

Emotional responses to interpersonal rejection

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Interpersonal rejections constitute some of the most distressing and consequential events in people's lives. Whether one considers a romantic rejection, the dissolution of a friendship, ostracism by a group, estrangement from family members, or merely being ignored or excluded in casual encounters, rejections have myriad emotional, psychological, and interpersonal consequences. People not only react strongly when they perceive that others have rejected them, but a great deal of human behavior is influenced by the desire to avoid rejection.

This article begins with a brief primer on the adaptive significance of emotions and discusses the interpersonal functions of rejection-related emotions in particular. It then examines specific emotions that are involved in the management of social acceptance and rejection—including hurt feelings, jealousy, loneliness, shame, guilt, social anxiety, and embarrassment—as well as others that often arise during rejection episodes, but that are not specific to rejection.

A great deal of human emotion arises in response to real, anticipated, remembered, or imagined rejection by other people. Because acceptance by other people improved evolutionary fitness, human beings developed biopsychological mechanisms to apprise them of threats to acceptance and belonging, along with emotional systems to deal with threats to acceptance. This article examines seven emotions that often arise when people perceive that their relational value to other people is low or in potential jeopardy, including hurt feelings, jealousy, loneliness, shame, guilt, social anxiety, and embarrassment. Other emotions, such as sadness and anger, may occur during rejection episodes, but are reactions to features of the situation other than low relational value. The article discusses the evolutionary functions of rejection-related emotions, neuroscience evidence regarding the brain regions that mediate reactions to rejection, and behavioral research from social, developmental, and clinical psychology regarding psychological and behavioral concomitants of interpersonal rejection.

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The adaptive significance of emotions

Since the publication of Darwin's seminal book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*,¹ theorists have regarded emotions as evolved adaptations that provide an advantage to survival and reproduction.^{2,3} In particular, emotions signal the presence of events that have potentially major implications for an animal's well-being—specifically, important threats and opportunities in its environment—thereby causing the individual to focus on concerns that require immediate attention. Once aroused, emotions involve not only subjective feelings, but also a motivational readiness to respond in a particular fashion to the threat or opportunity (the emotion's "action tendency"). Some emotions also involve expressive movements that communicate the animal's state to others and that lead conspecifics to respond in desired ways, as when an animal's threatening stare frightens intruders out of its territory.

Many emotions can be precipitated by either impersonal or interpersonal events. For example, people may become frightened, angry, or sad due to either impersonal acts of nature or the actions of other people. Other emotions, however, are experienced only with respect to real, anticipated, remembered, or imagined encounters with other people. For example, embarrassment, hurt feelings, and loneliness are inherently social emotions that involve threats and challenges that arise in interpersonal interactions and relationships.

We focus here specifically on emotions that are caused by the prospect or presence of rejection by other people. The fact that rejection consistently evokes strong emotional reactions suggests that acceptance and rejection had important adaptive implications throughout human evolution that led to the promulgation of the genes of our hominid ancestors who experienced emotions in response to signs of rejection. On the savannas of east Africa where most human evolution occurred, survival and reproduction depended heavily on living within a group that provided resources, protection against predators, and care for offspring. Because individuals who lived within the protective confines of the group fared far better than those who did not, natural selection favored prehuman and human beings who formed and maintained supportive relationships with others. As a result, a drive to form and maintain some minimum number of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships—a need for acceptance and

belonging—evolved as a fundamental aspect of human nature.⁴

However, successfully living within a group requires that individuals be accepted (or at least tolerated) by other members of the group. To remain in the good graces of other group members, people have to behave in ways that foster their acceptance by others, whether they are coalition members, friends, family members, mates, acquaintances, or whoever. In addition, they need to be vigilant to indications of disapproval and devaluation, both to avoid behaving in ways that might lead to rejection and to address any problems that arise. Because rejection had serious, potentially fatal, consequences in the ancestral environment, a person would have needed to avoid social exclusion and ostracism at nearly all costs and had to be attuned to cues indicating that his or her positive standing in other people's eyes might be in jeopardy. Thus, human beings developed bio-psychological mechanisms to apprise them of threats to acceptance and belonging, an emotional aversion to cues that connote rejection and exclusion, and motivational systems to deal with threats to acceptance.

