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Rejection Sensitivity and Adolescent Girls' Vulnerability to Relationship-Centered Difficulties

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Rejection sensitivity (RS)—the disposition to defensively expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection—is a potential source of vulnerability for adolescent girls' relationship difficulties. RS is thought to develop from rejection experiences, including maltreatment. When adolescent girls enter romantic relationships, RS may prompt vigilance for rejection cues and reactions to perceived rejection that are maladaptive, including hostility. To preserve their romantic relationships, high RS girls may behave in ways that increase their risk of victimization or other negative outcomes. These claims were tested with longitudinal data from 154 minority, economically disadvantaged, middle school girls. RS prospectively predicted insecurity about a boyfriend's commitment and also a willingness to do things known to be wrong to maintain the relationship. RS predicted more physical aggression and nonphysical hostility during romantic conflicts. Implications for a relationship-centered approach to adolescent girls' characteristic vulnerabilities are discussed.

Given the central motivational role that close relationships play in women's lives (Gilligan, 1982; see Cross & Madson, 1997, for review), it is not surprising that the characteristic difficulties of adolescent girls involve their close relationships, especially their romantic relationships. These difficulties include early childbearing, sexually transmitted diseases, dating violence, and depression resulting from relationship problems (for discussion, see Downey, Bonica, & Rincon, 1999). The significant personal and societal

costs of these outcomes make understanding the psychological processes that lead to their occurrence a priority. Because the majority of girls do not show these difficulties, it is necessary to answer the question of why some adolescent girls show a vulnerability to relationship-centered difficulties, including a vulnerability to victimization, whereas others do not. Addressing this question is the goal of this article.

Implications of Prior Troubled Relationships for Girls' Romantic Relationships

To explain why some girls show heightened susceptibility to relationship-centered difficulties, researchers are beginning to examine the implications for romantic relationships of prior family and peer relationships (e.g., Pawlby, Mills, & Quinton, 1997; Wolfe, Wekerle, Reitzel-Jaffe, & Lefebvre, 1998; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998). Evidence is now emerging implicating difficulties in these earlier relationships as the cause of troubled romantic relationships. Particularly noteworthy are findings from Pawlby, Mills, and Quinton's (1997) prospective study showing that adolescent girls who had been removed from maltreating families perceived their relationship with their current boyfriend as the most important part of their social

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networks. They also viewed themselves as easily influenced by their boyfriends, who tended to be delinquent. In adulthood, these girls experienced poorer personal and interpersonal functioning than a comparison sample (Pawlby, Mills, Taylor, & Quinton, 1997).

Pawlby and colleagues' research (Pawlby, Mills, & Quinton, 1997; Pawlby, Mills, Taylor, & Quinton, 1997) implicated maltreatment in leading girls to develop a heightened dependence on romantic relationships with troubled partners, perhaps explaining these girls' heightened personal and interpersonal difficulties. However, the study stops short of identifying what these girls took from their troubled families into romantic relationships that increased their dependency on and susceptibility to difficulties in such relationships.

Rejection Sensitivity: Its Causes and Consequences

Influenced by classic interpersonal theories (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Erikson, 1950; Horney, 1937; Sullivan, 1953), we have proposed that a key way in which past relationships can affect adolescent romantic relationships is through the messages that these earlier relationships communicate concerning acceptance and rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Feldman, Khuri, & Friedman, 1994; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Experiences within significant relationships that communicate messages of rejection (e.g., parental maltreatment) can lead children to develop defensive expectations of rejection. When carried into new types of relationships, such as adolescent romantic relationships, these expectations can give rise to hypervigilance for rejection cues, such as the romantic partner's attention to a potential rival. The detection of even minimal or ambiguous cues can lead the adolescent to readily perceive intentional rejection and to feel rejected. The perceived rejection can prompt both cognitive-affective and behavioral overreactions, including hostility or a sense of victimization and despondency. Our theoretical model posits that rejection expectations, in addition to leading to such potentially maladaptive outcomes, may also lead people to engage in potentially maladaptive behavior to avert the rejection they expect and fear.

We have described individuals who defensively (i.e., anxiously or angrily) expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection as being high in rejection sensitivity (RS). Because no one is completely immune to the types of rejection experiences that give rise to RS, everyone will develop to some extent the cognitive-affective processing disposition (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) that we have outlined. Thus, we con-

sider RS to be on a continuum. The people we characterize as high in RS (HRS) are relatively high on this continuum, and those we characterize as low in RS (LRS) are relatively low on this continuum. Most of the basic links in our theoretical model have been empirically tested in experimental and field studies with middle school and college students (for reviews, see Downey, Bonica, & Rincon, 1999; Levy, Ayduk, & Downey, in press).

