Partner self-esteem and interpersonal risk: Rejection from a low self-esteem partner constrains connection and increases depletion☆

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal rejection activates connectedness goals that are either prioritized or suppressed.

We explored whether rejection from a low (vs. high) self-esteem partner influences this process. In study 1 ($N = 205$) participants exhibited less accessibility to connection-related thoughts following rejection from a low (vs. high) self-esteem partner. Using a dyadic conflict interaction, study 2 ($N = 102$ couples) revealed that participants engaged in more connection-inhibiting behavior during conflict with a low (vs. high) self-esteem partner. Study 3 ($N = 115$) used a daily diary design and found that participants reported greater mental exhaustion on days they felt more (vs. less) rejected by a low self-esteem roommate. These effects emerged despite evidence from both self-report (studies 2 and 3) and independent coding (study 1) that rejection from a low self-esteem other was not more painful than rejection from a high self-esteem other. In sum, people appear to use impressions of others' self-esteem to determine whether connectedness goals are suppressed following rejection.

1. Introduction

Research exploring how people regulate responses to rejection within their close relationships has revealed self-esteem as an important moderator of this process (Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). While this research clearly demonstrates that people with low self-esteem respond to relationship threats with a range of self-protective (but potentially destructive) behaviors (e.g., Gomillion & Murray, 2014; Murray et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2008; Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002), it does not address how relationship threat affects the partners of people with low self-esteem. Given that perceptions of a partner's level of insecurity (Lemay & Dudley, 2011; MacGregor, Fitzsimmons, & Holmes, 2013; MacGregor & Holmes, 2011) and a partner's actual level of insecurity (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer, 2006) guide relationship processes important for fostering closeness, partner self-worth may be an often overlooked, but equally

important predictor of how actors regulate connection-related thoughts and behavior in response to rejection within the dyadic bond. Therefore, the current research explores how rejection from a low (vs. high) self-esteem relationship partner differentially affects actor's inclination to suppress connection.

1.1. Regulating connection in response to rejection

The risk regulation model suggests that responses to interpersonal rejection are governed by a regulatory system aimed at maximizing a sense of security and minimizing the pain of being hurt by close relationship partners (Murray et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2008). At the relatively uncontrolled end of this risk regulation system is the central conflict between connectedness and self-protection goals. To resolve this goal conflict, an executive control system uses situation specific appraisals and state expectations of rejection to determine whether people will pursue connectedness goals or suppress such goals in the quest for self-protection (Murray et al., 2008). Research suggests that

the signature style underlying this corrective system, however, is moderated by people's own chronic insecurities about acceptance (e.g., Gomillion & Murray, 2014; Murray et al., 2002; Murray, Holmes, MacDonald, & Ellsworth, 1998).

Indeed, previous research has provided ample evidence that people with low explicit self-esteem (Gomillion & Murray, 2014; Murray et al., 2002; Murray, Bellavia, et al., 2003), low implicit self-esteem (Hamilton & DeHart, 2017; Peterson & DeHart, 2013), high rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996), and an insecure attachment style (Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996) have regulation systems calibrated to prioritize self-protection over connectedness goals. But given the dynamic nature of the risk regulation system (Murray et al., 2008) and the inherently dyadic process of interpersonal rejection, it is perhaps surprising that more researchers have not explored the moderating role of *partner* (in) security. We know of only one study to date that has explored how dispositional differences in partner qualities, namely partner self-control, moderate the risk regulation process predicting actor behavior (Gomillion, Lamarche, Murray, & Harris, 2014). However, there is good reason to believe that partner self-esteem informs the functioning of the risk regulation system in times when the partner is the source of rejection concerns.

1.2. Partner self-esteem as a moderator

Why might partner self-esteem influence the suppression of connectedness goals following rejection? An implicit theory of self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011, 2009) provides some insight. Specifically, the implicit theory of self-esteem suggests that self-esteem has status signaling properties, such that people perceived as high (vs. low) in self-esteem are presumed to have other characteristics (e.g., confidence, attractiveness, warmth-trustworthiness) thought to co-vary with high (vs. low) levels of self-worth. In line with this theory, research suggests that people not only form fairly accurate impressions of others' levels of self-esteem (Robinson & Cameron, 2012; Kilianski, 2008; Lemay & Dudley, 2011; Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Myers, Southard, & Malkin, 2012; MacGregor et al., 2013), but also use these impressions as a guide for how those others should be regarded (e.g., Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011) and treated (e.g., Lemay & Dudley, 2011; MacGregor et al., 2013; MacGregor & Holmes, 2011). Unfortunately, people perceived to have low self-esteem are evaluated more harshly and treated more cautiously than their high self-esteem counterparts.

