



Self-Esteem Stability and Romantic Relationships

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Introduction

- Self-esteem has been shown to influence a number of aspects of romantic relationships, such as closeness, satisfaction and commitment
- Self-esteem also influences the degree to which individuals are able to pursue goals to connect to their partners versus goals to protect themselves from potential rejection by their partners (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006)
 - Specifically, when placed in a position of risk (e.g., something that threatens the relationship), individuals with high self-esteem (HSE) pursue connection goals by initiating closeness
 - In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem (LSE) pursue self-protection goals by distancing themselves and thereby avoiding rejection
- However, recent research has found a number of differences among those within a given level of self-esteem
 - For example, HSE has been associated with defensive reactions (e.g., Lupien, Seery, & Almonte, 2010), which appears to contradict the multitude of benefits both endorsed by society and found in previous literature regarding romantic relationships and HSE
 - One explanation of these apparent contradictions is that different dimensions of self-esteem, beyond the extent to which it is high or low, are also important
 - **Fragile HSE** refers to having favorable, but shallow feelings of self-worth that often fluctuate or are easily disrupted
 - **Secure HSE** refers to having well anchored and relatively stable and favorable self-views
 - Research suggests that people with fragile HSE possess an underlying self-doubt, which is not seen in those with secure HSE (Seery, Blascovich, Weisbuch, & Vick, 2004)
 - Furthermore, research in our lab has shown that only those with fragile HSE—not secure HSE—tend to employ defensive strategies, suggesting that the defensive reactions among those with HSE may be driven by those with fragile HSE in particular (Lupien et al., 2010)

Purpose:

- To extend the previous research on romantic relationships and self-esteem to include these various subtypes of self-esteem
 - Specifically, to investigate how fragile self-esteem affects couples' psychological experiences during an interactive task following a relationship threat
- To assess responses during interactions between romantic partners, we applied the biopsychosocial model of challenge/threat (BPS; Blascovich, 2008; Seery, in press) and measured cardiovascular responses

Biopsychosocial Model of Challenge and Threat:

- A constellation of cardiovascular responses indexes task engagement and differentiates challenge from threat
- **Task Engagement** occurs when the task goal is subjectively relevant to the participant
 - Increase in heart rate (HR; heart beats faster) and ventricular contractility (VC; heart beats harder)
- Given task engagement, motivational states along the challenge/threat continuum are experienced
- **Challenge** occurs when evaluated personal resources are high and situational demands are low
 - Decrease in total peripheral resistance (TPR) - arteries dilate
 - Increase in cardiac output (CO) - heart pumps more blood
- **Threat** occurs when evaluated situational demands are high and personal resources are low
 - Increase in TPR
 - Decrease or no change in CO

Method

Participants:

- 48 couples involved in exclusive relationships

Procedure:

- **Web-Based Session**
 - 8 Web-based assessments over 4 days using a modified version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to gauge self-esteem stability
 - **Instability**—the degree of short-term fluctuations in state self-esteem—reflects fragile self-esteem
- **Laboratory Session**
 - Physiological sensors were attached to one member of the couple (the "participant")
 - Sat for a 5-minute resting baseline
 - In the same room, participants and partners completed a listing task in which they were told that each member of the couple will be listing at least one important fault about each other
 - Participants gave a 2-minute speech about their professional goals while their partner watched and listened

Rejection Manipulation:

- **Rejection:**
 - Partners were actually given a different listing task in which they received directions instructing them to list at least 25 items in their residence, giving the participant reason to believe their partner perceived an inordinate amount of faults in them
- **No Rejection:**
 - Partners were given the same listing task as described to participants, in which there was no reason to believe their partner perceived an excessive amount of faults in them

Dependent Variables:

- Cardiovascular reactivity markers of task engagement and challenge/threat during the fault-listing task and speech

Hypotheses:

- 3-way interaction between relationship threat condition, self-esteem level, and self-esteem fragility
- **Within Threat Condition:** 2-way interaction between self-esteem level and fragility
 - Those with LSE should exhibit a relative threat response, consistent with rejection concerns found in previous literature
 - Those with HSE should be differentially affected by relationship threat depending on the extent to which their self-esteem is fragile vs. secure
 - Individuals with secure HSE should exhibit a relative challenge response, consistent with closeness strivings found in previous literature
 - Individuals with fragile HSE should exhibit a relative threat response, consistent with easily activated self-doubt found previously in our laboratory

Analytical Strategy:

- Both self-esteem level and fragility were treated as continuous variables and thus regression analyses were used
- Index scores combining TPR and CO were created to produce a standardized index score of challenge/threat (higher values indicate greater challenge)
- Index scores combining HR and VC were created to produce a standardized index score of task engagement (higher values indicated greater engagement)

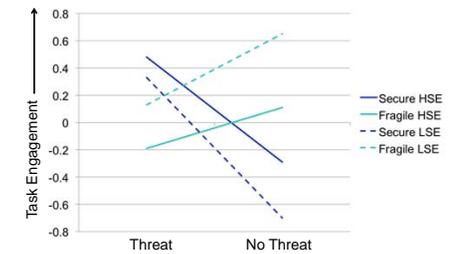
Results

Challenge/Threat:

- Inconsistent with expectations, we did not find significant differences for challenge/threat in either task

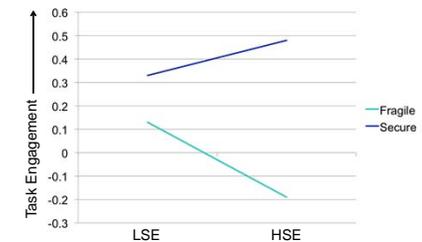
Task Engagement:

- Marginal 3-way interaction between threat condition, self-esteem level, and fragility ($B = 0.93$, $p = .061$) during fault-listing task



•Within Threat Condition

- Marginal 2-way interaction between self-esteem level and fragility ($B = 0.26$, $p = .084$) during fault-listing task



Discussion

- Inconsistent with predictions, we did not find significant differences for challenge/threat reactivity
- However, we did find a marginal 3-way interaction and a marginal 2-way interaction between self-esteem level and stability within threat condition for task engagement
- This was unexpected, but potentially consistent with previous literature
 - Distancing from one's partner—a defensive response—could decrease the subjective self-relevance of the relationship interaction, thus decreasing task engagement
 - Participants with fragile HSE tended to exhibit lower task engagement than others in the threat condition, which could reflect greater underlying psychological distancing from their partners

Conclusion

- This study builds on existing research and shows the importance of looking deeper into the sub-components of self-esteem in romantic relationships
- The differences seen between the subtypes of HSE have important implications
 - Although we did not find differences for challenge/threat, the task engagement findings suggest that two very different responses can emerge within the same level of self-esteem in the context of close relationships
- These findings may help us understand under what conditions and types of self-esteem individuals will employ defensive strategies (i.e., distancing behaviors) within a romantic relationship