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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, $t(64) = 2.695$, $p < .05$.

- 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.