First, we have found evidence in four studies that rejection by parents or peers gives rise to defensive expectations of rejection. Two cross-sectional studies of college and high school students showed that defensive expectations of rejection were associated with childhood exposure to parental emotional neglect (Downey, Khouri, & Feldman, 1997) and family violence (Downey, Lebolt, & O'Shea-Lauber, 1995; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Two longitudinal studies of middle school students also showed that rejection led to increases in defensive expectations of rejection over time. In one study, parents' reports of harsh parenting practices predicted an increase in their children's defensive expectations of rejection over a 1-year period. In a second study, peer rejection, assessed through peer sociometric ratings, predicted an increase in students' defensive expectations of peer rejection over a 4-month period (Bonica & Downey, submitted).

Second, we have shown that, once formed, rejection expectations promote a readiness to perceive and to cognitively and affectively overreact to rejection. In an experiment with middle school children, those with defensive expectations of rejection became more distressed than other children when told that friends refused to participate in projects with them (Downey, Lebolt, Rincon, & Freitas, 1998, Study 2). No differences were found when situational explanations were given for the friends' refusals (e.g., teacher would not give permission). In a 1-year longitudinal study, children who angrily expected rejection became increasingly likely to react to an ambiguous rejection with angry thoughts, feelings, and action plans (Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998, Study 1). Parallel findings emerged in college students. In a laboratory experiment, students who defensively expected rejection felt more rejected than others when told that strangers, with whom they had just finished friendly conversations, declined to continue with the study, which involved meeting with them again (Downey & Feldman, 1996, Study 2). A longitudinal study showed that defensive expectations of rejection also predicted a readiness to perceive rejection in the actions of significant others (Downey & Feldman, 1996, Study 3). College students who enter-

ed romantic relationships defensively expecting rejection more readily perceived hurtful intent in their new partner's ambiguous behavior (e.g., being cool and distant). This association did not change when other relevant personality dispositions (i.e., self-esteem, neuroticism, extraversion, social anxiety and distress, and adult attachment style) were statistically controlled.

Third, we have shown that the tendency to perceive and feel rejection, combined with chronic anxiety about its occurrence, compromises the quality of people's important relationships. Specifically, defensive rejection expectations undermined the peer and teacher relationships of middle school children and the romantic relationships of college students in ways that were likely to elicit rejection and erode well-being. A 1-year longitudinal study with middle school children from the population used in the present investigation showed that RS predicted more aggression and reactivity in children to interpersonal slights over time. Their oppositional and disruptive behavior led to increasingly compromised relationships with peers and teachers and to suspension from school (Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998, Study 3).

HRS college students' romantic relationships were also fraught with more difficulties than those of LRS students (Downey & Feldman, 1996, Study 4). However, although RS was associated with relationship difficulties in both men and women, its effects on women's romantic relationships were more pronounced and more consistent. We have preliminary support for the view that this gender difference reflects the greater centrality of intimate relationships in HRS women's lives than in HRS men's lives. For example, HRS men appear to be particularly vulnerable to social disrespect, whereas HRS women show vulnerability in situations that threaten devaluation of their intimate relationships (Ayduk & Downey, 2000).

What type of relationship difficulties did we find? Rejection expectations predicted heightened concern and insecurity about a romantic partner's relationship commitment and satisfaction, irrespective of the partner's actual self-reported commitment and satisfaction (Downey & Feldman, 1996, Study 4). Implicating RS in maladaptive behavior, partners described HRS men as jealous and controlling and HRS women as hostile and unsupportive. These gender-specific behaviors helped explain why the partners of HRS people were more dissatisfied than the partners of LRS people.

These results suggest a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948) wherein rejection expectations created their own reality. In the case of women, but not

men, we confirmed this cross-sectional finding in a self-report daily diary study and an observational study of conflict, which prior research had suggested should activate rejection concerns (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). Specifically, we found that during conflict, HRS women behaved in hostile, rejecting ways that undermined partner satisfaction and commitment.

Why do HRS women behave in ways likely to elicit the rejection they fear in situations that activate their rejection concerns? The reason appears to be that in such situations, they tend to perceive rejection, and this perception triggers hostile reactions (Ayduk, Downey, Testa, Yen, & Shoda, 1999). We have shown in three studies that rejection triggers hostility in HRS women. The first study used a lexical priming task to establish that rejection automatically activates hostility to a greater extent in HRS women than in LRS women. HRS women pronounced a hostile word (e.g., hit) that was preceded by a rejection word (e.g., abandon) more quickly than LRS women. The second study showed that HRS women acted in a more hostile way than LRS women toward a potential dating partner from whom they had received an ambiguous rejection. No differences were found in a control condition. The third study showed that perceived rejection triggered hostility in ongoing romantic relationships. When HRS women felt rejected, they were more likely to get into conflicts with their romantic partner, during which they behaved in a hostile way. In LRS women, the probability of conflict was unrelated to perceived rejection.

Implications of RS for Adolescent Girls' Romantic Relationships

The foregoing discussion shows that RS undermines early adolescents' peer and teacher relationships and college students' romantic relationships. The purpose of the research described in this article is to establish whether these findings extend to adolescent romantic relationships. Does sensitivity to rejection in prior important relationships, presumably developed as a result of rejecting experiences, influence how adolescents approach and behave in romantic relationships when they enter into these new types of relationships?

