Rejection Sensitivity and Girls' Aggression

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Studies of maladaptive behavior in women have traditionally focused on difficulties that are self-destructive in nature, such as suicidal behavior, eating disorders, and self-mutilation (e.g., Canetto & Lester, 1995; Cross, 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). However, in the last several years, there has been a shift toward seeking to understand women's maladjustment in its aggressive and socially harmful forms (Aydin, Downey, Testa, Ying, Yen, & Shoda, 1999). This shift has, in part, been the result of a greater awareness of the existence and prevalence of women's harmful acts. For example, between 1988 and 1997, the rate of criminal activity rose more dramatically for female (69%) than for male (26%) adolescents, as measured by court referrals (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). Finally, interest in female aggressive behavior has also been encouraged by studies on close relationships that find women use strategies such as direct physical aggression (e.g., Archer & Ray, 1989; Arias, Samios, & O'Leary, 1987; Ben-David, 1993; Deal & Vamplew, 1986; Pless & Gesser, 1983), verbal aggression (e.g.,Billingham & Stack, 1987; deWeerth & Kalma, 1992), and the undermining of others' social relationships (e.g., Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Lagerspetz, 1992; Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) to inflict intentional harm (Aydin et al., 1999).
A lack of consensus on how to define and assess female antisocial behavior has spurred researchers to further investigate the development, course, and consequences of female maladaptive aggressive behavior (Hippwell, Loeb, Stouthamer-Loeb, Keenan, White, & Kroneman, 2002). Such research is beginning to clarify the specific situations and contexts that trigger female aggression, the form that women’s hostility takes, and the function (both interpersonal and intrapersonal) it serves. First, female hostility is often expressed as relational aggression, particularly in private contexts and towards significant others, especially romantic partners (see Ben-David, 1993). Second, conditions that trigger female aggression occur when interpersonal relationships are deemed threatened or devalued (Harris, 1993). Third, female hostility takes the form of both verbal and direct physical aggression. For example, women have been found to engage in physical aggression toward significant others more often than once thought, and to do so more frequently than men (Archer, 2000). Fourth, women’s anger appears to serve an expressive function and follows situations that elicit overwhelming feelings of despair and helplessness (Aydin, et al., 1999; Ben-David, 1992; Eskin & Kravitz, 1990). Thus, it has been suggested that women’s expression of aggression and hostility reflects a loss of self-control and is therefore more reactive than reflective or instrumental in nature (Campbell, Muncer, & Coyle, 1992). In addition, women’s aggressive behavior (whether relational or physical) consistently displays a stronger link with depression than is true for men.

Given the central importance of close relationships in women’s lives (Gilligan, 1982; see Cross & Madson, 1997, for review), issues of acceptance and rejection appear to play a particularly salient role in women’s interpersonal interactions (Purdy & Downey, 2000). It has been posited that maintaining harmonious intimate relationships is integral to women’s self-concept (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Cross & Madson, 1997). Yet, some women react aggressively towards important others when the threat of rejection is perceived. Such reactions threaten the security and stability of the relationship, and, in turn, the woman’s self-concept. What cognitive-affective processes might account for this distinctive pattern of female hostility?

Our efforts to address this question have focused on the role that Rejection Sensitivity (RS) may play in helping explain why some women show high levels of relational, and even physical, aggression against the very people they care about most. Our model also takes into account a resilience-generating process (i.e., self-regulation) that may play a potentially crucial role in breaking the link between RS and maladaptive behavior. Self-regulatory competency appears to protect RS women from the maladaptive consequences of the RS disposition. However, women who show a combination of both high RS and poor self-regulatory abilities appear to be particularly vulnerable to aggressive behavior toward significant others, as well as other personal and interpersonal difficulties. Although the mechanisms of the RS model hold true for both male and female populations, we have found that the context and resultant behavior can differ for women and men. In this chapter, our theoretical interpretation of RS and aggression, as well as our findings, refer to women. However, we want to clarify that most of these results also apply to men, but we have found that the results for men have generally been weaker and less consistent than for women.