For example, participants assign a lower mate-value and are less willing to engage in relational activities with people they believe to have low (vs. high) self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011). Moreover, even though people report equivalent levels of love for low and high self-esteem romantic partners (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), people engage in less authentic behavior toward partners they believe to be insecure (Lemay & Dudley, 2011) and are less willing to capitalize on positive events with a close other they perceive to have low self-esteem (MacGregor & Holmes, 2011; MacGregor et al., 2013), suggesting that even within the context of a loving relationship a partner's perceived level of self-worth constrains relationship processes that promote connection. As a result, naïve theories about the negative attributes associated with low self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2009, 2011), including the perception that insecure partners are easily upset (Lemay & Dudley, 2011), less responsive to self-disclosure (e.g., MacGregor et al., 2013), and particularly self-focused in conflict-of-interest situations (e.g., Murray et al., 2008; Murray & Holmes, 2009) may make it difficult for people to feel safe depending on a low self-esteem partner for the fulfillment of connectedness goals following rejection or conflict within the dyadic bond.

Research on the effect of actual (rather than perceived) partner insecurity seems to support the contention that efforts to reconnect with low self-esteem partners in response to relationship threat may be met with at least some resistance. For example, Salvatore, Kuo, Steele,

Simpson, and Collins (2011) report that insecure participants are more likely to reengage with conflict during a post-conflict "cool-down" discussion task, even when explicitly told to focus on the positive aspects of the relationship. In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that actors whose partners doubt their self-worth are slower to physiologically recover from conflict (Powers et al., 2006) and report that daily conflicts will have more negative long-term implications for the future of their relationship (Campbell et al., 2005). As a result, it seems reasonable to suggest that rejection or conflict with a low (vs. high) self-esteem partner may be perceived as inherently more risky and unlikely to end with satiated connectedness needs, prompting the risk regulation systems of actors to activate control processes that interfere with connectedness goals (e.g., Murray et al., 2008).

2. Overview of the present research

We believe that a partner's level of self-worth will provide important information about whether actors minimize interdependence in the face of relationship threats. Specifically, we explore the inhibition of connection in response to rejection from a low (vs. high) self-esteem partner across three studies. The goals of studies 1 and 2 were to explore the effect of partner self-esteem on the suppression of connection-related thoughts and on connection-inhibiting behavior, respectively. In study 1 we used a lab experiment to explore how perceived partner self-esteem moderates the effect of a rejection manipulation on the accessibility of connection-related themes in memory. Given that connection-related information should be less accessible in memory if connectedness goals have been suppressed (e.g., Murray et al., 2008), in study 1 we tested whether rejection from a low (vs. high) self-esteem partner reduced the cognitive accessibility of constructs related to interpersonal connection.

Additionally, because the effects of goal suppression likely unfold on a cognitive level before being observed in overt behavior (e.g., Murray, Pinkus, et al., 2001), we thought it was important to determine whether the suppression of connection was also evident in behavioral reactions to relationship threat. Therefore, in study 2 both members of a dyad came to the lab, completed measures of self-esteem, and then engaged in a conflict interaction that was videotaped and coded by trained observers for behaviors related to the inhibition of connection. This method allowed us to explore how actual (rather than perceived) partner self-esteem predicted actor's connection-inhibiting behavior during the conflict, as rated by independent observers. Finally, in study 3 we sought to extend the interactive effect of partner self-esteem and partner rejection to ego depletion in day-to-day life. Given that suppressing connectedness goals in response to interpersonal risk requires executive control and, therefore, taxes cognitive resources (Murray et al., 2008 experiments 4 & 5), study 3 used a daily diary methodology to test whether daily experiences of rejection from a low (vs. high) self-esteem roommate predicted daily increases in cognitive depletion. If people are indeed suppressing connectedness goals in response to rejection from a low self-esteem partner, we would expect increases in mental exhaustion on the days participants report feeling rejected by someone with low self-esteem.

3. Study 1: partner self-esteem, rejection, and connection-thought accessibility

Previous research suggests that actors use observations about partner self-esteem to both make assumptions about additional partner characteristics (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011, 2009) and forecast a partner's future behavior (e.g., Lemay & Dudley, 2011; MacGregor et al., 2013). Given that people with low (vs. high) self-esteem are perceived as less desirable relationship partners (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011), respond poorly to conflict of interest situations (e.g., Murray et al., 2008; Murray & Holmes, 2009), and are treated with extra caution (e.g., Lemay & Dudley, 2011), having a partner with low self-worth may