The specific goals of this investigation are as follows: The first goal is to examine whether, in adolescent girls, RS prospectively predicts heightened concern and insecurity about the partner's commitment to the relationship, as has been found with college students. The second goal is to investigate a theoretical prediction derived from our assumption that HRS individuals are strongly motivated to prevent rejection.

tion by significant others from whom they fear rejection. As a result of this motivation, HRS individuals should show a heightened willingness to engage in behaviors that are potentially self-harmful or socially harmful if they believe that such behaviors will prevent rejection. Thus, we will examine whether RS prospectively predicts an increased willingness to engage in potentially harmful behavior to maintain the relationship. The third goal is to examine whether RS prospectively predicts that, during conflict with romantic partners, female adolescents are more likely to report behaving in a hostile way, as has been found in college students. We are also interested in whether HRS girls report being victims of partner hostility. Of particular interest is whether RS predicts heightened rates of physical violence in romantic relationships. Such relationships are of special concern because relationship violence places young women at considerable risk for both physical and psychological damage.

These questions were addressed in a longitudinal study of early adolescents attending a public middle school in New York city that serves a low-income Latino and African American neighborhood. Specifically, we examined whether sensitivity to rejection from peers and teachers predicts how adolescents negotiate the romantic relationships in which they subsequently become involved.

METHOD

Participants

The self-report questionnaire and interview data used in this study were collected as part of a larger prospective study of risk and protective factors in childhood and adolescence. The data are from 154 girls who completed a measure of sensitivity to rejection from peers and teachers when in Grades 6, 7, or 8 (Time 1) and who also completed a structured interview on their dating relationships 1 year later (Time 2). At Time 1, 51% of the girls were in 6th grade, 28% were in 7th grade, and 21% were in 9th grade. An additional 36 girls completed the RS measure at Time 1 but not the dating relationships interview at Time 2. Attrition was due mainly to changing schools and was not significantly associated with RS.

The racial composition of the sample was representative of the school's population. Sixty-nine percent of the participants were Hispanic; 24% were African, African Caribbean, or African American; 6% were Asian American (primarily Vietnamese); and 1% were European or European American. The majority of children attending the participating school (91%) were eligible for free school lunches because their

families' incomes were below 150% of the poverty level. Individual-level data on family income and socioeconomic status were not obtained. The school serves a largely immigrant, minority, economically disadvantaged urban community.

Procedure

The measures included the Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (CRSQ), which was administered at Time 1, and the Peer and Romantic Relationships Interview (PRRI), which was administered at Time 2. The CRSQ assessed the various cognitive-affective components of RS. The PRRI obtained information about adolescents' peer and romantic relationships. This study focuses on the information obtained about romantic relationships, including information on dating behavior, attitudes toward romantic relationships, tactics used during conflicts, and efforts to prevent rejection by partners. Versions of the measures were available in both English and Spanish. Approximately 10% of the girls completed the measures in Spanish with the assistance of a bilingual research assistant.

Time 1 (1995-1996). During a single class period, participants completed the CRSQ in their classrooms, where trained research assistants supervised up to 6 children each. Questionnaires were either read aloud or administered independently, depending on the participants' reading abilities. Participants received a small gift for their participation.

Time 2 (1996-1997). In the spring of the 1996-1997 academic year, the PRRI was individually administered to participants in private interview rooms. The interviews were done by trained research assistants who were familiar to the children. Questions were read aloud, and research assistants recorded responses in writing. Again, participants received a small gift for their participation.

Measures

CRSQ

The CRSQ was used to assess (a) anxious and angry expectations of rejection, and (b) angry and victimized reactions following an ambiguously intentioned rejection. (For a detailed description of the development and validation of the measure, see Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998.) The measure was initially developed from open-ended interviews with children from this school district. The purpose of the interviews was to identify culturally and developmentally salient situations in which rejection was a concern. These interviews also focused on how children would feel and

think in anticipation of a possible rejection and how they would think, feel, and plan to behave following the occurrence of a rejection. Based on these interviews we developed a two-part questionnaire.

Part 1: Defensive expectations of rejection. The first part of the measure assessed the two types of defensive expectations of rejection: anxious and angry expectations. Children were presented with 12 hypothetical vignettes in which they were asked to imagine being in a situation where they were anticipating acceptance or rejection by peers or teachers. A sample teacher vignette is as follows:

Pretend your teacher lets the kids in the class take home a video game to play on the weekend. Every week so far you have watched someone else take home the video game. You decide to ask the teacher if you can take home the video this time. You wonder if the teacher will let you have it.

Following each of the 12 vignettes, the children were asked to indicate their degrees of anger about the possible outcome of the situation (e.g., "How ANGRY or MAD would you feel over whether or not the teacher would let you take home the video game this time?") on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not mad*) to 6 (*very, very mad*). They were also asked to indicate how anxious or nervous they would feel in anticipation of the outcome of the situation (e.g., "How NERVOUS would you feel over whether or not the teacher would let you take home the video game this time?") on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*not nervous*) to 6 (*very, very nervous*). Next, they were asked to indicate the likelihood that the other person(s) would respond in an accepting fashion (e.g., "Do you think the teacher is going to let you take home the video game this time?") on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*YES!!!*) to 6 (*NO!!!*). High likelihood of this outcome represents expectations of acceptance, and low likelihood represents expectations of rejection.

