The recognition that violence occurs in adolescent romantic relationships has helped prompt research on these relationships. Because adolescence is the time when romantic relationships typically begin, this is when the legacy of troubled family and peer relationships for romantic relationships may be first evident. Yet, although destructive relationship processes may emerge in adolescents, these processes are likely to be less ingrained than in adulthood. This means that adolescence may be a particularly opportune time for targeting interventions designed to promote healthy relationship skills in individuals at risk for troubled romantic relationships. A requisite preliminary step in the development of effective interventions involves answering the following questions: (a) What do adolescents bring with them from prior relationships that might undermine their romantic relationships? (b) What experiences in adolescent relationships can challenge the malevolent psychological legacy of past troubled relationships? The goal of this chapter is to describe our approach to answering these questions.

Rejection Sensitivity and Adolescent Romantic Relationships

Influenced by classical interpersonal theories (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Erikson, 1950; Horney, 1937; Sullivan, 1953), we propose that a key way in which past relationships can influence adolescent romantic relationships is through their impact on expectations of attaining acceptance and avoiding rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Feldman, Khuri, & Friedman, 1994; Feldman & Downey, 1994). An adolescent who has developed defensive (anxious or angry) expectations of rejection as a result of having experienced rejection, initially from parents and subsequently from peers, will be more sensitive to rejection from a romantic partner. We have termed individuals who anxiously or angrily expect, readily perceive, and react intensely to rejection as being rejection sensitive. We view rejection sensitivity as a cognitive-affective processing system (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) that originates in rejecting experiences and becomes activated in social situations where rejection is possible, influencing the course of the interaction in ways that may confirm and thus maintain rejection expectations. Our basic model is presented in Figure 7.1.

How does the rejection-sensitive adolescent approach the task of forming and managing romantic relationships? To shield the self from the rejection that is expected and feared, the youth may avoid or limit involvement and investment in romantic relationships. However, this strategy entails lost opportunities for attaining the sense of being accepted that has been miss-
Rejection experiences

- Parental rejection
  - abuse/neglect
  - rejection/toleration
  - hostility
  - conditional acceptance
- Peer rejection
  - physical/violent
  - rejection/isolation

Rejection by romantic partner

Rejection because of status group characteristics

- role/crowding
- rejection/isolation
- loneliness
- self-esteem

Rejection sensitivity

- defined/undefined rejection
- avoid/reject
- withdraw

Over/avoidance strategy

- reflective responses:
  - Cortisol
  - Tend-agressiveness in index gender partnership
  - Control of self-focus in keep posture in relationship
  - Copulatory
  - Tend to emotional/physical or sexual abuse in order to maintain relationship

- reflective responses:
  - Withdraw
  - Rejection or avoidance
  - Shy, and hostility

Figure 7.1: Implications of rejection sensitivity for adolescent romantic relationships.

Rejection sensitivity

The assumption is reflected in the way we measure it (for details, see Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Lobelt, Rincón, & Prentas, 1998). The people we characterize as rejection sensitive differ from the more typical person in the level of their defensive expectations of rejection, in their readiness to perceive rejection, and in the intensity of their reaction to rejection.

We view defensive expectations of rejection as being at the core of rejection sensitivity and assume that these expectations are particularly likely to be activated in situations where the person is dependent on a significant/important other for something. These assumptions are reflected in our operationalization of the construct in the form of the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ) (Downey & Feldman, 1996). The following is a sample situation from our late adolescent questionnaire: "Your boy/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." Individuals are asked (a) whether a significant other would be likely to agree to this request and (b) how concerned or anxious (or angry) they would be about the answer to their request. In keeping with an expectancy-value formulation, people's expectancies of rejection are weighted by their concerns about the outcome of the situation.

We have evidence that this processing system influences the peer relations of early adolescents (Downey et al., 1995) and the romantic relationships of late adolescents (Aydin, Downey, Tessa, Yen, & Shoda, in press; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Prentas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Feldman & Downey, 1994). We also have evidence that rejection from both parents and peers is associated with heightened levels of rejection sensitivity (Bonica & Downey, 1997; Downey et al., 1997). Our late adolescent studies are based mainly on first- and second-year Columbia University undergraduates. About half of the participants were Caucasian; a quarter were Asian American; the remaining participants were, in about equal proportions, Hispanic, African American, and mixed or other race. Our early adolescent studies are based primarily on children attending a public middle school that serves an economically disadvantaged, inner-city neighborhood with a large immigrant population. About 75% of the participants were Hispanic, 20% were African American, and the remainder were primarily Asian American.

After briefly outlining the theoretical background to the rejection sensitivity processing system, we describe the expectations, biases, and coping strategies that the rejection-sensitive adolescent brings to the task of forming and maintaining adolescent romantic relationships. We then consider how rejection sensitivity might influence and be influenced by adolescent romantic relationships.
Theoretical Background

The cognitive-affective processing system that we have proposed draws selectively on attachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Izard & Shaver, 1987), social-cognitive (e.g., Anderson, 1990; Baldwin, 1992; Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Crick & Dodge, 1994), and interpersonal perspectives (e.g., Cozby, 1976; Gottman, 1979; Wachtel, 1977) on relationships.

