



Rejection sensitivity and adolescents' perceptions of romantic interactions



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ABSTRACT

Rejection sensitivity – the tendency to expect, perceive, and overreact to rejection by others – is linked with individuals' expectations that their romantic partners' behaviors have negative intent, even if, perhaps, such behaviors could be considered neutral when observed by another. The aim of the present study was to test this proposition, derived from rejection sensitivity theory, using a Video-Recall Procedure with adolescent couples in the US ($N = 386$ adolescents, 50% girls). We examined whether adolescents who were more sensitive to rejection perceived their romantic partners' behaviors as more conflictual than when viewed by trained, third-party observers. Findings suggest that, at the micro-analytic level, higher rejection sensitivity is associated with adolescents' heightened perception of their romantic partners as conflictual when compared to observers, who more often coded the same behaviors as neutral rather than conflictual. Implications for adolescent mental health and well-being are discussed.

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Adolescence is a unique developmental stage during which most individuals experience their first romantic relationships (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). During this time, adolescents begin to navigate romantic experiences that involve emotional intimacy and sexual activity (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Perceptions and interpretations of these new romantic experiences are often guided by relational schemas¹ about oneself and others in romantic relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1997; Smith, Welsh, & Fite, 2010). 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; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Lebolt, Rincón, & Freitas, 1998). 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; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998).

Rejection sensitivity is related to both individual and couple well-being in adolescence (Downey, Freitas, et al., 1998; Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998). For example, rejection sensitivity is associated with depressive symptoms for adolescents

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¹ Many terms in developmental psychology refer to such frameworks, such as "schemas" (Bowlby, 1983), "relational schemas" (Smith et al., 2010), and "relational views" (Furman & Wehner, 1997). We have chosen to use the term "relational schema" in the present study to represent these similar constructs.

and young adults (Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001; Harper, Welsh, Grello, & Dickson, 2002; Mellin, 2008). Rejection sensitivity is also associated with self-silencing behaviors, whereby individuals withhold expressing negative feelings and/or thoughts to their romantic partners, for fear that such expressions might lead to the end of their relationship (Harper et al., 2002). Additionally, rejection sensitivity is related to dyadic interactions and romantic relationship health. For example, rejection sensitivity is associated with cyclical, aggressive behaviors between romantic partners, which is damaging to both physical and psychological health (Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010).

Rejection sensitivity and perceptions of romantic interactions

Rejection sensitivity can be activated during interactions that are relevant to the self (as opposed to situations that apply to others; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2013), including interactions with potential dating partners (Downey et al., 1999; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2013). In self-relevant situations with potential dating partners, high and low levels of rejection sensitivity are uniquely related to individuals' perceptions of potentially rejecting interactions (Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2013). Recent research by Romero-Canyas and Downey (2013) suggests that low rejection sensitivity is linked with inaccurate perceptions of others. Specifically, individuals high and low in rejection sensitivity wrote a brief biographical profile about themselves and viewed videos of how potential dating partners reacted to their biographical profile and to others' biographical profiles. Results suggested that individuals low in rejection sensitivity tended to *underestimate* others' negative reactions toward their own profiles. However, this underestimation did not occur after rating perceptions of potential dating partners' reactions to others' profiles (Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2013). Thus, low rejection sensitivity was associated with inaccurate perceptions of others' reactions in self-relevant situations.

High rejection sensitivity is also related to perceptions of interactions with current romantic partners. In a recent observational study on adolescent romantic partners' conversations about issues in their relationship, adolescents who were more sensitive to rejection perceived more instances of conflict in conversations with their partner than did those who were less sensitive to rejection (Galliher & Bentley, 2010). These findings are consistent with the theoretical assertion (Downey et al., 1999) that adolescents who are sensitive to rejection approach their relationships with the expectation that their romantic partners' behaviors have negative intent and evaluate these behaviors as such, even if, perhaps, such behaviors could be considered neutral from an impartial point of view. Conflict during romantic interactions is likely to be particularly uncomfortable for those who are sensitive to rejection, as it might threaten the relationship and lead to unwanted romantic dissolution (Downey et al., 1999). Relatedly, those with anxious attachments, a romantic attachment style marked by an expectation of rejection from a romantic partner, report more daily conflict with their romantic partner than do those with other attachment styles. Conflicts are also expected to worsen in frequency and intensity throughout their relationship (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005).

We can offer two interpretations of the Galliher and Bentley (2010) findings. First, it is possible that those who are more sensitive to rejection also behave in ways that *elicit negativity* from their romantic partners and lead them to behave in conflictual ways. Indeed, research has shown that more rejection-sensitive individuals tend to approach interpersonal interactions with more hostility and aggressive behaviors than less rejection-sensitive individuals (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010), and their partners might respond aggressively as a result. Thus, rejection-sensitive individuals' perceptions *accurately* reflect their partners' conflictual behaviors. However, a second possibility remains and differs in the accuracy of individuals' perceptions of their partners' conflictual behaviors. Specifically, research has yet to examine whether romantic partners of those who are sensitive to rejection objectively behave in conflictual ways, or if rejection sensitivity colors individuals' perceptions and is linked with incorrect perceptions of partners' behaviors as more conflictual. Thus, an important next step for research is to examine individuals' subjective perceptions of their romantic partners and how they compare to impartial perceptions by trained, third-party coders.

Assessing rejection sensitivity

Past experimental studies on rejection sensitivity in children and college-age adolescents focus on the relationship between rejection sensitivity and *global* perceptions of interactions with friends (Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998; Study 2), strangers (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Study 2), and potential dating partners (Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2013). Specifically, such studies evaluate high and low rejection-sensitive individuals' reactions to entire ambiguous interactions, with a focus on how individuals feel after potentially rejecting situations (e.g., depressed, anxious, unaccepted). Furthermore, research that places a distinct focus on romantic partners' interactions have solely utilized self-report survey measures to capture differences between high and low rejection-sensitive individuals (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Freitas, et al., 1998; Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2013) on domains such as relationship security, satisfaction, and commitment, whether one's partner was being purposefully hurtful, and whether the other person reacted negatively or positively after the interaction. Additionally, using observational methods, one past study compared high and low rejection-sensitive individuals' self-reported perceptions of romantic interactions to one another (Galliher & Bentley, 2010).

Although it has been well-established that rejection sensitivity is related to assessments of interactions with friends, strangers, and potential dating partners, several gaps in the literature remain. First, research has yet to examine whether such differences exist with individuals' perceptions of their own interactions with *actual* rather than hypothetical romantic partners. It is important to examine rejection sensitivity in the context of actual romantic relationships because of their

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