



Short Communication

Peer rejection as a social antecedent to rejection sensitivity in youth: The role of relational valuation

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ABSTRACT

Although much is known about the consequences of rejection sensitivity (RS), less is known about its social antecedents, particularly during development. Despite research demonstrating the role of peer rejection in the development and maintenance of problematic social schema like RS, little is known about why some youth are more susceptible to these negative consequences than others. We examined how relational valuation might moderate the effects of peer rejection on RS in a sample of 294 youth (138 boys) who made the transition from middle to high school. Results from path analysis revealed that 8th grade peer rejection was most highly associated with 9th grade RS for youth who held high regard for social relationships. Findings demonstrate the importance of examining cognitive moderators in the links between negative social experiences and problematic social schema, and highlight the need to move beyond simple main effects models for understanding the heterogeneity of rejection.

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1. Introduction

Rejection sensitivity has been defined as the dispositional tendency to defensively expect, perceive, and overreact to rejection (RS; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Harb, Heimberg, Fresco, Schneier, & Leibowitz, 2002). Ironically, RS can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which individuals' expectations of rejection lead them to engage in defensive actions (e.g., aggressing against or withdrawing from others; Downey, Lebolt, Rincon, & Freitas, 1998), which in turn increases the likelihood of actual rejection. Indeed, RS has been linked with psychosocial problems such as rejection, depression, and loneliness across development (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; McDonald, Bowker, Rubin, Laursen, & Duchene, 2010; Sandstrom, Cillessen, & Eisenhower, 2003).

Although extensive research has examined the consequences of RS, much less is known about its antecedents. Whereas a genetic predisposition for RS has received empirical attention (Gillespie, Johnstone, Boyce, Heath, & Martin, 2001), little is known about its social predispositions during development. Because RS is theorized to originate from early rejection experiences (Feldman & Downey, 1994), peer rejection may play a role in its development and maintenance. Extant developmental research suggests chronic

peer rejection may cause one to misinterpret social cues and become overly sensitive to rejection cues, contributing to interpersonal difficulties and leading to a vicious cycle of rejection (see Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). For instance, peer rejection alters youths' social schemas about relationships and, in turn, increases their tendency to defensively expect and overreact to rejection (London, Downey, Bonica, & Paltin, 2007). Understanding the links between peer rejection and RS, then, may provide important insights to breaking the cycle of rejection.

In the only developmental study to our knowledge that has been conducted, peer rejection in the beginning of 6th grade was associated with increases in RS by the end of 6th grade for boys (London et al., 2007). Research on adults using retrospective methods has also linked negative peer experiences during childhood with RS in adulthood (e.g., Butler, Doherty, & Potter, 2007).

Although these studies help address the paucity of research on the antecedents of RS, they are not without limitations. The ethnically homogeneous sample of London et al. (2007) study may have limited the generalizability of its findings, and the retrospective nature of Butler et al. (2007) study may have resulted in measurement biases like selection bias. Furthermore, none of these studies (or any research to our knowledge) has considered that the relations between peer rejection and RS may not hold across all individuals. In particular, because people vary considerably in how much they value social relationships (Leary, 2001), any explanation of people's reactions to rejection must consider the degree to

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which they value their relations with others. Indeed, cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987) theories suggest that failing in a domain deemed personally important would produce dissonance and lead to negative affect. In comparison, failing in a domain deemed personally insignificant would not. In this view, peer rejection may lead to RS particularly for youth who hold high regard for social relationships. Few researchers, however, have considered this possibility.

Despite limited research, there is some evidence for this moderation hypothesis. Research suggests people experience loneliness only when they perceive a discrepancy between their desired and existing social relationships (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Brown and Lohr (1987) found that adolescents who were unaffiliated with a peer crowd and who attributed little importance to crowd membership had higher self-esteem than unaffiliated adolescents who attributed high importance to crowd affiliation. Research also suggests that people who place a greater value on friendship and love are more likely to experience negative emotions when rejected than those who do not value social relationships as highly (Morrison, Wheeler, & Smeesters, 2007). Finally, Prinstein and Aikins (2004) found that peer rejection was predictive of increased depression only among adolescent girls who highly valued social acceptance.

