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The association between rejection and depression in the context of women's relationships with their parents

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ABSTRACT

The relation between rejection and depression was examined in the context of college students' relationships with their parents. Female college students ($n = 183$) provided self-reports of how rejected they felt by their parents, and parents provided self-reports of how rejecting they were of their daughters. In father-daughter dyads, we found that fathers' reports of rejection moderated the relation between women's reports of rejection and depression. In mother-daughter dyads, we found that daughters' reports of rejection, but not mothers' reports of rejection, was associated with depression. These findings suggest that relationship factors may be critical for understanding depression, and that the role of rejection in depression can only be understood by taking into account the nature of the relationship.

KEY WORDS: college students • depression • father • mother • parent-child relationship • rejection, women

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A great deal of theorizing and research has implicated interpersonal factors in the development and maintenance of depression (Joiner & Coyne, 1999) – a disorder that often leads to significant distress and impairment (Lopez & Murray, 1998). The present research focused on a particular relationship phenomenon: rejection. More specifically, we examined the relation between women's depression and perceptions of rejection in the context of undergraduate women's relationships with their parents.

We define rejection as communication of global negative evaluation of a person. Our conceptualization of rejection does not include communication concerning specific characteristics (e.g., comments about punctuality), or what others have labeled as complaints (e.g., Yoshimoto, Shapiro, O'Brien, & Gottman, 2005), as these do not reflect a global evaluation. We examined rejection from two different perceptions: (1) the daughter's perception (i.e., the woman's perception of how rejecting her parent is of her); and (2) the parent's perception (i.e., how rejecting a mother or father perceives she or he is of the daughter).

Numerous studies report that depression is associated with individuals' perceived rejection by mothers (e.g., Magaro & Weisz, 2006), peers (e.g., Panak & Garber, 1992), and romantic partners (e.g., Weinstock & Whisman, 2004). Several studies have also examined perceived rejection from the rejector's perspective. For example, mothers' (but not fathers') perceptions of how rejecting they are of their children were associated with children's concurrent depressive symptoms (Lefkowitz & Tesiny, 1984). Previous research has not examined whether depression is associated with perceptions of rejection in combination (i.e., both the rejector and the rejected), either additively or interactively.

There are several ways in which rejection might be associated with daughters' depression. First, all that might matter is the degree to which daughters perceive parental rejection. In other words, it is the daughter's *perception* of rejection that makes women vulnerable to depression, with parents' perceptions of rejection being completely unrelated to women's depression. Second, all that might matter is the degree to which *parents* perceive they are rejecting their daughters. In other words, it is parents' knowledge and awareness of rejecting their daughters that makes women vulnerable to depression. In this case women's perceptions of rejection are completely unrelated to their own depression. Third, what might facilitate depression is not the women's or the parents' perceptions of rejection alone, nor the sum of the two, but rather specific combinations of the perceptions. This possibility is consistent with our hypothesis that what leads women to be depressed is not always their perceptions of rejection. Instead, we posit that it is certain aspects of the daughter–parent relationship and their consequences, such as a lack of emotional attunement and a sense of subordination, that lead to depression.

Because of two important differences in the nature of daughter–mother and daughter–father dyads, we hypothesized that the meanings of rejection would differ across the two types of dyads. We expected how rejection is associated with depression to vary across the two relationships. First, in

many, if not most, families mothers and fathers will play different roles with their children (e.g., mothers are main attachment figures for most infants; Bowlby, 1969/1997). Some of these role differences may be related to differences in gender dynamics. Compared to women, men more often assume a position of greater power in the family (e.g., Tannen, 1990). Individuals in power more easily influence the emotions of those with less power (e.g., Szinovacz, 1987). For example, fathers' moods predicted adolescents' subsequent moods more often than did mothers' moods (Larson & Richards, 1994). These findings indirectly suggest that father–daughter relationships may be more hierarchical than mother–daughter relationships. Threats and rejection can trigger submissive behavior (Ohman, 1986). Both submissive behavior and involuntary subordination are associated with depression (e.g., Gilbert, 2000).