This psychological system has been characterized as a "sociometer"⁵ that monitors the social environment for cues relevant to one's relational value—the degree to which other people regard their relationship with the individual to be valuable or important. Indications of low relational value can range from explicit indications of rejection, such as a romantic breakup or expulsion from a group, to subtle expressions of disinterest, disapproval, or dislike, such as low responsiveness, distant body language, and avoidance. Perceiving that others do not adequately value one's relationship triggers the sociometer and its concomitant emotional and motivational responses. Even the possibility of relational devaluation can cause negative emotions, as does realizing that one may have behaved in ways that might lower one's relational value and, thus, jeopardize one's acceptance by others.

Neuroscientific investigations suggest that much of the activity of the sociometer is mediated by the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) and anterior insula. Among other functions, these neural regions are also associated with physical pain, which may help to explain why people report that they are "hurt" when others devalue or reject them. Not only does rejection lead to increased activity in the dACC and anterior insula,^{6,7} but people who score high on measures of rejection

tion sensitivity show greater activity in these areas in response to rejecting stimuli than people low in rejection sensitivity,^{8,9} and activity in these regions correlates with self-reported social distress in response to rejection.¹⁰⁻¹² Interestingly, activity in these regions during rejection is also associated with changes in people's feelings about themselves at the moment (ie, state self-esteem), which is consistently affected by rejection and may be an internal, psychological gauge of one's relational value.¹³ A recent meta-analysis shows that the ventral and dACC are most consistently involved in reactions to rejection.¹⁴

Several specific emotions arise from the prospect or presence of rejection, including hurt feelings, loneliness, jealousy, guilt, shame, social anxiety, embarrassment, sadness, and anger. However, as we will see, some of these emotions are elicited by perceived low relational value per se, whereas others are caused by other different features of the rejection episode.

Hurt feelings

The emotion that is most consistently and incontrovertibly associated with low perceived relational value is the one that people colloquially call "hurt feelings."^{15,16} In many ways, hurt feelings can be regarded as the "rejection emotion"¹⁷ in that people's feelings are hurt by events that connote that other people do not regard their relationship with them to be as valuable or important as the individual desires, thereby leading them to feel rejected.

In a study of 168 hurtful episodes,¹⁸ all but two of the episodes appeared to be caused by participants' perceptions that one or more other people did not sufficiently value their relationship. Furthermore, participants' ratings of how hurt they felt in the situation they recounted correlated highly with the degree to which they felt rejected. Criticism was the most common cause of hurt feelings. Not only does criticism convey that another person thinks that one possesses negatively valued attributes, often with implications for one's relational value and acceptance, but the simple action of voicing a criticism, even one that is justified, sometimes implies that the criticizer does not value his or her relationship with the target. (People often refrain from strongly criticizing those they care about.) In addition, people in this study also reported being hurt by betrayal (which indicates that the betrayer does not adequately value his or

her relationship with the betrayed person), passive disassociation (ignoring or avoiding the individual), and, of course, explicit rejection, exclusion, ostracism, and abandonment.

In brief, evidence shows that people's feelings are hurt when they believe that others do not sufficiently value their relationship.¹⁷ People typically experience hurtful events as rejection, although people's feelings can be hurt even when they know that other individuals accept or care about them at some level if they believe that the others do not value their relationship as much as they desire.

Jealousy

People feel jealous when they believe that another person values his or her relationship with them less than they desire because of the presence or intrusion of a third party. Although people usually think of jealousy in the context of romantic and sexual relationships,¹⁹ people may feel jealous whenever they believe that a third party has caused them to have lower-than-desired relational value to another person. For example, children may be jealous of the attention that a parent devotes to a sibling, or an employee may feel jealous because the boss seems to favor another employee. Jealousy is often accompanied by fear about the possibility of losing the relationship entirely and anger toward the relational partner and the rival.²⁰

The action tendency associated with jealousy involves a motivation to eliminate the influence of the third party. Jealous people may try to increase their desirability (and, thus, their relational value and acceptance) to the target and/or diminish the third party's influence by disparaging the rival to the target or threatening one or both of them. Ironically, jealous people sometimes behave in ways that are anything but endearing to the target, including outbursts of anger, threats, and physical abuse.¹⁹⁻²¹ Such behaviors appear intended to intimidate the partner into disassociating from the rival, but they may further reduce the jealous person's relational value, undermine the relationship, and lead to explicit rejection.

