
III Early Interpersonal Trauma and Later Adjustment: The Mediational Role of Rejection Sensitivity

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A central question in the field of developmental psychopathology is: What is the psychological legacy of parental maltreatment? Numerous studies have documented the behavioral sequelae of maltreatment, which include impaired functioning across the social and personal domains (for reviews see Cicchetti & Carlson, 1990; Downey, Feldman, Khouri, & Friedman, 1994; Widom, 1989). Nonetheless, the field has made little headway in identifying the specific psychological mediators of these behavioral effects. The question here is: What precisely does the individual take away from such experiences and carry to new situations such that functioning in those situations is impaired?

Over the past few years we have been developing and testing a theory that addresses this question (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey et al., 1994; Downey, Feldman, & Avdak, 1997; Downey, Freitas, Lifshitz, & Khouri, 1997; Downey, Lebolt, Racum, & Reitz, in press; Feldman & Downey, 1994). We contend that the core psychological message that various forms of maltreatment convey to children is that of rejection (Feldman & Downey, 1994). This message leads children to develop a heightened sensitivity to being rejected. That is, they become disposed to anxiously or angrily expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection. We have termed this disposition “rejection sensitivity,” and we have begun to document how it undermines relationships and impairs functioning in both college students and early adolescents. To date, our studies have focused primarily on documenting the role of rejection sensitivity in fostering a hostile and aggressive interpersonal style, which can promote violence in peer and romantic relationships.

In this paper, we describe our theoretical model and the program of research that we are undertaking to test and refine the model. We first review the rich theoretical and empirical foundations on which our theory builds.

Rejecting Parenting and its Behavioral and Psychological Sequelae

There is increasing recognition that children exposed to physical or emotional abuse or neglect show similar profiles of personal and interpersonal difficulties (see Downey

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et al., 1994, for a review). This observation has led some researchers to speculate that these children's difficulties result from the emotional message of rejection common to diverse forms of inadequate parenting (e.g., Garbarino, Guttman, & Sorely, 1986; Rohner & Rohner, 1980).

These recent observations by maltreatment researchers echo those of one of the first scholars to investigate the impact of parenting quality on children's social development (Symonds, 1938). In 1938, Percival Symonds claimed that parental rejection is evident in neglect, physical cruelty, and hostile criticism and undermines the personal and interpersonal difficulties of children exposed to such parenting. Studies conducted since Symonds' seminal work have continued to support his basic conclusions. Theoretical and empirical approaches consistently identify parental acceptance and rejection as primary dimensions of individual differences in parenting that have important implications for children's well-being (see McClelland & Martin, 1984, for review). Early experiences of rejection have been shown to predict depression, aggression, social withdrawal, and addictive behavior (Campbell & Rohner, 1992; McClelland & Martin, 1984; Parker, 1979).

Symonds' emphasis on the significance of parental rejection for children's well-being was shared by other early proponents of interpersonal approaches to personality development, who also sought to describe the psychological legacy of parental rejection. In the Neurotic Personality of Our Time, Karen Horney attributed maladaptive orientations to relationships to "basic anxiety" about desertion, abuse, humiliation, and betrayal. She proposed that this anxiety develops through early rejection experiences and predisposes people to "a painful sensitivity to any rejection or refusal of what they have asked for, even if it is not the right thing to do. . . ." (Horney, 1937, p. 135-136). Erikson (1950) asserted that a basic mistrust of others, formed on the basis of troubled experiences with early caretakers, would compromise the possibility of personal and interpersonal fulfillment. Sullivan (1937) claimed that generalized expectations or "personifications" of significant others as meeting needs or as punitive, disapproving, or rejecting, form the basis for how people perceive and relate to others. Although these theories differed in important ways in their conceptualization of the psychological processes underlying maladaptive reactions to perceived rejection, they concurred in locating the origins of these processes in rejecting experiences in childhood.

Attachment Perspective

Bowlby's attachment theory is the most elaborate and generative model of the psychological mediators linking early rejection with later interpersonal functioning (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Bowlby proposed that children develop mental models of themselves and of relationships that influence their future relationships. At the core of these models are expectations about whether significant others will satisfy their needs or reject them. These expectations derive initially from the reliability with which children's primary caretakers meet their needs in early childhood. When caretakers tend to meet children's needs sensitively and consistently, children develop secure working models that incorporate the expectation that others will accept and support them. When caretakers tend to meet children's needs with rejection, children develop insecure working models that incorporate doubts and anxieties about whether others will accept and support them. Insecure working models are thought to underlie difficulties in adult interpersonal relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

As Bremerton, Rodway, and Cassidy (1980) have noted, when Bowlby introduced the internal working model "it was little more than a metaphor with useful connotations" (p. 275). The task of clarifying, elaborating, and operationalizing the working model was left to later generations of researchers. These researchers have focused primarily on developing global assessments of whether the person has internalized a sense of being securely attached or a sense of being insecurely attached (e.g., Bremerton, 1985; Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1990; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Main & Goldwyn, 1984; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). In studies of children, attachment security is typically inferred from children's behavior when reunited with their mother following separation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Behavior that is avoidant, ambivalent, disorganized, or controlling is interpreted as evidence of insecure working models.

An approach to the assessment of adult attachment security that focuses on people's orientations towards their current relationships has been developed (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). By extrapolating from the behavior profiles of securely and insecurely attached children, Hazan and Shaver (1987) generated profiles of beliefs about close adult relationships designed to indicate differences in attachment security. An alternative, influential approach developed by Lewis and his colleagues involves using the detail, coherence, affective tone, and content of people's thoughts about the parenting they received in childhood as a basis for inferring the security of their working models (Main & Goldwyn, 1984).

A wealth of evidence supports Bowlby's claims that insecure attachment originates in parental rejection and contributes to maladjustment. Perspective, contemporaneous, and retrospective data document a link between various forms of parental rejection, including physical and emotional abuse, and insecure attachment (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978; Cicchetti & Rogoff, 1988; Cicchetti & Woods, 1983; Lyons-Ruth, 1989; Main & Goldwyn, 1984). Insecurely attached children, in turn, have more troubled relationships with peers and adults and are generally less socially competent and more aggressive, disruptive, and oppositional than securely attached children (e.g., Booth, Rose-Krasnor, & Rubin, 1994; Bower, Rose-Krasnor, & Rubin, 1991; Cohn, 1990; Easterbrooks, Davidson, & Uranam, 1998; Lyons-Ruth, Alpert, & Rezapouli, 1993; Urban, Cicchetti, & Woods, 1987; Watson, Corsman, Prommer-Bonnik, & Sues, 1994; Waters, Powers, Crowell, & Keng-Ling, 1993). Insecurely attached adolescents and adults also experience difficulties in their relationships with friends, romantic partners, and their own children (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Kobak & Sceery, 1988; Main & Goldwyn, 1984).
Social-Cognitive Perspective

There is now ample evidence that attachment behavior, global beliefs about relationships, and internalized representations of the parent-child relationship (a) are predicted by rejecting parenting and (b) predict social maladjustment. However, the cognitive and affective mechanisms linking the legacy of rejecting parenting with social maladjustment have not yet been clarified or empirically investigated by attachment researchers. Specifically, we refer to the moment-to-moment cognitive and affective processes that generate behavior in specific social situations. Bowlby (1973, p. 203) explicitly draws attention to these intervening mechanisms in proposing that, with the aid of working models, the child forecasts "the probable availability of (his or her) attachment figure," "perceives events," and "constructs plans." Adding an affective dimension to information processing, he also claimed that linked with the child's forecasts about the availability of significant others is a "sensitiveness to respond with fear whenever he meets any particularly alarming situation within the ordinary course of his life" (p. 203) and that this defensive response can emerge in anxiety or anger.