The second way in which mother–daughter relationships differ from father–daughter relationships is in levels of emotional attunement and empathy. Compared with fathers, mothers are more emotionally attuned to their children. For example, mothers were more accurate when estimating their adolescents' moods than were fathers (Larson & Richards, 1994). Moreover, adolescents (1) view their mothers as more empathic than their fathers, and (2) seek social support more often from their mothers than their fathers (Crouter & Crowley, 1990). Similarly, about three quarters of adolescent daughters felt that their mothers met their emotional needs, whereas only about a third of adolescent daughters felt that their fathers did (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Generally, young women feel more connected to their mothers than their fathers.

We posit that when women perceive parental rejection, whether from fathers or mothers, they are prone to feel depressed (because this perceived rejection is associated with factors such as a lack of emotional attunement and a sense of subordination). We also posit that when both women and their parents report low levels of rejection, it reflects a healthy relationship that will be associated with low levels of depression. Because of the differences between mother–daughter and father–daughter relationships in power balances and emotional attunement, we posit that when fathers perceive they are rejecting, their daughters will be at risk of elevated levels of depression even if they do not perceive themselves to be rejected, whereas when mothers perceive they are rejecting, their daughters will not be at risk of elevated levels of depression unless the daughters also perceive being rejected. We speculate that in the case of fathers and their daughters, the pattern of the father perceiving being rejecting when the daughter does not reflects an unhealthy relationship (in which there are problems such as a power imbalance and a lack of emotional attunement) which increases the daughters' vulnerability to depression. In contrast, we propose that when the mother perceives being rejecting but the daughter does not, (although not ideal) the relationship does not reflect the sort of unhealthy relationship that makes daughters more vulnerable to depression. To summarize, we propose that for daughter–father relationships, both the daughter perceiving rejection and the father reporting rejection (even if the daughter does not

perceive rejection) are indicators of unhealthy relationships characterized by problems such as lack of emotional attunement and significant power imbalances, whereas for daughter–mother relationships it is only perceived rejection by the daughter that is an indicator of unhealthy relationships.

In sum, we examined the relations between rejection and depression. We hypothesized that the relation between rejection and depression would depend on the type of relationship (i.e., mother–daughter vs. father–daughter). In the case of daughter–father dyads, we hypothesized that the combinations of fathers' and daughters' perceptions of rejection would predict depression beyond the contributions of daughters' perceived rejection and fathers' perceived rejection alone. In contrast, in the case of daughter–mother dyads, we hypothesized that the daughters' perceptions of rejection alone would account for the relation between perceived rejection and depression. In other words, we hypothesized that fathers' but not mothers' perceptions of rejection would moderate the relation between daughters' perceived rejection and depression.

Method

Participants and procedure

To explore the relations between rejection and depression, we examined college women and their parents. We focused on a female sample because the rate of major depressive disorder is two to three times higher in women than in men (Kessler, 2000; Kessler, Dupont, Berglund, & Wittchen, 1999). In addition, because our study is interpersonal in nature, we focused on women because they are higher in interpersonal orientation than are men (Feingold, 1994). We obtained measures of depression and perceived rejection from the college women, and also obtained a measure of perceived rejection from parents.

Researchers have frequently noted that many purported depression measures primarily tap the distress that is common to both depression and anxiety (e.g., Nitschke, Heller, Imig, McDonald, & Miller, 2001; Watson, Clark et al., 1995; Watson, Weber et al., 1995). In the present research, we measured individual differences in anhedonic depression, a construct that captures low positive affect and anhedonia. Low positive affect is associated specifically with major depressive disorder (Watson, Clark et al., 1995; Watson, Weber et al., 1995) and is not associated with anxiety disorders.