Due to the paucity of developmental research on the social antecedents of RS and with the hypothesis that an individual's regard for relationships may impact their interpretations of social situations, we examined whether youths' relational valuation would moderate the link between peer rejection and RS. More specifically, we examined whether peer rejection would put youths at risk for RS, and whether certain youths—namely those who hold high (vs. low) regard for social relationships—would be more vulnerable to this negative outcome. Due to the importance of peers during early adolescence and because peer rejection becomes an increasingly prominent concern for youths during school transitions (Rubin et al., 2009), we felt that the 8th-to-9th grade school transition would provide an excellent opportunity to examine whether preexisting individual factors and environmental experiences contribute to problematic social schema.

We hypothesized that 8th grade relational valuation would moderate the link between 8th grade peer rejection and 9th grade RS. That is, we hypothesized that peer rejection would be most predictive of RS for youth who hold high regard for social relationships.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Drawing from a larger longitudinal study, this study included 294 youths (138 boys) who made the transition from 8th ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.61$ years) to 9th grade ($M_{\text{age}} = 14.05$ years). The sample was ethnically diverse, with participants self-identifying as European-American (56.3%), Asian-American (18.9%), Latino/Hispanic (9.8%), African-American (8%), or bi-/multi-racial (6.9%).

2.2. Procedure

During 8th grade, participants completed the Peer Rejection and Relational Valuation measures (see below), either during lab visits (80.3%) or at home (19.7%). During the 9th grade, participants completed the RS measure (see below), either at home on paper (93.8%) or on the internet (6.2%). Statistical comparisons revealed no significant differences among participants who completed the questionnaires in these different contexts.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Peer rejection

8th Grade Peer Rejection was assessed using the *Extended Class Play (ECP)* (Wojlawowicz, Rubin, Burgess, Rose-Krasnor, & Booth-LaForce, 2006). The ECP asks respondents to nominate up to three boys and three girls in their grade who best fit each description of Rejection (“Someone who has mean things said to them,” “Someone who gets picked on,” “Someone who gets hit or kicked by other persons”, “Someone who has trouble making friends”, “Someone who can't get others to listen”, and “Someone who is often left out”). Only same-sex nominations for participants were considered to eliminate possible gender stereotyping. All item scores were standardized within sex and school to adjust for the number of nominations received and also the number of nominators. The standardized item scores for nominations were summed to create a Peer Rejection score for each participant ($\alpha = .90$). A detailed description of the ECP has been reported elsewhere (Wojlawowicz et al., 2006).

2.3.2. Relational valuation

8th Grade Relational Valuation was assessed using *Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA)* (Harter, 1988). The SPPA asks respondents to report their perceptions of competence in several domains and the importance they attribute to each of these domains on a scale from 1 (low) to 4 (high). Only items assessing youths' regard for social relationships (“Think that having a lot of friends is important” and “Think it's important to be popular”) were examined; these items were averaged to create a score of Relational Valuation ($\alpha = .65$). This alpha reliability is acceptable for measures consisting of three or fewer items (see Burisch, 1997).

2.3.3. Rejection sensitivity (RS)

9th Grade RS was assessed using a modified version of the *Children's Rejection-Sensitivity Questionnaire (CRSQ)* (Downey et al., 1998). The CRSQ asks respondents to read six separate hypothetical vignettes describing potential rejection situations involving peers (e.g., “. . .you hear some kids whispering. . . You wonder if they are talking about YOU”). After reading each vignette, respondents rate how nervous and how mad they would feel (“How NERVOUS would you feel?”; “How MAD would you feel?”) in that situation on a scale from 1 (not nervous/mad) to 6 (very, very nervous/mad), and how much they would expect to be rejected in that situation (e.g., “Do you think they were saying bad things about you?”) on a scale from 1 (no) to 6 (yes). The total RS score ($\alpha = .85$) was created by multiplying the rating for each negative affect (anxiety, anger) by the rejection expectation for each vignette and then summing the products. Scores ranged from 16 to 262.