These ideas about the psychological processes linking parental rejection with social behavior translate readily into such cognitive-affective processing variables as expectancies, the subjective value placed on different outcomes, attributional biases, and scripts for regulating one's affective and behavioral response to various experiences (Baldwin, 1991; Bandura, 1986; Crick & Dodge, 1992; Dodge, Pettit, & Coie, 1993; Dodge, Pettit, O'Brien, & Price, 1993; Dodge, Pettit, Price, & Price, 1993). These immediate psychological antecedents of behavior have been the focus of much contemporary research from a cognitive-affective information processing perspective (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Crick & Dodge, 1992; Dodge, Pettit, O'Brien, & Price, 1993; Dodge, Pettit, Price, & Price, 1993). Particularly relevant to understanding the social-cognitive mediators of troubled social relationships is research initiated by Dodge (1980) to explain why some children characteristically display high rates of aggression toward peers. Influenced by attributional approaches to social behavior (Heider, 1957; Kelley, 1973), he proposed that aggressive children behave aggressively because they tend to attribute the negative behavior of others toward them to hostile or malevolent intent, justifying aggressive retaliation. This proposition was informed by experimental evidence that people retaliate against the perpetrators of negative behavior when led to believe that the negative behavior was intentional but not when led to believe it was either accidental or benignly intended. Dodge proposed that aggressive children differed from nonaggressive children in that they more readily attribute hostile intent to others. This claim has been well substantiated (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Moreover, aggressive children have also been shown to selectively attend to cues of hostility, to become angry when they perceive intentional hostility, and to redly generate aggressive solutions to interpersonal problems, and to overestimate the potential efficacy of aggressive solutions (e.g., Crick & Ladd, 1990; Dodge et al., 1986; Crick & Dodge, 1992).

Explaining Hostile Attributional Biases

Research generated by Dodge (1980) has considerably furthered our understanding of the attributional processes underlying social maladjustment, and especially interpersonal aggression. However, this research has not clarified why those who are interpersonally aggressive think that others are intentionally hostile toward them. Dodge (1980) showed that it is not simply that aggressive children view all negative behavior as motivated by hostility. Rather, their characteristic attributional bias is limited to negative behavior directed towards them. This bias does not emerge in their attributions for negative behavior directed toward other children (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1980).

We hypothesize that aggressive children's readiness to perceive intentional hostility and rejection in the behaviors of their peers towards them results from pre-existing expectations of rejection. This hypothesis is supported by Dodge and Sonderegger (1987) finding that when aggressive children were led to expect rejection by a peer (i.e., a participant overheard an anticipated confederate playmate refusing to play with him because the confederate says he dislikes the participant), they showed an even more heightened readiness to perceive hostile intent in subsequent negative or ambiguous interpersonal events. This finding suggests that aggressive children may be especially sensitive to interpersonal rejection and that, when primed to expect rejection, their readiness to attribute hostile intent to others intensifies.

In turn, prior research provides some evidence that concerns about acceptance and rejection influence how people who experience interpersonal difficulties process social information. This finding is compatible with predictions from attachment theory, which emphasizes the impact on social behavior of expectations about whether others will be accepting or rejecting. The presumed path of influence is through the intervening cognitive-affective processes—the social cues that receive attention, the perception of events, and the response plans that are generated and selected. Attachment theory also adds an affective dimension to social information processing.
processing; the theory suggests that people who are concerned about rejection are likely to feel threatened in social situations where rejection is possible. This defensive reaction, consciously experienced and expressed as anger or anxiety, interacts with expectations of acceptance or rejection to influence subsequent information processing and behavior.

Rejection Sensitivity as the Link Between Parental Rejection and Social Maladjustment.

The Psychological Construct of Rejection Sensitivity

In our research we have conceptualized the psychological legacy of early rejection in cognitive-affective processing terms. Specifically, we have sought to establish how early rejection experiences shape its expectations, values and concerns, interpretative biases, and self-regulatory strategies that underlie behavior in particular interpersonal contexts, and (b) the dynamic relations among these cognitive-affective variables and interpersonal behavior (Downey et al., 1994; Feldman & Downey, 1994).

Drawing on Bowlby (1980), our model proposes that when parents tend to meet children's expressed needs with rejection, children become sensitive to rejection. That is, they develop the expectation that when they seek acceptance and support from significant others they will probably be rejected, and they learn to place a particularly high value on avoiding such rejection. They thus feel threatened in situations where their needs or vulnerabilities may be evident to significant others. Feeling threatened emerges in the defensive emotions of anger or anxiety. These defensive expectations of rejection make children hypervigilant for signs of rejection. When they encounter rejection cues, however minimal or ambiguous, they readily perceive intentional rejection and feel rejected. The perceived rejection is then likely to prompt both affective and behavioral overreactions, including rage and distress.

Behavioral Implications of Rejection Sensitivity

Because rejection-sensitive people find the prospect of rejection so distressing, much of their behavior becomes organized around the goal of avoiding rejection. One strategy is to avoid rejection by seeking social relationships in the belief that “if I withdraw, nothing can hurt me” (Horney, 1937). Consistent with this view, rejection sensitivity is a core symptom of social phobia and avoidant personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1995). Both of these disorders are characterized by an avoidance of and anxiety to social encounters. This strategy bears a high cost, however, involving loss of the opportunity of ever attaining the feeling of acceptance that has eluded rejection-sensitive people in life. Thus, this strategy may put one at an increased risk for loneliness.

Alternatively, rejection-sensitive people may seek to avoid rejection by intervening in securing intimacy and unconditional love in the belief that “If you love me, you will not hurt me” (Horney, 1937, p.96). Because they are sensitized to the possibility of rejection, however, they are especially prone to perceive their partners’ negative or ambiguous behavior as rejecting. Perceived rejection is likely to prompt both affective and behavioral overreactions, which may include anger and hostility, dependency, counter rejection, jealousy, and inappropriate attempts to control the significant other's behavior. Such reaction patterns are likely to undermine the relationships of rejection-sensitive people, increasing the likelihood of their rejection by peers and romantic partners, and thus reinforcing defensive expectations of rejection.

Figure 1 summarizes our theoretical model.

Empirically Testing the Theoretical Model.

Over the past few years we have been conducting a program of experimental and longitudinal field research to examine several questions derived from the theoretical model. We are testing the model in two developmentally and culturally distinct groups in the belief that such an approach can help reveal what is robust about the model and what is contextually and developmentally specific. The first group consists of college students in the late adolescent/young adult period. Most of the students are from middle- or upper-middle-class urban or suburban backgrounds and are either Caucasian or Asian-American. The second group consists of elementary and middle-school children from economically disadvantaged families attending an inner-city public school. This sample is mainly Hispanic and African-American.