Loneliness and homesickness

People experience loneliness and homesickness when they believe that people who greatly value their rela-

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tionship are not available for social interaction and support. In some instances, people may not have a meaningful relationship with anyone, but at other times, the people who value and support them are simply not available to interact and offer their support. Homesickness is characterized primarily by acute feelings of loneliness and sadness when one is not only separated from loved ones, but is also away from familiar circumstances.²² (In fact, homesickness is perhaps best regarded as a blend of loneliness and sadness rather than as a distinct emotion.)

Research shows that loneliness is linked to factors that cause a sense of having low relational value to other people. Children who are not accepted by their peers tend to be lonelier than those who are accepted, and peer rejection prospectively predicts subsequent loneliness.^{23,24} Geographical relocation also causes loneliness by causing a loss of relationships in which people feel relationally valued.²⁵ Loneliness is particularly common among people who have recently experienced bereavement, divorce, or the dissolution of a close relationship and who believe that other people do not regard them as desirable friends and partners.²⁶ Not all loneliness arises from explicit rejection, but rejection is a common antecedent of loneliness.

Guilt and shame

Guilt and shame are typically conceptualized as reactions to moral or ethical violations (which they are), but they are tied closely to people's concerns about relational value and rejection. Indeed, these emotions may have evolved to manage situations in which one has violated group standards in ways that, if not remediated, might decrease one's relational value, damage one's relationships, and even result in social rejection or group expulsion. Although the terms guilt and shame are often used interchangeably, they are psychologically different emotions: people feel guilty about engaging in a "bad" behavior, whereas they feel ashamed about being a "bad" person.²⁷ Because being a bad person is generally worse than merely engaging in an undesirable behavior, shame is typically a more intense experience than guilt.

Most theorists have traced shame and guilt to violations of one's personal standards. However, guilt and shame appear to be inherently social emotions rather than merely reactions to violations of personal standards.²⁸ (The fact that people can make us feel guilty or

ashamed even when we believe we did nothing wrong demonstrates the centrality of interpersonal concerns in guilt and shame.) Both guilt and shame arise in situations that have potential implications for people's relational value to other people, but they arise in response to slightly different concerns. When people believe that they have done something that might lead others to relationally devalue them—which is typically the case in instances in which they behave unethically or immorally—they feel guilty. When they think that others' judgments of them *as a person*, particularly judgments of their character, may lead to relational devaluation and possible rejection, they experience shame. Of course, people sometimes experience guilt or shame even when no one else knows about their undesirable behaviors or thoughts. In order to help people avoid rejection, the sociometer can trigger guilt and shame proactively to discourage them from doing things that, if later discovered by others, might lead to devaluation and rejection.

Guilt and shame are associated with different motivations or action tendencies. Guilty people are motivated to repair the damage that their undesired behavior has caused. They apologize, ask for forgiveness, engage in remedial behaviors and restitution, and take other steps to improve their social image and repair their interpersonal relationships.²⁹ In contrast, shame is associated with a desire to withdraw from social interactions, often because nothing can be done immediately to repair the damage to one's image and relational value.²⁷

Social anxiety and embarrassment

Social anxiety—feelings of nervousness in social encounters—is an anticipatory response to the possibility of conveying undesired impressions of oneself that will lower one's relational value in other people's eyes.³⁰ People realize that the degree to which others value and accept them as relational partners, group members, and social interactants depends heavily on how they are perceived. For example, being viewed as attractive, competent, likeable, and ethical generally results in higher relational value than being viewed as unattractive, incompetent, unlikeable, or immoral. Thus, when people believe that they might not make the impressions they desire to make in a particular situation (or, worse, believe that they will make undesired impressions), they experience social anxiety. Social anxiety may have evolved as an "early warning system" that

deterred people from behaving in ways that might compromise their social image and relational value.³⁰