A total of 281 undergraduate women enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a large Midwestern university completed the study, which had obtained university institutional review board approval. Participants received partial course credit for their participation. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 29 ($M = 18.6$, $SD = 1.1$). The ethnic/racial make-up of the participants was as follows: 76% European American (white), 5% Asian American, 7% African American, 7% Latina, 2% biracial and 3% "other".

College students are an appropriate sample to study the relation between rejection and depression because: (1) female undergraduates' relationships

with their parents are associated with their college adjustment (e.g., Rice & Whaley, 1994); and (2) among young people, rates of depression have increased during the latter part of the twentieth century (Fombonne, 1998; Kessler & Walters, 1998). Approximately 16% of individuals between 15 and 24 report having a lifetime major depressive episode (Kessler & Walters, 1998).

Participants completed several questionnaires including those described later. One of the questionnaires assessed how rejecting one of their parents had been of them over the past month. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire regarding the parent from whom they sought more approval (70.5% chose their mothers). Participants were asked to contact the chosen parent either (1) via a short email containing a study description and a link to the online survey; or (2) via a short note mailed with a study description, measures, and a stamped return envelope. All but three participants agreed to contact a parent. A total of 183 (~65%) parents completed the questionnaires ($n = 135$; ~74% were mothers). A large majority ($n = 160$; ~87%) of parents who responded completed the online survey. Participants whose parents participated did not differ significantly from participants whose parents declined participating in terms of perceived parental rejection, $t(280) = 1.04$, *ns*, or depression, $t(277) = .55$, *ns*. Participants who chose their mothers versus fathers did not differ on levels of perceived parental rejection, $t(280) = .89$, *ns*, their parents' perceived rejection, $t(181) = 1.51$, *ns*, or depression, $t(277) = .51$, *ns*.

Participants answered all questionnaires concerning their experiences over the past month. The internal consistencies, ranges, means, and standard deviations of all variables below are presented in Table 1. Correlations between measures of rejection and depression are presented in Table 2.

Materials

Anhedonic depression. We examined depression using the 22-item anhedonic depression scale of the Mood and Anxiety Symptoms Questionnaire (MASQ; Watson, Clark et al., 1995; Watson, Weber et al., 1995). Items included "felt like nothing was very enjoyable." Participants indicated how much they felt or experienced things this way (1 = not at all, 5 = extremely).

TABLE 1
Descriptive statistics

	Alpha	Range	Mean (SD)
Anhedonic depression	.92	23–95	51.5 (13.0)
Daughters:			
Perceived maternal rejection ($n = 198$)	.78	1–4.0	1.3 (0.5)
Perceived paternal rejection ($n = 83$)	.88	1–4.5	1.4 (0.6)
Parents:			
Mothers' perceived rejection ($n = 135$)	.55	1–2.5	1.2 (0.3)
Fathers' perceived rejection ($n = 48$)	.56	1–2.8	1.3 (0.4)

TABLE 2
Zero-order correlations between perceptions of rejection and depression

	Anhedonic depression
Daughters:	
Perceived maternal rejection	.27**
Perceived paternal rejection	.24*
Parents:	
Mothers' perceived rejection	.17*
Fathers' perceived rejection	.11

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Past research has indicated that the MASQ anhedonic depression subscale has good convergent and discriminant validity (Nitschke et al., 2001; Reidy & Keogh, 1997; Watson, Clark et al., 1995; Watson, Weber et al., 1995). Watson, Weber et al. (1995) reported a clinical sample having a mean of 65.5 and a standard deviation of 14.8 on the anhedonic depression scale.

