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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Role Taking in Rejection Sensitivity

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#### Abstract

People who are susceptible to rejection are predisposed to anxiously anticipate, readily make out and react excessively to it in interpersonal situations. Concerns over security and over interpersonal estrangement provide the primary motivating forces for personality formation. Thus it may lead to the formation of a defensive structure in an endeavour to provide a false sense of safety. Role taking is the process whereby an individual imaginatively constructs the attitudes of the other and thus anticipates the behavior of the other. The present paper provides an overview about the concepts of rejection sensitivity and role-taking and of the interaction between the two. Previous research on causes of rejection sensitivity are reinterpreted using methods of symbolic interactionism, to understand how the interactions between humans involve the processes of interpretation and fitting together of developing lines of action.

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The course of relationships are influenced to a great extent by people's beliefs about their significant others (Baldwin, 1992; Reis & Patrick, 1996). The individual does not and cannot exist apart from his or her relations with other people. Personality is formed by recurrent interpersonal situations that characterize human life (Sullivan, 1953). It can be adequately understood only as process within the larger socio-cultural environmental process. Human nature as well as society is malleable and plastic. The former is made anxious by the conditions under which they live. Anything that disturbs the security of the child in relation to his or her significant others produce anxiety (Horney, 1937). This anxiety produces an excessive need for affection which when not met lead to a sense of rejection. This in turn, makes the child develop strategies by which to cope with its feelings of isolation and hopelessness. According to Horney, the neurotic need for affection and approval, makes the person live for the good opinion of others and is extremely sensitive to any sign of rejection or unfriendliness. Inner conflicts develop due to this neurotic need for love which is insatiable. Conflict arises out of social conditions and the neurotic person had faced culturally determined difficulties through childhood experiences (Karen Horney, *Neurotic*

*personality of our times*, 1937). Sroufe (1990) suggested that rejection prospects can pilot people to conduct them self in ways that elicit rejection from others. In the present paper the researcher examines the interplay between rejection sensitivity and role-taking. The question reflected on is how rejection sensitivity colours role-taking or the symbols and gestures expressing the attitudes of others.

Drawing selectively on the interaction of role-taking and rejection sensitivity in interpersonal situations, an attempt is made to analyze how these affect internal conversations and subsequently human behaviour in social situations. Rejection Sensitivity is operationalised as anxious expectations of rejection by significant others in interpersonal situations where rejection is possible. Role taking is defined as the imaginative construction of the attitudes of significant others to anticipate their behaviour. Mead defined attitudes in behavioural terms as the beginning of acts. However it is also defined as certain regularities of an individual's feelings, thoughts and predispositions to act towards some aspect of his environment (Paul. F. Secord, Carl.W.Backman, 1964). A vital concept influencing sensitivity in social situations is the concept of embarrassment which is an outgrowth of interaction. In high rejection sensitive individuals embarrassment entails a threat to ones identity by the behaviour

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(rejecting) of others or by contradictory expectations about roles. As embarrassment makes subsequent interaction problematic, it furthers the anxious need for love in high rejection sensitive individuals (Erving Goffman, 1967). Once activated, anxious expectations of rejection prompt readiness to perceive rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). The paper presents an overview on the causal factors activating rejection sensitivity in individuals.

### **Early Experiences and Rejection Sensitivity**

Human beings have a strong need to belong and a stronger aversion towards being rejected. Human beings thus hold specialized psychological systems that observe and control their pursuit for social acceptance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tooby & Cosmides, 1996). Early rejection experiences could reduce one's ability to cope with future social interactions. Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity is defined as an excessive level of awareness of the behaviour and feelings of others (Boyce & Parker, 1989). Karen Horney (1950) saw the core of neurosis in human relations. When a child feels isolated and helpless in a world potentially dangerous (basic anxiety) there is a compulsive tendency to move toward, against or away from people to keep this basic anxiety at the minimum (Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, W.W. Norton & Co, Inc. 1950). As posited by Erikson, for a child one of the earliest psychosocial goals is to develop basic trust and confidence on self and others. In high rejection sensitive individuals the basic conflicts are those that arise due to conflicting needs and conflicting attitudes with others. At the core of this disposition is the anxious expectation of being rejected by people who are important to the self due to prolonged and severe rejection (RS; Downey & Feldman, 1996). The dynamic defense of rejection sensitivity is active to the extent an individual has experienced pain in rejection. It serves as a shield against the threat of interpersonal rejection but with time it becomes dysfunctional and is activated with the minimal cues of rejection. It sets in motion a series of responses which leads to the fulfillment of expectations of rejection (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis & Khouri, 1998). Threat can be socially learned such as an expectation of rejection in certain social situations (Lang et. al, 1990). In Rejection Sensitivity, perception and reaction to threat-congruent cues are amplified wherein an individual readily detects a threat in negligible cues of rejection (Lang et.al, 2000). The PARTheory (Parental-Acceptance and Rejection Theory) confirms that children need acceptance from parents and attachment figures to develop into well adjusted individuals. Children who perceive rejection are more