In this chapter, we first describe the RS model and the evidence that we have in support of the links in the model. We next describe the role of self-regulatory competency in moderating the maladaptive effects of RS. Whereas our focus is primarily on the links between RS and aggression, we also discuss how RS may place women at risk for other forms of harmful behavior. Specifically, we propose that, whereas the perception of the occurrence of rejection may unleash hostile retaliation, the threat of rejection may also prompt behavior that is intended to prevent rejection but instead puts the self or others in harm’s way. For example, women may put themselves at risk for personal harm, as when they tolerate abusive behavior or engage in unprotected sex in order to maintain a relationship (Purdy & Downey, 2000). Furthermore, women may engage in antisocial behavior to maintain a relationship, such as concealing weapons or drugs for a romantic partner (Bedell, 1999).

THE REJECTION SENSITIVITY MODEL

The RS model (see Figure 1) has been conceptualized as a cognitive-affective processing system that anxiousy expect, readily perceive, and over-react to rejection. Reflecting the influence of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Erikson, 1950; Hornsey, 1973; Sullivan, 1953), the RS model proposes that severe, prolonged rejection leads people to develop defensive (i.e. anxious or angry) expectations that others will reject them. When rejection cues are subsequently encountered, they activate a defensive motivational system (Link 1). In this state of threat, high RS (HRS) individuals are readily to interpret ambiguous or even slightly negative, interpersonal information as evidence of rejection expectations fulfilled (Link 2). Hostile thoughts and actions are likely to result (Link 3), and over-reactions, especially those involving hostility and aggression, are likely to elicit actual rejection by others (Link 4). Consequently, rejection expectations, whatever their origin, become reality and are thus reinforced,
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perpetuating the RS cycle (Link 5) (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998).

OPERATIONALIZING RS

According to a cognitive-affective processing system approach to personality, a particular personality disposition (i.e., anxious rejection expectations) should be most evident in an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviors in situations pertinent to the given disposition (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Applying this concept to the RS model, measurable differences in RS should be particularly apparent in situations where an individual is vulnerable to rejection, such as when they request the support of a significant other. This assumption is reflected in the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ), which assesses anxious rejection expectations through a series of hypothetical situations involving the possibility of rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996, Study 1).

RS—THE DEFENSIVE MOTIVATIONAL SYSTEM

In this section, we review evidence in support of the RS model focusing on the defensive expectations of rejection, perceptions of rejection, and reactions to rejection.

DEFENSIVE EXPECTATIONS OF REJECTION (LINK 2)

Given our assumption that defensive expectations of rejection form the core of RS, we have posited that in children, defensive expectations of rejection develop due to messages of rejection communicated to them through potential behavior that is emotionally or physically abusive or neglectful. Such painful and distressing rejection then generates defensive expectations in new situations where rejection seems possible, with implications for long-term personal and interpersonal adjustment.

Indeed, rejection by parents or peers is linked to the formation and continuation of defensive expectations for rejection in adolescents and early adults (Levy, Ayduk, & Downey, 2001). Two longitudinal studies of middle-school students revealed that over time, actual experiences of rejection increased defensive expectations of rejection. Specifically, over a one-year period, parents' reports of harsh parenting practices predicted an increase

1 For more information on the measure and for references to studies describing its psychometric properties, please refer to our website, www.columbia.edu/psychology/associations.
in their children's defensive expectations of rejection (Downey, Khouri, & Feldman, 1997). Over a 4-month period, reports of rejection by peers predicted an increase in students' defensive expectations of peer rejection (Downey, Bonica, London, & Paltin, in press). In addition, cross-sectional studies of college and high-school students showed that defensive expectations of rejection were associated with childhood experiences of parental emotional neglect (Downey et al., 1997) and family violence (Downey, Lebolt, & O'Shea-lauber, 1995; Feldman & Downey, 1994).