College Student Sample

Undergraduates were recruited to participate for pay in various studies of interpersonal relationships through posters placed around campus and notices placed in their campus mailboxes. The racial and gender composition of study participants is representative of the Columbia University undergraduate population. About 50% of the overall sample was female. Fifty-four percent of participants were Caucasian, 28% were Asian-American, 7.5% were Hispanic, 6.5% were African-American, and 6% were from other ethnic backgrounds. The majority of participants were in their final or second year of college. The sample is more completely described in Downey and Feldman (1996) and Feldman and Downey (1994).

Early Adolescent Sample

The early adolescent participants were fifth and sixth graders attending a public elementary (5th grade) and junior-high school (6th and 7th graders). These schools serve an ethnically diverse, economically disadvantaged, inner-city neighborhood with a
large immigrant population. All students in participating classes were invited to be in the study and a parental consent form was sent home with each child. Approximately 85% of the children in each class returned completed parental consent for their participation. Children received small gifts (e.g., pencils, erasers, candy) for being in the study, including a gift for returning a completed consent form, whether or not the parent agreed to the child’s participation. The sample racial and gender composition was representative of each school’s population. Sixty-nine percent of the sample were Hispanic, 24% were of African descent (African, African-Caribbean, African-American), 6% were of Asian descent (Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai), and 1% were of European descent. Ninety-one percent of children at the participating schools were eligible for a free school lunch, indicating a family income below 130% of the poverty level. A more detailed description of the sample is given in Downey, et al. (in press).

Operationalizing the Construct of Rejection Sensitivity

A cognitive-affective perspective on personality takes the view that whether or not someone has a particular personality disposition should be most clearly evident in that person’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior in situations that activate the disposition (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). We have proposed that someone who is rejection-sensitive should defensively expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection when faced with potential rejection by important others. Thus, individual differences in rejection sensitivity should be most evident in situations where rejection is possible. This conditional, or if . . . then, approach to personality suggests the importance of carefully identifying diagnostic situations in which people face the threat of rejection by important others.

Because we view defensive expectations of rejection as at the core of rejection sensitivity, we have operationalized rejection sensitivity as anxious or angry expectations of rejection in situations that afford the possibility of rejection by important others. We began the process of developing culturally and developmentally salient and meaningful measures of rejection sensitivity for young adult/late adolescents and for early adolescents by conducting qualitative interviews. The goals of the interviews were to identify (a) situations where rejection by important others was possible and (b) the relevant dimensions of thought and feelings that people experienced in situations where rejection was possible. The development of the measure for the college student sample preceded the development of the early adolescent measure. Although we had expected that the specific situations that would activate rejection sensitivity in each group would differ for both developmental and cultural reasons, we had not expected differences in the thoughts and feelings experienced in situations where rejection was possible. However, as we shall see, differences emerged across the two groups that caused us to revise our initial operational definition of rejection sensitivity and to augment our theoretical model.

Late Adolescent/Young Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ)

Qualitative interviews revealed that college students’ thoughts and feelings in situations where rejection was possible varied along two dimensions: (a) the degree of anxiety and concern about the outcome and (b) expectations of acceptance or rejection. Thus, we operationalized rejection sensitivity in college students as the degree of generalized expectations and anxiety about whether significant others will meet one’s needs for acceptance or will be rejecting.

The late adolescent/young adult RSQ presents respondents with 18 situations in which they make a request of a significant other, such as a peer, teacher, parent, or romantic partner. A sample situation is, “You ask a friend to do a big favor.” For each situation, participants were first asked to indicate on a 6-point scale (from very unconcerned to very concerned) their degree of concern or anxiety about the outcome (e.g., “How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your friend would want to help you out?”). Respondents then indicated on a 6-point scale (from very unlikely to very likely) the likelihood of the other person honoring their request (e.g., “I would expect that my friend would willingly help me out.”). For each situation, the response to the expectations question was reversed and then multiplied by the answer to the concern question. The responses to all 18 situations were averaged to generate the person’s RSQ score. Responses to the expectations and concern questions did not covary systematically. If so as respondents are anxious about the outcome and expect a rejecting outcome, they are considered to be sensitive to rejection. The measure shows a stable single factor structure and good internal and test-retest reliability and convergent and discriminant validity in college
students in whom it is normally distributed (for further details, see Downey 
Feldman, 1996; Feldman & Downey, 1994).

Children’s Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (CRSQ)

We also developed a rejection sensitivity questionnaire for the early adolescent 
group. Our research on rejection sensitivity in children began after we had 
operationalized rejection sensitivity in late adolescents/young adults as anxious 
expectations of rejection. Interviews with children in the course of developing an 
age- and culturally-appropriate measure of rejection sensitivity revealed that some 
children who behaved as if they were rejection sensitive said that they would not 
feel nervous in situations where rejection was possible. In fact, they claimed that 
they never felt anxious or nervous. When asked how they would feel, they claimed 
that they would feel angry. Prior work also suggested that anger expectations of 
rejection in situations where rejection was possible was a strong predictor of aggres-

sive behavior in children. Thus, we expanded our definition of the expectations 
component of rejection sensitivity to include angry as well as anxious expectations 
of rejection in situations where rejection is possible. The view that people can ex-
perience anger or anxiety when they feel threatened is consistent with research on 
emotion (Lang, 1995) and with Bowlby’s (1969) observation that threats of loss 
can elicit either anger or anxiety in insecurely attached children.

The CRSQ consists of 12 situations. Six situations pertain to peers and six to 
teachers. We decided to focus on children’s sensitivity to rejection by peers and 
teachers because we were interested primarily in the impact of rejection sensitivity 
on children’s behavior functioning in the school setting. We have since devel-
oped additional situations assessing children’s sensitivity to parental rejection. The 
following is a sample situation: “Pretend you have moved and you are going to 
a new school. In this school, the teacher lets the kids in the class take home a video 
game to play with on the weekend. Every week so far you have watched someone else take it home. You decide to ask the teacher if you can take home the video 
game this time. You wonder if she will let you have it.” For each situation, children 
are first asked to indicate their degree of anxiety about the outcome of each situa-
tion (e.g., “How NERVOUS would you feel about whether or not the teacher will 
let you take the video game home this time?”) on a 6-point scale ranging from 1, 
“not nervous,” to 6, “very, very nervous.” Next, the children indicate their degree 
of anger about the outcome of each situation (e.g., “How MAD would you feel if 
the other person responded with acceptance or rejection?”) on a 6-point scale ranging from 1, “not mad,” to 6, “very, very mad.” They then 
indicate the likelihood that the other person would respond with acceptance or 
rejection (“Do you think the teacher is going to let you take home the video game 
this time?”) on a 6-point scale ranging from 1, “YES!!!” to 6, “NO!!!” Thus, a high 
score indicates the expectation of rejection and a low score indicates the expecta-
tion of acceptance.

A separate rejection-sensitivity score was generated for each situation by multiply-
ing the score for the expected likelihood of rejection by the degree of anger or anxiety 
over the possibility of its occurrence (expectancy of rejection X anger). The responses 
to all 12 questions were averaged to generate the child’s CRSQ score. Of theoreti-
cal interest to us were children who both expected rejection and experienced anger 
or anxiety at the possibility of rejection in a variety of interpersonal situations. 
Separate scores were computed for angry and anxious expectations of rejection.

