

2013

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Love the One You're With: Rejection and Trait Forgiveness Predict Partner Attraction



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Introduction

Individuals have a fundamental need to belong. They form and maintain stable, long-term relationships with ease, and they desire frequent, pleasant interactions with their close others. They are reluctant to end even harmful relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Rejection presents a strong belonging threat, and individuals experience negative affect during an experience of rejection (Barden, Garber, Leiman, Ford, & Masters, 1985).

But how do individuals regain a sense of belonging? Would you be more attracted to a partner in an existing relationship if you were rejected by others? Previous research demonstrated that rejected individuals acted with hostility to their rejectors but acted prosocially toward individuals who were not involved in their rejection and with whom they had opportunity for future interaction (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). This suggests that third-party rejection and partner attraction may be related. The present research examines trait forgiveness as a moderator between third-party rejection and partner attraction. We expected that individuals who recalled a rejection by a third-party and who were low in trait forgiveness would expect greater attraction to their current romantic partner.

Method

Participants were 120 (31 male, 89 female) college students with a mean age of 19.55 ($SD = 3.56$) who were currently involved in a romantic relationship.

Participants first completed a questionnaire assessing their trait forgiveness. Participants were then prompted to write either about a time they were rejected or accepted by someone other than their romantic partner. After the rejection manipulation, participants completed questionnaires regarding their feelings toward their current romantic partners (i.e., attraction to their partner)

Results



Using PROCESS (Hayes, 2012), we examined whether the rejection manipulation affected the participants' attraction to their romantic partners and whether this effect was moderated by trait forgiveness. Participants who recalled a rejection by someone other than their romantic partner reported significantly greater attraction to their partners than participants who recalled an acceptance by someone other than their romantic partner, $t(117) = 2.31$, $B = 2.82$, $p = .03$, and participants reported greater attraction to their partners when they reported higher levels of trait forgiveness, $t(117) = 4.02$, $B = .92$, $p < .001$. The interaction between condition (rejection versus acceptance) and trait forgiveness was significant, $t(117) = -2.25$, $B = -.80$, $p = .03$.

Thus, trait forgiveness significantly moderated the effect of rejection condition on attraction to one's romantic partner. No differences in partner attraction were observed between rejection and acceptance conditions for participants reporting moderate levels of trait forgiveness ($p = .53$) or high levels of trait forgiveness ($p = .24$). Importantly, participants who reported low trait forgiveness, reported significantly greater attraction to their partners after recalling a rejection (versus an acceptance) by someone other than their romantic partner, $t(117) = 2.01$, $B = .66$, $p = .047$. In other words, it appears that when individuals who are not easily forgiving recall a rejection by someone other than their romantic partner, they connect more with their romantic partner by expressing greater attraction.

Discussion

What happens when someone other than your romantic partner rejects you, and does your reaction vary based on your general level of forgiveness?

When individuals recalled being rejected by someone other than their romantic partner, individuals rated their attraction to their partners significantly greater than those whom recalled being accepted by someone other than their romantic partner. The partner attraction level varied based on the individual's general forgiveness level. Individuals who reported lower levels of trait forgiveness and recalled being rejected by someone other than their romantic partner reported greater partner attraction.

Rejection is often followed by many negative outcomes (e.g., negative affect). This research suggests that current relationships may serve as a buffer against belonging threats (i.e., rejection), particularly if the rejected individual is not likely to forgive their rejector. Current relationships may serve as a reminder that an individual has relationships through which belonging needs can be met.