Attachment Approach. Our emphasis on the expectations that people bring from one relationship to the next reflects the influence of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Stroufe, 1990). The expectations that people have about whether others will satisfy their needs or reject them is a key component of the internal working models of relationships that Bowlby proposed to account for continuity between early and subsequent relationships. These expectations were seen as deriving initially from the reliability with which children’s needs are met in early childhood (Bowlby, 1973; Stroufe, 1990). When their needs are met sensitively and consistently, children develop secure working models that incorporate the expectation that others will accept and support them. When children’s needs are met with covert or overt rejection, they develop insecure working models that incorporate fears and doubts about whether others will accept and support them. Bowlby proposed that this defensive response can emerge as anxiety or anger. This view is consistent with theories of emotion that view both anxiety and anger as high-arousal, negative-valence, defensive reactions to a perceived threat (Lang, 1995).

Bowlby identified two alternative strategies that children can adopt to cope with anxiety about the supportiveness of a consistently or intermittently rejecting primary caretaker (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1960, 1973, 1980). The anxious-avoidant strategy is characterized by an active avoidance of contact with the caretaker, whereas the anxious-ambivalent strategy is characterized by frequent demands for reassurance from the caretaker interspersed with displays of hostility (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Similar coping styles have been identified in several distinct literatures, including psychodynamic theories of personality (e.g., Horn, 1937), biological psychiatry (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Davidson, Miller, Turnbull, & Sullivan, 1982; Heinberg, Holt, Schneider, Spitzer, & Lebowitz, 1993), and cognitive theories of depression (Beck, 1983). When used in subsequent relationships, these coping styles are likely to have negative consequences. We have already outlined some of the possible negative consequences that these styles may have for adolescent romantic relationships. We will return to this issue later.

Social-Cognitive Approach. Although theoretical analyses within the attachment framework have drawn attention to the operation of internal working models in social interaction (e.g., Stroufe, 1990), this attention is just beginning to translate into empirical studies (see Reis & Downey, in press; Reis & Patrick, 1996, for reviews). We have sought to contribute to this effort in conceptuallyizing the psychological legacy of rejection in terms of the immediate, moment-to-moment cognitive-affective antecedents of behavior (Bandura, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Higgins & Baugh, 1987; Mischel, 1973; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Thus, we view early rejection experiences and associated coping efforts as setting up relationship schemas that encompass relationship goals, expectations, values and concerns, interpretive biases, and self-regulatory scripts. Subsequent experiences of acceptance-rejection are interpreted from the standpoint of existing cognitive-affective schemas. However, people’s working models or schemas of relationships are also continuously modified by experience, although the extent of their malleability probably decreases as relationship experiences cumulate.

Interpersonal Approach. Consistent with the view that internal working models or relational schemas reflect experience, we see the cognitive-affective processing system that we have outlined as maintained and modified within important peer, romantic, and parental relationships through social interactional processes that operate similarly across developmental periods. This assumption recognizes that relationships are at least dyadic, with each person bringing to the relationship distinctive cognitive-affective processing systems (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Reis & Downey, in press). Thus, in adolescent romantic relationships, if one person behaves in a hostile way when feeling rejected, his or her partner may respond by withdrawing. Alternatively, the partner may initiate a calm discussion focused on understanding what prompted the hostility. Whereas the former approach will maintain and perhaps intensify rejection expectations, the latter approach may help diminish rejection expectations. Thus, healthy romantic relationships may enable some adolescents to break cycles of troubled relationships by reducing their sensitivity to rejection.

Our efforts to identify the implications of rejection sensitivity for adolescent romantic relationships begin with a description of what rejection-sensitive adolescents bring to a romantic relationship that might influence...
the relationship's course and nature. We then describe the impact of rejection sensitivity on specific relationship processes. Our discussion draws on our research on early and late adolescents.

What Does the Rejection-Sensitive Individual Bring to Adolescent Romantic Relationships?

Rejection Sensitivity

Rejection-sensitive adolescents bring defensive expectations of rejection, a readiness to perceive rejection, and a tendency to react intensely to rejection to their romantic relationships. They also bring beliefs about the situations that are diagnostic for them of acceptance and rejection, as well as beliefs about the cues within such situations that signify acceptance or rejection. Although we expect a general similarity across individuals in the rejection sensitivity processing disposition and its behavioral consequences, we also expect that rejection-sensitive adolescents will differ in ways that reflect their individual developmental history, gender, age, and culture.

Situations that Activate Rejection Sensitivity. The specific situations in each individual's romantic relationship that activate defensive expectations of rejection will reflect how parents and peers communicated a rejecting intent. Parents can communicate rejection to their children through physical or verbal abuse, physical and emotional neglect, and acceptance that is conditional on the child's adhering to the parent's wishes (Downey et al., 1997). Peers can communicate rejection through overt physical or verbal victimization, exclusion, rumor spreading, and ignoring (Asher & Coie, 1990; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Certain interpersonal situations are probably more likely to trigger concerns about rejection in boys than in girls, and vice versa, reflecting gender differences in socialization. One stereotyped expectancy for males is that they are dominant in their relationships. Expectancies for females emphasize the centrality of relationships and the importance of their preservation (Gilligan, 1982). These normative sex-role expectations permeate the typical socialization experiences of boys and girls both within families and within sex-segregated peer groups. Gender differences in situations that trigger rejection expectations may be even more pronounced in early adolescence, when the socialization effects of sex-segregated peer groups on romantic relationships may be strongest. For girls, situations that reflect threats to their relationship may be particularly likely to activate expectations of rejection. We therefore propose that for rejection-sensitive girls, conflict and partner inattentiveness are particularly threatening and trigger rejection sensitivity. Alternatively, for boys, situations that reflect threats to their status in the relationship may be more likely to elicit rejection concerns. Thus, situations that rejection-sensitive boys may view as threatening include occasions when their partner is showing interest in a potential alternative romantic partner or where their competence in valued domains is called into question.

