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Rewriting the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Social Rejection: Self-Affirmation Improves Relational Security and Social Behavior up to 2 Months Later

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Abstract

Chronically insecure individuals often behave in ways that result in the very social rejection that they most fear. We predicted that this typical self-fulfilling prophecy is not immutable. Self-affirmation may improve insecure individuals' relational security, and this improvement may allow them to express more welcoming social behavior. In a longitudinal experiment, a 15-min self-affirmation improved both the relational security and experimenter-rated social behavior of insecure participants up to 4 weeks after the initial intervention. Moreover, the extent to which self-affirmation improved insecure participants' relational security at 4 weeks predicted additional improvements in social behavior another 4 weeks after that. Our finding that insecure participants continued to reap the social benefits of self-affirmation up to 8 weeks after the initial intervention demonstrates that it is indeed possible to rewrite the self-fulfilling prophecy of social rejection.

Keywords

interpersonal interaction, social behavior, interpersonal relationships

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One of the sad ironies of social life is the self-fulfilling prophecy of rejection, which starts out like this: Andrew incorrectly believes that Tara does not like him, so he ignores her. In response, Tara snubs Andrew, who then concludes based on Tara's cold behavior that he was correct in his original belief that she does not like him. The opposite is also true: If Andrew believes that Tara likes him, he will behave in ways that cause her to like him. This prophecy has been demonstrated experimentally by inducing participants to believe that an interaction partner either likes or dislikes them (e.g., Curtis & Miller, 1986; Jones & Panitch, 1971; Rabiner & Coie, 1989). However, the sad irony of the prophecy is revealed in the lives of chronically insecure individuals: People who are most concerned about acceptance from others, and indeed crave acceptance the most, often behave in ways that result in rejection (e.g., Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Stinson, Cameron, Wood, Gaucher, & Holmes, 2009), an outcome that unfortunately serves to reinforce insecurity and undermine well-being. In the research reported here, we took a first step toward undoing this negative outcome and attempting to rewrite the self-fulfilling prophecy of anticipated rejection for insecure individuals.

Recently, Stinson et al. (2009) uncovered the behavioral mechanisms underlying the rejection prophecy. They demonstrated that relational insecurity (i.e., lack of confidence that one is valued by interaction partners) translates into a tense social demeanor that inhibits social warmth, which in turn results in a cold social reception from novel interaction partners that further reinforces the individuals' relational insecurity (Cameron, Stinson, Gaetz, & Balchen, 2010, Study 5; Stinson et al., 2009). The rejection prophecy seems to result from insecure individuals' feelings of inferiority, which result in a self-protective motivation to avoid social situations in which rejection is anticipated (e.g., Cameron et al., 2010). Stinson et al.'s and Cameron et al.'s research offered promising laboratory evidence that insecure individuals are capable of behaving in a relaxed, calm, and positive manner, at least in the short term, when social cues suggest that the risk of rejection has been reduced. The presence of this latent ability suggests that it might be possible to rewrite the

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typical rejection prophecy experienced by chronically insecure individuals. In the research reported here, we attempted to do just that. Our longitudinal experiment tested whether a one-time, laboratory-based self-affirmation intervention could improve relational security and social behavior up to 8 weeks later. In other words, we attempted to rewrite the first two links in the chain of the typical rejection prophecy (i.e., relational insecurity yields tense social demeanor).

Self-affirming tasks bolster the sense that the self is good, moral, and efficacious (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). A typical self-affirming task guides participants to reflect on important, self-relevant values and has a wide array of positive effects on people's reactions to self-threats in the laboratory (for a review, see McQueen & Klein, 2006). Moreover, self-affirmation can also have long-term effects on important outcomes, such as academic performance (e.g., Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009) and weight loss (Logel & Cohen, 2011). Self-affirmation appears to function longitudinally by buffering the individual against self-threats and interrupting the recursive process that begins when psychological threats undermine performance in a given domain (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). We expected similar processes to operate in the domain of social relationships. Relationships are a minefield of potential self-threats, ranging from negative evaluative feedback to outright rejection. These self-threats are particularly salient to insecure individuals, who not only attend more readily to relational self-threats (e.g., Cameron et al., 2010), but also show stronger, and often maladaptive, affective and behavioral reactions to such threats (e.g., Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). In the research reported here, we expected that our self-affirmation intervention would help buffer insecure participants against social self-threats, and this buffering would be evident in sustained improvements to insecure participants' relational security (an indicator of resistance to self-threat) and improvements in their social behavior (e.g., reactions to self-threat).