Following from our adoption of an expectancy-value model (Bandura, 1986) of defensive expectations of rejection, angry expectations scores were computed as follows: A score for each situation was obtained by weighting (i.e., multiplying) the expected likelihood of rejection by the degree of anger about the possible outcome of the request. A total (cross-situational) angry expectations score for each participant was computed by summing the angry expectations scores for each situation and dividing by the total number of situations ($M = 8.03$, $SD = 3.9$). A total anxious expectations score was calculated in a similar fashion ($M = 8.20$, $SD = 3.81$).

We have evidence that both angry and anxious expectations of rejection are approximately normally distributed, reliable measures that tap a relatively enduring and coherent information-processing disposition and have distinctive predictive validity in the population from which the present sample is drawn (Bonica & Downey, submitted; Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998, Study 1). Specifically, we have found that, whereas angry expectations predicted increasingly aggressive behavior over time, anxious expectations predicted social withdrawal (Bonica & Downey, submitted). Thus, we thought it important to assess whether the two types of defensive expectations had distinctive implications for girls' romantic relationships.

Part 2: Psychological reactions to ambiguously intentioned rejection. The second part of the measure assesses children's responses to the occurrence of an ambiguously intentioned rejection in a representative teacher and a representative peer situation chosen from the 12 CRSQ situations. The teacher situation involved the teacher's response to the child's request to take a particular video home for the weekend by saying, "No, you can't take it home this weekend. I'm giving it to someone else." In the peer situation, peers respond to the child's request for help with groceries that had spilled onto the footpath by "just walk[ing] quickly by, as if they don't see you." In each situation, the rejecting behavior of the teacher or peers could be interpreted as an intentional rejection or as circumstantial (e.g., the teacher might have already promised it to someone else, or the peers really did not see the child). Pilot work revealed that children could generate explanations for these outcomes that ranged from benign to rejecting. Children were given 13 responses to the teacher situation and 11 responses to the peer situation that indexed either angry or victimized reactions to the ambiguously intentioned rejection. They were asked to indicate how true each of the responses would be, using a 3-point scale where 1 = *very true*, 2 = *sort of true*, and 3 = *not true*. The responses tapped feelings (F), thoughts (T), and behavioral plans (BP).

Angry reaction. Eleven items (6 teacher and 5 peer) assessed the extent to which the child would have an angry reaction to the ambiguously intentioned rejection. A total angry reaction score was computed by averaging across the angry response items for the peer and teacher situation ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.41$). Examples of angry responses to the teacher's giving the video to someone else for the weekend include "I would feel like hitting someone or something" (F); "I would feel like I don't really like that teacher because she's never

fair with me" (T); and "Next time when the teacher wants me to be quiet in class, I won't" (BP).

Victimized reaction. Thirteen items (7 teacher and 6 peer) assessed the extent to which the child would react to the ambiguously intentioned rejection with a sense of helplessness and victimization. A total victimized response score was computed by averaging across the victimized response items for the peer and teacher situations ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 0.41$). Examples of victimized reactions to the teacher's giving the video to someone else for the weekend include "I would feel so uncomfortable I couldn't stand it" (F); "I would feel like it was probably my own fault that the teacher won't give it to me" (T); and "I would feel like she'll never give me the video, so what's the point of even asking" (BP).

PRRI

The PRRI was used to ask all participants about their histories of romantic relationships, including their number and duration. Participants who had been in dating relationships since the end of the previous academic year were asked about conflict in their dating relationships since then (i.e., the previous July). Those currently in dating relationships completed questions about their current dating relationships. Participants were also questioned about conflicts in their peer relationships, including whether any of their arguments with peers had involved physical aggression. However, peer conflicts are not the focus of this article.

Dating history. Participants were asked about whether they had ever had boyfriends, the age of their first romantic relationships, number of partners, their current relationship status, and the age of their current or most recent romantic partners. Care was taken to ensure that students who reported a dating relationship were clearly distinguishing relationships in which the partners spent time together and that were romantic in nature from one-sided crushes and cross-sex, nonromantic friendships.

Conflict in relationships. Students who reported having been in at least one argument with romantic partners since the end of the previous academic year were questioned about their conflicts with romantic partners. First, a series of questions probed the frequency and context of conflicts with romantic partners. Participants were asked to indicate how often they argued with romantic partners on a 4-point scale: *never*, *once in a while*, *every week*, or *every day*. Participants were asked to describe their most recent arguments in the greatest detail that they could recall. Answers were recorded and coded by topic of argument. Topics

included jealousy, cheating, possessions, game gets out of hand, name calling, rumor spreading, sex, and misunderstanding.