3. Results and discussion

On average, 7.14% (range = 0.0–10.0%) of each variable's data were missing across all variables. The full information maximum likelihood (FIML) method was used to address data missingness. Preliminary analyses demonstrated that missingness was unrelated to any of the variables.

Preliminary analyses with gender and ethnicity as moderators demonstrated that none of the interactions with gender or ethnicity were statistically significant. Because scores on 8th grade Peer Rejection were positively skewed, natural log transformations were applied. Analyses were performed with the untransformed and transformed data, and because the results were very similar, results with untransformed data are presented herein.

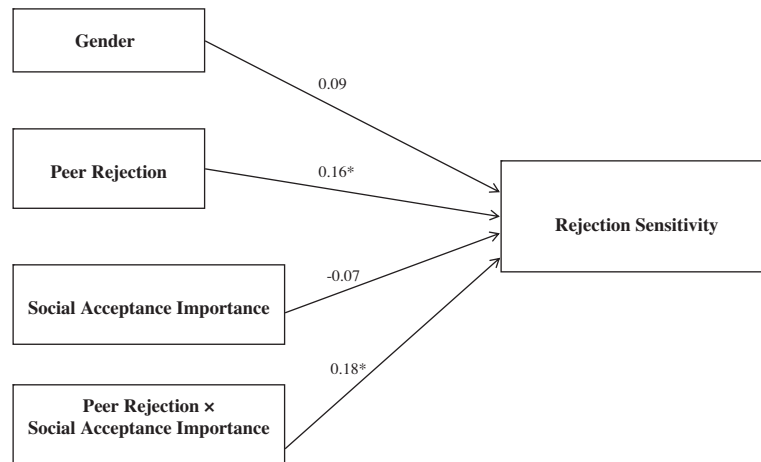


Fig. 1. Path diagram in standardized form * $p < .05$.

3.1. Descriptives

8th Grade Peer Rejection ($M = .00$; $SD = .77$) was negatively correlated with 9th grade Relational Valuation ($M = 2.86$; $SD = .74$), $r(294) = -.09$, $p < .01$. Further, 9th grade RS ($M = 79.63$; $SD = 46.94$) was unrelated to 8th grade Peer Rejection, $r(294) = .11$, ns , and 8th grade Relational Valuation, $r(294) = -.05$, ns .

3.2. Does relational valuation moderate the effects of peer rejection on RS?

In order to test the moderating effect of Relational Valuation on the link between 8th grade Peer Rejection and 9th grade RS, a path analysis was conducted using FIML within LISREL (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2005). This approach not only allows the testing of

theory-driven models, it also allows the usage of all available data information (see Hancock & Mueller, 2006). With gender as a control variable, our final path model consisted of Peer Rejection, Relational Valuation, and the interaction between Peer Rejection and Relational Valuation.

The final model accounted for 9.5% of the total variance in RS. Fig. 1 shows that, consistent with previous research (Butler et al., 2007; London et al., 2007), Peer Rejection was significantly associated with RS ($Z = 1.99$, $SE = 5.47$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, consistent with our hypothesis, the interaction between Peer Rejection and Relational Valuation was significant ($Z = 2.19$, $SE = 5.35$, $p < 0.05$). In order to probe this interaction, we conducted simple slopes analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) using values for Relational Valuation that corresponded to 1 SD above (high) and 1 SD below the mean (low). Fig. 2 shows that whereas Peer Rejection was positively associated with RS for youth who scored high on Relational