Although this discussion has emphasized family and gender as determinants of situations that activate rejection concerns, cultural differences and differences in sexual orientation may also be important factors.

Defensive Expectations of Rejection. The primary way in which rejection expectations may differ among rejection-sensitive individuals is in the interpretation of the anticipatory distress experienced in situations that trigger rejection concerns. We propose that the distress will be interpreted as either angry or anxious expectations of rejection. Whether this distress is interpreted as anger or anxiety will reflect familial, gender, age, and cultural differences in the acceptability of expressing anger versus anxiety.

Family and peers may socialize girls to interpret anticipatory distress as anxiety. Boys may be socialized to interpret the same feelings as anger. Anxiety may promote vulnerability to feeling helpless and depressed when rejection is perceived. By contrast, anticipatory anger may set in motion a readiness to perceive rejection as intentional and unjustified, thus eliciting retaliation. In this way, anticipatory anger may activate the hostile attributional bias and its aggressive consequences that have been identified by Dodge (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1980; Dodge, Pettit, & McClaskey, 1995). These observations suggest that rejection-sensitive women may show heightened vulnerability to depression, whereas rejection-sensitive men may be at risk for aggression.

Cultures may differ in the acceptability and functionality of anger and anxiety. The acceptability and functionality of anger and anxiety may also differ by the adolescent's level of development. Our research shows that among predominantly middle-class college students, anxiety appears to be the salient anticipatory affect in situations of possible rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Among inner-city minority early adolescents, however, anticipatory anger is also salient. One environmental difference underlying this divergence could be the increased risk of violence faced by inner-city children relative to middle-class college students. In the relatively more
physically dangerous inner-city context, the expression of anxiety could make a youngster appear vulnerable and a potential target of victimization. Thus, experiencing anger rather than anxiety may be a protective strategy that some inner-city children learn through reinforcement and modeling. In contrast, the majority of college students participating in our research were raised in environments in which the expression of fear and anxiety may have been less dangerous and in which the expression of anger and aggression may have been less acceptable.

Perceptions of Rejection. When defensive expectations of rejection are activated, individuals begin to scan for cues of rejection and their threshold for perceiving rejection is lowered. Thus, rejection-sensitive people readily perceive rejection in the ambiguously intentioned negative behavior of others. For this reason, they are vulnerable to perceiving rejection even when none was intended. However, they are not more likely than others to perceive rejection in negative behaviors for which there is an unambiguous situational explanation (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey et al., 1998). The specific cues that are interpreted as signifying acceptance or rejection will reflect the person's developmental history, gender, and culture, as well as the history of the relationship.

Reactions to Perceived Rejection. We expect that when rejection-sensitive individuals perceive rejection, they will overreact in characteristic ways that will undoubtedly reflect the influence of their family, peer group, gender, and culture. We distinguish two primary patterns of overreaction directed toward the romantic partner.

Reflective Responses. These strategic responses are enacted to control the situation in the belief that actions can be taken to prevent imminent rejection or to regain acceptance. These responses can be divided into those that seek to control the situation through (a) coercion or (b) compliance.

Coercion involves forcing the partner to accede to one's wishes through threats or guilt induction (Patterson, 1982). Coercive processes include:

1. Use of aggression or threats of aggression to induce partners to remain in the relationship for fear of the consequences of leaving
2. Regulating partners' social contacts to keep them dependent on the relationship and to minimize their access to alternatives to the relationship. These strategies include wanting to know where the partner is all the time and with whom the partner is in contact.

3. Threats of self-harm to keep the partner in the relationship.

The use of compliance as a control strategy is based on the belief that changing oneself to comply with a partner's expressed or imagined wishes will prevent rejection. Such compliance becomes potentially harmful when it compromises personal safety and well-being. Examples of compliance in the service of avoiding rejection include the following:

1. Acquiescing to the partner's pressure to engage in forms of sexual intimacy for which the adolescent does not yet feel ready.
2. Initiating and maintaining sexual intimacy in the belief that it will strengthen a partner's commitment to the relationship and make rejection less likely.
3. Tolerating behavior that may compromise one's personal safety in order to maintain the relationship. For example, rejection-sensitive adolescents may tolerate emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive partner behavior to avoid rejection.
4. Acceding to the partner's pressure to engage in deviant behavior such as skipping school, using drugs or alcohol, or shoplifting.
5. Engaging in harmful behaviors to achieve ideal standards of physical attractiveness. Rejection-sensitive girls may be particularly vulnerable to engaging in unhealthy behaviors, such as excessive dieting or exercising, to approximate more closely ideal standards of physical beauty with the goal of attracting or maintaining a partner's interest.