Embarrassment also involves a concern for how one is perceived by other people; however, whereas social anxiety is anticipatory in nature, embarrassment occurs when people think that they have already conveyed an undesired impression of themselves to others.³¹ Although people dislike appearing embarrassed, research shows that expressions of embarrassment after making an undesired impression help to improve people's public image and relational value by indicating to others that they are aware of their undesired behavior and that they regret behaving in a socially undesirable or nonnormative fashion.³² Facial blushing often plays an important role in this process, conveying the person's awareness that he or she has behaved unacceptably in an involuntary, nonverbal fashion that is impossible to fake.³³ In many ways, human displays of embarrassment—which often include blushing, averted gaze, and mirthless smiling—are analogous to the appeasement displays of other primates when they have displeased a higher-ranking member of the group.³³

Sadness and anger

Each of the emotions discussed thus far expressly involves events that have implications for people's relational value and social relationships, and each appears designed to deter actions that might result in rejection or, if such actions have already occurred, to manage the interpersonal threat to one's social connections. However, people who feel rejected often experience other emotions that are not tied specifically to concerns with relational value per se, including sadness and anger. Neither sadness nor anger is caused by perceived low relational value. Rather, sadness arises from perceived loss, and anger arises when people perceive that another agent (usually, but not always, a person) has unjustifiably behaved in an undesired fashion that threatens their desires or well-being.³⁴

Although sadness can result from nonsocial losses—of a prized possession or a desired opportunity, for example—people also experience sadness when they lose an important interpersonal relationship. For example, people become sad when loved ones move away, when relationships end, when they grow apart from friends, and when trusted others betray them. In each instance, sadness is caused specifically by the loss of a

valued connection to a particular person. In fact, when asked to write about a typical instance in which people feel sad, roughly two thirds of the participants in one study wrote about the loss of a relationship or separation from a loved one, and a quarter of the participants wrote specifically about rejection.³⁵ Even the sadness of bereavement may reflect, in part, the fact that one has lost an important relationship and source of relational value. People may also experience sadness from the loss of a potential relationship, as when one's affection for another person is not returned or a person is not accepted into a team or group that he or she desired to join. Although sadness is obviously an aversive experience, the emotion may be functional in leading people to protect both their relationships and the people with whom they have those relationships. Because lost relationships cause painful sadness, people are motivated to behave in ways that protect their relational value in the eyes of those with whom they desire to maintain close relationships.

In extreme cases, particularly momentous or prolonged rejection can contribute to depressive episodes. Of course, depression has many causes, but ostracism, romantic breakups, and other forms of severe or chronic relational devaluation are common precipitators of depression in both adolescents and adults. Not only does rejection contribute to depression,³⁶ but also people who are already depressed are more sensitive to indications that others do not adequately value having relationships with them³⁷ and have greater difficulty recovering from rejection.³⁸

People also sometimes become angry when they feel rejected but, as with sadness, anger is not caused by perceived low relational value per se. Rather, anger arises during rejection episodes when people interpret the rejection as unjustified harm.^{17,34} In some cases, people who feel rejected not only become angry, but also react aggressively. Indeed, anger may be designed to prevent, terminate, or punish specific behaviors that are perceived as an immediate threat.³⁹ Jilted lovers sometimes lash out, domestic violence commonly erupts when people feel devalued by family members, and school shootings are usually perpetrated by students who feel ostracized by their peers.⁴⁰ Whether people aggress when rejected depends on a number of factors; for example, aggression is more likely when people value the relationship, believe that the rejection was unfair, and believe that the relationship cannot be repaired.⁴¹

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Conclusion

Several interpersonal emotions reflect reactions to real, anticipated, remembered, or imagined rejection. Hurt feelings, jealousy, loneliness, shame, guilt, social anxiety, and embarrassment occur when people perceive that their relational value to other people is low or in potential jeopardy. Other emotions, such as sadness and anger, may accompany these rejection-related emotions, but are reactions to features of the rejection episode other than low relational value. As aversive, if not downright painful, as the subjective features of these emotions sometimes are, they nonetheless serve an important function, motivating people to behave in ways that maintain their relational value and protect their interpersonal relationships, alerting them to threats to those relationships, and prompting them to take action when relational problems arise. A person who was unable to experience these emotions would be incapable of managing his or her interpersonal interactions and relationships and would likely experience wholesale rejection.