Second, participants were asked about the tactics used in nonphysical arguments. They were to indicate the frequency with which they had enacted and been the target of three types of negative tactics: hostile withdrawal (a composite of "ignored the other person to make them feel bad" and "stopped talking to the other person for a while"); indirect or relational aggression (a composite of "badmouthed or spread rumors about partner," "did something to embarrass partner," and "did something to make partner jealous"; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995); and direct verbal hostility (a composite of "called partner names or said mean things" and "threatened to harm partner"). The response range was from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*all of the time*).

Third, participants were asked about whether they had ever been involved in physical fights with romantic partners since the end of the past academic year. If so, they were asked to indicate the frequency with which they had enacted or been the victims of eight different types of physical aggression, based on Wolfe and colleagues' (1998) revision of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) for use with adolescents. The physical aggression items included pushing, slapping, kicking, punching, and hitting the other person. The range of responses was 1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times*, and 4 = *a lot*.

Attitudes Toward Current Relationships

These two questions were asked only of participants who were currently in dating relationships.

Investment in romantic relationship. Participants were asked how much time they spent with their current romantic partner. Ratings were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all of the time*). Participants were also asked how important the relationship was to them. Ratings were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*very important*).

Relationship concerns and insecurities. Participants were asked to report their relationship concerns and insecurities. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate how true each of a series of statements was on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not true at all*) to 5 (*very true*). These items included concerns about current partner fidelity (e.g., "I worry my boyfriend will cheat on me or betray me," "I worry my boyfriend might be interested in someone else") and distress about partner involvement with others (e.g., "I feel uncomfortable/upset when my boyfriend does things that don't in-

volve me," "I always want to know what my partner is doing and where he is").

Tactics for preventing rejection. Two approaches to preventing rejection were assessed. First, participants were asked to what extent they would be willing to do things they knew were wrong to keep their romantic partner (e.g., "I would do anything to keep my boyfriend with me even if it's things that I know are wrong"). Second, participants were asked whether they tried to control their partners' behavior (e.g., "I try to keep my boyfriend from talking to or playing with his friends"). The same 5-point scale was used as for relationship concerns and insecurities.

RESULTS

Of the 154 girls in the study, 56% reported having been in dating relationships since the end of the previous academic year. Seventy-three percent of girls who had been in relationships during this time (41% of the 154 girls) reported having argued at least once with romantic partners. Finally, 36% of all the girls were currently in relationships. The proportion of participants in any dating relationship since the end of the previous academic year increased across grades. The rates for dating in the past year were 46% for 7th graders, 63% for 8th graders, and 70% for 9th graders. The rates for currently dating were 30% for 7th graders, 45% for 8th graders, and 41% for 9th graders. The median length of participants' relationships was between 7 and 8 weeks. Girls were dating boys who were on average 1.5 years older ($SD = 1.57$). The typical age at which girls had their first dating relationships was 12 years ($SD = 1.42$). Girls who were currently dating typically described their relationship as serious ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.1$, range = 1 to 5) and important to them ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.1$, range = 1 to 5).

Neither angry nor anxious expectations of rejection, nor angry or victimized reactions to rejection, were significantly related to the indicators of dating history described above. Specifically, they were unrelated to whether a girl had ever been in a relationship, had been in a relationship since the end of the previous school year, was currently in a relationship, or had argued with a dating partner.

Anxious and angry rejection expectations were highly correlated, $r(152) = .68$, $p < .001$. Angry and victimized reactions were also highly correlated, $r(147) = .64$, $p < .001$. Anxious expectations were somewhat more strongly related with victimized reactions, $r(147) = .40$, $p < .001$, than with angry reactions, $r(147) =$

.29, $p < .001$. Angry expectations were equally strongly related with both victimized, $r(147) = .42$, $p < .001$, and angry reactions, $r(147) = .46$.

RS and Relationship Insecurities and Concerns

Defensive rejection expectations. The correlations between anxious and angry rejection expectations and girls' worries and insecurities about their current relationships are given in Table 1. To the extent that girls either anxiously or angrily expected rejection, they worried that their partner would betray them and was interested in someone else, and they reported feeling upset and uncomfortable when their partner did things that did not involve them. Anxious expectations, but not angry expectations, predicted always wanting to know where the partner was and what he was doing. We next sought to establish whether these relationship insecurities and concerns were predicted by what is common to anxious and angry rejection expectations or what is distinctive about these different types of defensive expectations. Thus, we regressed the various relationship attitude measures on a variable indexing the average of anxious and angry expectations and a variable indexing the difference between these expectations indices (i.e., angry expectations minus anxious expectations). Table 2 gives these results. In all cases, the variable indexing the common effect of the two types of expectations was significant. This was not true of the variable indexing the difference in expectations, with one exception. To the extent that participants felt more anxious than angry (indexed by a significant negative coefficient for the difference variable), they felt more uncomfortable and upset when their partner did things that did not involve them.