By bridging research on close relationships and on self-affirmation, we aimed to make novel contributions to the literature in both of these fields. To date, only one study has examined the effect of self-affirmation on relational processes (Jaremka, Bunyan, Collins, & Sherman, 2011). This study demonstrated that self-affirmation can eliminate the typical self-protective cognitive reactions of individuals with low self-esteem to self-threat in the lab. Moreover, only two experiments have ever successfully improved relational security in romantic relationships longitudinally via an in-lab intervention (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007, 2010). Our research extends these previous studies by focusing on generalized relational insecurity across different relationships, rather than on low self-esteem and romantic relationships specifically. This study was intended to identify a novel means of improving generalized relational security over the long term, an outcome that has eluded relationship researchers to date. It may also have important theoretical implications for self-affirmation theory. Previous research has demonstrated that self-affirmation can

undo a normatively downward spiral of performance by interrupting the negative recursive loop of social threat, underperformance, and additional threat (Cohen et al., 2009). In contrast, we hypothesized that self-affirmation can also improve the normatively stable trajectory of relational security by introducing a positive recursive loop of increases in relational security, positive social outcomes, and additional increases in relational security. To examine our hypothesis, we collected data from participants at three different time points spanning a period of 8 weeks.

Method

Participants

One hundred thirty-nine introductory-psychology students participated at Time 1. Of these, 84% also participated at Time 2 and Time 3; only data from these 117 participants were included in the analysis (mean age = 19.24 years; 96 females and 21 males; 57% Caucasian and 43% ethnic minorities; 52% single and 48% in romantic relationships). Participants who completed all data-collection points did not differ from the full sample on any key variables.

Procedure

At Time 1, participants completed a questionnaire assessing demographics and relational security. We assessed relational security with three scales. All participants rated their relational security with friends (five items, $\alpha = .74$; e.g., "My friends regard me as very important in their lives") and with family (five items, $\alpha = .66$; e.g., "I often worry that my family will stop loving me"). Participants in romantic relationships rated their relational security with their current romantic partner (three items, $\alpha = .85$; e.g., "My partner loves and accepts me unconditionally"), and participants who were single rated their relational security with potential future romantic partners (three items, $\alpha = .85$; "I have the kind of qualities that many people desire in a romantic partner"). All items used the same 7-point scale (1, *strongly disagree*, to 7, *strongly agree*). For each participant, relational security with each of the three targets was averaged to create a relational-security variable.¹

Participants were assigned to one of two conditions, in both of which they ranked 11 values (e.g., academics) according to personal importance (e.g., Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). Participants in the affirmation condition were instructed to write several paragraphs describing why their top-ranked value was important to them. They then listed the top two reasons why they picked that value as most important and indicated the extent to which their top-ranked value influenced their lives and was an important part of their self-image. Participants in the control condition were also instructed to write several paragraphs and answer similar questions, except that we asked this group to focus on their ninth-ranked value and why it might be important to someone else.

Table 1. Relational Security and Tense Social Demeanor: Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	M	SD	Correlations			
			Time 2 relational security	Time 3 relational security	Time 2 tense social demeanor	Time 3 tense social demeanor
Time 1 relational security	5.68	0.83	.78*	.74*	-.03	-.11
Time 2 relational security	5.82	0.84	—	.88*	-.11	-.25*
Time 3 relational security	5.89	0.83	—	—	-.15	-.28*
Time 2 tense social demeanor	23.34	2.32	—	—	—	-.35*
Time 3 tense social demeanor	22.18	2.16	—	—	—	—

Note: Relational security and tense social demeanor were assessed at Time 1 (baseline), Time 2 (2–4 weeks after baseline), and Time 3 (4 weeks after Time 2).

* $p < .01$.