Daughters' perceived rejection by parents. Daughters' perceived rejection was measured using the four items from the Beliefs about Reactions to the Self scale (BARS; Segrin, 1993) that were both unique and most applicable to child–parent relationships. The words “mom” or “dad,” replaced the word “partner” (e.g., “My mom(dad) did not seem to enjoy talking with me”). Participants indicated the extent to which each item described their mother's/father's feelings and behaviors over the past month (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Parents' perceived rejection of daughters. Parents completed the same rejection scale as did their daughters with items modified to reflect parents' perception (e.g., “I did not seem to like my daughter”). Parents indicated the extent to which each item described how they felt over the past month. As shown in Table 1, the alphas for mothers' and fathers' perceived rejection were low. Low internal consistencies may be due to the small number of items and/or to a restricted range of reported scores by parents, with few parents endorsing high levels of rejection. Daughters' perceived rejection was not significantly associated with fathers' perceived rejection, $r = .07$, *ns*, or mothers' perceived rejection, $r = .13$, *ns*.

Results

To test the relations between depression and rejection, and whether the relations vary as a function of relationship type (i.e., mother–daughter vs. father–daughter) and the reporter of rejection, we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression analysis using centered variables. In the first step of the equation, we entered daughters' perceived rejection, parents' perceived rejection, and the parent chosen (i.e., mother vs. father). In the second step,

we entered three interaction terms: (1) daughters' perceived rejection \times parents' perceived rejection; (2) daughters' perceived rejection \times parent; and (3) parents' perceived rejection \times parent. In the third step, we entered the three-way interaction term: daughters' perceived rejection \times parents' perceived rejection \times parent. The three-way interaction was marginally significant, $p = .05$, suggesting that association between depression and rejection varied as a function of the relationship type and the reporter of rejection (see Table 3).

To help interpret the three-way interaction, we proceeded to analyze the relations between rejection and depression separately for mother–daughter and father–daughter dyads. This allowed us to test our hypothesis that parents' perceived rejection would moderate the relation between daughters' perceived rejection and depression. For both father–daughter and mother–daughter dyads, we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression using centered variables as predictors. We entered daughters' perceived rejection and the parents' perceived rejection in the first step of the equation, and the interaction between daughters' perceived rejection and the parents' perceived rejection in the second step.

First, we examined whether the association between daughters' perceived paternal rejection and depression was moderated by fathers' perceived rejection. As shown in Table 4, daughters' perceived rejection and fathers' perceived rejection were significantly associated with depression in the first step. However, as we had predicted, the interaction term in the second step was significantly associated with depression, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 43) = 7.86, p < .01$. In order to interpret the interaction, we computed predicted values using unstandardized beta weights and 1.0 and -1.0 standard deviation values to predict high and low scores (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). To rule out the possibility that this interaction was due to a small number of

TABLE 3
Hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting depression

	Anhedonic depression	
	β	ΔR^2
Step 1		.12**
Daughters' perceived rejection	.31**	
Parents' perceived rejection	.10	
Parent	-.02	
Step 2		.03
Daughters' perceived rejection \times parents' Perceived rejection	-.20*	
Daughters' perceived rejection \times parent	.00	
Parents' perceived rejection \times parent	.01	
Step 3		.02 [†]
Daughters' perceived rejection \times parents' Perceived rejection \times parent	.18 [†]	

Note. [†] $p = .05$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

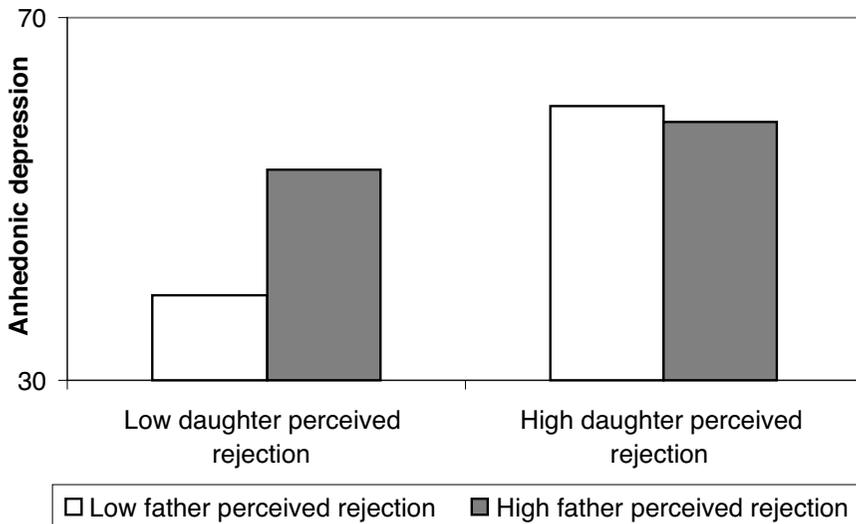
TABLE 4
Hierarchical multiple regression analyses (for mothers and fathers) predicting anhedonic depression