Reactions to rejection. Table 1 also gives the correlations between relationship insecurities and worries and both victimized and angry reactions to an ambiguously intentioned rejection. To the extent that girls reported angry or victimized reaction patterns following rejection, they worried that their partner would betray them and was interested in someone else, they felt upset and uncomfortable when their partner did things that did not involve them, and they always wanted to know where their partner was and what he was doing. As above, we wanted to establish whether these relationship insecurities and concerns were predicted by what is common to angry and victimized reactions or what is distinctive about these different types of reactions. Thus, we regressed the various relationship attitude measures on a variable indexing the

TABLE 1: Correlations of Rejection Sensitivity and Attitudes With Beliefs About the Relationship and Rejection Prevention Tactics

	M (SD), Range = (1 to 5)	Rejection Expectations (N = 45)		Rejection Reactions (N = 41)	
		Anxious r	Angry r	Angry r	Victimized r
Relationship insecurities and concerns					
I worry partner will cheat or betray	2.2 (1.32)	.42***	.55****	.46***	.35**
I worry partner is interested in someone else	1.96 (0.98)	.51****	.49****	.40***	.32**
Upset when partner does things that don't involve me	1.83 (1.07)	.51****	.36**	.39**	.33**
Want to know exactly where partner is and what he's doing	2.98 (1.45)	.46***	.18	.31**	.29*
Tactics to prevent rejection					
I try to keep partner from doing things with friends	1.28 (0.66)	.16	.02	-.15	-.03
I would do anything to keep partner with me, even things I know are wrong	1.63 (0.85)	.42***	.38***	.08	.21

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

TABLE 2: Regression Analyses to Determine Whether Relationship Attitudes and Rejection Prevention Tactics Were Predicted by Common or Distinctive Features of Rejection Expectations and Reactions to Rejection: Unstandardized Regression Coefficients

	Rejection Expectations (N = 45)		Rejection Reactions (N = 41)	
	Mean of Angry & Anxious Rejection Expectations b	Difference Between Angry & Anxious Rejection Expectations b	Mean of Angry & Victimized Reactions b	Difference Between Angry & Victimized Reactions b
Relationship insecurities and concerns				
I worry partner will cheat or betray me	.20****	.07	1.27**	.66
I worry partner is interested in someone else	.16****	-.004	.93**	.31
Upset when partner does things that don't involve me	.14***	-.07	.93**	.31
Want to know exactly where partner is and what he's doing	.15**	-.17**	1.14**	.07
Tactics to prevent rejection				
I try to keep partner from doing things with friends	.01	-.04	-.14	-.33
I would do anything to keep partner with me, even things I know are wrong	.10***	-.01	.34	-.51

NOTE: Separate analyses were done for rejection expectations and rejection reactions.

** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

average of angry and victimized reactions and a variable indexing the difference between these reactions (i.e., angry reactions minus victimized reactions). Table 2 gives these results. In all cases, the variable indexing the common effect of the two types of expectations was significant, whereas the variable indexing the difference was not.

RS and Efforts to Prevent the Occurrence of Rejection

One way in which RS, and in particular defensive expectations of rejection, may lead adolescent girls into difficulties is through prompting them to engage in potentially problematic behaviors to avert rejection by romantic partners. Consistent with this possibility, both anxious and angry rejection expectations are associated with a tendency to endorse the statement, "I would do anything to keep my boyfriend with me even if it's things that I know are wrong."

Regression analyses using the average and difference approach described above revealed that it was what was common, rather than what was distinctive, about these types of defensive expectations that predicted endorsement of this statement. Neither angry nor victimized reactions predicted endorsement of this statement.

We also examined whether expectations of and reactions to rejection predicted reports of a different type of rejection prevention strategy—keeping romantic partners from spending time with their friends. This indicator of a controlling strategy was not significantly associated with either expectations of or reactions to rejection.

RS and Conflict Tactics

A second way in which RS may lead adolescent girls into difficulties is through its impact on how they

TABLE 3: Correlations of Rejection Sensitivity with Hostility in Arguments

Use of Hostile Tactics	M (SD)	Rejection Expectations (N = 58)		Rejection Reactions (N = 54)	
		Anxious r	Angry r	Angry r	Victimized r
Direct verbal hostility					
To partner	1.41 (0.52)	.09	.14	.30**	.28**
By partner	1.18 (0.45)	.28**	.29**	.47****	.30**
Hostile withdrawal					
To partner	1.49 (0.55)	.32**	.29**	.23*	.28**
By partner	2.00 (0.79)	.17	.03	.17	.17
Relational or indirect hostility					
To partner	1.35 (0.38)	.04	.09	.19	.25*
By partner	1.49 (0.57)	.16	.07	.25*	.22*

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. **** $p < .001$.

negotiate conflict with romantic partners. Issues of jealousy (66%) and cheating (10%) were the main reasons given for arguments. Neither type of defensive rejection expectation nor type of reaction to rejection was significantly related with whether arguments had occurred or with the topics of the arguments.

Physical fights with dating partners were infrequent. Overall, 10% of participants reported physical fights with someone they had dated since the end of the previous academic year. The corresponding rate for involvement in a physical fight with a peer was 45%. Logistic regression analyses showed that both angry and anxious rejection expectations were significantly associated with involvement in physical fights (angry expectations: $b = .31$, $\chi^2(1) = 6.6$, $p < .01$; anxious expectations: $b = .30$, $\chi^2(1) = 6.5$, $p < .01$). Angry reactions were also marginally significantly associated with involvement in physical fights ($b = 1.54$, $\chi^2(1) = 2.82$, $p < .10$).