Overview of Research Program

The remainder of the paper provides evidence in support of three propositions de-
erived from the theoretical model. First, we provide evidence that rejection sensitivity 
is a coherent, distinctive and dynamic personality disposition. Second, we provide 
evidence linking rejection sensitivity with parental rejection. Third, we provide evi-
dence that rejection sensitivity undermines social relationships particularly through 
featuring an aggressive or volatile interpersonal style. Our work with young adults 
has focused on anxious expectations of rejection by romantic partners and our work 
with early adolescents focused on angry expectations of rejection by peers and teachers.

Validating the Construct of Rejection Sensitivity

We defined rejection sensitivity as the disposition to anxiously or angrily expect, 
readily perceive, and overreact to rejection. To empirically validate this construct, 
we tested in experimental and field studies whether anxious or angry expectations 
of rejection fuel a readiness to perceive intentional rejection in the ambiguous be-
havior of others and to overreact as a consequence (Downey & Feldman, 1996; 
Downey, et al., in press).

Downey and Feldman (1996) conducted an experiment to test the assumption 
that anxious expectations of rejection predict a readiness to perceive rejection 
in interpersonal situations. They sought to establish whether rejection-sensitive people 
were more likely than others to feel rejected following an ambiguously intentioned 
rejection. Study participants were introduced to an opposite-sex stranger, a confede-
rate, with whom they expected to converse during two short sessions. Following the 
first conversation, however, the participant was informed that the confederate 
did not want to continue with the experiment. No explanation was given for the 
confederate’s decision. High rejection-sensitive people were expected to experience 
a greater sense of rejection than low rejection-sensitive in response to the 
confederate’s action.

Half of the sample was exposed to this experimental condition. The other half 
was exposed to a control condition in which they were told that the interaction had
to end early because of time constraints. This explicit implosion expansion for the outcome of the interaction was not expected to induce feelings of rejection in either high or low rejection-sensitive people. Participants completed self-report assessments of mood before the interaction and after the experimental manipulation. The dependent variables in the study were change in self-reported feelings of rejection from pre- to post-interaction and the experimenter’s ratings of participants’ reaction to learning that the second interaction would not occur. Both the experimenter and confederate were blind to participants’ rejection-sensitivity score and the confederate was blind to whether participants were in the experimental or control condition.

The data supported theoretical predictions. High rejection-sensitive people showed a greater increase in feelings of rejection than low rejection-sensitive people after being told that the confederate did not want to continue the experiment. They were also rated by the experimenter as reacting more negatively than low rejection-sensitive participants to this information.

The increase in rejected mood shown by high rejection-sensitive people was contingent upon receiving the ambiguous rejection feedback. High and low rejection-sensitive people did not differ in level of initial rejected mood, nor did they differ in change in rejected mood when the feedback was explicitly non-rejecting. Social interaction in itself, in the absence of any potential rejection cues, did not induce feelings of rejection in rejection-sensitive people.

In summary, the results of this study support the proposition that reaction-sensitive people readily perceive intentional rejection in the ambiguous or negative behavior of others. Because the study was conducted with an initially unacquainted confederate, however, it was unclear whether these findings would extend to reaction-sensitive people’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior with people they know well.

Downey and Feldman (1996) addressed this question in a prospective study that tested whether a person’s RSP score would predict attributions of hurtful intent to a subsequent romantic partner’s insensitive behavior (e.g., being cool and distant, being insolent of something you did, beginning to spend less time with you). By assessing people’s RSP score before the romantic relationship began, any association found between anxious expectations of rejection and attributions for a new partner’s insensitive behavior could not reflect the impact of the partner’s behavior or the quality of the relationship on their sensitivity to rejection.

Around 300 first-year college students who had completed the RSP at the beginning of the academic year were screened at the end of the academic year to identify those who had begun a new romantic relationship after completing the RSP but before completing a questionnaire on their attributions for their current romantic partner’s insensitive behavior. The attributions questionnaire was completed approximately four months after the completion of the RSP. Seventy-three students were identified as meeting this criterion from information they provided on the start dates of their romantic relationships over the course of the academic year. Participants also completed a number of measures of personality dispositions around the same time they completed the RSP. These measures were included to test whether any support found for the hypothesized relationship between anxious expectations and subsequent attributions of hurtful intent was an artifact of a third variable. The following dispositional attributes were assessed through self-report questionnaires: (a) Social anxiety, measured with the social distress items of the Social Anxiety and Distress Scale (SADS; Watson & Friend, 1969); (b) Social avoidance, measured with the social avoidance items of the SADS; (c) adult attachment style, measured with the continuous version of the Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Levy & Davis, 1988); (d) self-esteem, measured with the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979); and (e) neuroticism and (f) introversion, measured with the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964).

Anxious expectations of rejection assessed before a romantic relationship began predicted the extent to which people would attribute hurtful intent to their new romantic partner’s insensitive behavior. This relationship was not an artifact of the dispositional variables listed above. Although all of these dispositional variables were significantly related with RSP, none was a significant predictor of attributions of hurtful intent for the insensitive behavior of a romantic partner. This study provides evidence for the distinctive predictive utility of the RSP to college students.

The next step in validating the construct of rejection sensitivity was to determine whether the construct was valid in the young adolescent sample and to test more directly whether defensive expectations of rejection had an impact on interpersonal behavior. With these goals in mind, Downey et al. (in press) did an experiment to test whether high rejection-sensitive children were more likely than low rejection-sensitive children to feel distressed and to behave more negatively in a situation that could be perceived as intentionally rejecting. Participants were asked to select a friend as a partner for an interview. After selecting a friend the participant was informed by an experimental assistant that the friend did not wish to join the child in the activity. No further explanation was offered for the friend’s refusal. High rejection-sensitive children were expected to be more distressed by their friend’s decision than low rejection-sensitive children.

Half of the participants were exposed to this experimental condition, while the other half were exposed to a control condition in which they were told that the teacher would not allow the chosen friend to leave the classroom for the joint interview. Thus, the control condition offered participants a clearly contextual explanation for the same outcome. This explanation was not expected to induce increased negativity in either high or low rejection-sensitive children. The experimenter was blind to the participant’s experimental status until the manipulation was introduced, and both the experimenter and the assistant were blind to the participant’s RSP score.

Children completed self-report assessments of mood both prior to and following the experimental manipulation. All participants received a small gift at the close of the interviews. To establish whether the ambiguous interpersonal rejection would have behavioral consequences, they were also given the opportunity to select a gift for their absent friend. Before leaving the experimental situation the children were thoroughly debriefed. The dependent variables in the study were changes in self-
reported negative mood from pre- to post-experimental manipulation, and whether the child opted to choose a gift for the friend he had selected to join him in the interview.

High rejection-sensitive children became more distressed in response to being told their friend would not join them for the interview whereas low rejection-sensitive children did not. Neither high nor low rejection-sensitive children became more distressed in the control condition, in which the outcome was the same — the friend did not join the child for the interview — but was not the result of rejection by the friend. Thus, rejection-sensitive children are not simply overreacting to an undesirable outcome. Rather, they show heightened negativity specifically in response to being told that their friend did not want to join them. In addition, rejection-sensitive children in the experimental condition were marginally more likely than children in the other conditions to refuse to take a gift for their absent friend, suggesting that angry expectations of rejection can promote a behavioral overreaction to rejection.