Of course, self-perception of one's relational value is sometimes inaccurate, and a good deal of research has examined instances in which people underestimate or overestimate their relational value in other people's

eyes. Importantly, like other systems that monitor the environment for threats, the sociometer seems to be biased in the direction of false positives. This bias reflects a functional feature of the system, decreasing the likelihood that people will miss cues that their relational value is low or declining. However, the downside is that this bias generates unnecessary distress and sometimes leads people to overreact to relatively benign signs that others do not value their relationship as much as they desire.

This article has focused on negative emotions that arise from perceived low relational value, but positive emotions also arise from interpersonal events. People experience intense happiness, if not joy, when they feel admired, appreciated, or deeply loved, and explicit evidence that one has high relational value—such as being accepted into desired groups, forming friendships, and developing other kinds of social bonds—evokes pleasurable feelings as well.

The fact that a large portion of human emotion is devoted to the maintenance of interpersonal connections points to the importance of acceptance and belonging in human affairs. People are inherently motivated to be valued and accepted by other people, and many of the emotions that they experience reflect these fundamental interpersonal concerns. □

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Respuestas emocionales al rechazo interpersonal

Una parte importante de la emoción humana surge en respuesta al rechazo de otras personas, el cual puede ser real, anticipado, recordado o imaginado. Dado que la aceptación por otras personas mejoró la aptitud evolutiva, los seres humanos desarrollaron mecanismos psicobiológicos para darle valor a las amenazas contra la aceptación y la pertenencia, junto con los sistemas emocionales para manejar las amenazas contra la aceptación. Este artículo examina siete emociones que aparecen a menudo cuando las personas perciben que su valor relacional con otros es bajo o está en potencial peligro; incluyendo sentimientos de lástima, celos, soledad, vergüenza, culpa, ansiedad social y bochorno. Otras emociones, como la tristeza y el enojo, pueden presentarse durante los episodios de rechazo, pero son reacciones a las características de la situación más que al bajo valor relacional. El artículo discute las funciones a través de la evolución de las emociones relacionadas con el rechazo, la evidencia neurocientífica sobre regiones cerebrales que median las reacciones al rechazo, y la investigación conductual de la psicología clínica, del desarrollo y social acerca de los concomitantes psicológicos y conductuales del rechazo interpersonal.

Réponses émotionnelles au rejet interpersonnel

Une grande partie des émotions humaines provient de la réponse au rejet réel, anticipé, mémorisé ou imaginé par les autres. Parce que l'acceptation par les autres a amélioré l'aptitude au cours de l'évolution, les êtres humains ont développé des mécanismes biopsychologiques pour les informer des menaces contre l'acceptation ou l'appartenance, ainsi que des systèmes émotionnels pour gérer les menaces contre l'acceptation. Cet article analyse sept émotions qui surviennent souvent lorsque les gens sentent que leur valeur relationnelle pour les autres est faible ou potentiellement en danger : préjudice moral, jalousie, solitude, honte, culpabilité, anxiété sociale et gêne. D'autres émotions comme la tristesse et la colère peuvent apparaître pendant les épisodes de rejet mais ce sont des réactions à des caractéristiques d'autres situations qu'une valeur relationnelle faible. Cet article examine les fonctions pour l'évolution des émotions liées au rejet, les arguments des neurosciences en ce qui concerne les régions cérébrales qui véhiculent les réactions au rejet, et la recherche comportementale en psychologie sociale, clinique et du développement sur les corollaires psychologiques et comportementaux du rejet interpersonnel.

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