The procedures used at Time 2 (2–4 weeks after Time 1) and Time 3 (4 weeks after Time 2) were identical to one another. At each of these follow-up sessions, participants completed the same measures of relational security used at Time 1 (all $\alpha s > .75$), which were again averaged to create relational-security variables for Times 2 and 3. Participants next met with a female, age-peer experimenter (and trained nurse) for an interview about their health and well-being. After the interview, the experimenter (who was blind to condition) rated the participants' social demeanor (calm/agitated, relaxed/anxious, and appreciative/unappreciative) using 9-point bipolar trait scales (1 = positive, 9 = negative); these scales were intended to assess participants' social tension and general positivity during the interaction. Trait ratings were summed at each time point to create reliable indices of tense social demeanor (both $\alpha s > .74$).

Results

Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations between the variables assessed at each time point are presented in Table 1. Preliminary analyses indicated that gender, ethnicity,

relationship status, time between lab sessions, and selected value in the affirmation manipulation did not moderate the results or produce main effects.²

We conducted a regression analysis on the data (see Fig. 1). First, we entered Time 1 relational security (mean-centered), condition (dummy-coded; control = 0, affirmation = 1), and the interaction between these two variables to predict Time 2 relational security. A main effect of Time 1 relational security indicated that relational security was highly stable, in that Time 1 relational security was a very strong predictor of Time 2 relational security, $\beta = 0.79, t(116) = 13.59, p < .001, d = 2.52$. Despite this stability, an interaction between Time 1 relational security and condition emerged (see Fig. 2). For participants who were low in relational security at Time 1, the affirmation successfully increased their relational security at Time 2, $\beta = 0.34, t(116) = 4.56, p < .001, d = 0.85$, whereas participants who were high in relational security at Time 1 were unaffected by the affirmation, $\beta = -0.13, t(116) = -1.69, p = .094, d = 0.31$ (Fig. 2). Next, we used the same regression to predict Time 2 tense social demeanor, as rated by the experimenter. Once again, an interaction between Time 1 relational security and

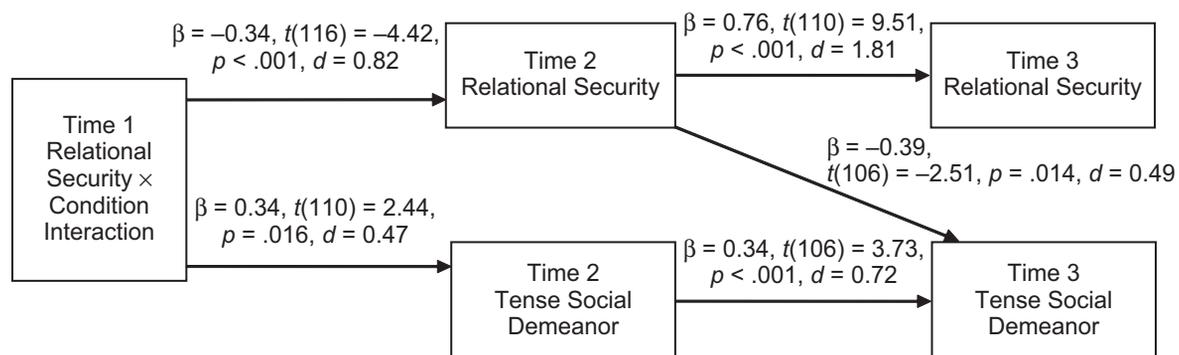


Fig. 1. Model depicting the direct and indirect interactive effects of condition and Time 1 relational security on relational security and tense social demeanor at Times 2 and 3. The main effects of condition and relational security at Time 1 were included in the regressions but are not depicted for ease of presentation. Paths not depicted in the figure were nonsignificant, all $ps > .05$. Degrees of freedom vary because data were missing for some participants.

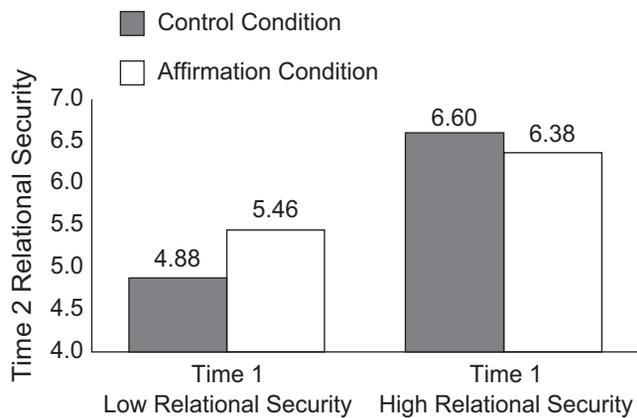


Fig. 2. Relational security at Time 2 as a function of relational security at Time 1 and condition. Low and high relational security refer to values 1 standard deviation below and above the mean, respectively.

condition emerged: For participants low in relational security at Time 1, the affirmation decreased their tense social demeanor with the experimenter at Time 2, $\beta = -0.28$, $t(110) = -2.13$, $p = .036$, $d = 0.40$. Participants high in relational security at Time 1 were once again unaffected by the affirmation, $\beta = 0.18$, $t(110) = 1.32$, $p = .187$, $d = 0.25$.