**Perceptions of Rejection (Link 3)**

When in the presence of rejection cues, do HRS women more readily perceive rejection than those low in RS (LRS) women? Empirical support for the third link in the RS model has been found in both experimental and field studies (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Lebolt, Rincon, & Freitas, 1998). In a laboratory experiment ostensibly about first impressions, students who anxiously expected rejection (based on their RSQ scores) felt more rejected than those low in anxious rejection expectations when told that a stranger (who was actually a confederate) with whom they had just finished a friendly conversation, had declined to continue with the study (which involved meeting with them a second time) (Downey & Feldman, 1996, Study 2). No differences emerged when an explicit explanation (constraints in experimenter's time) was given for the early termination. At study onset, all women had reported high levels of enthusiasm for interacting with the potential dating partner, yet the experimental manipulation induced rejection perceptions above baseline uniquely in the HRS women. HRS women in the experimental condition also tended to attribute the stranger's ambiguous rejection to something they themselves had said or done, whereas LRS women tended to explain the same behavior in impersonal terms.

In a laboratory study of middle-school children, those high in RS felt more rejected and became more distressed than those low in RS when told that a friend whom they had selected as a study partner, did not want to leave class to do so (Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1996, Study 2). As in the previous study, no differences were found when a situational explanation (teacher would not give permission) was given for the friend not leaving class. Thus, defensive expectations of rejection also appear to prime HRS children to more readily perceive potential signs of rejection.

To further establish whether anxious expectations of rejection predicted the perception of intentional rejection, Downey and Feldman undertook a prospective longitudinal examination of college students in romantic relationships (1996, Study 3). The study tested whether rejection expectations (assessed before the beginning of a new romantic relationship) predicted perceptions of harmful intent in a new partner's insensitive behavior (e.g., being inattentive or distant). For HRS women, only the results showed that anxious expectations of rejection predicted a readiness to attribute harmful intent to a new romantic partner's ambiguous or insensitive actions. The prospective relationship between RS and attributions of harmful intent did not change when other relevant personality dispositions (e.g., introversion, neuroticism, self-esteem, general attachment style, social anxiety, and social avoidance) were statistically controlled.

**Reactions to Perceived Rejection (Link 4)**

Having documented that anxious expectations of rejection prompt a readiness to perceive rejection, we sought to examine the link between perceptions of rejection and hostile reactions in HRS women. We hypothesized that given HRS women's tendency to perceive intentional rejection in innocuous or ambiguous rejection cues, they may be likely to respond with hostile behavior when rejection is perceived. Their hostile behavior might in turn elicit actual rejection, which could eventually erode even committed relationships. In a study of dating couples, we investigated whether feelings of rejection triggered hostility in ongoing relationships to a greater extent in HRS than LRS individuals (Downey, Freitas, et al., 1998, Study 1). Specifically, we examined HRS and LRS women's hostility toward romantic partners as a function of day-to-day variation in feelings of rejection in their ongoing romantic relationships. A longitudinal daily diary design was selected to capitalize on the naturally occurring relationship conflict situations that can trigger rejection expectations (Downey, Freitas, et al., 1998). As predicted, HRS women showed a higher probability of reporting conflicts than did LRS women on days after they felt rejected, but not otherwise. HRS women's, but not HRS men's, resulting hostility also significantly accounted for their partners' relationship dissatisfaction. Multilevel modeling (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998) revealed that on days preceded by naturally occurring conflict, HRS women's partners were more likely than LRS women's partners to experience relationship dissatisfaction and to think of ending the relationship. RS also predicted a greater frequency of relationship breakup for women, even when controlling for partners' initial level of RS, relationship satisfaction, and commitment. The effect was similar, but weaker, for men. These findings were not attributable to the effect of stable partner background characteristics or to the contaminating effect of prior day's dissatisfaction and thoughts of ending the relationship. Finally, the reported differential impact of conflict on partners of HRS and LRS women was also evident to
the women themselves: on the days proceeded by conflict, partners were perceived to be less accepting and more withdrawn by HRS than by LRS women.