Reflective Responses. These disregulated emotional responses are an expression of one's immediate, affective reaction to the perceived rejection. These responses include withdrawal, dejection and helplessness, anger and hostility, and aggression. Implied in these types of responses is the belief that rejection is inevitable or has already occurred.

The negative emotions experienced in response to perceived rejection may disrupt the daily routines that serve long-term valued goals. Thus, an adolescent who has been rejected by a romantic partner may be so distressed that he or she is unable to function academically or socially at the same level as before. The intense pain of rejection may also prompt rejection-sensitive adolescents to engage in behaviors that are immediately gratifying but that may have negative long-term consequences. These behaviors include binge eating, substance abuse, and engaging in unprotected sex with numerous partners. It is also possible that some rejection-sensitive adolescent girls become pregnant in the misguided belief that a child will
provide the unconditional acceptance that has been absent from their other relationships.

Normative Developmental Concerns

Although there are individual differences in the level of rejection sensitivity that adolescents bring to their relationships, adolescents as a group are likely to experience heightened sensitivity about acceptance and rejection by romantic partners. Adolescence is a period when issues of acceptance by peers and romantic partners are particularly salient as individuals work on the developmental tasks of autonomy and identity. Success in romantic relationships is normatively valued. Although all individuals face the possibility of rejection from a potential romantic partner, adolescents involved in their first romantic relationship have no prior experience of this type and thus may be especially sensitive to romantic rejection.

These conditions will generate defensive expectations of rejection in typical adolescents. The behavior of romantic partners or prospective partners may be carefully scanned for evidence of rejection or acceptance. Minimal cues will be interpreted as clear evidence of acceptance and rejection and will have a powerful effect on mood and behavior that are already labile. There may be a normative reduction in rejection sensitivity from early to late adolescence as more experience is acquired in selecting romantic partners and in entering and managing romantic relationships.

These normatively heightened rejection concerns are expected to be exaggerated in adolescents who have developed a generalized sensitivity to rejection based on experiences with peers and parents in the preadolescent years.

Relationship Skills and Peer Influences

In addition to providing opportunities for acceptance and rejection, peer relationships provide opportunities for adolescents to develop relationship skills, such as those involved in negotiating closeness, intimacy, and sharing. These skills carry over into their romantic relationships and are likely to influence whether these relationships become a source of acceptance or rejection (Connolly, this volume; Furman & Buhrmester, 1994; Neumann, Hubbard, & Masten, 1995). When rejection sensitivity prompts adolescents to avoid relationships or to react aggressively to ambiguous peer behavior, they forfeit opportunities for developing these relationship skills. These adolescents may also develop a negative social reputation among peers that may restrict their range of dating partners. The dating prospects of adolescents with a reputation for overreacting with aggression to real or imagined slights may be limited to individuals who also deviant in their interpersonal behavior. The rejection-sensitive girl who withdraws from peers may be overlooked as a potential dating partner and, consequently, may lack opportunities for finding acceptance in romantic relationships.

Status Characteristics as New Sources of Rejection

Thus far, we have focused on the consequences of rejection directed at the individual’s personal qualities or behaviors. Rejection because of status group characteristics will also sensitize individuals to expect and perceive rejection during interactions with nongroup members and in this way will influence decisions about whether and how to interact with nongroup members. Status characteristics that may elicit rejection include religion, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation. Rejection because of one’s status may also contribute to a generalized sensitivity to rejection, especially when it is interpreted as personal. The dating context will undoubtedly create new sources of rejection for adolescents because of status characteristics.

Parents who have previously encouraged their children to be ecumenical in their choice of friends may attempt to constrain their children’s choice of romantic partners to in-group members because of fear of marriages that are mixed in religion, race, ethnicity, or social class. This phenomenon is illustrated in Field’s (1992) research on biracial (Black/White) adolescents girls who grew up white-identified in predominantly white neighborhoods where they were readily accepted by peer groups. These girls often faced difficulties in getting white dating partners, something they found hard to comprehend and very distressing.

A potential new source of acceptance and rejection that some adolescents confront is being gay or bisexual. For the first time, individuals are expected to enter into relationships that have an inherently sexual component. The sex of one’s dating partner is a public statement of one’s sexual orientation. Because of society’s negativity about homosexuality, the mere suspicion of homosexuality can elicit peer and sometimes parental rejection. Mirroring societal fear and rejection of homosexuality, homosexual teasing are the most prominent type of sexual harassment that occurs in junior high and high school. Knowledge of how society in general and peers and families in particular treat gay or lesbian adolescents is likely to sensitize adolescents who develop same-sex sexual attractions to readily expect and perceive rejection. To avoid such rejection, they may keep their
romantic relationships hidden, they may become involved in unsatisfying heterosexual romantic relationships; or they may decide to eschew romantic relationships. The efforts of gay and lesbian adolescents to negotiate romantic relationships may have a devastating toll on their mental health (Hammelman, 1993; Hetrick & Martin, 1987).

Summary

We have outlined a cognitive-affective processing system that, we argue, has important implications for adolescent romantic relationships. We have also delineated some sources of individual differences in the content of this system that might account for variability in the situations in which the system is activated and in its behavioral consequences. Finally, we have considered how people's sensitivity to rejection may be transformed by their experiences with adolescent romantic relationships, such as when adolescents who are attracted to same-sex rather than opposite-sex romantic partners become sensitized to expect rejection because of their sexual orientation.