Conflict tactics. Because of the infrequency of physical fights, the association between the various components of RS and specific violent conflict tactics could not be reliably examined. Table 3 gives the correlations between expectations of and reactions to rejection and three types of nonphysical hostile conflict tactics: hostile withdrawal (e.g., ignoring partner to make him feel bad), direct hostility (e.g., saying mean things), and indirect or relational hostility (e.g., doing something to make partner jealous). Anxious and angry rejection expectations were significantly associated with being a victim of direct hostility and with enacting hostile withdrawal. Angry and victimized reactions were associated with both enacting and being a target of direct hostility and with enacting hostile withdrawal. Victimized and angry reactions were marginally significantly associated with enacting and being the recipient of relational or indirect aggres-

sion. In addition, a victimized reaction pattern was significantly associated with hostile withdrawal. Additional regression analyses showed that the association between hostility and the two types of rejection expectations reflected what was common rather than what was distinctive to anxious and angry rejection expectations. Regression analyses involving rejection reactions yielded similar results.

DISCUSSION

This study yields support for the claim that sensitivity to rejection from peers and teachers increases adolescent girls' risk for subsequent involvement in relationship-centered difficulties. The pattern of results was consistent across the two key components of RS addressed in this study: defensive (anxious or angry) rejection expectations and intense (victimized or angry) reactions to an ambiguously intentioned rejection.

The first question addressed was whether RS is associated with heightened concerns and insecurities about dating partners' commitment to the relationship. We found that among early adolescent girls, rejection expectations and intense reactions to the occurrence of rejection were associated with worries about the possibility of partner betrayal and interest in someone else, and with discomfort when away from their partner. These findings extend Downey and Feldman's (1996) findings with college-age women to early adolescent women. These findings are of concern in that such a dependency on romantic relationships may pave the way for victimization. For example, overdependence on a romantic partner may lead to increased vulnerability to overlooking partner's abuse, dishonesty, or unfaithfulness, or abuse of drugs or alcohol. Preoccupation with issues of acceptance and rejection may also have implications for partner selection, perhaps leading HRS girls to over-

value partners who are extremely attentive and who really need them. We have found some support for this claim in female college students (Downey, Purdie, & Davis, 1999). These partner attributes may initially help allay rejection concerns, but the clinical literature on battered women suggests that these desirable qualities may subsequently manifest themselves in jealous, controlling behavior, paving the way for emotional and physical abuse (e.g., Brown, 1987; Walker, 1984). These questions need to be examined directly in future research.

We also examined whether RS is associated with a willingness to do things that are potentially problematic to maintain the relationship. As expected, angry and anxious rejection expectations were associated with a willingness to do anything, even things known to be wrong, to maintain the relationship. Intensity of reaction to rejection was not associated with this willingness. Thus, for girls high in rejection expectations, the goal of maintaining the relationship appears to supersede the goal of not doing things that are wrong. Problematic behaviors that girls may enact to prevent partner rejection include engaging in sexual intimacy for which they do not yet feel ready; tolerating emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive partner behavior; or engaging in delinquent behavior such as skipping school, using drugs or alcohol, or shoplifting at the boyfriend's suggestion (see Downey, Bonica, & Rincon, 1999, for further discussion). The question of whether HRS girls actually engage in these types of harmful behaviors to preserve the relationship needs to be addressed directly in future research.

We also examined a second potentially problematic approach to maintaining relationships: attempting to control the partner's behavior to prevent contact with potential rivals to the partner's relationship commitment. Although both rejection expectations and overreactions to rejection were associated with feeling upset when the partner did things that did not involve the girl, neither rejection expectations nor overreactions to rejection predicted efforts to control the partner's contact with friends. Perhaps efforts to maintain the relationship through controlling the partner's behavior are more characteristic of HRS boys than of HRS girls. This possibility is suggested by findings with college students in which the partners of HRS men described them as controlling, whereas the partners of HRS women described them as hostile and unsupportive (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

The third question addressed was the implications of RS for conflict in romantic relationships. Consistent with findings from college students (Downey, Freitas, et al., 1998), RS did not predict level or source of conflict, but had implications for how conflict was

handled. Irrespective of RS level, jealousy and concern over cheating were the main sources of conflict. As with female college students, RS predicted heightened levels of both physical and verbal hostility during conflict. Although the rate of physical fights was low (10%), their occurrence was significantly associated with anxious and angry rejection expectations and marginally significantly associated with angry reactions to rejection. This low rate meant that it was not feasible to reliably conduct more fine-grained analyses distinguishing between perpetrators and victims of violence. Nonetheless, the finding suggests that RS is a risk factor for the early onset of violence in romantic relationships and implicates early adolescence as a potential point of intervention.

