

**Adverse reactions to rejection: Rejection sensitivity and aggressive tendency in  
heterosexual men**

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## **Adverse reactions to rejection: Rejection sensitivity and aggressive tendency in heterosexual men**

Heterosexual relations between men and women can at times be problematic because of threats that are posed to the continuation or noncontinuation of romantic interactions. Violence and aggression as carried out by men in particular may reflect deep-seated issues regarding rejection sensitivity, self-esteem, personality, and the subscription to certain gender roles involving toxic masculinity. Rejection sensitivity and aggressiveness in men appear to be connected, and the goal of my research is to determine if there is a relationship between the two by extrapolating whether or not women's romantic/sexual advance declines and rejection sensitivity may provoke aggressive responses. Furthermore, prior to my research, I was aware of the gender-specific violence (both physical and emotional) carried out by men onto women who would reject their romantic and/or sexual advances. Countless headlines about murders, rapes, and harassment flooded internet platforms, and there appeared to be an obvious linkage between rejection sensitivity and aggressiveness, though unconfirmed. Rejection sensitivity as I understood it was a byproduct of low self-esteem, masculine ideals of domination, entitlement and persistence, objectification, and negative attribution styles. Nevertheless, all these factors combined could potentially play a role in fostering rejection sensitivity, which would presumably escalate into aggression -- the latter of which I am exploring.

The idea of rejection sensitivity and aggression in heterosexual relations between men and women is explored in the article "Social Dominance Orientation Predicts Heterosexual Men's Adverse Reactions to Romantic Rejection" through the idea of social dominance orientation. Social dominance orientation (SDO) is defined as "a preference for inequitable,

hierarchical social relations” (Kelly, Dubs & Barlow, 2014, p. 903). This is hypothesized to play a role in the male pursuit and manipulation of women, and aggression toward them in the context of romantic rejection. In the study, socially dominant men were more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors in regard to romantic rejection, to persistently pursue and manipulate women, and react with aggression and threats of violence when rejected. The study measured their hypotheses through the use of the Ten-Item Personality Inventory, an SDO scale, an externalization of blame scale, a persistent manipulation scale, and an aggressive manipulation scale. It was found that “participants higher in SDO were more likely to externalize blame for romantic rejection onto women”, and “participants who were higher in SDO stated that they had reacted to relationship rejection by using aggressive manipulative tactics more frequently than those lower in SDO” (p. 908). Men who displayed higher SDO were more likely to report using persistent pursuit tactics (following women, repeatedly calling) and were more inclined to think that a woman’s rejection was an indication of “playing hard to get”. Men with higher SDO were also more likely to have reacted aggressively to rejection in the past, i.e. “threatening to physically harm rejecting women and working to sabotage their other dates” (p. 906).

Aggressiveness (a facet of rejection sensitivity) in this context implied SDO. It can be said that SDO is related to rejection sensitivity as well, given that SDO is a concept that is rooted in hierarchy -- and any threat posed to the hierarchy -- (the “natural order of things”), results in sensitive reactivity: “Within heterosexual dating contexts, the gender hierarchy is flipped; Buss (2007) and Trivers (1972) have argued that women typically have greater power than men in terms of being able to accept or reject mates” (p. 904). Furthermore, rejection sensitivity in socially-dominant men and the expression of aggression appear to be connected.

Rejection sensitivity and aggression (particularly the expression of violence) are extrapolated in the research article “Rejection sensitivity and male violence in romantic relationships”. Rejection sensitivity (RS) is a “cognitive-affective processing disposition” which is thought to account for male violence. Individuals who “anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection” are deemed high in RS (Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000, p. 46). Anxious-avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment in general is posited to be associated with high RS. A Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire was administered to help measure expectations of rejection in hypothetical scenarios. Their attachment styles were also considered and they were interviewed about relationship investment. A Conflict Tactics Scale, which measured the execution of violence in heterosexual partnerships was also administered. Results showed that “...participants [men] who were relatively high in both RS and romantic investment showed the highest probability of relationship violence” (p. 53). Anger, overreaction, and jealousy were characteristic of high RS behaviorally, but this is not a prerequisite to having high RS. Anxious relationship expectations in regard to both avoidant and ambivalent people were associated with intimate violence if investment was high. Rejection sensitivity and violence in males in heterosexual partnerships was correlated, with the potential for rejection to invoke aggressive reactions, though not causally.