To further explore the assumption that the negative behavior of HRS women during conflicts mediated their partners’ post-conflict negativity, we videotaped couples discussing a self-selected unresolved relationship issue using a paradigm developed by Gottman (1979) for studying marital conflict (Downey, Freitas, et al., 1998, Study 2). In support of our daily diary study findings, women high in RS engaged in more hostile behavior during the discussion than did LRS women. Further analyses indicated that HRS women’s hostility explained the relatively higher post-conflict anger and resentment about the relationship experienced by the partners of HRS women. Therefore, hostile behaviors actually elicit rejection from others, confirming initial expectations about the likelihood of rejection. Even controlling for partner’s pre-conflict anger, relationship commitment, and satisfaction did not change this relationship. Thus for HRS women, their expectations influence, rather than merely reflect, the reality of their ongoing relationships. We believe this self-fulfilling prophecy is one reason why it may be difficult to intervene in the RS cycle; HRS women’s tendency to expect, perceive, and overreact to rejection increases their likelihood of being rejected. Finally, a prospective study of young women further showed that RS predicted heightened levels of both physical and verbal hostility in adolescent girls during relationship conflicts. Although rates of actual physical fights were relatively low (10%), their occurrence significantly associated with expectations of rejection. These findings suggest that RS is a risk factor for the early onset of violence and dysfunction in young women’s romantic relationships (Purdie & Downey, 2000).

Does the relationship between RS and relational difficulties extend beyond romantic relationships? In a longitudinal study of early adolescents, we found that it does (Downey, Lobato, et al., 1999, Study 3). We tested whether early adolescents, who expected and perceived rejection from peers and teachers, engaged in more disruptive behavior (e.g., getting into fights), and experienced increased interpersonal difficulties over time. Fifth, sixth, and seventh grade children’s self-reports of RS, acts of aggression, and feelings of victimization were compared with teacher reports of aggression, social competence, and RS, and with the Dean of Students’ reports of fights with peers and conflict with school personnel. Our analysis revealed that RS predicted differences in aggression, antisocial behavior, and being victimized. Over a one-year period, HRS children became more aggressive towards their peers, showed a decline in positive classroom behavior, and became more sensitive and reactive to negative interpersonal events. Specifically, defensive rejection expectations undermined the

peer and teacher relationships in ways that were likely to elicit rejection and erode wellbeing. Consequently, these children were more frequently punished for misbehavior and were at a greater risk for suspension from school.

WHY DO ANXIOUS EXPECTATIONS OF REJECTION LEAD TO HOSTILITY?

The studies described in this chapter, while depicting the links involved in the RS-hostility cycle, do not explain why women who fearfully expect rejection engage in the type of hostile behaviors likely to elicit rejection. To unpack the perceptual processes that may give rise to this outcome, we sought to specifically address why thoughts of rejection frequently lead to hostility. One possible explanation is that when HRS women perceive even mild rejection, they may view it as signifying the irreversible loss of a relationship. Their subsequent desire to take revenge may therefore be an outward expression of hurt and hopelessness (Ayduk et al., 1999). In order to test the hypothesis that HRS women respond aggressively only when rejection is perceived, rather than across situations, we compared HRS and LRS women’s reactions in two contexts.

