



Rejection sensitivity and depressive symptoms: Longitudinal actor-partner effects in adolescent romantic relationships



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ABSTRACT

The present study utilizes the actor-partner interdependence model to examine the longitudinal relationship between rejection sensitivity and one's *own* and one's *partner's* depressive symptoms. The sample included adolescent romantic couples from the U.S. ($N = 198$ adolescents; 50% girls; 90.2% Caucasian) whose rejection sensitivity at Time 1 and depressive symptoms approximately one year later (Time 2) were assessed. Additionally, aggressive behaviors and maintenance behaviors that commonly associated with rejection sensitivity (e.g., self-silencing) are explored as mediators. Results indicate that boyfriends' rejection sensitivity at Time 1 predicted girlfriends' depressive symptoms at Time 2. Additionally, girls' rejection sensitivity predicted their own *and* their boyfriends' self-silencing. Developmental and clinical implications are discussed.

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Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable developmental stage for of girls' and boys' mental health stability. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2012), about 9% of American adolescents experienced a major depressive episode in the past year, which translates to over 2 million adolescents. Internationally, the World Health Organization (2015) notes that depression is the leading cause of difficulties for adolescents. Indeed, a review of studies from several countries, including Scotland, Sweden, Iceland, the United Kingdom, China, Finland, and the Netherlands also indicates that depressive symptoms increase from childhood through adolescence (Bor, Dean, Najman, & Hayatbakhsh, 2014). These statistics highlight the need to gain a deeper understanding of possible predictors of adolescent depression in order to improve current prevention and intervention strategies.

In addition to potential mental health difficulties, adolescents face the developmental task of forming romantic relationships (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Interestingly, adolescents who report involvement in romantic relationships also report more depressive symptoms than those who are not involved in romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009; Joyner & Udry, 2000). Given these associations, an important step for research involves examining the link between romantic experiences and depressive symptomatology.

With a sample of adolescent couples, the present study investigates an actor-partner interdependence model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) of rejection sensitivity, an individual variable commonly associated with depression, and depressive symptoms. Specifically, the actor-partner interdependence model is used to examine the relationship between rejection sensitivity and one's *own* and one's *partner's* depressive symptoms in the context of adolescent romantic relationships.

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Additionally, the model includes the possible mediating roles of various aggressive and maintenance behaviors commonly associated with rejection sensitivity. Examining both actor and partner effects can help unearth the mechanisms through which aspects of romantic relationships, can contribute to the development or the buffering of depressive symptoms. At present, research has yet to explore an actor-partner interdependence model of rejection sensitivity, mediating behaviors, and depression; thus, in the following sections, we review research on their bivariate associations.

Rejection sensitivity and romantic interactions

Romantic experiences are often guided by relational schemas about oneself and others in romantic relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1997). A growing body of literature has focused on rejection sensitivity, a relational schema that refers to the tendency to expect, perceive, and overreact to rejection by others (Downey, Bonica, & Rincón, 1999). Theoretically, children who experience rejection from their parents adopt a rejection sensitivity schema and expect rejection to continue in future social relationships, including romantic relationships (Bowlby, 1983; Downey et al., 1999).

Aggressive behaviors. The extant research demonstrates associations between rejection sensitivity and both individual and couple outcomes (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). Youth who are more sensitive to rejection generally perceive their partners as being conflictual (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Galliher & Bentley, 2010), even if their partners behave in ways that were perceived as neutral by third-party observers (Norona, Salvatore, Welsh, & Darling, 2014). It is possible that these biased perceptions help explain the relationship between rejection sensitivity and the tendency to behave aggressively toward one's romantic partner (Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Jan Kang, 2010). Indeed, those who are sensitive to rejection tend to respond to their partners with *verbal* and *physical aggression* (Downey, Irwin, Ramsay, & Ayduk, 2004; Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010), which can be potentially damaging to the psychological and physical health of both couple members (Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Johnson, Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2013).

Maintenance behaviors. Individuals who are sensitive to rejection also engage in behaviors that they believe will *protect* their romantic relationship, even if these behaviors might be individually maladaptive. Indeed, rejection sensitivity is related to an increase in *self-silencing behaviors* (London, Downey, Romero-Canyas, Rattan, & Tyson, 2012). In an effort to maintain the relationship and avoid rejection, those who engage in self-silencing behaviors actively withhold discussions about their thoughts or feelings from their romantic partners (Jack, 1991). These individuals might engage in compliance or self-sacrifice, such as avoiding conversations about sensitive issues with partners, for fear it might put the relationship in danger. These individuals are often left to cope with problems in the relationship independently. This independent coping, along with the perceived lack of freedom to be genuine with romantic partners, is associated with the development of depressive symptoms (Jack, 1991).

Given that rejection sensitivity is related to both aggressive and self-silencing behaviors, it is unsurprising that rejection sensitivity is associated with the development of depression across various cultures (Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001; Mellin, 2008). Examining the potential mediating roles of aggressive and maintenance behaviors, specifically verbal aggression, physical aggression, and self-silencing can deepen our current understandings of the mechanisms through which rejection sensitivity and depression are associated.

Gender and romantic interactions

In addition to the possible mediating roles of aggressive and maintenance behaviors, gender socialization has been linked to experiences of rejection and the development of depressive symptoms. Specifically, because girls are socialized and reinforced to maintain close relationships with friends, family members, and romantic partners (Downey et al., 1999; Gilligan, 1982), conflict in these relationships might be particularly frightening. It is possible that girls who are sensitive to rejection are affected more than boys in conflictual situations, as conflict might signal tension and the possible end of a relationship for girls (Downey et al., 1999).

Additionally, gender socialization might contribute to the differential processes of self-understanding and identity for girls/young women and boys/young men. Girls and young women are theorized to establish their self-understandings based on social relationships; in contrast, boys and young men are socialized to distance themselves from others in order to explore their identity (Eagly, 2013; Gilligan, 1982; Meller, 1989; Norona, Preddy, & Welsh, 2015; Sneed et al., 2006; Wood & Eagly, 2002). As a result, girls' and young women's development might develop through "self-other connectedness," whereas boys' and young women's development might develop through "self-other separateness" (Mellor, 1989, p. 362; Gilligan, 1982; Sneed et al., 2006; Wood & Eagly, 2002). Thus it is possible that their romantic partners' characteristics and behaviors are more closely related to dimensions of girls' mental health and well-being.

Recent research continues to point to gender differences among those who are sensitive to rejection. For example, during conversations with their romantic partners, young women who are sensitive to rejection tend to speak negatively to their partners, make fun of them, and display negative affect (e.g., disgust; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). On the other hand, young men who are sensitive to rejection tend to use effective problem-solving strategies and involve their partner when attempting to resolve an issue (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Given these findings that suggest that young women who are sensitive to rejection react in a hostile manner toward their partners, it is quite possible that their male partners are affected more negatively by their partner's rejection sensitivity than vice versa.

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