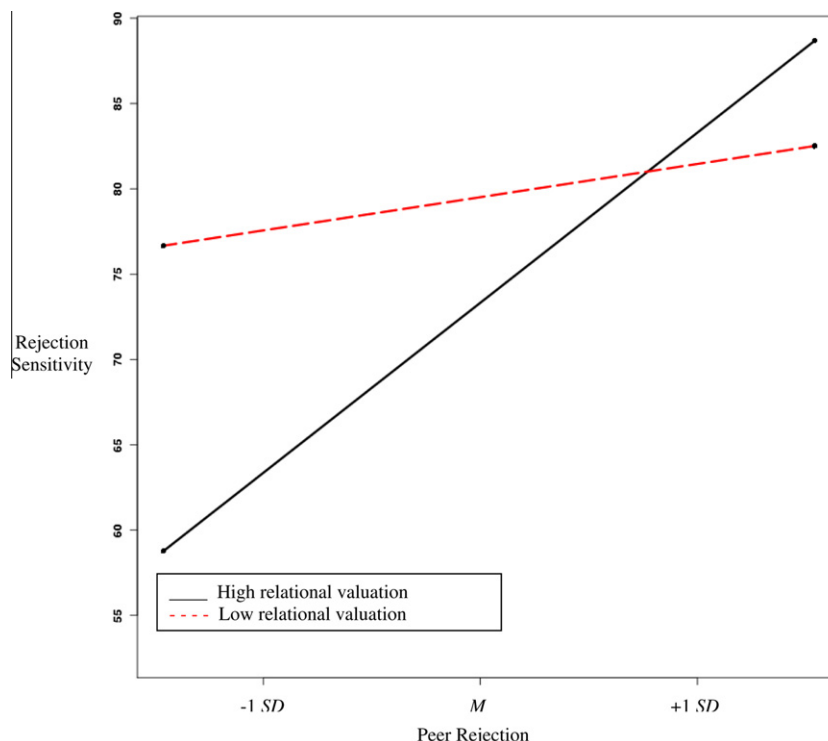


Fig. 2. Interaction between Peer Rejection and Relational Valuation in the prediction of RS.

Valuation ($\beta = 19.94$, $t = 2.51$, $p < 0.01$), this relation was not significant for those who scored low on Relational Valuation ($\beta = 3.90$, $t = 0.74$, ns). Thus, consistent with our hypothesis, peer rejection was most associated with RS for youth who held high regard for social relationships.

It is important to note that because RS was only measured in 9th grade, results should be viewed as temporally descriptive and not as causal, though RS does appear to be moderately stable (Downey & Feldman, 1996; London et al., 2007). Although we examined Peer Rejection as an antecedent to RS, it is possible that RS may also lead to Peer Rejection. This view would be consistent with the “cumulative deficit” hypothesis forwarded by peer relationship researchers (Bierman, 2004; Rubin et al., 2009), in which prior negative social experiences lead to maladaptive schema and behaviors, which in turn lead to further rejection. Future research using a longitudinal design may shed additional insights.

4. Conclusion

By addressing the gap in research on the social antecedents of RS, we demonstrated that peer rejection was most associated with RS for adolescents who held high regard for social relationships. Consistent with cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987) theories, findings suggest youths may be most susceptible to adjustment difficulties like RS when encountering a stressor that is personally important. In addition to contributing to the literature on RS, findings demonstrate the importance of considering cognitive moderators for understanding the links between negative experiences and adjustment, and highlight the need to move beyond simple main effects models for understanding the heterogeneity of rejection.

In addition to cognitive interventions addressing the attribution and interpretation of social encounters, therapeutic techniques addressing the level of regard youths place on social relationships may successfully help rejected youths cope with negative social experiences. Such techniques may be particularly important given the difficulty of changing youths' overall reputations among peers (Bierman, 2004). Future research is needed to further elucidate the individual cognitive and motivational processes (e.g., need for belongingness) through which social dynamics are linked with adjustment across development.

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