	Father–daughter dyads anhedonic depression		Mother–daughter dyads anhedonic depression	
	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
Step 1		.06		.15**
Daughters' perceived rejection	.23		.35**	
Parents' perceived rejection	.05		.12	
Step 2		.15**		.00
Daughters' perceived rejection	.50**		.37**	
Parents' perceived rejection	.22		.14	
Daughters' perceived \times parents' perceived rejection	-.52**		-.06	

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

outliers, we computed leverage values for each participant. Only one participant had a leverage value greater than 3.0 and the interaction remained statistically significant when this one father was excluded. Figure 1 indicates that the daughters who perceived low rejection and whose fathers also perceived low rejection had the lowest levels of depression. The other three groups had similar levels of depression.

FIGURE 1
Fathers' perceived rejection \times daughters' perceived rejection predicting anhedonic depression



Second, we tested whether the association between daughters' perceived maternal rejection and depression was moderated by mothers' perceived rejection. As shown in Table 4, in contrast to father–daughter dyads in the first step of the equation, daughters' perceived rejection was significantly associated with depression. Further, unlike father–daughter dyads, the addition of the interaction term (daughters' perceived maternal rejection \times mothers' perceived rejection) did not predict depression above and beyond the independent contributions of daughters' perceived maternal rejection and mothers' perceived rejection, $F_{\text{change}}(1, 130) = 0.54, ns$.

Discussion

Replicating past research (e.g., Magaro & Weisz, 2006; Panak & Garber, 1992; Weinstock & Whisman, 2004), we found that perceived rejection and depression are positively associated. The present study extended that research by accounting for the relationship type and the perceptions of each dyad member. Our data suggested that the relation between rejection and depression depended both on the relationship (i.e., mother–daughter vs. father–daughter) and, at least for father–daughter dyads, the unique combination of each member's perception. These results are consistent with our hypothesis that it is not rejection per se that generates depression, but rather aspects of relationships and their consequences.

As hypothesized, fathers' but not mothers' perceptions of rejection moderated the relation between daughters' perceived rejection and depression. These findings are consistent with (though they do not provide direct evidence for) our expectations that for daughter–father relationships, both the father's and daughter's perceiving rejection represent indicators of relationships problems such as lack of emotional attunement and significant power imbalances. For daughter–mother relationships, on the other hand, it is only the daughter's perceived rejection that suggests the same sorts of relationship problems.

An optimal parent–daughter relationship could act as a buffer against stressors in daughters' lives and reduce susceptibility to depression. In the present context, we define optimal as when both the daughter and the parent perceive low rejection. Both perceiving low rejection suggests that the daughter and parent are emotionally attuned with each other. Emotional attunement is the extent to which two people respond, listen, and connect with each other in a positive way (Booher & Jacobvitz, 1998, as cited in Curran, Hazen, Jacobvitz, & Sasaki, 2006). It is a dimension of communication that includes positive affect but also describes the extent to which each individual is aware of the other individual's perceptions and responds to the other individual's needs (Curran et al., 2006). Emotional attunement is a necessary component of healthy, stable relationships (e.g., marriages; Gottman, 1994).

