern about rejection tends to elicit rejection (Hokanson & Butler, 1992).

Thus, significant others may provide intentional as well as unintentional opportunities for rejection-sensitive people to experience rejection. In this way, anxious expectations of rejection may be fulfilled and thus sustained (Berscheid, 1994). These observations suggest that rejection sensitivity has a self-perpetuating quality: Expectations of rejection facilitate subjective perceptions of rejection, which cause behaviors that evoke objective rejections, reinforcing expectations of rejection. It will be important to examine evidence for this transactional dynamic in future research.

Can Supportive Social Relationships Help Break the Cycle Linking Rejection Sensitivity to Rejection?

Besides providing a context for the maintenance of rejection sensitivity, social relationships may also provide opportunities for change. Research on people who transcend severe childhood rejection suggests a potential role for significant others in helping people break out of the negative cycle we have described (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Patterson, Cohn, & Kao, 1989; Quinton, Rutter, & Liddle, 1984). Supportive relationships, whether with a parent, another adult, a peer, an intimate partner, or a therapist, can fundamentally alter people's expectations and anxieties about rejection and help them to develop less malevolent explanations for others' behavior and more adaptive conflict resolution skills. Yet, rejection sensitivity is deeply ingrained. Thus, change is probably unlikely to occur unless the rejection-sensitive person is highly motivated and the partner can provide effective guidance and encouragement. The role of naturally occurring relationships in modifying rejection sensitivity warrants further investigation.

Conclusions

The belief that concern about acceptance and rejection contributes in crucial ways to interpersonal functioning has a long

history in personality psychology. In this article we proposed that rejection sensitivity—a disposition to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection—describes this concern in cognitive-affective processing terms. Our data substantiate the claim that rejection sensitivity has important implications for how people think, feel, and behave in their intimate relationships and, thus, for their own and their partners' satisfaction.

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