Impact of Rejection Sensitivity on Relationship Processes

We now turn our attention to how rejection sensitivity affects specific relationship processes, potentially contributing to relationship difficulties. The question that we address is: How might rejection sensitivity influence the course of a relationship from start to finish?

Before addressing this question, we note three observations that help orient our discussion. First, it is necessary to distinguish involvement from investment in relationships. Particularly in early adolescence, individuals may become involved in relationships in which they are not invested. These relationships may serve as status symbols rather than provide a sense of closeness and commitment. However, as noted previously, some rejection-sensitive individuals never move on from this pattern. Most of our discussion is focused on relationships in which the adolescent is invested.

Second, by adolescence, people will have accumulated multiple sources of acceptance and rejection. Thus, understanding adolescents' decisions concerning romantic relationships requires identifying (a) which source of rejection or acceptance is most salient and (b) how the adolescent balances the demands of sometimes conflicting sources of acceptance and rejection. For example, adolescents may be in situations where avoiding rejection by their family or peer group is incompatible with gaining acceptance by a romantic partner. Whether adolescents are most concerned with approval from peers, parents, or romantic partners will undoubtedly influence their relationship decisions.

Third, information on the distinctions between the dating relationships of early and late adolescents will be used to qualify general considerations about the impact of rejection sensitivity on adolescent relationships. Our research shows that although early adolescents' understanding of what constitutes dating relationships resembles that of late adolescents, their relationships are less committed, less intimate, and of shorter duration than those of late adolescents (Pudlo et al., 1999). Our research also shows that early adolescents' romantic conflicts are distinct from their peer conflicts in terms of both topics and tactics. Jealousy is the most common topic of conflict in romantic relationships. Peer conflicts center on games for boys and rumors for girls. The use of both physical and relational (i.e., behavioral) intended to damage the target's relationships; Crick & Grotzinger, 1995) aggression is less common in romantic than in peer conflicts. Behavior intended to induce jealousy emerges as a new tactic in romantic conflicts.

Entering Romantic Relationships

Earlier, we described two broad strategies that rejection-sensitive adolescents may adopt to regulate their concerns about rejection. One strategy is to avoid or postpone the transition to romantic relationships, losing opportunities for gaining acceptance. The adolescent who avoids age-appropriate romantic relationships will also miss opportunities to increase competencies in conflict resolution, establishing intimacy, and negotiating the boundaries between autonomy and connectedness in intimate relationships (Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1976; Sullivan, 1953). A similar loss of opportunities to develop relationship skills may accrue to adolescents who avoid rejection by not investing in the relationships in which they get involved. These adolescents may show a pattern of brief, superficial relationships because of their tendency to withdraw when they fear that they or their partner are becoming invested. Although this behavior pattern may be normal in early adolescence, its persistence through late adolescence and into young adulthood may prevent the person from developing the skills necessary to maintain a romantic relationship. The identification of these two avoidant strategies highlights the need to distinguish concerns about first impressions from anxiety about being rejected as more of oneself is revealed (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

The second strategy that rejection-sensitive adolescents may adopt to avoid rejection is to overinvest in securing intimacy and unconditional love.
Thus, rejection sensitivity may affect adolescent romantic relationships by prompting adolescents to make the transition to exclusive dating relationships in which they are highly invested earlier than their peers. They may not yet be ready developmentally for such relationships in that they may not yet have sufficient practice in such relationship tasks as negotiating conflict or boundary management.

Moreover, they may not yet have developed sources of well-being that are independent of romantic partners, given that rejection-sensitive individuals often have a history of troubled relationships with parents and peers. As a consequence, their emotional well-being may be entirely dependent on how well their romantic relationship is going, and they may begin to perceive themselves solely in terms of this relationship. In such circumstances, concern about maintaining the relationship may constrain their decision making in important respects. For example, they may decide to engage in activities that they find uncomfortable or distressing in order to maintain the relationship. Some of the compliance strategies that they may engage in have already been outlined.

Why some rejection-sensitive adolescents specialize in one approach to their romantic relationship over another remains unclear in our investigations. Perhaps individuals differ in their relative valuation of attaining acceptance versus avoiding rejection. In his work on the development of promotion-focused (e.g., gaining acceptance) and prevention-focused (e.g., preventing rejection) motivational systems, Higgins (1991) has suggested some parenting antecedents of these distinct motivational systems.

Parental Influence. In addition to concern about rejection in romantic relationships, sensitivity to parental rejection is expected to influence the timing of adolescents’ entry into romantic relationships. The precise way in which parents convey rejection may determine the nature of their influence on their adolescent child’s entry into romantic relationships.

Children with parents whose acceptance is conditional on their fulfilling parental expectations may postpone or speed up involvement in romantic relationships simply to maintain parental approval. More generally, to maintain approval, the children of such parents may tolerate high degree of parental intrusion into their decisions about romantic relationships. However, in evaluating the role of parents in their adolescent’s romantic relationships, it is important to distinguish inappropriate intrusions from appropriate parental guidance within the context of a respectful, accepting relationship.

The decisions of adolescents with neglectful or overly rejecting parents may be un influenced by their parents’ views on romantic relationships.

