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The Influence of Self-Esteem Level on the Interpretation of Ambiguous Stimuli after a Rejection Experience

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Method

72 participants (26 female) at the University of Dayton. Four participants were missing data, bringing the final sample to 68.

Participants first completed personality measures:
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)
- Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey & Feldman, 1996)
- Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988)

Participants were randomly assigned to 1 of 3 conditions: write about acceptance, rejection, or order a list of topics according to their interests (control).

Finally, participants evaluated three email messages. One message was emotionally positive, one emotionally negative, and the third was emotionally neutral.

Results (continued)

The self-esteem x condition effect was examined for each message in comparison with the control group.

Neutral message: no significant effects.

Positive message: significant self-esteem x condition interaction, $t(64) = -4.625, p < .0001$.

- For acceptance condition:
  - High self-esteem rated positive message more positively, $(B = .86, SE = .42), t(62) = 2.03, p < .05$.
  - Low self-esteem rated positive message more negatively, $(B = -1.72, SE = .45), t(62) = -3.84, p < .0001$.

Negative message: significant self-esteem x condition interaction, $t(64) = 2.695, p < .5$.

- Acceptance condition: High self-esteem, rated negative message more negatively, $(B = -1.31, SE = .59), t(62) = -2.22, p < .05$.
- Rejection condition: Low self-esteem, rated negative message more negatively, $(B = -1.08, SE = .55), t(62) = -1.96, p = .55$.

Conclusion

There was no difference in neutral stimuli evaluation. However, those with high self-esteem rated messages more accurately when accepted, and those with low self-esteem rated positive messages more negatively when accepted and negative messages more negatively when rejected.

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