First, using a sequential priming-pronunciation paradigm, Ayduk et al. (1999, Study 1) tested whether specifically priming thoughts of rejection facilitated thoughts of hostility to a greater extent in HRS than LRS women, rather than being more chronically accessible in HRS than LRS women. In this paradigm, participants’ speed in beginning to pronounce a target word (preceded by the presentation of a prime word) reliably measures the strength of mental associations between the prime and the target constructs (see Bargh, Raymon, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Bargh, Chaiken, Raymond, & Hymes, 1996). The results showed that HRS women begin pronouncing hostility words (e.g., hit) faster than LRS women uniquely when the words were preceded by rejection words (e.g., abandon). When other negative words (e.g., vomit) served as the prime, HRS and LRS women did not differ in onset of their pronunciation of hostile words. These findings provide experimental evidence that rejection automatically activates hostility to a greater extent in HRS than in LRS women, and that HRS and LRS women do not differ in the chronic accessibility of hostile thoughts. Whereas the initial studies in this series focused on women, we have recently replicated the findings in men (Ayduk & Downey, 2003).

Second, we established that hostile thoughts, activated by rejection expectations, translate into hostile behaviors to a greater extent in HRS than in LRS women. In a laboratory experiment, Ayduk et al. (1999, Study 2)
recruited women to participate in a study of how people form impressions in an internet-based "dating chat-room." To facilitate their on-line discussion, participants were asked to write a biosketch that would be exchanged with a "partner" (all participants actually received the same biosketch). Participants were then told that the interaction would not occur either because the partner did not want to continue with the on-line interaction portion of the study and had departed (experimental condition) or due to equipment failure (control condition). All participants then evaluated their assigned partner's biosketch. In support of our hypothesis, HRS women expressed indirect retaliatory rejecting behavior (in the form of more negative evaluations of their partner) in direct response to perceived rejection by this potential partner. In the absence of rejection cues (i.e., the broken equipment explanation), HRS and LRS women evaluated their partner similarly, again confirming the idea that HRS women are not more dispositionally hostile but instead are subject to psychological processes that are triggered within particularly salient contexts (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). When we repeated this experiment for men, we found that rejection by a potential chat-room partner elicited retaliatory indirect aggression only when it occurred in front of an audience of peers (Ayduk & Downey, 2003).

Several explanations as to why rejection elicits retaliatory behavior in HRS women can be drawn from these results. Perhaps HRS women perceived more subtle negativity in the confederate's behavior during the initial interaction than did LRS women, and then used this information to disambiguate the partner's ambiguous behavior. If so, HRS women may have perceived more negativity during the initial interaction because more existed, or because they were more attentive to their partner's negative behavior than were LRS women. It is also possible that HRS women tended to personalize ambiguously intentioned negative outcomes, whereas those low in RS tended not to. We are currently testing these possibilities.

MOTIVATED EFFORTS TO PREVENT REJECTION

As we have shown, the combination of high investment in close relationships coupled with anxious expectations and a heightened propensity to perceive and overreact to minor or ambiguous cues of rejection, leads HRS women to engage in hostile acts if security is perceived to be threatened. Therefore, destructive aggression may actually arise from feelings of disconnection and separateness, and may be an effort on the part of HRS women to attempt to regain some sense of control in a situation in which they feel powerless (Jack, 1999). Our data suggest that these patterns of reactive behavior are likely to perpetuate the RS cycle and put HRS women, and others close to them, at risk for relationship difficulties. We propose that the aggressive behavior of HRS women is engaged in when their worst fears, i.e., rejection, are realized. This explanation implies that HRS women should be likely to engage in acting in stenuous, and perhaps excessive (and ultimately self-defeating) efforts to prevent rejection.