These adolescents may have given up the hope of attaining parental acceptance and approval. Instead, they may seek acceptance by romantic partners as a substitute for parental acceptance. This reaction may accelerate adolescents’ involvement in committed, exclusive romantic relationships, which, in turn, may have positive or negative consequences for them, depending on whether they become overly involved in a healthy or troubled relationship.

Peer Influence. Research has found that close friends and peer norms contribute to an adolescent’s concepts of and expectations about romantic partners. Among adolescents who are especially sensitive to peer acceptance and rejection, the opinion of close friends and, more broadly, peer norms may be the key influence on the adolescent’s decisions about romantic relationships. This may be especially true in early adolescence, when experimentation with romantic relationships often begins. At that time, many adolescents have little investment in their romantic partners. Instead, their motivation for romantic involvement may be to gain or maintain the acceptance of their peer group. In such cases, the peer group rather than the romantic partner is the salient source of acceptance or rejection.

Alternatively, rejection-sensitive adolescents who have experienced peer rejection may give up on peers as a source of acceptance and seek instead acceptance from romantic partners. As with parents, a history of conditional peer acceptance may characterize adolescents who are overly influenced by peers, whereas fairly consistent overt rejection or neglect may characterize adolescents who give up completely on peer acceptance.

Partner Selection

Rejection sensitivity may also affect the risk of becoming involved in an unhealthy or even abusive relationship through its impact on partner selection. Preoccupation with issues of acceptance and rejection may lead rejection-sensitive adolescents to overvalue partners who are attentive, who need them, and who seek a rapid intensification of commitment early in the relationship. Although these partner attributes may initially help allay rejection concerns, they may be harbingers of later difficulties. The clinical literature on battered women (e.g., Browne, 1987; Walker, 1984) suggests that excessively high levels of dependency early in the relationship may presage jealous and controlling behavior, with emotional and physical abuse as a potential outcome.

In addition to being at risk for selecting on the basis of valued characteristics that may predict the emergence of later difficulties, intimacy-seeking,
rejection-sensitive adolescents may be insufficiently selective in choosing a romantic partner. For example, they may be more willing than others to overlook a prospective partner’s history of being abusive, dishonest, or unfaithful, or of abusing drugs or alcohol. In sum, the need for acceptance may compromise rejection-sensitive adolescents’ judgment in selecting a romantic partner.

Influence of Peers and Parents. The choice of romantic partners is also a potential cause of peer and/or parental rejection. Some parents may reject children who select partners who are dissimilar in ethnicity, class, and religion. Peers may expect peer group members to select as partners members of a particular social clique, rejecting and ostracizing transgressors. The dilemma of resolving a mismatch between their desired romantic partner and the type of partner acceptable to peers and/or parents may be especially upsetting for adolescents who are highly sensitive to peer or parental rejection. As a group, gay adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to rejection from peers and parents and its distressing consequences because of their choice of a romantic partner.

Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in Relationships

How do rejection-sensitive adolescents think, feel, and behave in romantic relationships in which they are invested? We first describe our findings on late adolescents. We then describe some recent findings on early adolescents.

Late Adolescents. Late adolescents who enter a romantic relationship disposed to expect rejection from significant others tend to (a) perceive intentional rejection in their partner’s insensitive behaviors, (b) feel insecure and unhappy about their relationship, and (c) behave in ways that erode their partner’s relationship satisfaction (Downey & Feldman, 1996). We found that the behaviors that eroded partner satisfaction differed in males and females. Rejection-sensitive men’s jealous, controlling behavior helped explain their partner’s dissatisfaction. Rejection-sensitive women’s hostile, unsupportive behavior contributed to their partner’s dissatisfaction.

To better understand the processes through which the romantic relationships of rejection-sensitive women begin to unravel, we examined their behavior in conflicts, which we expected to trigger their rejection concerns (Ayduk et al., in press; Downey et al., 1998). A daily diary study of naturally occurring conflict in dating couples revealed that when rejection-sen-

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itive women felt rejected, they tended to report having a conflict with their partner the next day. During the conflict they behaved in a hostile way (e.g., lost their temper, said spiteful things). The next day, the relationship satisfaction and commitment of high-rejection-sensitive women’s partners declined, whereas those of low-rejection-sensitive women’s partners increased. The high-rejection-sensitive women were aware of their partners’ reduced satisfaction and commitment, which emerged in diminished attentiveness and affection. Consistent with the view that the conflicts of rejection-sensitive women affect their partners in ways that matter for the relationship, the partner’s level of commitment and dissatisfaction during the diary period predicted subsequent breakup.

To test more rigorously the impact of rejection-sensitive women’s conflict behavior on their partners, we conducted an observational investigation of couples discussing an unresolved relationship issue. Consistent with self-reports, high-rejection-sensitive women behaved in a hostile manner, and this behavior helped maintain their partner’s initial level of anger and resentment. The discussion led to a reduction in anger and resentment in the partners of women who were low in rejection sensitivity. Men’s post-conflict anger helped distinguish couples who had broken up a year later.

These findings suggest that, whatever its origins, rejection sensitivity has a self-perpetuating quality: Expectations of rejection facilitate subjective perceptions of rejection, which cause behaviors that evoke objective rejection, reinforcing expectations of rejection (Jussim, 1986, 1991; Merton, 1948). So far, our research on late adolescents has addressed only one of the many hypothesized processes, outlined in the previous section, through which rejection sensitivity may undermine relationships and compromise well-being.

