

Significant Others' Effect on Affect: Responses to Acceptance and Rejection¹

Donya Bernier
Robert Morris University

Self-esteem was evaluated based on the presence or absence of a significant other in acceptance and rejection situations. Hypothetical scenarios were utilized to include acceptance and rejection conditions for individuals who either had a significant other, or did not have a significant other. Thirty-nine undergraduates were asked to read these scenarios, and complete a self-esteem questionnaire from the point-of-view of the individual in each scenario. The presence of a significant other did result in a higher self-esteem score in acceptance situations (as opposed to acceptance without significant other). However, the presence of a significant other did not lessen rejection's negative effect on self-esteem.

Introduction

The concepts of self-esteem and social acceptance have repeatedly been linked in research. Self-esteem has been shown to vary with our perceptions of social acceptance (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). The Sociometer theory postulates that self-esteem varies positively with perceived inclusion (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). In performing multiple experiments employing several techniques of exclusion, Leary, et al. (1995) showed that exclusion from a group of peers resulted in lower self-esteem for the excluded individual when that individual perceived the exclusion to be based on the his or her qualities or attributes, as opposed to being based on random selection.

Social exclusion also causes people to engage in behaviors that are unhealthy and risk-prone (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002). Twenge et al. (2002) showed that people who were told they would be alone made more unhealthy and unwise decisions (such as to procrastinate, drink alcohol, and smoke) than those who were told they would have relationships at some point during their lives. As self-esteem varies with social acceptance, it has a large bearing on our life choices through that need for acceptance.

Self-esteem has been found to affect our choices of interaction partners. Rudich and Vallacher (1999) set up experiments in which subjects previously shown through questionnaires to possess high, moderate, or low self-esteem interacted with appraisers who either accepted or rejected individuals through the medium of evaluative feedback. Individuals with low self-esteem chose to enhance self-esteem by choosing to interact with those whom they thought would provide them with the highest level of acceptance, regardless of whether the evaluators provided them positive or negative feedback (Rudich & Vallacher, 1999). Self-esteem also influences level of attachment to significant individuals – if we feel consistently accepted (according to the Sociometer Theory, a function of self-esteem), we weather relationship difficulties better, and have confidence in significant others' regard for us (Murray, et al., 2002; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000).

Murray, et al. (2002) studied the reactions of individuals with either high or low self-esteem in a condition in which they believed their significant-other saw a problem in their relationship. Those individuals with low self-esteem saw the problems as more relationally detrimental than those with high self-esteem. Murray et al proposed that the persistent need for acceptance in people with low

¹ Address correspondence to: Stephen T. Paul, Ph.D., 6001 University Blvd., Moon Township, PA 15108-1189, or via email at: paul@rmu.edu.

self-esteem may cause them to see signs of rejection where none exist, therefore causing them to find less satisfaction in attachments to others. This may lead us to suppose that those with satisfying attachments will perceive greater acceptance from their significant other.

Indeed, people who have high self-esteem have confidence in their partners regard for them (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Murray, Holmes, and Griffin had couples describe themselves, their significant other, and how they thought that significant other perceived them. Individuals with high self-esteem saw greater well-being in their relationships than those with low self-esteem.

Because social acceptance is directly related to self-esteem, and self-esteem is directly related to perception of acceptance, we may conclude that the two operate in a reciprocal relationship. Therefore, if the perception of consistent acceptance from a significant other helps us weather relationship difficulties (e.g. Murray, et al., 2002), that same consistent acceptance might help us weather other difficulties as well – specifically social exclusion.

I hypothesize that the self-esteem boost resulting from the perceived acceptance of a significant other causes one's self-esteem to be less negatively affected by the perceived social exclusion of peers. Several predictions flow from this hypothesis. One, in the presence of *social exclusion*, subjects who do have significant others will have *higher* self-esteem than those who do not. Two, in the presence of *social acceptance*, subjects who have a significant other will either receive *less* of a self-esteem boost than those who do not (because their need for acceptance has already been partially met), *or* they will receive *the same* self-esteem boost as those without a significant other. Research was intended as a pilot-study to determine whether people intuitively believe that individuals who have a significant other fare better in rejection situations than those who do not have a significant other.

Method

Participants

The research volunteers consisted of thirty-nine undergraduates (approximately equal numbers

of males and females) who were enrolled in psychology classes at a private university in Western Pennsylvania. Students volunteered to participate in order to receive class credit.

Design

The present study used a 2 x 2 within-subjects design, in which both significant other (presence or absence) and situation (acceptance or rejection) were manipulated. The dependant variable was each participants' responses to a self-esteem questionnaire based on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965).

Materials

Materials were a listing of specific scenarios and a self-esteem assessment. Four descriptions of specific scenarios were written to depict all levels of the independent variables. Hypothetical scenarios were utilized to include acceptance and rejection conditions for individuals who either had a significant other, or did not have a significant other. Scenarios included one of four conditions: (a) individual had a significant other, and was *accepted* by peers, (b) individual had significant other, and was *rejected* by peers, (c) individual did not have a significant other, and was *accepted* by peers, and (d) individual did not have significant other, and was *rejected* by peers. In addition, scenarios depicting two positive experiences, and two negative experiences were also included to decrease the likelihood of hypothesis-guessing (see appendix for an example of the stimuli used).

The method of self-esteem assessment was a questionnaire based on Rosenberg's self-esteem scale. Rosenberg's scale is a ten-item Likert scale designed to utilize self-assessment to determine whether common indicators of high or low self-esteem are present in the individual's self-concept. For clarity, the Rosenberg scale was altered so that participants answered questions from the point-of-view of the individual in the scenario.

