



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

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## Self-Esteem, Rejection, & Information Ambiguity

High self-esteem can psychologically buffer the negative impact of rejection; however, low self-esteem can lead to further declines in self-esteem in response to rejection (Leary, Tambor, Terdal & Downs, 1995).

Low self-esteem and social rejection are associated with negative mood states (e.g., Baumeister, Boden, & Smart, 1996; Leary, Tambor, Terdal & Downs 1995).

The interactive effects of self-esteem and rejection on subsequent evaluation of ambiguous material (e.g., emotionally neutral messages) has not been explored.

The *mood congruent encoding hypothesis* suggests that when material is ambiguous, it will be encoded based on one's mood (Alexander & Guenther, 1986).

## Hypothesis

Self-esteem will interact with condition to predict reactions to neutral stimuli such that:

- low self-esteem, rejection condition will interpret an ambiguous message negatively
- high self-esteem, rejection condition will interpret an ambiguous message positively

## 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*.

Each message was rated on a 10-item scale where participants indicated the extent to which positive and negative adjectives (e.g., *hostile*, *cheerful*, *angry*, *enthusiastic*) described each message.

## Results

Data was analyzed using a mixed model. A three-way interaction between type of message (positive, negative, and neutral), self-esteem level, and condition (rejection, acceptance) was found,  $F(4, 124) = 4.194, p = .003$ .

## 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,  $t(64) = 2.695, p < 0.5$ .

- 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.