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Changes in rejection sensitivity across adolescence and emerging adulthood: Associations with relationship involvement, quality, and coping

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ABSTRACT

Using a sample of 110 Israeli youth (72% female), the present study investigates associations between initial levels of rejection sensitivity as well as changes in rejection sensitivity from age 16 to age 23 and relationship involvement, quality, and (growth following) coping with relationship stress. Results showed that rejection sensitivity generally decreased over time into the transition to adulthood. Furthermore, levels of rejection sensitivity at age 16 predicted whether young people were romantically involved by age 23, as well as the quality of their relationships. Yet, the change in level of rejection sensitivity over time explained far more the quality of later romantic relationships and competence in coping with relationship stress than the initial level of rejection sensitivity. These findings have important implications for examining the role of changes in personality attributes such as rejection sensitivity in the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

1. Introduction

Forming and establishing meaningful, committed romantic relationships are important endeavors for adolescents and emerging adults (Arnett, 2015). Concerns about being rejected by a romantic partner can complicate this process. Rejection sensitivity refers to the tendency to anticipate rejection, interpret neutral situations as rejecting and hostile, and overreact to these interpretations (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Findings from cross-sectional empirical research have consistently supported the link between rejection sensitivity and outcomes in late adolescence and emerging adulthood, including relationship dissatisfaction (Downey & Feldman, 1996, 2004; Galliher & Bentley, 2010), depressive symptoms (Norona, Roberson, & Welsh, 2016), and aggressive behaviors (Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Jan Kang, 2010). Importantly, relatively little research on the longitudinal associations between rejection sensitivity and individual and relational qualities later in life can be found. Using a sample of Israeli youth, the present study investigates associations between initial levels of rejection sensitivity as well as changes in rejection sensitivity from age 16 to age 23 and relationship involvement, quality, and growth following relationship stress.

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1.1. Rejection sensitivity and romantic experiences

Rejection sensitivity is a relational schema (Furman & Wehner, 1997) that affects the lenses through which individuals see their interactions with others (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Originating in childhood, individuals with parents who display rejecting behaviors tend to anticipate their parents' negativity in order to protect themselves against it (Bowlby, 1984; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Lebolt, Rincón, & Freitas, 1998). This sensitivity to rejection is often carried forward into adolescence and emerging adulthood, affecting young people's interactions with peers and romantic partners. For example, during romantic interactions in particular, individuals who are sensitive to rejection continue to expect that their romantic partners will behave with negative intentions, even though these behaviors might be generally positive or neutral (Norona, Salvatore, Welsh, & Darling, 2014). Indeed, observational studies have shown that during conversations with romantic partners, adolescents who are more sensitive to rejection perceive more conflict with their romantic partners compared to those who are less sensitive to rejection (Galliher & Bentley, 2010). Conflictual interactions are particularly difficult for those who are sensitive to rejection because of the potential threat of romantic dissolution (Downey, Bonica, & Rincón, 1999).

The discoloration of romantic interactions might explain the associations between rejection sensitivity and aggressive behaviors toward romantic partners (Downey, Irwin, Ramsay, & Ayduk, 2004; Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Kang, 2010). Specifically, individuals who are sensitive to rejection perceive their partners as behaving in hostile and rejecting ways; as a result, they react aggressively in retaliation to protect themselves. Consequently, rejection-sensitive individuals' attempt to protect themselves results in a self-fulfilling prophecy, as romantic partners react negatively to aggressive behaviors (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Relatedly, rejection sensitivity is associated with withholding negative feelings about their relationships with their romantic partners because the expression of such opinions might lead to conflict (Harper, Dickson, & Welsh, 2006). This cyclical dance of perceived rejection, hostility, and withholding feelings might account for the relationship between rejection sensitivity and relationship dissatisfaction (Galliher & Bentley, 2010). Taken together, this diminished quality in romantic relationships is likely to affect the schema of those who are sensitive to rejection, which in turn can explain the difficulty to sustain long-term, committed romantic relationships in the future.

1.2. Rejection sensitivity and its longitudinal associations

Despite the abundance of research on the associations across rejection sensitivity and individual and relationship qualities, the majority of these studies are cross-sectional (e.g., Besicki, Agnew, & Yildirim, 2016; Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Göncü & Sümer, 2011; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2013). Relatively little research on the longitudinal associations of rejection sensitivity exist. To our knowledge, only one study (Hafen, Spilker, Chango, Marston, & Allen, 2014) examined the effect of rejection sensitivity over time on romantic relationships assessing rejection sensitivity at age 16 and its association with relationship qualities at age 22. Using self-report measures and behavioral observations, Hafen et al. (2014) found that those who reported higher rejection sensitivity at age 16 tended to be single at age 22. Further, those who were high in rejection sensitivity at age 16 but were in a romantic relationship at age 22 reported more anxiety and avoidant behaviors with their romantic partners, behaved in ways that negatively impacted their romantic partners' independence and interdependence, and behaved submissively in their romantic relationships (Hafen et al., 2014).

This long-term effect of rejection sensitivity can be understood within the tenets of the attachment theory showing how relational schemas are re-enacted in future relationships (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). This pattern of coherence aligns with existing research on the continuity in relationship characteristics from adolescence to adulthood. For example, Seiffge-Krenke (2003) showed that the quality of a relationship with a partner at age 17 is associated with bonded love during emerging adulthood. Additionally, maladaptive relationship characteristics that contribute to low relationship quality seem to continue from adolescence to adulthood (Madsen & Collins, 2011; Smith, Welsh, & Fite, 2010). Thus, considering the self-perpetuating nature of the biased behaviors of rejection-sensitive individuals (Galliher & Bentley, 2010), these individuals are also more likely to experience difficulties in their future relationships.

1.3. Changes in rejection sensitivity over time

Early romantic experiences have been described as the “training ground” for romantic experiences later in life (Shulman & Connolly, 2013, p. 28). However, individual and relational qualities are not yet set in stone; rather, research suggests that relationship skills build upon one another. For example, at the couple level, Seiffge-Krenke (2003) showed that romantic relationship quality improves from adolescence to early adulthood. Furthermore, at the individual level, as they grow older, adolescents begin to use more productive strategies to solve problems with their romantic partners (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Townsend Betts, 2001; Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2006).

Conceptually, it might be questioned whether relational schemas also change from adolescence to early adulthood and whether rejection sensitive individuals' views and interactions also improve with age. Indeed, Hafen et al. (2014) demonstrated that rejection sensitivity decreased from adolescence to early adulthood, suggesting that young people either learn to cope with rejection or develop alternate views that change the ways they perceive interactions. These changes are consistent with research on personality across the lifespan, which suggest that individual characteristics shift throughout adulthood (Donnellan, Hill, & Roberts, 2015; Specht et al., 2014). During the transition to adulthood, individuals become more socially dominant, conscientious, and emotionally stable; for example, they become more open to new experiences and are less defensive (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). According to Arnett (2015), as youth approach the transition to adulthood and consider their roles as romantic partners and join the workforce in

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