Next, we added Time 2 relational security and Time 2 tense social demeanor to the original regression to predict Time 3 relational security (see Fig. 1). Once again, relational security was stable over time. It is important to note that this stability meant that the relational-security gains enjoyed at Time 2 by participants with low relational security in the affirmation condition were still maintained up to 8 weeks after the initial affirmation; Sobel's test indicated that the indirect path from the Time 1 Relational Security \times Condition interaction to Time 3 relational security through Time 2 relational security was significant, $z = 4.12$, $p < .001$. We then used the same regression to predict Time 3 tense social demeanor and found that this variable was also stable over time (i.e., decreases in tense social demeanor for participants with low relational security in response to the affirmation manipulation were maintained over time, $z = -1.85$, $p = .057$). But more important, this analysis revealed that Time 2 relational security also predicted Time 3 tense social demeanor. Because Time 1 relational security and Time 2 tense social demeanor were both included in this final regression equation, this significant association meant that for insecure participants, increases in relational security from Time 1 to Time 2 in the affirmation condition predicted additional decreases in tense social demeanor from Time 2 to Time 3; Sobel's test of this indirect path was again significant, $z = -2.20$, $p = .027$.

Discussion

By demonstrating that it is possible to rewrite the rejection prophecy for insecure individuals using a self-affirmation intervention, we have made a significant contribution to the study of close relationships and self-affirmation. We have

identified a novel and reliable means of improving generalized relational security over the long term, a goal that has eluded relationship researchers to date. Moreover, our research demonstrates the surprisingly broad range of applications across which self-affirmation can improve well-being via recursive processes. Future research should examine potential mechanisms to explain why self-affirmation benefits relational security and behavior. One avenue to explore is whether self-regulatory capacity plays a role in buffering insecure individuals against self-threats. Schmeichel and Vohs (2009) demonstrated that self-affirmation causes a shift to higher levels of mental construal, and such shifts in mental construal buffer self-regulatory abilities. Hence, it is possible that in the research reported here, self-affirmation buffered insecure individuals' self-regulatory abilities, and this buffer allowed them to override maladaptive reactions to self-threats and instead behave in relationship-enhancing ways. This mechanism could also explain how Marigold and colleagues' (2007, 2010) abstract reframing intervention (ARI) increased felt security: The ARI essentially induced higher-level construals about a person's romantic relationship. Self-regulatory capacity thus may explain why self-affirmation and the ARI improve relational security and social behavior for insecure individuals. Future research should explore this intriguing possibility.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Notes

1. We considered relational security to be distinct for each of the three relationship partners for which participants reported. Our goal in creating the summary relational-security index was to capture relational security across a variety of relationships, any of which could benefit from our affirmation manipulation. At Time 1, across all participants, the correlation between relational security with friends and with family was $.39$, $p < .001$. For participants in relationships, the correlation between relational security with friends and with romantic partners was $.18$, $p = .154$, and with family and with romantic partners was $.21$, $p = .092$. For single participants, the correlation between relational security with friends and with potential romantic partners was $.64$, $p < .001$, and with family and with potential romantic partners was $.29$, $p = .035$.

2. In the affirmation task, participants were allowed to affirm their social relationships, and about 60% of participants did so. Self-affirmation researchers often remove the value from the task that

relates to the dependent variable that they desire to affect, because affirmation is thought to function by buffering self domains other than the target domain. In the research reported here, the pattern of results was the same for individuals who affirmed social relationships and for individuals who affirmed other values. Most important, even when we excluded participants who affirmed relationships, the key indirect path from the Time 1 Relational Security \times Condition interaction to decreases in Time 3 tense social demeanor through increases in Time 2 relational security was significant, $z = 2.07$, $p = .038$.

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