

Social Withdrawal and Psychological Distress during Early Adolescence: Examining the Moderating Effects of Rejection-Sensitivity



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Abstract

This study examines the associations between anxious-withdrawal (e.g., shyness) and psychological distress during early adolescence, and whether rejection-sensitivity moderates the associations. Research indicates that anxiously-withdrawn children and adolescents suffer psychologically. Rejection-sensitivity (RS) is a social-cognitive processing bias that also has been linked to psychological distress. This is the first study to investigate whether RS exacerbates the psychological risks associated with anxious-withdrawal. 150 adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 13.05$) participated and completed peer nomination measures of anxious-withdrawal and peer experiences and self-report assessments of RS, three types of social anxiety (fear of negative evaluation, social avoidance-new situations, social avoidance-general) and self-esteem. A series of hierarchical regression analyses, controlling for social preference and victimization, revealed that RS was positively related to fears of negative evaluation and low self-esteem ($ps < .04$). Two significant interaction effects were also found: (1) anxious-withdrawal-x-RS when predicting social avoidance-new; and (2) anxious-withdrawal-x-RS when predicting social avoidance-general. Simple slopes analyses revealed that anxious-withdrawal was related to the outcomes at high and medium levels of RS ($\beta s = .31-.60, ps < .001$), but not at low levels ($\beta s = .02-.08, ps > .52$). Findings strongly suggest that anxiously-withdrawn young adolescents who are also rejection-sensitive are at the greatest risk for psychological maladjustment.

Background

- Anxious-withdrawn children and adolescents are shy and timid, and spend considerable alone and away from peers (Rubin et al., 2009)
- The study of anxious-withdrawal is important because research consistently indicates that anxious-withdrawal is a strong risk factor for peer difficulties (e.g., peer rejection, peer victimization) and psychological distress (e.g., loneliness, low self-esteem, depression) during childhood and adolescence (Rubin et al., 2009).
- Rejection sensitivity (RS) is a social-cognitive bias in which individuals anxiously and readily expect rejection in ambiguous social situations (e.g., Bowker et al. 2011).
- RS has been shown to predict psychological maladjustment during adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., London et al. 2007).
- Not all anxiously-withdrawn young adolescents experience psychological difficulties. The present study tests whether RS can explain variability in the psychological outcomes of anxious-withdrawal during early adolescence.

Hypotheses

Anxious-withdrawal will be more strongly associated with psychological distress outcomes for adolescents who are high in RS, after controlling for related negative peer experiences.

Participants

150 7th grade students from one middle school in suburban Buffalo, NY. The mean age was 13.5 years ($SD = 0.43$).

Measures

Rejection Sensitivity. Participants completed the shortened Children's Rejection-Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998), which includes 6 hypothetical scenarios involving possible rejection. On a 6-point scale, participants reported how anxious they would feel and whether they expected to be rejected ($\alpha = .79$).

Self-esteem. The 10-item *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to assess self-esteem. Statements such as "I am able to do things as well as most other people" were rated, with participants indicating how strongly they agreed with each statement. Mean scores were calculated, with higher responses indicative of higher self-esteem ($\alpha = .87$).

Social Anxiety. The *Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised* (SASC-R; La Greca and Stone, 1993) was used to assess three types of social anxiety: *Social avoidance to new situations* (6-items; $\alpha = .80$), *General social avoidance* (4-items; $\alpha = .62$), and *Fear of negative evaluation* (8-items; $\alpha = .89$). Mean scores were calculated with higher scores indicating greater anxiety.

Anxious Withdrawal. Participants completed 4 peer nomination items descriptive of *anxious-withdrawal*, e.g. "Shy" ($\alpha = .84$).

Victimization. *Victimization* was assessed with 3 peer nomination items, e.g. "Hit or kicked by others" ($\alpha = .82$).

Social Preference. *Social preference* was calculated using the difference between two peer nominations ("Likes Most" - "Rather not be with").

Procedure

Participants completed measures during school hours in their classrooms.

Data Analyses

• Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to examine the relation between anxious-withdrawal and psychological difficulties, and whether rejection sensitivity acted as a moderator.

• 4 regression models were run, with the three social anxiety or one self-esteem scale serving as the dependent variable.

• In all models, social preference, victimization, and sex were entered as Step 1 as control variables.

• At Step 2, anxious-withdrawal and RS were entered.

• At Step 3, the interaction between anxious-withdrawal and RS was entered.

• Interactions were probed according to the procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991).

Results

▪ RS was associated positively to all of the psychological outcomes ($ps < .04$). Anxious-withdrawal was related positively to social avoidance-new and general social avoidance ($ps < .003$).

▪ When predicting social avoidance-new and general-social avoidance, significant interaction effects were found between anxious-withdrawal and RS.

▪ Follow-up analyses revealed that anxious-withdrawal was related to social avoidance-new at high levels of RS ($\beta = 0.60, p = .001$) and medium levels of RS ($\beta = 0.30, p = .001$), but was not significant at low levels ($\beta = 0.02, p = .86$).

▪ And, anxious-withdrawal was related to general-social avoidance at high ($\beta = 0.54, p = .001$) and medium levels of RS ($\beta = 0.31, p = .001$), but not at low levels ($\beta = 0.31, p = .20$).

Conclusions & Future Directions

• Consistent with past research (London et al., 2007; Rubin et al., 2009), both anxious-withdrawal and RS were related significantly to the outcomes, providing additional support that both represent strong psychological risk factors during early adolescence.

• However, it was also found that anxiously-withdrawn adolescents who were highly rejection sensitive reported the highest levels of social avoidance. This finding is novel, and demonstrates for the first time that a social-cognitive factor may place anxiously-withdrawn young adolescents at increased psychological risk.

• Additional research is clearly needed to understand the processes responsible for this effect but it is possible that anxiously-withdrawn adolescents who are high in RS are more sensitive to negative peer experiences and avoid both familiar and unfamiliar social situations in the hopes of avoiding stressful and rejecting experiences with peers.

• Future studies should continue examining rejection sensitivity and its relation to psychological distress in adolescents. Past interventions with anxiously-withdrawn youth have been limited in their success. But, it is possible that targeting the rejection-related cognitions of anxiously-withdrawn youth could improve their social and psychological worlds.

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