Evidence from a number of our studies support this claim by showing that HRS women exhibit a heightened propensity to engage in risky acts or in behaviors that make them uncomfortable in order to maintain a romantic relationship. In a prospective study, young women in sixth and seventh grade who were high in RS reported a greater willingness, two years later, to do things that they knew were wrong in order to maintain their current dating relationship (Purdie & Downey, 2000). Similarly, in a study of college-aged women, RS predicted a heightened likelihood of having done things that felt wrong or uncomfortable in order to maintain a relationship (Downey, Ayduk, Irwin, & Ransmay, under review). These findings suggest that their desire to maintain their relationship goals may motivate HRS women to engage in antisocial or delinquent behavior if they believe such activity will prevent rejection by a significant other. The threat of rejection may also prompt women to make great efforts to comply with a partner's wishes at the expense of their own goals (Cross & Madson, 1997), including being ingratiating, overly agreeable, and overly revealing of intimate information. Compliance may also place women in troubled relationships at risk for future victimization (Ayduk et al., 1999), as well as in dangerous situations, such as not speaking up and remaining in abusive relationships. We have also repeatedly found a link between RS and self-silencing in women (e.g., Ayduk et al., 2003). HRS women, when attempting to retain a desired level of intimacy, may attempt to suppress their emotionally driven cognitions and behaviors (Jack, 1991 & 1999; Jack & Dill, 1992) to avert rejection outcomes. Although this more reflective (as opposed to reactive) behavior may be positive in that it averts aggression and repercussions of hostility, such strategies carry their own dangers.

In response to perceived rejection from romantic partners, self-defeating efforts, such as self-blame, self-silencing, and compliance strategies, may be self-damaging avenues through which HRS women experience and express their hurt and distress. Self-silencing, in particular, is viewed as a risk factor for depression (Guthe, Basset, & Attaa, 1995; Jack & Dill, 1992). Patterns of internalizing reactions may put HRS women at a greater risk for self-harming behaviors, such as substance abuse and/or eating disorders. For example, loss of self-esteem following rejection may also take the form of dysregulated eating behavior in which HRS women use eating to regain love and acceptance.
Together these findings suggest that HRS women are vulnerable to engaging in potentially self-damaging reactions in their efforts to avoid rejection and in order to gain acceptance. Thus, the same cognitive-affective processing dynamic, RS, that increases risk for aggression in women may also account for the traditional described pattern of self-harmful behavior displayed by some women.

SUPPORT FOR RS-AGGRESSION LINK IN INCARCERATED FEMALES

The evidence we have presented concerning RS and aggression is based on data from college students and from a demographically high-risk sample of early adolescents. However, a critical test of the RS model is its applicability to women who have engaged in seriously aggressive and/or antisocial behavior. Bedell (1999) addressed this question in a study of women incarcerated in a maximum-security prison, using a measure of RS developed specifically for this population. In a sample of 63 women, RS was found to be associated with childhood exposure to rejection as well as with depression, substance abuse, and involvement in violent relationships. The female inmates reported high levels of involvement in violent romantic relationships (60%), substance abuse (73%), and moderate to high levels of depression. Anxiety about rejection was also significantly related to being the victim of physical aggression, and expectations of rejection were significantly associated with being the perpetrator of physical aggression.

These findings suggest that for female offenders, chronic rejecting experiences and the rejection concerns to which such experiences give rise, may contribute to depression and interpersonal difficulties. Involvement in drugs may be an effort to numb experiences of traumatic memories of childhood abuse, violence, depression, and feelings of rejection. Bedell proposes that living and growing up in a violent and rejecting environment may lead some women to adopt violence and aggression as the only available and viable option for resolving disputes and for dealing with relationship difficulties. As suggested by Jack (1999), women who have been severely abused as children may resort to physical aggression as a familiar means of maintaining intimacy, and as a way of sustaining their attachment to others. Applied to female inmates, exposure to violent and traumatic childhood and adult experiences may lead to expectations of familiar patterns of violence and aggression. Consequently, in new romantic relationships, relational violence and abuse may be accepted as a way of life, and feelings of powerlessness may stand in the way of positive change.

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RS MODERATORS: SELF-REGULATION ABILITY AND ATTENTIONAL CONTROL

Despite the link between RS and aggression, and other maladaptive outcomes, there is reason to believe that not all women who fear and expect rejection show such maladaptive behaviors. A theoretically relevant factor related to creating more adaptive functioning in vulnerable women is how well they are able to regulate themselves under conditions of stress.