Summary

This set of studies provides evidence supporting the view that rejection sensitivity is a valid and distinctive dynamic personality disposition that is selectively activated in situations where rejection is possible and has implications for interpersonal behavior.

Linking Rejection Sensitivity with Rejecting Parenting

The next major question that our research has addressed is: How does rejection sensitivity develop? Our theoretical model proposes that it develops in part as a protective reaction to parental rejection. We have some support from retrospective studies of college students and a prospective study of early adolescents to support this claim.

Feldman and Downey (1994) examined the association between rejection sensitivity and exposure to family violence in a sample of 212 college students. A positive association was expected given our assumption that rejection is the key psychological message communicated by physically abusive behavior. Consistent with expectations, rejection sensitivity correlated positively with college students' reports of the severity and frequency of their childhood exposure to parent-to-child physical aggression and parent-to-parent physical aggression, assessed with the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1987).

We have also found evidence linking parental neglect with rejection sensitivity. We tested this association in a sample of 460 college students who completed the RSQ and an index of emotional neglect. (We did not examine the impact of physical neglect on rejection sensitivity in this sample because pilot-testing showed that incidents of overt physical neglect, such as not having enough to eat or poor hygiene, were very rarely reported in this predominantly middle- to upper-middle-class sample). The index of emotional neglect was developed for the study and consisted of 13 items indexing possible neglect by either mother or father. Sample items included: "I had little or no contact with my father/mother in recent years"; "My parents had a serious psychological problem that made it difficult for him/her to take care of me"; "My parents were more concerned with what I achieved than with what I needed or wanted"; "As a young child I was left at home alone for extended periods of time." Level of rejection sensitivity increased linearly as a function of number of items endorsed ($r = .20, p < .001$). The mean RSQ score for students (20% of sample) experiencing none of these forms of neglect was 8.3; for students (60%) experiencing 1 to 3 types of neglect the mean RSQ score was 9.7, and for students (20%) experiencing 4 or more forms of neglect the mean RSQ score was 10.3 ($t(2, 456) = 12, p < .001$).

These studies demonstrate a link between rejection sensitivity and exposure to family violence and emotional neglect. Two caveats should be noted, however. First, the level of family violence and neglect experienced by more of the violence- or neglect-exposed college students was typically mild and would not meet the legal definition of maltreatment. We have not yet examined the association between rejection sensitivity and severe maltreatment. Second, although the retrospective data described above are consistent with the view that rejecting experiences foster rejection sensitivity, they may also reflect rejection-sensitive people's propensity to perceive rejection. A stronger test would involve prospectively assessing the impact of rejecting parenting on rejection sensitivity.

Downey, Lebolt, and Rinchin (1995) conducted such a test with data from the early adolescent sample. Specifically, they tested whether parenting that is high in rejection leads to an increase in children's angry expectations of rejection by peers and teachers over a one year period. Data are from 141 5th to 7th graders who completed the CRSQ and whose primary caretaker completed a questionnaire assessing the degree to which they behaved in a hostile, rejecting manner toward their child. The children completed the CRSQ again the following year when they were in 6th to 8th grade. Rejecting parenting predicted an increase in the tendency to angrily expect rejection from peers and teachers over the next year. The study supports claims that the experience of parental rejection sensitizes children to expect and feel threatened by the possibility of being rejected by important others outside the home.

Theories and researchers typically view early childhood as a sensitive period during which the implications of parenting quality for subsequent development are most pronounced. Although parenting quality is viewed as continuing to affect development at least through adolescence, the effects are thought to wane over time as children are exposed to an expanding variety of other socialization influences. Thus, the finding that the quality of parenting experienced in adolescence intensifies angry expectations of rejection provides relatively strong support for the claim that rejecting parenting causes rejection sensitivity.
While these data suggest a causal association between parental rejection and rejection sensitivity, an even stronger test of this proposition could be undertaken by assessing whether rejecting parenting assessed in early childhood predicts adolescent rejection sensitivity. It would be possible to undertake such a test by assessing rejection sensitivity in adolescents who have been participating in studies since early childhood at which time extensive observations of parent-child interaction were made.

Our research so far has focused on documenting the link between rejection sensitivity and parental rejection, reflecting the influence of attachment theory (Bowby, 1973). However, other sources of rejection are also likely to increase children's sensitivity to rejection. Peer rejection is a case in point. Although children who are rejected by their peers have been the focus of considerable research, investigators have typically addressed the causes rather than the consequences of peer rejection (Asher & Coie, 1990). Yet, rejected children are more often the targets of peer aggression, their attempts at positive interaction are rebuffed, and they are marginalized on the outskirts of social activity (Coie, 1990). These observations led Coie (1990) to propose that "the experience of (peer) rejection alters the thoughts, feelings, and responses of the rejected child" (p. 367). One way in which active rejection by peers may alter children's feelings, thoughts, and behavior is through heightening their sensitivity to rejection.

Rejection by significant adult figures such as teachers is also likely to heighten sensitivity to rejection. One circumstance where we can envision this happening is when a child enters a new classroom angrily expecting rejection. When the teacher provides critical feedback or attends to other children's needs before those of the rejection-sensitive child, the child is likely to perceive and overreact to rejection. This is likely to set up a negative interactional dynamic between the child and the teacher, with the teacher increasingly rejecting the child in ways that exacerbate the child's sensitivity to rejection.

Finally, rejection because of one's membership of an ethnic or racial minority group as well as because of poverty may also increase rejection sensitivity. It is likely that members of one group who have had negative experiences with members of another group may learn to anxiously or angrily expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection or disrespect in subsequent encounters with members of the other group.

Social Relationships of Rejection-Sensitive People

We have provided evidence on some potential origins of rejection sensitivity and speculated about others. We now turn to considering the consequences of rejection sensitivity for personal and social functioning. Whereas rejection sensitivity may originally develop as a self-protective reaction to parental rejection, this system may prompt behaviors that are poorly adapted to later social contexts (see Bowby, 1973). When activated in a potentially benign social encounters, rejection sensitivity may lead people to behave in ways that undermine their chances of maintaining supportive and satisfying relationships. We now examine some of the ways in which rejection sensitivity may contribute to interpersonal difficulties in adolescence and young adulthood. Our research with late adolescents/young adults has focused on the implications of rejection sensitivity for romantic relationships while our research with early adolescents has focused on its implications for relations with peers and teachers in the school setting.

Implications of Rejection Sensitivity for Late Adolescent/Young Adult Romantic Relationships

Our model suggests that people who enter a relationship disposed to anxiously expect rejection from significant others should be likely to (a) perceive intentional rejection in their partner's insensitive or ambiguous behaviors, (b) feel insecure and unhappy about their relationship, and (c) respond to perceived rejection or threats of rejection by their partner with hostility, diminished support, and/or jealousy, controlling behavior. When unjustified and exaggerated, these behaviors are likely to erode even a committed partner's satisfaction with the relationship.

