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

Nicholette Smith, Erin O’Mara
University of Dayton

Overview

People with high and low self-esteem react differently to self-esteem threats (DeHart, Longua, & Smith, 2011).

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

Both decreased self-esteem and experiencing rejection are associated with negative mood states (Baumeister, Boden, & Smart, 1996; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs 1995).

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

Limitations of Previous Research

Previous research has established an association between (a) rejection and a negative mood state, and (b) self-esteem level and a negative mood state.

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

Hypothesis

People with low self-esteem who have undergone a rejection experience will interpret an ambiguous message negatively, whereas people with high self-esteem who have undergone a rejection experience will interpret an ambiguous message positively.

Proposed Method

Time 1:

150 participants will complete baseline measures of the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey & Feldman, 1996), and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Time 2:

Participants will be asked to recall an experience of rejection (high rejection condition), an experience of acceptance (low rejection condition), or be asked to order a list of topics based on their preference to write about them (control condition).

Participants will then evaluate three email messages and their senders. One email will be positively-valenced, one will be negatively-valenced, and one will be neutrally-valenced (i.e., ambiguous).

Prospective Results

If the proposed hypothesis is true, students in the high rejection condition who have low self-esteem will evaluate the ambiguous message and its sender more negatively than those with either high or low self-esteem in the low rejection conditions or those with high self-esteem in the high rejection condition.

If the null hypothesis is true, there will not be a difference in how the ambiguous message and its sender are interpreted among conditions.

Implications

Identifying links between concepts such as self-esteem and rejection and their relationship to cognitive processes like perception or interpretation can reveal how emotions impact cognition.

Understanding how people differ in their reaction to rejection experiences can help us to predict when our own rejection experiences will impair our subsequent judgments.

Select References