Early Adolescents. Our research suggests that rejection sensitivity can have profound consequences for late adolescents dating relationships. Does this characteristic have a similar impact on early adolescents’ dating relationships? Our findings suggest an affirmative answer for girls but not boys (Purdie et al., 1998). In seventh- to ninth-grade girls, sensitivity to peer and teacher rejection measured 2 years earlier predicted heightened concern about their current romantic partner’s commitment to the relationship. These girls worried about whether their partner was thinking of leaving the relationship, was interested in someone else, and might cheat on them. They felt uncomfortable when their boyfriend was doing something that did not involve them. They reported that they would do things with which they did not feel comfortable to maintain the relationship, suggesting that
they are at heightened risk for using some of the potentially harmful compliance strategies that we have identified. They were the targets of more verbal aggression from partners than were girls low in rejection sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity was less predictive of early adolescent boys’ relationship concerns, perhaps because their dating relationships are less serious and committed than those of their female peers. Early adolescent boys’ relationships are shorter, and they are more likely to be involved with multiple partners.

Gender Differences in Vulnerability to Depression and Aggression

Our research with late adolescents suggests that rejection-sensitive individuals may be differentially vulnerable for depression and aggression. Rejection-sensitive young women, but not young men, show heightened vulnerability to depressive symptoms following rejection (i.e., having the relationship terminated) by their romantic partners (Kim, Ayduk, & Downey, 1998). These findings converge with Hammen and colleagues’ finding that relationship disruptions prompted clinical levels of distress in young women concerned about rejection and abandonment (Hammen, Burge, Daley, Davila, Paley, & Rudolph, 1995). The results of these two longitudinal studies suggest the importance of considering whether disruptions in romantic relationships help contribute to the sharp increase in female depression during adolescence (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994).

We have found evidence that rejection sensitivity may be a risk factor for physical abusiveness toward a romantic partner in college men (Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, in press). Although relatively rare, aggression by rejection-sensitive men may be an outgrowth of their more general tendency to behave in a jealous, controlling way toward their partners (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Jealousy, controlling behavior has been consistently identified as characterizing male abusers (Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg, & Walker, 1990, Walker, 1984).

Ending Relationships

During adolescence, romantic relationships begin and end with greater frequency than in adulthood. This is especially true in early adolescence. Nonetheless, rejection sensitivity may help account for individual differences in the length of relationships. In support of this prediction, we found that rejection sensitivity prospectively predicted the breakup of late adolescents’ dating relationships.

Rejection Sensitivity

We have suggested a process whereby rejection sensitivity may unintentionally lead to the termination of relationships by eroding the commitment and satisfaction of the rejection-sensitive individual’s partner. It is also possible that belief in the imminence of rejection may prompt some rejection-sensitive adolescents to end the relationship themselves. They may prefer to reject a partner preemptively rather than be rejected. Rejection-sensitive adolescents who continually reject romantic partners may never get beyond the casual stage of their romantic relationships.

Alternatively, a desire to maintain some degree of acceptance may help explain why some adolescents maintain unhealthy relationships. For example, battered women’s commitment to their partners (Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991) may sometimes reflect a motivation to avoid rejection and being alone. A similar motivation may underlie the solicitous overtures of 4-year-old victims of peer aggression studied by Troy and Straus (1987). These children’s persistence in making positive overtures toward an abusive playmate may indicate a preference for abusive attention over no attention, as the following request by a victimized child ignored by his aggressor suggests: “Why don’t you tease me? I won’t get mad” (Troy & Straus, 1987, p. 169).

The decision to remain in or end a relationship may also be influenced by concern about peer and parental acceptance. Thus, when peers disparage a romantic partner’s appearance or parents deem the partner’s background to be unacceptable, adolescents who are sensitive to peer or parental rejection may break up with a partner they like.

Impact of Rejection by a Romantic Partner

Negative relationship experiences such as rejection by a prospective romantic partner, being belittled or demeaned by a partner, or being “dumped” may undermine an adolescent’s confidence in romantic relationships. Such rejections may have a sensitizing effect even on adolescents who were not previously rejection sensitive. As a consequence, adolescents may decide to avoid future relationships. If they do get involved in relationships, they may be overly cautious and their defensive expectation of rejection may prompt a self-protective readiness to perceive rejection. However, rejection sensitivity that results from a bad experience in a single romantic relationship is probably more easily undone and less likely to generalize beyond romantic relationships than rejection sensitivity that results from parental rejection. Nonetheless, the corrosive effect of an abusive relationship on an adolescent’s confidence in self and others should not be underestimated.
Breaking the Cycle of Rejection

Besides providing a context for the maintenance and intensification of rejection sensitivity, romantic relationships may provide adolescents with opportunities for change. Research on people who transcend severe childhood rejection suggests that relationships that are mutually satisfying and healthy may help rejection-sensitive adolescents change their tendency to expect, perceive, and react intensely to rejection. Having a supportive partner distinguishes women who break the intergenerational cycle of child abuse from those who continue the cycle (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Quinton, Rutter, & Liddle, 1984).