Effective self-regulation when in a state of heightened arousal—whether positively or negatively valenced—should enable the inhibition of undesired, impulsive behaviors, and may facilitate the enactment of effective problem-solving strategies. Based on this rationale, we have undertaken a set of studies to investigate the prediction that self-regulatory ability, and strategic attention deployment in particular, protect women high in anxious expectations of rejection from the negative consequences associated with their expectations.

EVIDENCE OF THE PROTECTIVE ROLE OF SELF-REGULATORY ABILITY

In two studies, self-regulatory ability was assessed in the classic self-imposed delay of gratification (DG) paradigm (Mischel, 1974; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). In this paradigm, children are presented with a choice between an immediate or smaller reward and a delayed but larger reward. Shortly after the child selects the option of the larger reward, delay becomes increasingly difficult. Mischel’s original research demonstrated that individual differences in the amount of time that a child could delay gratification reflected whether the child could shift his or her attention away from “hot” consummatory features of the delay situation to “cooler” features, in an effort to attenuate their frustrating arousal. Mischel demonstrated that children who use purposeful self-distraction and cognitive reframing are more successful at delay, and that delay time is a predictor of both short-term and long-term adjustment.

Does DG protect HRS women against aggressive behaviors and low-self-esteem (Aydurk et al., 2000)? Our findings indicate that it does. Aydurk et al. (2000) showed that those HRS women from the original Mischel study who had exhibited low delay ability, reported lower self-esteem and used more crack/cocaine, as compared to their high delay or LRS counterparts. Additionally, the HRS-low delay group was more easily stressed and had more troubled relationships (Aydurk, Downey, & Mischel, 2003, unpublished data). This pattern of findings was replicated and extended to
aggressive behaviors in a one-year prospective study with middle-school children. HRS children who were low in delay ability, reported lower self-worth and showed higher levels of aggression and peer rejection than either the high delay or LRS groups (Aydin et al., 2000).

These findings concerning the interactive effect of RS and poor self-regulatory skills have led us to further explore this potentially troubling combination. Of particular interest was whether this combination of processing dispositions might contribute to increased risk for a personality disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), that is disproportionately found in women. Its symptomatology encompasses difficulties that our data suggest characterize those high in RS and low in delay. A core symptom of BPD is intense anger. BPD is also marked by a pervasive pattern of highly unstable and volatile interpersonal relationships, lack of self-identity or sense of self, feelings of emptiness, impulsivity, and extreme instability of affect (i.e., reactive mood swings) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Self-harmful behavior associated with BPD includes bulimia and substance abuse. BPD individuals have a desperate fear of abandonment, and may go to great lengths to maintain their relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Paris, 2003). Thus, not surprisingly, extreme sensitivity to rejection is a characteristic of many people with BPD. The perception of rejection can trigger overreactions that include aggressive or hostile behavior, inevitably leading to partner conflict. Thus the combination of intensive reactivity to interpersonal stress, combined with poor emotional self-regulation, can lead to stormy and chaotic interpersonal relationships.

We found support for the hypothesis that HRS and low DG (assessed with a self-report questionnaire) would predict clinically significant levels of BPD in a sample of 380 college students. Moreover, BPD and RS interacted in this sample such that those who evidenced combined HRS and low self-regulation showed borderline symptoms: low self-worth, aggression, victimization, bulimia, depression, and substance abuse (Downey et al., under review).

**Interventions to Decrease the RS—Aggression Link, and Other Forms of Maladjustment**

Research indicates that flexible and strategic attentional deployment is essential for distress- and impulse-inhibition (Derryberry & Rothbart, 1997; Field, 1981; Gerardi, Rothbart, Posner, & Kuper, 1996; Rothbart & Ahadi, 1994; Sethi, Mushel, Abes, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 2000). In other words, being able to attenuate arousal by “cooling” impulse-eliciting features of a situation, may help explain why some HRS women cope more rationally and reflectively, in accordance with their long-term relationship goals. Conversely, the prototypical “hot” RS-hostility dynamic primarily characterizes those HRS women with poor self-regulatory ability. Therefore, self-regulatory competency can be thought of as serving a moderating role for the negative interpersonal and personal consequences of anxious expectations of rejection in HRS women.