susceptible to substance abuse, adjustment issues, interpersonal conflicts and other mental health related problems. They feel that they do not possess the qualities that merit nurturance, care and attention in social situations. In threatening situations, inferences are drawn about the significant other's regard for them.

According to Downey & Feldman (1996) the Rejection Sensitivity (RS) Model posits that the excessive sensitivity to rejection cues; with its ensuing over-reactions disagree with the regular learning course. Through premature and severe rejection experiences with significant others, children learn to anxiously expect rejection with a poorer threshold for discernment of negativity. They personalize negative cues and counter intensely these perceived cues of rejection. Negative-behaviour composite such as hostile or negative voice-tone, mockery of the partner, assigning negative mind-set to the partner, denying responsibility, being turn-off etc increase partner's level of dissatisfaction leading to more rejection for the High Rejection Sensitive individual in interpersonal situations (MICS-IV; Weiss & Summers, 1983). Such inferences and emotions create distress and are expressed as depression or hostility leading to a feedback loop which serves to fulfill the anxious expectations of rejection. This dynamic, once acquired, may decide the pattern in relationships all throughout the life course.

### *Self-fulfilling prophecy in Rejection Sensitivity*

For High Rejection Sensitive people there is an uncertainty about whether they will be accepted or rejected in situations where rejection is a possibility. The outcome is very critical as these situations integrate cognitive assessment of danger for such people (Fanselow, 1994; Lang et. al, 2000; Lazarus, 1999). People's sense of self worth is bound up in their quality of relationship with others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The potential threat which is implicit in close interpersonal situations make us weary of detecting rejecting cues and also of behaving in ways that may trigger painful rejection (Murray, Griffin & Holmes, 2000). In rejection-relevant situations, the Defensive Motivational System is automatically activated leading to monitoring and detection of threat-relevant cues which in turn prepares the individual for swift response once these cues are detected (Downey, Mougious, London, Ayduk, Shoda, 2004). However it is to be remembered that Rejection Sensitivity is not a global disposition. Even harmless societal interactions are perceived as intentionally rejecting due to the situation specific trigger that realizes anxious expectations of rejection. Cognitive-affective reactions such as hurt and anger follow and

then maladaptive behavioural responses lead to the formation of a feedback loop highly unrewarding in interpersonal situations with close others. Uncertainty in interpersonal situations makes High Rejection Sensitive individuals scan the environment for potential cues of threat (Krohne & Fuchs, 1991) and preparing to act defensively once such cues are detected. Though vigilance is intended as a coping strategy it leads to hypersensitivity and overreactions to false alarms disregarding contextual cues and assigning harmful intent to other's behaviour towards them. Individuals may react with hurt, anger, blaming of self or others etc. this has different implications on a person's life ranging from aggressive reactions to depressive symptoms and withdrawal. Such individuals show biases in attentional and self-referential encoding and recall of negative socially relevant material. Sroufe (1990) suggested that rejection expectations can make people react in ways that draw rejection from others. This is the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948) inherent in the process of rejection sensitivity. In both experimental and field studies, High Rejection Sensitive people have been found to perceive rejection in ambiguous clue more readily than Low Rejection Sensitive people (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey et. al, 1998). When perceived rejection quickly evokes an over-reaction in behaviour that a significant other finds aversive, it is likely that the significant other will behave in ways that will fulfill the High Rejection Sensitive person's anxious expectations of rejection thus predicting relationship breakup (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis & Khouri, 1998). Murray Holmes and Griffin (1996a; 1996b) demonstrated that peoples' idealizations of their romantic partners affected their partners self-images, controlling for the effect of their partner's pre-existing self-perceptions. Thus an increase in congruence between self-concept of individuals with their partner's appraisals for the same can be seen (McNulty & Swann, 1994). A study of interpersonal conflicts where behavioural overreactions from individuals with high sensitivity to rejection are mostly seen reveals that such individuals are more anxious regarding the accepting and warm dimensions of their partner's personality on the day succeeding the conflict.