What are the mechanisms through which supportive relationships can help adolescents transcend a legacy of rejection? By violating the expectations of rejection, partners can potentially alter rejection-sensitive adolescents’ expectations and anxieties about rejection. Healthy, supportive partners can also act as models for generating less maladaptive explanations for others’ behavior and for developing more adaptive conflict resolution skills. Yet, rejection sensitivity is deeply ingrained. Thus, change is probably unlikely to occur unless the rejection-sensitive adolescent is highly motivated, and the partner is deeply committed and can provide effective guidance and encouragement.

What characteristics of the rejection-sensitive adolescent facilitate change? By adolescence, people have developed the cognitive competencies (i.e., formal operations) that permit them to think hypothetically, a skill that should help them to think through the implications of alternative ways of perceiving and reacting to other people’s actions. They can also think reflectively about themselves and consider and map out alternative futures. These cognitive skills should provide an important tool for change. However, belief in the possibility of personal change may be a prerequisite for change to begin (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

General self-regulatory competencies, such as the ability to delay immediate gratification in the pursuit of a long-term goal (Mischel, Cantor, & Feldman, 1996), can also help adolescents stop themselves from acting on their immediate feelings following perceived rejection. In most individuals, these competencies improve with age. However, even when people have the ability to delay gratification, they probably will not do so in the absence of a long-term goal. The desire to maintain an important romantic relationship may motivate some rejection-sensitive adolescents to work on inhibiting their tendency to respond reflexively to perceived rejection with aggression and to replace this tendency with responses that serve long-term goals.

Rejection Sensitivity

What partner characteristics facilitate change? Effective change is probably possible only when the partner is able to convey a sense of acceptance, does not reciprocate the negativity that rejection-sensitive people often show when they fear or perceive rejection, knows how to initiate constructive discussion of relationship problems, and can negotiate boundaries between autonomy and connectedness. These are difficult requirements for any person, let alone an adolescent without much experience in romantic relationships. What kind of relationship history instills these capacities? One possibility is that a developmental history in which relationships have gone relatively smoothly allows such skills to develop. Alternatively, someone who has successfully negotiated challenging relationships with parents or peers may be more capable of helping the rejection-sensitive person change than someone who has not confronted such challenges.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have drawn selectively on attachment, social-cognitive, and interpersonal approaches to relationships to outline a model of adaptive and maladaptive approaches to adolescent romantic relationships. Our model proposes that rejection sensitivity, a legacy of rejecting experiences, influences whether and when adolescents enter romantic relationships; who they select as partners; how they think, feel, and behave in their relationships; and whether they remain in or end relationships. In particular, we have outlined some ways in which rejection sensitivity may lead adolescents to engage in behaviors that are potentially harmful to their relationship and to themselves. For example, we have argued that rejection sensitivity may contribute to heightened levels of depression in adolescent women and to partner aggression in adolescent men.

The framework allows for cultural, gender, and developmental differences in rejection sensitivity. It also draws attention to the rejection directed at individuals because of status characteristics (e.g., sexual orientation), as well as personal characteristics or actions (e.g., being victimized by peers because of a tendency to overreact, being rejected by parents because of trivial misbehavior or noncompliance).

While accounting for continuity from parental and peer relationships to adolescent romantic relationships, the framework also allows for change. Our assumption that rejection sensitivity is maintained by experiences in relationships means that it can also be modified by disconfirmatory experiences. Thus, interventions can be designed to facilitate change toward more healthy ways of feeling, thinking, and behaving in relationships.
In cloaking, we caution that identifying maladaptive relationship patterns is not possible in the absence of knowledge of normative developmental change in adolescent dating relationships. Thus, although we have proposed an agenda for research on individual differences in adolescent dating relationships, we also emphasize the need for normative developmental studies.

References


### 8  Sex, Dating, Passionate Friendships, and Romance

**Intimate Peer Relations Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents**

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Although the raw number of adolescent romantic and sexual involvements is well documented, the actual experience and meaning of these relationships for adolescents receives little attention. As a result, these relationships are frequently classified together on the basis of surface similarities, despite important structural and functional differences. Attention to these differences, however, reveals how young men and women craft adaptive constellations of peer relationships to meet changing needs for intimacy and social support during the multiple transitions of adolescence. In this chapter we put forth a typology of intimate peer relationships based on the motives prompting adolescents to pursue them, their specific characteristics, and the functions they serve. We specify four varieties of adolescent relationships—sexual relationships, dating relationships, passionate friendships, and romantic relationships—representing prototypical combinations of some of the most salient motives, characteristics, and functions.

Three qualifications are in order. First, our use of this typology is primarily heuristic. We do not suggest that all adolescent intimate relationships can or should be shoehorned into one of these categories or that such a task has any intrinsic value. Rather, we elaborate these relationship categories to demonstrate how an analysis of the motives, characteristics, and functions underlying adolescent intimate relationships elucidates their developmental significance better than an analysis of surface features alone. Second, our usage of otherwise general terms such as *romantic relationship* should be assumed to be specific to this chapter unless otherwise noted. *Romantic relationships, dating relationships, sexual relationships, and passionate friendships* will be defined with regard to the specific combination of motivations, characteristics, and functions we perceive to define archetypical examples of these relationships. Third, although certain relationships may prove more salient early in adolescence, whereas others take...