Downey and Feldman (1996) examined these propositions in 80 heterosexual student-couple samples in committed nonmarital relationships. Each member of the couple completed the RSQ and provided information about themselves and about their partner. Consistent with expectations, rejection-sensitive people showed heightened concern about being rejected by their partners, irrespective of their partners' actual level of commitment to the relationship. Confirming these self-reports, partners of rejection-sensitive persons perceived them to be more insecure about their relationship. Partners of rejection-sensitive people were more dissatisfied with the relationship than were partners of non-rejection-sensitive people; nevertheless, rejection-sensitive people held exaggerated views of their partner's level of dissatisfaction. When the correlations between participants' rejection sensitivity and their appraisal of their partners' satisfaction were recomputed controlling for their partners' reports of their own satisfaction, the partial correlations remained significant.

In light of rejection-sensitive people's insecurity about the relationship, it is not surprising that they were less satisfied with it and perceived their partners to be dissatisfied as well. Their partners' independent reports of being less satisfied suggest that rejection-sensitive people may behave in ways that jeopardize the quality of the relationship. Consistent with this prediction, high rejection-sensitive men were reported by their partners to show more jealousy than low rejection-sensitive men. High rejection-sensitive women were reported by their partners to be more hostile and emotionally unsupportive than low rejection-sensitive women. None of these results changed appreciably when the correlations were recomputed controlling for the partner's own level of rejection sensitivity.
Does the behavior of rejection-sensitive people help account for their partner’s dissatisfaction with the relationship? Downey and Feldman (1996) conducted a path analysis to assess whether rejection-sensitive men’s jealousy and rejection-sensitive women’s hostile and unsupportive behavior helped explain their partner’s heightened dissatisfaction. Jealous behavior accounted for almost 20% of the effect of men’s rejection sensitivity on their female partner’s relationship dissatisfaction. Hostility and lack of support accounted for over a third of the effect of women’s rejection sensitivity on their male partner’s relationship dissatisfaction.

In summary, these results generally support theoretical predictions about the impact of rejection sensitivity on romantic relationships, with the unexpected finding of gender differences in the behaviors of rejection-sensitive people that undermined partner satisfaction. The findings suggest the need to consider the following two issues in our further investigations of the implications of rejection sensitivity for relationships. First, they suggest the need to consider gender differences in the implications of rejection sensitivity. Second, they suggest the need to directly examine rejection-sensitive people’s behavior in situations that trigger concern about rejection. Specifically, in such situations do rejection-sensitive people behave in ways that elicit partner rejection?

Gender Differences in the Implications of Rejection Sensitivity

The negativity and diminished positivity of rejection-sensitive women may be a consequence of women’s general tendency to cope with adversity and failure with rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). This coping style is likely to foster the belief that the partner has given up on the relationship and that the woman is helpless to do anything about it. This belief pattern may help explain the negativity of rejection-sensitive women and it may prompt them to stop investing emotionally in the relationship. It may also put rejection-sensitive women at risk for depression. The idea that rejection sensitivity plays a role in some forms of depression that are especially prevalent in women has precedents in existing literature (e.g., Beck, 1983; Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). Rejection sensitivity is viewed as a core symptom in dependent or anxious depression, which is characterized by extreme emotional rejection in the face of perceived loss or abandonment (American Psychiatric Association, 1995). The strongest empirical evidence that concerns about rejection and abandonment play a central role in female depression comes from a recent longitudinal study by Hammen, Buey, Daley, Davila, Palk, & Rudolph (1995).

The jealous behavior of rejection-sensitive men may be a manifestation of men’s general tendency to cope in instrumental, active ways with failure and adversity (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). The jealous behavior characteristic of rejection-sensitive men is also common in physically abusive relationships (L. Walker, 1994). Abusers are described as attempting to control and minimize their partners’ contacts with perceived rivals in the misguided belief that this approach will prevent their partner from leaving them (Goldner, Penn, Steinberg, & G. Walker, 1990).

L. Walker, 1984). Thus, in men, rejection sensitivity may be a risk factor for being physically abusive toward a romantic partner.

Are Rejection-Sensitive Women at Risk for Depression?

Kim, and Downey (1997) examined whether rejection-sensitive women show a heightened vulnerability to depressive symptomatology following rejection by their romantic partners. A sample of 120 women completed the RSQ and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) during their first month of college. At the end of the college year they completed the BDI for a second time. At that time they also indicated whether they had experienced the ending of a romantic relationship over the course of the year and, if so, had initiated the termination. It was hypothesized that rejection-sensitive women would be particularly likely to show an increase in depressive symptomatology if a romantic partner had ended the relationship. The data supported this hypothesis. Rejection-sensitive women who had experienced rejection by a romantic partner showed the greatest increase in depressive symptoms over the study period.

Are Rejection-Sensitive Men at Risk for Violence toward Romantic Partners?

Downey, Feldman, and Ayduk (1997) examined whether there was a link between rejection sensitivity and interpersonal violence in male college students. It was hypothesized that the association between rejection sensitivity and violence against romantic partners would depend on whether or not men were invested in romantic relationships. They reasoned that rejection-sensitive men who were highly invested in a romantic relationship would be at a heightened risk for exhibiting violent, coercive behavior toward their partners. On the other hand, lower relationship investment among rejection-sensitive men would be reflective of an avoidant interpersonal style and this would be associated with social isolation.

Study participants completed the following measures: (a) the RSQ; (b) a measure of relationship investment, which was indexed by items (e.g., “Some students feel that being able to establish romantic relationships is important”) taken from Neeman and Hartman’s (1984) measure of the importance of a variety of interpersonal and non-interpersonal domains to students (e.g., relations with parents, academic achievement, personal appearance); (c) Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1987), which asks participants how often they had engaged in any physically aggressive behavior toward a dating partner; and (d) a measure of social involvement in discretionary close relationships, which asked participants to list the number of close friends they had been or talked to on the phone in the past two weeks and the number of serious or committed romantic relationships in which they had been involved.

As predicted, an increased vulnerability for involvement in relationship violence was found in rejection-sensitive men who were highly invested in intimate
relationships. Rejection-sensitive men who were low in intimate investment reported reduced involvement in discretionary close relationships indexed by lifetime number of serious dating relationships and number of current close friends.

**Conditions that Trigger Defensive Expectations of Rejection**

As noted above, our research program has provided clear evidence that rejection sensitivity disrupts social relationships. To better understand the processes through which the relationships of rejection-sensitive people begin to unravel, we sought to examine rejection-sensitive people's behavior in situations likely to trigger concerns about rejection. We reasoned that conflicts may be particularly good candidates for triggering conflicts in that rejection-sensitive people are likely to perceive them as opportunities for rejection rather than as opportunities for resolving difficulties in the relationship. For them, conflicts should elicit negative overreactions that may prompt their partners to reassess their commitment to the relationship.

Data from two studies of the impact of rejection sensitivity on women's conflicts with romantic partners support this suggestion (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1997). The first study was a laboratory-based observational investigation of couples discussing an issue of ongoing conflict in their relationship. The Marital Interaction Coding System (Weiss & Summers, 1983) was used to code the interaction data. This study found that during the conflict rejection-sensitive women behaved in a hostile, rejecting manner that elicited partner anger and resentment. The findings remained robust when statistical controls were introduced for the men's rejection sensitivity, relationship satisfaction, and negative conflict behavior and for the pre-interaction negative mood of both the male and female partners.