#### *Role taking in interpersonal conflicts*

Any interpersonal situation entails many instances of rejection for an individual. We are constantly making inferences about our surroundings and also about the feelings, thoughts and intentions of others around us (Selman, 2003). By taking the role of another person, an individual conceives his/her interpersonal relationships. Symbolic Interactionist's concern with the processes of social-organization,

meaning making and social control has fostered a particular interest in what Shott (1979) has called 'role taking emotions' such as guilt, embarrassment, shame and empathy. These role taking emotions require a social self and thus foster both self-control and social-control. People feel or anticipate shame and work to avert or shrug off embarrassment. As Hochschild (1990:117) wrote "What we feel is truly as important to the outcome of social affairs as what we think or do." Thus our feelings about ourselves, others and our relationships etc. are central to the meanings we construct and the outcomes of our interactions with significant others over time. Thus the increase in dysphoric thoughts and the negative behaviour component of High Rejection Sensitive individuals during interpersonal conflicts have significant implications on our relationship outcomes because it is not just a cognitive exertion but engage our emotions as well. Thus the coercive effects of such role-taking emotions as embarrassment, guilt or shame etc may not only signify greater self-regulation but serve to increase the anxious hyper vigilance associated with such people. Research on the differential effect of this hyper vigilance on self-regulation and rejection averting behaviour needs to be undertaken in the future.

#### **Role-Taking and Rejection Sensitivity**

Roles exist in varying degrees of concreteness and consistency, whereas an individual confidently frames his behaviour as if they had unequivocal existence and clarity. In the present paper, the researcher attempts to trace the theoretical basis of Rejection Sensitivity rooted in Personality studies, Socio-Cognitive and Attachment perspectives and their analyses from a symbolic interactionist standpoint. Interactions with parents lead to later patterns of interpersonal behaviour or personality traits (Horney, 1937; Erikson, 1950; Sullivan, 1953). Intraindividual processing dynamics with variations in scripts and schemas have a pronounced effect on behaviour in social situations (Michel & Shoda, 1995). It was seen that aggressive children more readily ascribe hostile intent to others which morally justified aggressive retaliation (Dodge, 1980). He further noted that their attributional bias to inspect all negative behaviour as motivated by antagonism is constrained to harmful behaviour directed towards themselves and does not emerge in their attributions of negative behaviour directed towards others (Crick & Dodge, 1994). Thus anxious expectations of dislike and rejection underlie their attributions (Dodge & Somberg, 1987). Socio-cognitive perspective on rejection sensitivity focuses on how children encode and attribute others' behaviour. From a symbolic interactionist

perspective, role-taking is then of paramount importance in making sense of social environment. In this process an individual imaginatively constructs the attitudes of others and thus anticipates their behaviour (Robert H. Lauer & Linda Boardman, 1971). The cognitive and affective antecedents of behaviour in social situations are specific rather than global trends (Ayduk, Downey & Kim, 2000). Children being severely ostracized or rejected by parents and attachment figures early in their life, need to take the roles of these significant others to comprehend their world by assigning meanings to their actions (Walter Coutu, 1951). In Symbolic Interactionism, meanings are derived from how we respond to objects. The meaning thus ascribed to the rejecting parent is determined by how the child reacts to imminent threats to their sense of security. These reactions range from being hyper vigilant for signs of rejection along with anxious expectations of rejection in interpersonal situations. The RS Model links a high rejection sensitive (HRS) individual's reaction to specific social situations on the basis of his/her past social learning history (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Thus on the basis of the meanings derived from earlier interpersonal situations of rejection, the Defensive Motivational System propounded by Downey(1998) gets activated for HRS individuals on account of even minimal threat of rejection. Attribution bias due to anxious expectations leads to misapprehension of the meanings of the symbols or gestures which express the attitudes of others. In ambiguous situations, the role taking of significant others become over ridden with nervous anticipation of rejection thus leading to an internal conversation employing the perceived symbols. The relationships of children with parents, peers and teachers form a framework of understanding and expectations for all future interactions (Sroufe, 1990) Language is an important ingredient in acquiring role taking capacity. A conversation of significant gestures is also a process of role taking. In adult interactions, individuals proceed by taking the role of the generalized other i.e. roles of many others simultaneously. The generalized other is the social group which gives to the individual his unity of self (Mead, 1934). Hostile expectations of others' rejecting behaviour can distort perceptions of their behaviour causing defensiveness that destabilize relationships. The basic anxiety and conflicts as indicated by Karen Horney (1937) comprise of conflicts through conflicting attitudes of others. The cognitive and affective processes that underlie the high Rejection Sensitive dynamic and its link to aggression, such as attributions of rejecting intent (Downey & Feldman, 1996) and stronger mental associations between rejection and hostile thoughts