Rejection sensitivity in the context of masculine honor belief-endorsement as well as the endorsement of aggression is examined in the study “What, I’m not good enough for you? Individual differences in masculine honor beliefs and the endorsement of aggressive responses to romantic rejection”. Masculine honors beliefs “dictate that men must respond aggressively to threat or insult in order to create and maintain their desired masculine reputations (e.g., Barnes,

Brown, & Osterman, 2012; Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Saucier & McManus, 2014)". Rejection is hypothesized to be a threat to honor, thereby paving way for individuals to react aggressively in the face of it. The protection of self-worth is entwined with the idea of preserving one's honor. Individual differences in masculine honor beliefs were measured using the Masculine Honor Beliefs Scale (MHBS). Response items were provided for participants to answer with. These items concerned the various types of aggressive behaviors to potentially be utilized in a hypothetical rejection scenario and a Negative Self-Directed Affect scale was used to measure emotion. Results showed that "participant sex was significantly correlated with MHBS, such that men were higher in their level of endorsement of MHBS compared to women" (Stratmoen, Greer, Martens, & Saucier, 2018, p. 155). It did not make a difference whether a male or female expected aggression outcomes as resulting from rejection, pointing to the fact that aggression was regrettably anticipated by both sexes. In addition, "the correlation between MHBS and perceptions of aggressive behaviors was small in magnitude but still significant" (p. 154) implicating that adherence to MHB endorses aggressive responses to rejection. There was a direct positive relationship between participants' expectations that men would experience rejection sensitivity in response to rejection and adherence to MHB.

Interestingly, when the variable of presence of others was introduced, attitudes shifted -- public aggression is not endorsable, posing a dilemma for the aggressor. The expression of aggression is socialized in regard to romantic rejection, but carrying it out in a public space with others spectating serves as a threat to the execution of it, for one might fear that doing so would compromise his honor, while at the same time losing his honor due to rejection. Such is the

confusing nature of violence and the hypocrisy of archaic systems of gender-related codes of expressivity.

The role of sexualization in the Western world and its influence on male-female relationships is examined through heightened male aggression in the article “Heightened male aggression toward sexualized women following romantic rejection: The mediating role of sex goal activation”. Sexualized women and their rejection of male participants in the study was seen as subversive to male sex goals. Women’s likelihood of suffering harm was increased if she was sexualized, thereby rendering her likely to be aggressed against if she was seen as interfering with sex goals (Blake, Bastian, & Denson, 2017). The goals of the experiment in the study were used to determine if there was a reactive difference between sexualized and non-sexualized women in their being aggressed towards post-rejection. An aggression questionnaire was administered which measured verbal aggressiveness, anger, hostility, and physical aggressiveness. Participants rated women and indicated sexual/romantic interest. Experimentally, a woman was prerecorded speaking and participants were split into groups based on low, medium and high provocation. The woman was dressed more modestly in the low provocation group than in the other groups. The woman’s mannerisms also differed across the groups. Inevitably, the participants lost and were rejected by the woman who delivered remarks regarding the rejection, i.e, “your [sic] a nice guy and all, but...” (p. 43). Then, participants had the choice to “blast noise” at the woman, and aggression was operationalized through the questionnaire and the intensity/duration of the blast. The manipulation of sexualization and aggressiveness significantly predicted sex-goal activation for men, and men reacted more aggressively towards the woman if she was sexualized more, because of a perceived thwarting of

sex-goals due to entitlement beliefs rooted in male sex goals and threatened self-esteem. Sexualized women are presumed to be more interested in sex, and to be rejected by such a woman is perceived as more threatening than if she were not sexualized. In addition, beliefs that men were “led on” by the sexualized woman are used to justify aggression. Moreover, rejection sensitivity and aggression in an experimental context was tested and confirmed, with implications surrounding tendencies to treat sexualized women in less-than-respectful ways because of entitlement and the ends it espouses.

