

# Attraction and Rejection (Part 13)

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## 4.0 Rejection

**Social rejection** occurs when an individual is deliberately excluded from a social relationship or social interaction. The topic includes both *interpersonal rejection* (or peer rejection) and *romantic rejection*. A person can be rejected on an individual basis or by an entire group of people. Furthermore, rejection can be either *active*, by bullying, teasing, or ridiculing, or *passive*, by ignoring a person, or giving the "silent treatment." The experience of being rejected is subjective for the recipient, and it can be perceived when it is not actually present.

Although humans are social beings, some level of rejection is an inevitable part of life. Nevertheless, rejection can become a problem when it is prolonged or consistent, when the relationship is important, or when the individual is highly sensitive to rejection. Rejection by an entire group of people can have especially negative effects, particularly when it results in social isolation (Williams, Kipling D.; Joseph P. Forgas, William von Hippel, 2005).

The experience of rejection can lead to a number of adverse psychological consequences such as loneliness, reduced self-esteem, aggression, and depression (McDougall, P., Hymel, S., Vaillancourt, T., & Mercer, L., 2001). It can also lead to feelings of insecurity and a heightened sensitivity to future rejection.

## 4.1 Rejection sensitivity

Karen Horney was the first theorist to discuss the phenomenon of *rejection sensitivity*. She suggested that it is a component of the neurotic personality, and that it is a tendency to feel deep anxiety and humiliation at the slightest rebuff. Simply being made to wait, for example, could be viewed as a rejection and met with extreme anger and hostility (Horney, K., 1937).

An early questionnaire measure of rejection sensitivity was developed by Albert Mehrabian. (Mehrabian, A., 1976). Mehrabian suggested that sensitive individuals are reluctant

to express opinions, tend to avoid arguments or controversial discussions, are reluctant to make requests or impose on others, are easily being hurt by negative feedback from others, and tend to rely too much on familiar others and situations so as to avoid rejection.

More recently, Geraldine Downey and her colleagues at Columbia University refined the concept of rejection sensitivity and described it as the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and over-react to social rejection (Downey, G. & Feldman, S. I., 1996). Downey has demonstrated in the laboratory that, given a high level of rejection sensitivity, an ambiguous social interaction can be perceived as rejection. This can then lead to defensiveness and self-fulfilling prophecies that undermine social relationships.

Individual differences in rejection sensitivity are believed to be the result of previous rejection experiences, particularly childhood experiences with parents and peers. Attachment theory suggests that rejection from parents could lead to rejection sensitivity. Additionally, both retrospective and longitudinal research has found that peer rejection in children is associated with increased rejection sensitivity (Butler, J. C., Doherty, M. S., & Potter, R. M., 2007; London, B., Downey, G., Bonica, C. & Paltin, I., 2007). Teasing and other forms of bullying appear to be especially likely to cause later difficulties.

Because of the association between rejection sensitivity and neuroticism, there is a likely genetic predisposition that makes people more vulnerable to rejection experiences and more likely to develop rejection sensitivity.

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