(Ayduk et al., 1999) have been well documented in prior research.

In the attachment perspective on Rejection Sensitivity, it is children's expectations of whether their needs will be satisfied by important others or be rejecting, that will enable them to form internal working models of relationships (Bowlby, 1973). In attachment theory attitude and surviving orientations are seen as parts of a merged "attachment style" comprising of cognitions and emotions about possibility of acceptance/rejection and tactics to handle impending refutation. Exposure to abusive family environments serve as cognitive schemas that impact cognition, affect and behaviour in subsequent relationships (Ayduk, Downey & Kim, 2001). When a child's early requirements are met considerably time and again, their working model incorporates the expectation of support and acceptance. Otherwise they incorporate reservations and fears about whether others will accept them or not. Failed attempts to fulfill the "need to belong" lead to a variety of undesirable reactions and outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, devaluation of social relationships, loss of self-regulation, and aggression (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). This is accounted for by the reflexive nature of role-taking which emphasizes on the deployment of the role of the other as a parallel, reflecting the expectations or evaluation of the self as seen in the other role (Ralph Turner, 1956). When there are negative evaluations by others, the self-evaluation is unwarrantedly affected negatively. The frantic effort to shield the self from such negative evaluations leads to aggressive or hostile behaviour at the perception of threat in interpersonal situations. Appropriative role-taking where the imaginatively constructed attitudes of the other are internalized into the self throws light into the transmission of high rejection sensitivity within maladjusted families. Through the related process of identification, individuals imbibe for themselves certain attitudes of the other, becoming more like the other prior to appropriation. Acceptance/rejection schemas begin to form as soon as a child is born and all human contact becomes a field to learn the rules of social interaction (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). If rejected repeatedly, interpersonal situations in the future will serve as primes for rejection and strong mental associations will exist between relevant situations and rejection. Goffman related embarrassment to the self presented in interaction and is essential for impression formation in social situations (Erving Goffman, 1967). Embarrassment arises out of social interaction where something has happened to threaten the identity of the individual. In situations of rejection, the assumptions that the interactants hold about each

other are undermined consistently (Gross & Stone, 1964). Thus in viewing Rejection Sensitivity as a defensive motivational system, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, vigorous efforts to prevent realization of threat and preparedness for rapid action in case threat is noticed, is but an attempt to keep embarrassment at bay (Le Doux, 1996).

## Conclusion

Understanding the mechanisms through which anxious attachment style, self esteem and other dispositions yield relationship behaviours can greatly facilitate the development of more effective intervention intended to reduce the negative consequences of interpersonal vulnerabilities (Downey & Freitas, 1998). For high rejection sensitive individuals alternate interpretations for apparently discarding behaviour is not considered and exhibition of approval is undervalued. There is a kind of processing of information whereby pre-existing information are more readily evoked than information which are presently garnered. Highly defensive and inappropriately intense reactions follow thus making rejection-sensitivity a self-fulfilling prophecy of eventual rejection in interpersonal scenarios. A synergic role-taking by the partners of High Rejection Sensitive individuals will help the former understand how their neutral and ambiguous negative behaviour is posing a potential threat of rejection to the individual highly sensitive to rejection. One way in which the Rejection Sensitivity process can be broken is through aiming behaviours to avert rejection from occurring, even in the incidence of intimidating trigger cues. Another way is through mindful and controlled efforts to regulate responses to rejection once it has occurred (Rusbult, Verette et. al, 1991). It is through the altering of symbolic meanings ascribed to responses in rejecting situations and alteration in internal conversations with the generalized other that the above end can be reached.

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