The findings from the observational study were complemented by findings from a daily diary study of naturally occurring conflict in dating couples. This second study revealed that when rejection-sensitive women felt rejected, they tended to get into a fight with their partner the next day. During the typical fight they were more hostile and rejecting than other women. On the day following a conflict, the male partners of rejection-sensitive women showed a decline in satisfaction with the relationship. The women were aware of their partners' dissatisfaction, which tended to be expressed unambiguously in rejecting behavior such as criticism and insensitivity and diminished accepting behavior, such as trying to make the woman feel wanted. 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 dissatisfaction during the diary period predicted subsequent breakup. Overall, the combined results of these studies support the proposal that anxious expectations of rejection lead women to behave in ways that elicit rejection. Thus they 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, 1968).

**Summary**

The studies that we have just described show how rejection sensitivity can lead to maladaptive behavior in men and women and undermine their romantic relationships. We now consider how rejection sensitivity might affect the important interpersonal relationships of early adolescents.

**Implications of Rejection Sensitivity for Early Adolescent's Social Relationships**

Rejection-sensitive children's tendency to overreact to minor or unintended slights or insensitivities should cause trouble with peers and teachers. Downey et al. (in press) used longitudinal data to test this prediction.

The data were from 116 female and 103 male students who completed the CRSQ as 5th to 7th graders. Information on the children's interpersonal relationships was also obtained when they were 5th to 7th graders and one year later when they were 6th to 8th graders. This information included (a) the children's self-reports of being aggressive and being victimized, (b) teacher reports about the child's aggression, social competence, and rejection sensitivity, and (c) official school reports of defiant, oppositional behavior toward adults, fights with peers, and disciplinary suspensions. This latter data was obtained from the official log maintained by the dean of discipline assigned to each middle-school grade.

Analyses were conducted to assess the impact of angry expectations of rejection on the various indicators of social adjustment during the subsequent academic year. Initial level of adjustment was controlled except in the case of official reports of school rule infractions and suspensions, where this data was not available.

These analyses revealed that rejection-sensitive children experienced increasingly troubled, volatile, and aggressive relationships with peers and teachers over time and that their interpersonal difficulties were likely to lead to suspension from school. Specifically, according to teacher reports, over a one year period they became more aggressive toward peers, showed a decline in competent classroom behavior, and became more sensitive and reactive to negative interpersonal events. Rejection sensitivity also predicted an increase in children's self-reports of aggressive, antisocial behavior and of being victimized. They were more likely to be officially referred for punishment for conflicts with peers and oppositional, defiant behavior toward adults the following year, and to be suspended from school as punishment for such behavior.

Overall, these results support the prediction that children who angrily expect rejection by peers and teachers will experience increased interpersonal difficulties over time and elicit increasingly negative evaluations from others. At present, we are attempting to further elucidate the processes through which rejection sensitivity undermines adolescent relationships. Toward this end, we are conducting semi-structured interviews in which we ask about the cause, course, and consequences of naturally occurring conflicts with both peers and romantic partners. We hope to identify how perceptions of being rejected contribute to adolescent conflict.
Future Directions

We began this paper by outlining a theoretical model of the psychological mediators linking rejection experiences with subsequent interpersonal difficulties. The model is an attempt to integrate attachment and social-cognitive approaches to social maladjustment. It proposes that rejection sensitivity—the disposition to defensively expect, readily perceive, and overreact to interpersonal rejection—is a key mediator of the link between rejecting parenting and interpersonal difficulties. We have shown that rejection sensitivity is linked with parental rejection and has important implications for how people think, feel, and behave in important relationships. Many additional aspects of the model need to be addressed in subsequent research. Some of the key issues that we are currently addressing are outlined below.

Origins of Rejection Sensitivity

In this paper we focused on determining whether parental rejection leads to increased rejection sensitivity over time, reflecting the influence of attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1973) on our work. We have also begun to examine the contribution of peer rejection to sensitivity to rejection.

We are also interested in exploring whether and how the experience of rejection because of membership of an ethnic or cultural minority contributes to a heightened sensitivity to rejection in general and, more specifically, to sensitivity to rejection by members of other ethnic or cultural groups. We are especially interested in assessing how anxious or angry expectations of rejection influence intergroup interactions.

Anxious vs. Angry Expectations of Rejection

As we noted in the introduction, we view anxiety and anger as alternative (but not mutually exclusive) responses that rejection-sensitive people can express in rejecting situations. Both anxiety and anger have in common the fact that they are high arousal, negative valence, defensive reactions to the perception of a threat (Lang, 1995). It will be important to explore in future research whether anxious and angry expectations of rejection may promote different behavioral responses by the rejection-sensitive person to perceived rejection and thus have different consequences for the child's long-term adjustment. For example, whereas angry expectations may promote aggressive behavior, anxious expectations may be more likely to promote social withdrawal, leading in children to drop out of school and young adults to avoid intimate romantic relationships. Anxious expectations of rejection may also lead to ingratiation behavior, which may increase the risk of victimization or conformity with deviant peer group activities in order to belong.

It will also be important to address why some rejection-sensitive people develop angry expectations whereas others develop anxious expectations. In the college student population with which we began our empirical work on rejection sensitivity, anxiety appeared to be the salient emotional reaction to situations in which rejection was possible. In the adolescent sample used in this study, anger was also a salient response. It is possible that differences in the socialization context of the young adult and early adolescent samples may contribute to whether they report feeling angry or anxious when they feel threatened. In the neighborhoods from which the adolescent sample is drawn, exposure to interpersonal violence and aggression is commonplace. In such a context, anger may be a more socially scripted response to feeling threatened than is anxiety, the expression of which may be more dangerous as it makes the child appear vulnerable. In this context, children may be more likely to be socialized to experience anger rather than anxiety when they feel threatened. By contrast, the majority of college students participating in our study were raised in neighborhoods where the experience and expression of anxiety is more likely to be socially sanctioned.

We also need to examine whether there might be developmental differences in whether a defensive reaction to the possibility of rejection is expressed as anger or anxiety. As we continue to track our early adolescent sample, it will be possible to determine whether fears of rejection are more likely to evoke anxiety as they become adults. It will also be important to ask college students to indicate the extent to which they experience anger in situations where rejection is possible.

Physiological Correlates of Rejection Sensitivity

In our research to date we have relied on participants’ cognitively mediated reports of the emotions they would experience in situations where rejection is possible. Assessments at the physiological level may reveal a similarity at this level between people who report anger and people who report anxiety in the face of possible rejection. Assessment of the physiological component of people’s response to rejection stimuli is now possible with the recent development of procedures for assessing the affective valence of emotional responses (Lang, 1995; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1993). Lang and his colleagues have demonstrated that defensive reflexes, such as the startle reflex, increase in amplitude when someone is presented with an aversive stimulus, such as a loud noise, if the individual’s emotional state is already negative. Thus, the extent to which someone is responding negatively to a particular situation can be inferred from changes across situations in the amplitude of the person’s response to the same aversive stimulus, a loud noise. Therefore, it should be possible to detect people’s emotional response at the physiological level to ambiguous rejection situations and thus to see whether verbally expressed anxiety or anger look similar at the physiological level. We are currently exploring this possibility.
Establishing Why Some Rejection-Sensitive People Pursue Intimate Relationships

As mentioned earlier, there are two distinct maladaptive responses to concerns about rejection. Rejection concerns may lead to an avoidance of interpersonal intimacy and commitment, a strategy that entails the loss of opportunities for gaining acceptance. Alternatively, rejection concerns may lead to a preoccupation with gaining and maintaining acceptance in relationships. These two approaches have been independently identified by scholars working from a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Beck, 1983; Blascik & Zuroff, 1992; Bowlby, 1973; Horney, 1937). Our theoretical model predicts that some rejection-sensitive people will avoid opportunities for rejection by avoiding relationships whereas others will pursue relationships in the hope of attaining acceptance. Some support for this claim is provided by Feldman and Downey's (1994) finding that students who describe themselves as either having an avoidant or ambivalent attachment style are more sensitive to rejection than those who describe themselves as securely attached.