The article “Relational Dynamics Associated with Adolescent Dating Violence: The Roles of Rejection Sensitivity and Relational Insecurity” explored dating violence and aggression in adolescent contexts. Participants completed the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory—a questionnaire measuring victimization and violence perpetration in romantic relationships, as well as the Children’s Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire. Results revealed that “females ( $M = 1.58$ ,  $SD = .46$ ) scored significantly higher than males ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = .33$ ) on dating violence perpetration,  $F(4, 171) = 15.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , and females ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) scored higher than males ( $M = 1.26$ ,  $SD = .37$ ) on dating violence victimization,  $F(4, 171) = 13.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ” (Volz & Kerig, 2010, p. 593). In addition, women also scored higher in rejection sensitivity and relational insecurity, which seemed to contradict other research and my previous hypotheses, though the literature I examined didn’t account for gender differences. Other literature offered only a one-dimensional perspective in regard to gendered bases for violence perpetration and aggression and relied on the assumption that whatever violence or aggression being carried out was done by men onto women, and not the reverse. However, the

article takes note of the fact that because victimization is higher, using violence as a way to retaliate/self-defend is entirely possible.

The research I found was generally consistent in that there did exist links between rejection sensitivity and violence and/or aggression, even if the research article did not use “rejection sensitivity” as a terminology used to describe the phenomenon of male upset in the face or prospect of rejection. The hypotheses I originally held in regard to romantic rejection and its relationship to aggression were confirmed by nearly every piece of research, and correctional/causal ties were traced to the aforementioned ideas of low self-esteem, masculine ideals of domination, entitlement and persistence, objectification, and negative attribution styles. In addition to this, the endorsement of social dominance orientation, negative affect, and masculine honor beliefs were terms that appeared throughout papers, indicating that this topic has been researched before and is a pressing issue in gender relations. Much of the research I explored relied upon analyses of correlation and the administration of questionnaires, which does not point to causal indications of this relationship between romantic/sexual rejection and aggression. However, I was able to extrapolate some of the underlying causes that might play into the idea of being sensitive to rejection (attachment theory, low self esteem, MHB, SDO). Experimental studies supercede correlational ones in that they can attribute a causal relationship between variables, therefore I thought the study linking male aggression toward sexualized women following romantic rejection was particularly strong in that it was able to directly assert that being sexualized and experiencing a greater likelihood of being aggressed against was causally related. Limitations of the correlational studies included not being able to pinpoint directionality and causality as well as not accounting for certain variables, like male

attractiveness. In addition, unexplored extraneous variables can explain the relationship between rejection sensitivity and aggressiveness, such as past negative experiences with dating. Further, not all high-RS individuals will react violently or aggressively. Male rejection sensitivity is correlated with aggressive and violent reactivity significantly, and there exist many ideas that explain this relationship, such as the adherence to certain masculine honor codes of dominance or the espousal of toxic masculinity. However, one article posed a conundrum. Looking at both genders, there exists the possibility of women sensitively reacting to rejection more so than men, whilst carrying out violence in relationships more often than men. However, as mentioned above, this issue could be explained by the retaliatory efforts exercised to defend oneself if faced with violence/aggression.

Conclusively, a link between rejection, rejection sensitivity and the carrying out of aggression/violent behaviors by men was confirmed and explicable through various concepts concerning the adherence to certain gender roles, attachment theory, and low self-esteem. Something I would further explore is side-by-side comparisons of genders and these variables to explore a multifaceted, two-dimensional relationship between rejection sensitivity and aggression/violence. Are there disparities in the way men and women exhibit and even experience rejection sensitivity? In addition, I would have wanted to research the “incel” (involuntary celibate) community more, assuming there would be more literature on this relatively new movement, which is rooted in the ideas of male-entitlement, sexual deprivation, and social/physical inadequacy — things that are not very/only partially explored in these studies.

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