The findings described in this chapter led us to begin to examine whether interventions intended to increase the flexible and strategic deployment of attention under stress might reduce the ill-effects of RS. The first step in this goal has been to conduct a laboratory-based intervention with the goal of replacing the apparently automatic affectively-mediated “hot” response to rejection with a more instrumental, reflective, and cognitively mediated “cool” response. The characteristic “hot” system reaction of HRS women who perceive rejection is thought to occur when, in a state of distress, access to “cooling” processes and strategies (i.e., the ability to think rationally and reflect on the situation) is inhibited. The result of this inhibition is that informational processing becomes rapidly driven by emotional impulses (Davis, 1992; Fenselau, 1994; LeDoux, 1995; Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999; Zillman, 1992). Thus, under conditions of rejection, HRS women are unable to access and utilize self-regulatory strategies that foster “cool” system processing that attenuates reactive hostility (Aydin et al., 1999).

Does activating “cool-abstract” (i.e., reflective, rational focus) thought processes lead to less anger following rejection? In research involving college students, we manipulated attentional focus by asking participants to recall interpersonal experiences involving anger. Those individuals in the “hot” condition were asked to focus on their emotional experience of the memory, whereas those in the “cool” condition focused on cognitive aspects of their memory, designed to activate the abstract processes that characterize the “cool” system. The “hot” ideation group demonstrated shorter reaction times to hostility words during a lexical decision task, than did the “cool” condition group. These results indicate a clearer mental link between rejection and anger. Rejection and anger were countered against by a focus away from emotional and visceral aspects of a recalled situation in the “cool” condition. Relative to participants in the “cool” condition, “hot” participants also evidenced greater explicit anger, as reported through their ratings and cued essay data. Therefore, across implicit and explicit measures, the activation of a “hot” emotional attentional focus acts as a catalyst for hostile reactions, whereas employment of a “cool” focus seems to protect against dysregulated behavior, particularly in the case of HRS people. This intervention worked equally well for men and women.
In summary, one of the great challenges facing HRS women in rejection-related situations is their ability to overcome automatic “hot” system processing (Ayduk & Mischel, 2002). The ability to employ self-control strategies appears to buffer HRS women against overreactions to rejection, thereby reducing the risk of negative outcomes for which HRS women are vulnerable. By learning to employ self- and attentional-control strategies, HRS women with low self-control may be able to focus more on contextual cues that offer possible alternative explanations to perceived rejection thus preventing behavioral overreactions.

SUMMARY

Throughout this chapter, we have described research that expands our knowledge regarding situations that elicit women’s hostility and aggression, and what function this behavior serves. We have posited that the RS model sheds light on some of the dynamics involved in female hostility. Our results illustrate that a more complete understanding of women’s hostility and aggression in close relationships requires taking into account the significance of interpersonal acceptance and rejection for women, as well as the broader constellation of maladaptive behavior in which women’s aggression is embedded—depression, eating disorders, and dependency. It appears that RS negatively influences how women think, feel, and behave in different kinds of relationships. RS also leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy where women’s fears and expectations of rejection get confirmed, influencing current and future behavioral patterns and relationship health.

However, we posit that the RS-hostility cycle may be interrupted by the successful employment of self-control and attentional strategies. Intercepting HRS women’s harmful attributional biases and self-defeating reactive behaviors, by replacing them with alternative explanations and self-regulation tools, may permit women to respond more adaptively in situations when they feel threatened. HRS women who are encouraged to believe that they have control in a situation where they had previously felt none, may thus be able to diffuse their anxiety and break the self-fulfilling effect of the RS-hostility link.

REFERENCES


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