Both types of defensive rejection expectations and both victimized and angry reaction patterns were associated with being the target of partner verbal hostility. These reaction patterns also predicted enacting such hostility. Both types of rejection expectations and both types of reactions to rejection also predicted hostile withdrawal from the partner. Rejection expectations were not related to indirect or relational aggression, such as bad-mouthing the partner to others. However, enacting and being the recipient of this type of aggression was marginally associated with victimized and angry reactions to rejection. Although relational or indirect aggression has traditionally been studied in peer relationships, these findings indicate the potential importance of studying it in romantic relationships. The literature on adult conflict suggests that neither hostile withdrawal nor verbal hostility bode well for effective conflict resolution. It will be important to establish whether the types of hostility studied in our research mark a characteristic interpersonal style of HRS girls during conflict. Such a style may make them vulnerable to eliciting verbal negativity from their partners, as we have found for college women (Downey, Freitas, et al., 1998). Hostility, however, is only one possible type of overreaction to perceived rejection. Indeed, we have found that HRS college women show heightened depression following rejection (i.e., having the relationship terminated) by their romantic partners (Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, in press). This finding converges with Hammen and colleagues' (1995) finding that relationship disruptions prompted clinical levels of distress in young women with rejection and abandonment concerns.

Overall, these findings are consistent with the view that when girls who are sensitive to rejection from peers and important adults (e.g., teachers) enter into romantic relationships, these concerns influence how they think, feel, and behave in these relationships. It appears as if chronic fear of rejection in valued rela-

tionships leads romantic relationships to take on a greater salience for HRS girls than for those girls who took peer and teacher acceptance more for granted. It may be that HRS girls view success or failure in romantic relationships as more diagnostic of their success or failure as people. In addition, their chronic fear of failure in this valued domain may paradoxically make the risk of failure even greater, as when they overreact to perceived slights in hostile ways that drive the partner away. Of equivalent concern is the possibility that their desire to prevent rejection may make them vulnerable to victimization and to both self-damaging and socially damaging behaviors in the ways outlined above.

Clinical Implications

We view the research presented in this article as simply a first step in delineating the implications of prior rejection experiences for adolescent girls' romantic relationships. Nonetheless, when viewed in the context of being consistent with findings with college-age women, our findings suggest that understanding the difficulties of adolescent girls, especially those with histories of rejecting relationships, requires learning about the meaning of close relationships in their lives. This viewpoint on the problems of adolescent girls has several clinical implications. First, clinicians will need to establish the centrality of relationship goals in the motivational systems of their adolescent female clients. Second, clinicians will need to consider the possibility that girls' problem behavior may be motivated by the goal of preventing their romantic partners' rejection. As noted above, rejection concerns may lead girls to put themselves at risk for pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases and for being the victims of physical or emotional abuse. These concerns may also put them at risk for engaging in delinquent behavior or truancy when their boyfriends suggest these behaviors. Third, clinicians also need to consider the role of perceived rejection in triggering hostile behavior, depression, or substance abuse, which may result from efforts to deaden the pain of rejection. Indeed, in a study of incarcerated women, Bedell (1997) found that RS was associated with these three types of problem outcomes.

Caveats and Conclusions

Whereas the findings reported in this article provide evidence consistent with our model of the role of RS in the relationship-centered problems of adolescent girls, the data are limited in a number of ways. First, although the data suggest that RS is a risk factor for relationship-centered problems, we have not

established that this is the case. As noted earlier, this is a task for future research. A second potential limitation of our study is the reliance on self-reports. For example, RS may lead girls to overestimate the level of verbal hostility received from their partners. Moreover, the interview-based nature of our assessment procedure may have led participants to underreport the violence in their dating relationships. However, it is noteworthy that these girls were not reluctant to report physical aggression in their peer relationships and welcomed the opportunity to discuss their dating relationships. A more likely explanation is that, in the early stages of dating, violence may not tend to occur because the relationships tend to be idealized and of relatively short duration, and couples tend to meet in public settings such as school rather than in private settings, where adult intimate violence is more likely to occur. Finally, our investigation focused on an unselected sample of middle school girls, in which rates of seriously problematic behavior such as relationship violence or teen pregnancy were low. The advantage of this sample was that it allowed us to investigate the psychological processes that may lead to relationship-centered problems in a nonclinical sample of adolescent girls. Had we followed this sample into middle and later adolescence, the rates of the problematic behaviors of interest would undoubtedly have increased. Nonetheless, it remains to be established whether RS plays a role in leading adolescent girls to engage in problematic behavior.

These caveats notwithstanding, our results, together with findings from our prior research, suggest the need to consider the role that concerns about rejection in romantic relationships may play in the difficulties shown by adolescent girls, especially in those with histories of rejection. The value of this theoretical approach is that, although accounting for continuity from parental to peer relationships to adolescent romantic relationships, the framework also allows for change. Our assumption that RS is maintained by experiences in relationships means that it can also be modified by disconfirming experiences. Thus, it should be possible to design interventions to facilitate change toward more healthy ways of feeling, thinking, and behaving in relationships.

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