



Rejection sensitivity and schema-congruent information processing biases

Nilly Mor*, Mika Inbar

School of Education, Hebrew University, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 8 January 2009

Keywords:

Rejection sensitivity
Depression
Social anxiety
Information processing
Attentional bias
Self-referential encoding
Memory

ABSTRACT

Rejection Sensitivity (RS) refers to the tendency to anxiously anticipate, readily perceive and overreact to rejection. The current research assesses schema-congruent information processing biases related to RS. Specifically, we predicted that high RS individuals would show biases in attention and self-referential encoding and recall of rejection-relevant information. Similarly, we predicted stronger concordance between these biases among high RS than low RS individuals. People high in RS showed biases in self-referential encoding and recall of negative socially relevant material. However, RS was not characterized by an attention bias or by stronger concordance between information processing biases. Implications of these findings to the understanding of RS and its long lasting effects are discussed.

© 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

While everyone experiences rejection, people differ in the manner they respond to rejection. Some people respond adaptively, whereas others respond in ways that impair their social relations (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998) and make them susceptible to low self-esteem, social anxiety and depression (e.g., Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001; Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007). Individual differences in responses to rejection have been construed as a cognitive-affective processing disposition, termed *rejection sensitivity* (RS; Downey & Feldman, 1996). RS refers to the tendency to anxiously anticipate, readily perceive and overreact to rejection.

The concept of RS is rooted in attachment (Bowlby, 1980) and interpersonal theories (Horney, 1937; Sullivan, 1953), but social cognitive models of personality (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995) have been central to the conceptualization of RS. These models can be seen (e.g., Caprara & Cervone, 2000) as relying on schema theory to explain information processing and behavioral patterns in RS. According to schema theory, schemas are organized interconnected knowledge structures that develop through past experiences and guide the processing and interpretation of new information (Bartlett, 1932; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Markus, 1977). People typically hold schemas about themselves, others, and their relationships with others (i.e., relational schemas; Baldwin, 1999, 2005). Schemas are thought to lead to increased attention allocation, cognitive elaboration, and enhanced memory of schema-congruent material. Consequently, the activation of schemas is often assessed using information processing tasks that examine attention allocation to

schema-congruent material (e.g., Ingram, Bernet, & McLaughlin, 1994) and incidental recall of self or other-encoded information (e.g., Derry & Kuiper, 1981; Whisman & Delinsky, 2002).

Schema-based information processing, particularly the processing of affective, schema-congruent information, has been associated with a variety of personality traits. Neuroticism (Chan, Goodwin, & Harmer, 2007), extroversion (Rusting & Larsen, 1998) and trait depression and anxiety (Rusting, 1998 for a review) have been related to processing of emotional stimuli. This work has suggested that individuals selectively attend to, retrieve, and reconstruct events in ways that are consistent with these personality traits. Similarly, low self-esteem and insecure attachment orientations have been linked to biased processing of interpersonal information denoting rejection (e.g., Dandeneau & Baldwin, 2004; Dewitte, Koster, De Houwer, & Buysse, 2007; Gyurak & Ayduk, 2007; Koch, 2002).

Because current models of RS can be construed as relying on schema theory, and given that related personality traits have been associated with schema-congruent processing, the aim of the current research was to examine the link between RS and schema-based processing. The RS model suggests that among people high in RS, the rejection schema is chronically accessible and rejection is readily primed by interpersonal situations (e.g., Downey, Mougios, Ayduk, London, & Shoda, 2004; Pietrzak, Downey, & Ayduk, 2005). The heightened accessibility of this schema can lead to schema-congruent information processing, increase sensitivity to rejection cues and facilitate the development of anxious expectation of rejection. In turn, these expectations may lead to faulty interpretations of social situations and eventually to behaviors that bring about actual rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

Empirical evidence provides some support for this depiction of RS. High RS people show increased arousal in the face of rejection-

* Corresponding author. Fax: +972 2 588 1311.
E-mail address: nmor@huji.ac.il (N. Mor).

related stimuli (Downey et al., 2004) and they interpret ambiguous social situations as denoting rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). In addition, regulation of attention in the face of rejection cues has been proposed to play a role in RS. Focusing attention away from arousing aspects of a rejection experience has been found to attenuate hostile and angry feelings (Ayduk, Mischel, & Downey, 2002). Similarly, the ability to control attention mediates the relationship between RS and negative outcomes such as interpersonal difficulties and compromised well-being (Ayduk et al., 2000). Recent neuroimaging findings indicate that individuals low in RS display significantly more activity in areas responsible for cognitive control when processing rejection-related stimuli, compared to individuals high in RS (Kross, Egner, Ochsner, Hirsch, & Downey, 2007). Taken together, available findings link RS and attentional processes and suggest that attention regulation may play a significant role in RS. However, these findings do not follow a unified theoretical framework. In particular, these studies have not followed a schema-based conceptualization of RS demonstrating directly that high RS individuals show increased attention to rejection-related stimuli in their environment.