Suboptimal relationships may facilitate depression for women by degrading the sense of self and increasing feelings of shame. Although we did

not test the potentially mediating role of shame, past theorizing and research has linked depression with feelings of submissiveness, shame, and involuntary subordination (e.g., Allan & Gilbert, 1997; Cadbury, 1991; Gilbert, 1989). Submissive behavior can be triggered by threats or rejection (Ohman, 1986). Feelings of shame are characterized by feeling small, worthless, and powerless, as well as being concerned with others' negative evaluation of the self (e.g., Lewis, 1971; Tangney, 1991). Several researchers have found that shame is associated with psychological distress, depressive symptoms (e.g., scores on BDI; Andrews, Qian, & Valentine, 2002; Ferguson, Stegge, Miller, & Olsen, 1999; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992), minor and major depressive disorders (Thompson & Berenbaum, 2006), as well as parental rejection (e.g., Høglund & Nicholas, 1995; Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005).

Psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory has long considered the connection between invalidation (at least during childhood) and later pathology (e.g., Miller, 1979/1997; Winnicott, 1958, 1965). For example, Miller (1979/1997) posited that children lose their sense of self when parents do not adequately care for children's emotional needs. We speculate that when women are emotionally invalidated in relationships, an emotional hierarchy develops that leads the woman to feel ashamed, subordinated, and, ultimately, depressed. In other words, the parents' perceptions take precedence over the daughters' perceptions. Future research should explore these potential mediators (i.e., power differences and shame) of the link between rejection and depression.

In the present study both women and their parents provided their perceptions of rejection. However, we did not collect data that provided objective rejection ratings. Therefore, some might suggest caution in interpreting our results because the accuracy of either rejection report cannot be objectively determined. In other words, we do not know how much rejection "really" occurred within the relationship. To address this potential methodological concern, future studies could include an alternative measure of rejection (e.g., using behavioral observation methods). On the other hand, some might argue that the objective truth is subordinate to perceptions within interpersonal relationships. Relationships consist of individual perceptions, which may or may not match up with an observer's objective ratings. In effect, individuals within any relationship have to communicate within the context of each others' perceptions regardless of whether these perceptions reflect an objective reality.

The present study focused exclusively on young women and their relationships with their parents. Future research is needed to test whether these findings replicate with a larger sample of father–daughter dyads. Including a larger sample may also address the limitation of parental perceptions of rejection not being normally distributed. Future research should also examine the extent to which differences between mother–daughter and father–daughter relationships generalize to other male–female relationships. For example, the present results may be a function not of biological sex, but to how much individuals prescribe to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Differences may also be a function of the specific relationship

between partners (e.g., parent, friend, boss). Therefore, it will be important to explore how and why the relations between rejection and depression may vary as a function of the roles partners play in the dyad. Finally, although depression is a particularly important public health concern for women (Kessler, 2000; Kessler et al., 1999), future research should also examine rejection and depression in men.

We measured anhedonic depression and not major depressive disorder. Although some women's anhedonic depression scores were typical of clinical samples, the large majority of women's scores were in the average range. Future research would ideally include a larger proportion of women with clinical levels of anhedonic depression. Moreover, this research should incorporate diagnostic interviews to better elucidate the association between rejection and clinical depression. It will also be important to examine how parental depression may influence the relations between rejection and their adult children's depression.

We proposed several untested mechanisms potentially providing a link between rejection and women's depression (e.g., shame, subordination, and submissiveness). Future research should examine these mechanisms to increase understanding of the link between rejection and women's depression. Finally, we obtained data from only one parent of each female college student. Although women in father-daughter dyads did not differ from the in mother-daughter dyads on either perceived rejection or depression, we cannot rule out the possibility that differences between these two groups were a function of selection biases. An ideal design would be a prospective longitudinal study that includes both mothers and fathers of each participant. We are optimistic that such research following up the results of the present study will elucidate the important roles of interpersonal factors in depression.

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