# Interpersonal relationship mindsets and rejection sensitivity across cultures: The role of relational mobility

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## ABSTRACT

Extending past research on implicit theories of romantic relationships into a general interpersonal relationship domain, this research examined the sociocultural causes and psychological consequences of destiny beliefs (i.e., relationships with friends, family, romantic partners, and peers are destined to succeed or fail from the beginning) and growth beliefs (i.e., successful interpersonal relationships are developed through effort). Study 1 ($N = 103$) showed that people who believed strongly in destiny beliefs tended to more anxiously expect social rejection. Study 2 ($N = 97$) further examined whether the socio-ecological environment, in particular relational mobility (i.e., the extent to which individuals have opportunities to choose and establish new relationships based on their preferences), influenced individual differences in relationship beliefs and rejection sensitivity. The results showed that Hong Kong Chinese, who perceived their society to be low in relational mobility, believed more strongly in destiny beliefs and thus, were more sensitive to social rejection compared to European Canadians, who perceived their society to be high in relational mobility. These findings are discussed in terms of the importance of socio-ecological factors in shaping relationship beliefs, which in turn function as cognitive mechanisms that underlie relationship outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

People differ in their beliefs about what determines a successful relationship: some believe that successful relationships are "meant to be" (i.e., destiny beliefs), whereas others believe that successful relationships require constant effort (i.e., growth beliefs; Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003). In the domain of romantic relationships, these beliefs have been found to be linked to motivation, goals, and attribution in interpersonal processes, and thus, they can predict relationship outcomes such as reactions to conflicts and satisfaction (Knee, 1998). Specifically, people who strongly believe in destiny theories are likely to set short-term (vs. long-term) dating goals and thus, put less effort into developing relationships. As a result, they feel less satisfied with their relationships and are more likely to take the initiative to end their relationships compared to those who strongly hold growth theories (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Franiuk, Momerantz, & Cohen, 2004; Knee, 1998). Although this framework of relationship beliefs is shown to be useful in understanding romantic relationships, little is known about how these beliefs affect general interpersonal relationships, such as those with friends, family, and peers. Even less research has investigated

environmental causes of these beliefs; that is, whether and how people acquire these beliefs about relationships from their socio-ecological environment.

To understand how such beliefs might affect general interpersonal relationships, we first investigate whether implicit theories of relationships are associated with the tendency to anxiously expect social rejection (i.e., rejection sensitivity) in a general relationship domain. Second, we explore the role of culture on implicit theories of relationships and rejection sensitivity from the perspective of relational mobility – the extent to which individuals in a given society have opportunities to develop new relationships (Yuki & Schug, 2012).

### 1.1. Rejection sensitivity (RS)

Feelings of belonging and being accepted by others are fundamental psychological needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, social rejection can occur in different types of social relationships, including familial relationships, friendships, and romantic relationships (Lambert & Hopwood, 2016). For example, people may decline your requests, leave you out of a conversation, exclude you from social activities, refuse your romantic advances, or even avoid and ignore you. Such social rejection can lead to feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and decreased well-being (Leary, 1990). To avoid these negative outcomes, some people become attentive to signals of potential social rejection,

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which allows them to monitor and modify their behaviours in an effort to avoid social exclusion (Pickett & Gardner, 2005). Therefore, in response to social environments where rejection is likely, individuals may develop a tendency to worry about whether others will accept them (i.e., rejection sensitivity or RS) as an adaptive process (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

RS is a cognitive and affective processing disposition involved in detecting and responding to potential rejection cues, which can affect personal and interpersonal experiences (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Compared to people who expect social acceptance (i.e., low in RS), people who are high in RS more readily perceive rejection, which undermines their confidence in social interactions and causes social anxiety, diminishing the quality of their social relationships and well-being (London, Downey, Bonica, & Paltin, 2007). Therefore, although RS can function to detect potential rejection cues, being too high in RS can become dysfunctional and lead to maladaptive outcomes.

### 1.2. Implicit theories of social relationships and rejection sensitivity

Research showed that RS can be caused by previous rejection experiences; people who had experienced more social rejection developed a stronger tendency for RS (London et al., 2007). However, people may construe their social experiences differently based on the implicit theories that they hold (Dweck, 1999). Implicit theories are social–cognitive traits that have been widely investigated in understanding the individual differences in negative social situations (Carr, Rattan, & Dweck, 2012). For example, people who perceive personal and social characteristics (e.g., intelligence, personality, and relationships) as fixed are motivated to set performance goals that focus on gaining favourable outcomes and thus, they are motivated to avoid undesirable social cues (e.g., possible rejection). In contrast, people who perceive personal and social characteristics as being malleable tend to set mastery goals that focus on the process, thereby motivating them to approach improvement. Therefore, the type of implicit theory adopted may direct a person to interpret and understand his or her social environment differently (Carr et al., 2012; Dweck, 1999).