Procedure

Upon arrival, participants were given a packet of hypothetical scenarios in random order. Each self-esteem questionnaire was placed after each corresponding scenario. Participants were asked to read the scenario and respond to the questionnaire. Participants were tested in groups, but were instructed to complete the packets independently.

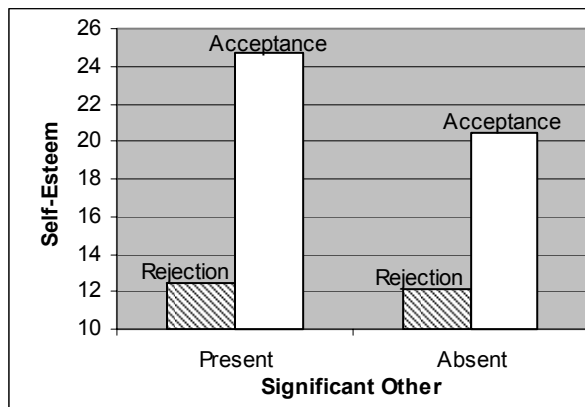
Significant others' effect on affect

After all group members completed the packet, they were told the nature and purpose of the study, and any questions were answered. Time taken to complete the packet was approximately one-half hour.

Results

A 2 (Significant Other) x 2 (Situation) within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on mean self-esteem scores. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of Significant Other, $F(1, 38) = 11.18, p < .05$, in which scores for presence scenarios were greater (18.6) than for the absence scenarios (16.3). The analysis revealed a significant main effect of Situation, $F(1, 38) = 110.65, p < .05$, in which scores for acceptance scenarios were greater (22.6) than scores for rejection scenarios (12.3). The analysis also revealed a significant interaction of Significant Other and Situation, $F(1, 38) = 7.36, p < .05$, which is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Significant Other relative to Situation.



Conclusions

As expected, self-esteem scores were significantly higher in peer-acceptance situations than peer-rejection situations. The presence of a significant other did result in a higher self-esteem score in acceptance situations (as opposed to acceptance without significant other). However, the presence of a significant other did not lessen rejection's negative effect on self-esteem. The research predictions aligned more with the expectation of a greater effect of the presence/absence of a significant other on self-esteem in rejection situations, rather than the obtained difference in acceptance situations. These results may be evidence that not having a

significant other generally decreases self-esteem, and peer acceptance cannot make up for this lack. The results may also be evidence that having a significant other does not mediate the profound effect of peer rejection on self-esteem. However, the research utilized scenarios in hopes that subjects would be able to identify with the situation – instead of utilizing real-life examples. Consequently, people may have been more objective than they would have been if they were actually in the situations, and the effects may have been exaggerated or diminished.

Additionally, conducting the research within-subjects may have caused participants to be more aware of positives – therefore increasing the effects of acceptance and presence of significant other simultaneously. Also, the ability of participants to compare scenarios may have exaggerated the effect of rejection and minimized any effect of significant other in the rejection scenarios. For instance, if the participant has just read about a positive experience, a subsequent negative experience may have seemed worse by comparison.

The hypothesis, therefore, may still be valid in real-life conditions in which participants can better identify and relate to experiences. Future research may be conducted to examine the results of the scenarios in a between-subjects design that reduces the tendency to compare scenarios. Further research may also explore the hypothesis in more realistic circumstances – perhaps even circumstances that directly involve the participant.

References

- Collins, N. L. & Feeney, B. C. (2000). A safe haven: An attachment theory perspective on support seeking and caregiving in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*, 1053-1073.
- Leary, M. R. & Baumeister, R. F. (2000). The nature and function of self-esteem: Sociometer theory. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 32*, 2-51.
- Leary, M. R., Tambor, E. S., Terdal, S. K. & Downs, D. L. (1995). Self-esteem as an interpersonal monitor: The sociometer hypothesis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68*, 518-530.

BERNIER

Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G. & Griffin, D. W. (2000). Self-esteem and the quest for felt security: How perceived regard regulates attachment processes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 478-498.

Murray, S. L., Rose, P., Bellavia, G. M., Holmes, J. G., & Garrett Kusche, A. When rejection stings: How self-esteem constrains relationship-enhancement processes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 556-573.

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rudich, E. A. & Vallacher, R. R. (1999). To belong or to self-enhance? Motivational bases for choosing interaction partners. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25, 1387-1404.

Twenge, J. M., Catanese, K. R., & Baumeister, R. F. (2002). Social exclusion causes self-defeating behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83, 606-615.

Appendix

Tim's company is beginning a new manager-feedback program. Meetings will be held once every few months, and each department will send one representative to communicate the department's ideas and concerns. Tim's wife, Ann, was especially excited to hear that Tim was chosen by his department to represent their interests in

these upcoming meetings. She had met some of his colleagues and knew that they respected him. His colleagues said that he was the only one who both listens to their concerns, and has the ability to articulate those concerns well.

If I were Tim:

- a. On the whole, I would be satisfied with myself.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree
- b. At times, I would think I was no good at all.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree
- c. I'd feel that I have a number of good qualities.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree
- d. I'm able to do things as well as most others.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree
- e. I'd feel that I do not have much to be proud of.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree
- f. I'd certainly feel useless at times.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree
- g. I would feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree
- h. I'd wish I could have more respect for myself.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree
- i. All in all, I'd feel that I am a failure.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree
- j. I would take a positive attitude toward myself.
__ Strongly Agree __ Agree __ Disagree __ Strongly Disagree