People who tend to avoid relationships because of concerns about rejection are currently the focus of considerable attention from social anxiety researchers. Schlenker and Leary (1982) noted that underlying diverse theoretical approaches to social anxiety is the belief that it arises when people expect that others will evaluate negatively their efforts to create a desired impression. Because of the prominence of first impressions, especially in public venues, it follows that responses to public situations involving strangers should be most diagnostic of a propensity toward social anxiety and that socially anxious people would avoid such situations.

Rather than emphasizing concerns about rejection by strangers, our conceptualization of rejection sensitivity emphasizes concern about rejection by important or significant others. It is possible that rejection-sensitive people who avoid relationships expect rejection by strangers as well as by important others. Rejection-sensitive people who pursue relationships may be confident they can make a favorable impression on new acquaintances. But, even in relationships that begin well, transient negativity, insensitivity, and waning enthusiasm is inevitable at the relationship progresses. Rejection-sensitive people should be particularly adept at interpreting these occurrences as omens of impending rejection, and defensive action may supplant ingratiating behavior. Defensive action may entail giving up on the relationship or engaging in coercive efforts to prevent the other person from leaving the relationship. The sense of hopelessness and acceptance that rejection-sensitive people experience early in their relationships may help maintain their belief in the power of relationships to meet their needs. They may hold onto the belief that it may simply be a matter of selecting the right romantic partner or friend or getting the right teacher—someone without the hidden flaws that emerged as the relationship progressed; or, it may be a matter of convincing (or coercing) the partner to remain in the relationship in the belief that the relationship will improve.

This question of why some rejection-sensitive people pursue relationships whereas others avoid them is still unresolved. Although attachment theorists (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978) have suggested that consistent parental rejection may prompt avoidance of relationships whereas intermittent rejection may prompt an ambivalent preoccupation with relationships, empirical support for this suggestion is mixed. Alternatively, similar rejection experiences may prompt distinct exaggerated reactions in people depending on whether they are temperamentally high or low in behavioral inhibition.

Partner Selection

Our efforts to date to explain the troubled social relationships of rejection-sensitive people have focused on showing that rejection sensitivity prompts people to behave in negative, hostile ways that elicit rejection from significant others. It is also possible that rejection sensitivity may contribute to unhealthy relationships through its impact on which rejection-sensitive people select as intimate partners and friends. Because of a preoccupation with issues of acceptance and rejection, rejection-sensitive people may overvalue people who are intensely caring and interested in them, who need them, and who seek a rapid intensification of commitment early in the relationship (for supportive evidence, see Crittenden, Partridge, & Clausen, 1991). Other people might find such behavior to be an intrusion on their autonomy and they may be harbinger of later difficulties. In fact, the clinical literature on battered women (e.g., Walker, 1984) suggests that excessively high levels of dependency early in the relationship may presage increasing demands for control over the partners' behavior, time spent exclusively together, and jealousy, with emotional and physical abuse as potential outcomes.

Another possibility is that because of the desire for any relationship, rejection-sensitive people may not be sufficiently selective in choosing friends or romantic partners. That is, they may be more willing than others to overlook indicators that someone is likely to engage in abusive or otherwise distressing behavior (e.g., a past history of being abusive, dishonest, or unfaithful). This tendency is poignantly illustrated in a study by Troy and Stroul (1986) where an insecurely-attached, 4 year old with a history of peer victimization made the following overture to an insecurely attached bully who was ignoring him: "Why don't you tease me? I won't get mad" (p. 169).

Do Supportive Social Relationships Help Break the Cycle Linking Rejection Sensitivity to Rejection?

Besides providing a context for the maintenance of rejection sensitivity, social relationships may also provide opportunities for change. Research on people who transcend severe childhood rejection suggests a potential role for significant others in helping people break out of the negative cycle we have described (Egeland, Jacobitz,
Supportive relationships, whether with a parent, other adult, peer, intimate partner, or therapist, can fundamentally alter people’s expectations and fears of rejection and help them to develop less maladaptive explanations for others’ behavior and more adaptive conflict resolution skills. Yet, rejection sensitivity is deeply ingrained. Thus, change is probably unlikely to occur unless the rejection-sensitive person is highly motivated and the partner can provide effective guidance and encouragement. The role of naturally occurring relationships in modifying rejection sensitivity warrants further investigation.

Conclusions

The belief that concern about acceptance and rejection contributes in crucial ways to interpersonal functioning has a long history in developmental and clinical psychology. We have proposed that rejection sensitivity—a disposition to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection—describes this concern in cognitive-affective processing terms. Our data substantiate the claim that rejection sensitivity has important implications for how people think, feel, and behave in their important social relationships.

REFERENCES

TRAUMA: PERSPECTIVES ON THEORY, RESEARCH, AND INTERVENTION


The Effects of Trauma on Children: Conceptual and Methodological Issues

Ariana Shahinfar & Nathan A. Fox

Introduction

Resilience—the ability to recover from or adjust easily to change—has traditionally been seen as one of the hallmarks of childhood. Many believe that the rapid rate of development during childhood, coupled with a plasticity unmatched at any other age, uniquely equips children to deal with environmental challenges in ways that adults simply cannot. This belief, stemming from evidence such as rapid neural recovery from early brain trauma, is one which has been accepted in the medical literature for quite some time (Papanicolaou, DiScenna, Gillespie, & Arah, 1990; Lassonde, Swarbrick, Chicoine, & Geoffroy, 1991; Levine, 1983). By contrast, recent research on the psychological effects of children's exposure to trauma has yielded quite different results. As the result of an increasing number of studies addressing the impact on children of war, natural disasters, and community and family violence, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that children's resilience is neither automatic nor limitless (Torr, 1983). Furthermore, the short- and long-term sequelae suffered by traumatized children depend not only on the child's own capacity for recovery, but also the familial and community resources available to the child as well as the nature of the trauma itself (Garfien, 1983).

This chapter is devoted to examining the evidence from the psychological literature regarding the effects of children's exposure to traumatic events. In delimiting which events qualify as "traumatic," we draw on the definition by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV, 4th ed., American Psychiatric Association, 1994) of "an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" in which the exposed individual's response involves "intense fear, helplessness, or horror." Tramc is defined by the nature of the event as well as the reaction of the individual to that event. In the case of traumatized children in particular, this reaction may be expressed by disorganized or agitated behavior. For the present purposes, our definition of trauma will encompass events which occur within the proximal environment of the child's home, school, and/or neighborhood. Although we recognize

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