To summarize, the available work is suggestive of rejection-congruent information processing biases in RS, but several issues remain unresolved. First, although there is indirect evidence for attentional biases in RS, to date no work has directly examined whether high RS individuals indeed direct their attention toward rejection-relevant stimuli and whether they have better memory for this information. Second, the specificity of these biases needs to be carefully delineated. Given the links between RS, depression (Ayduk et al., 2001) and social anxiety (e.g., Harb, Heimberg, Fresco, Schneier, & Liebowitz, 2002), it is important to demonstrate that these biases are characteristic of RS even when controlling for depression and anxiety. Available research on rejection-related biases rarely examined RS along with competing constructs (see Ayduk et al., 2007 for an exception). Third, specificity of these biases to rejection-related content has not been demonstrated. Therefore, investigating the association between RS and information processing biases toward positive social stimuli as well as toward negative but non-social stimuli is necessary for testing the assumption that these biases represent schema-congruent biases unique to rejection-related content. Finally, schema theory would suggest that a rejection schema should manifest itself not only in biases in specific processes such as attention, encoding and memory, but also in the coherence among these biases (e.g., Bower, 1981). Past research has not examined the concordance between the biases, namely whether people who readily attend to rejection-relevant content, also attribute rejection to themselves and recall rejection-related content.

The current research was designed to address these issues. Several hypotheses were examined. We predicted that RS would be associated with biases in attention, self-referential encoding, and memory for rejection-related content. We further predicted that these biases would be unique to rejection-related content rather than negative non-social content, and that these biases will be associated with RS while controlling for depression and social anxiety. Finally, we predicted that because people high in RS process information in ways that are congruent with a rejection schema, the association between the biases will be stronger among these individuals than among individuals low in RS. Thus, RS will moderate the association between the various information processing biases.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 127 Hebrew-speaking students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (95 female) who participated in exchange

for course credit or payment. Participants' ages were between 18 and 38 years ($M = 24$, $SD = 3.2$).

2.2. Questionnaires

The Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ; Downey & Feldman, 1996) was used to measure anxious expectations of rejection. It consists of 18 hypothetical situations in which rejection by a significant other is possible. For each situation, participants rate on a six-point scale, their anxiety from the expected outcome as well as the perceived likelihood of rejection. Following an expectancy-value model of anxious expectations of rejection, the score for each situation is calculated as the product of the rating of anxiety elicited by possible rejection, and the degree to which the person expects rejection to occur. The total RS score is the sum of the scores across all items divided by 18, the number of items, with a possible range of 1–36. The mean RSQ score in the current sample was 8.21 ($SD = 4.06$), with a range of 1.39–26.83. The coefficient α for the current sample was 0.93.

The Inventory to Diagnose Depression (IDD; Zimmerman & Coryell, 1987; Zimmerman, Coryell, Corenthal, & Wilson, 1986), a widely used 22-item self-report questionnaire, was used to measure symptoms of depression. Each item on the IDD consists of five statements, presented in ascending order of severity, that cover a depressive symptom. Responders are asked to indicate which statement best describes their experiences over the preceding week. Scores on the IDD range from 0 to 88. For ethical reasons, we removed a question assessing suicidal ideation from the questionnaire. In this sample the mean IDD score was 12.89 ($SD = 11$), with a range of 0–54. The coefficient α was 0.92.

The Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS; Liebowitz, 1987) was used to measure symptoms of social anxiety. The LSAS assesses fear and avoidance in 24 situations that are likely to elicit social anxiety. Scores on the LSAS range from 0 to 144. In the present study the mean LSAS score was 45.49 ($SD = 23.03$), with a range of 0–112. The coefficient α for the total score was 0.96.

2.3. Cognitive tasks

2.3.1. Self referential encoding and incidental recall task (SRET)

The SRET is a commonly used task that assesses incidental recall of self-encoded information (e.g., Derry & Kuiper, 1981; Joormann, Dkane, & Gotlib, 2006; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977; Whisman & Delinsky, 2002). The current version of the SRET was an adaptation of the procedure used by Gotlib et al. (2004). First, on each of 80 trials, the words “describes me or relates to me?” appear for 500 ms in the center of the screen followed by a 250 ms pause. Then, a word appears in the center of the screen. Participants press a key to indicate whether the displayed word describes them. This self-encoding phase is followed by a 3-min distraction task. Subsequently, participants are asked to write as many words as they can recall from the self-referential encoding phase, independent of whether they endorsed the words as self-descriptive or not. Participants are allotted 3 min for the recall phase.

The stimuli for the task were based on a Hebrew translation of words from the ANEW list (Bradley & Lang, 1999). Words were classified into four categories, with 20 words in each category: rejection (e.g., lonely), acceptance (e.g., popular) and non-social negative and positive (e.g., wound and pleasure, respectively). Words in the different lists were matched for length and frequency of use in Hebrew (Frost & Plaut, 2005). The word categories were chosen to distinguish between word content and valence. Because pilot work suggested that many negative adjectives are perceived as indicative of rejection, we added a similar number of nouns to the stimuli pool of each category to allow discrimination between the categories. Words were divided into the content categories by

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/951760>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/951760>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)