In the domain of romantic relationships, research showed that people who held strong destiny beliefs tended to attribute conflicts and rejection to internal factors (e.g., the relationship itself) and to view these conflicts as signs of relationship failure (Knee et al., 2003; Franiuk et al., 2002). In contrast, people who held strong growth beliefs tended to attribute conflicts and rejection to external factors and to perceive them as opportunities to cultivate a relationship. Similar findings were also obtained in the domain of peer relationships. Rudolph (2010) found that people who strongly believed that their peer relationships were destined to succeed suffered more depressive and aggressive symptoms when they were excluded by their peers. These findings suggest that implicit theories may be relevant to how people interpret the cues of potential rejection in different types of social relationships. Therefore, the framework of implicit theories may be applicable to understanding people's tendency towards RS in a general relationship domain.

Previous research on implicit theories suggests that destiny and growth beliefs can be used to understand and predict rejection sensitively separately. First, destiny and growth beliefs are conceptually and empirically independent; people who subscribe strongly to destiny beliefs do not necessarily reject growth beliefs (Knee et al., 2003). Moreover, destiny and growth beliefs function in different interpersonal processes (Knee et al., 2003). Destiny beliefs are related to the process of diagnosing bad relationships; people high in destiny beliefs are more attentive to their partners' negative behaviours and more readily perceive them as signs that the relationship will inevitably fail (Knee, 1998). Therefore, to avoid the consequences of relationship failures (e.g., the termination of relationships), they may become more sensitive towards negative social cues that indicate potential rejection. On the other hand, growth beliefs are particularly important in the process of dealing with relationship conflicts; people high in growth beliefs put more effort into

dealing with conflict and use more positive resolution strategies in such situations. Given that destiny beliefs, but not growth beliefs, are found to be associated with the concerns of negative interpersonal cues (Knee, 1998), we predict that only destiny beliefs will be linked to RS.

The link between destiny beliefs and rejection sensitivity is also supported by research from the domain of intercultural communication. People who hold strongly fixed beliefs about language ability are more sensitive to their performance and express higher anxiety towards rejection when using the target language (Lou & Noels, 2016, 2017a). Similarly, migrants who hold strongly fixed beliefs express more concerns about being rejected by native speakers (Lou & Noels, 2017b). Building upon the theoretical framework of implicit theories and findings from other domains, we predicted that a strong destiny belief is linked to rejection sensitivity.

### 1.3. Culture, relational mobility, and relationship beliefs

Given the importance of implicit theories in interpersonal relationships, it is critical to understand what causes people to endorse different relationship beliefs. Previous studies suggest that people can acquire and change their relationship beliefs based on their interpersonal experiences in their immediate social environments (Oishi, 2010). In other words, people may endorse different implicit theories as an adaptive strategy in a given environment. One important environmental factor with regard to understanding interpersonal relationships is relational mobility – the extent to which a given society provides individuals with chances to establish new relationships (Yuki & Schug, 2012).

The framework of relational mobility provides insight into how social ecologies shape individuals' relationships with others (Yuki & Schug, 2012). Greater relational mobility in a society provides more freedom for individuals to choose new relationships based on their personal preferences. That is, their social relationships are more voluntaristic in nature. Accordingly, people are likely to develop promotion-oriented relationality; they are motivated to seek out positive outcomes in social relationships. For example, people in high-relational-mobility societies show greater motivation to strengthen their relationships (Schug, Yuki, & Maddux, 2010) and put more effort into expanding their social ties (Oishi, 2010). In contrast, relationships in low-relational-mobility societies are relatively stable and dependent on one's close-knit living environment; people in such societies have little freedom to choose their relationships. Therefore, for these people, establishing a new relationship is more difficult and losing a relationship is more detrimental (Yuki & Schug, 2012). Accordingly, in low-relational-mobility societies, people are likely to develop prevention-oriented relationality; they are more motivated to avoid potential negative consequences in social relationships in order to maintain their current social networks. As a result, people in low-relational-mobility societies tend to be sensitive to social rejection (Sato, Yuki, & Norasakkunkit, 2014) cautious about interpreting their friends' behaviours (Li, Adams, Kurtis, & Hamamura, 2015), and to take fewer social risks by suppressing their differing opinions (Li, Hamamura, & Adams, 2016).

Considering that people acquire their beliefs about relationships through their social experiences embedded in their given society, we propose that cultural contexts that vary in their degree of relational mobility may promote different types of beliefs about relationships. Specifically, in societies low in relational mobility, such as those in East Asia, people may adapt to hold the belief that the nature of relationships is fixed due to the embedded interdependence of social relationships. In contrast, in societies high in relational mobility, such as North America, people may adapt to hold beliefs that relationships are malleable due to the voluntaristic nature of social relationships.

Moreover, these culturally acquired beliefs about relationships may function as underlying cognitive processes that mediate the influence of cultural environments on relationship outcomes. For example, previous research suggests that socio-ecological factors affect individuals' rejection sensitivity; rejection sensitivity is found to be more prevalent in