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Zahra Amer  
zamer@vols.utk.edu

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Examining the role of relationship satisfaction in the association between rejection sensitivity and infidelity

Zahra Amer

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### Abstract

A considerable amount of research has demonstrated that individuals high in rejection sensitivity behave negatively towards their partners when they sense rejection. There also exists a large body of research dedicated to identifying the factors leading to infidelity in romantic relationships as well as its consequences. In an effort to bridge the gap between these two areas of research, the present study investigates the possible association between high rejection sensitivity and infidelity while also examining whether this proposed relationship is mediated by relationship satisfaction, as this proposed model has yet to be explored. Participants were undergraduate students (77 males, 249 females, 1 other) who took an anonymous online survey in which they completed measures of rejection sensitivity, infidelity, and relationship satisfaction. Mediation analyses revealed that rejection sensitivity significantly predicted relationship satisfaction and that relationship satisfaction was predictive of infidelity; however, rejection sensitivity did not significantly predict infidelity. Implications for utilizing these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

## Introduction

Although the majority of Americans consider infidelity, the act of being unfaithful in a romantic relationship, to be an unforgivable act of betrayal, infidelity rates have been on the rise among all age groups (Fincham & May, 2017; Oberle, Dooley, & Nagurney, 2017). Research examining infidelity in romantic relationships has sought to determine what makes an individual more likely to engage in infidelity (Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011; Whisman, Gordon, & Chatav, 2007). For example, research has found that factors such as income, relationship satisfaction, or previously engaging in infidelity are predictive of infidelity (Allen, Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon, & Glass, 2005). Gaining a clearer understanding of the specific characteristics and demographics that may make one more likely to engage in infidelity can aid in identifying at-risk couples in clinical contexts. Interestingly, infidelity research to date has yet to examine the relationship between engaging in infidelity and rejection sensitivity, which is commonly defined as the disposition to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and strongly respond to potential cues of rejection (Lou & Li, 2017).

### *Rejection Sensitivity*

The desire to be accepted by others and avoid rejection is a natural tendency in humans (Downey & Feldman, 1996); however, some people are more sensitive to rejection than others. As can be witnessed in everyday life, many people react to rejection benignly and are able to maintain their composure, whereas other people react so strongly to rejection that their relationships with those around them can be compromised. The most widely accepted definition of rejection sensitivity (RS) is the disposition to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and strongly respond to potential cues of rejection (Lou & Li, 2017; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). While being sensitive to rejection can be considered a useful defense mechanism at times, it can be a maladaptive trait to have within the context of a romantic relationship. Previous research has found that poorer relationship satisfaction is common among couples in which at least one partner is highly sensitive to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

### *Association Between Rejection Sensitivity and Relationship Satisfaction*

Among college students, there is a negative correlation between rejection sensitivity and relationship satisfaction for both the rejection-sensitive individuals and their partners (Galliher & Bentley, 2010), with greater rejection sensitivity predicting poorer relationship satisfaction. Among couples, the rejection-sensitive (RS) partner is (1) more likely to perceive rejection in ambiguous situations in which rejection could be possible (Downey & Feldman, 1996), and (2) is more likely to strongly react to perceived rejection with a form of aggression (Ayduk, Gyurak, &

Luerssen, 2008; Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Research also shows that in couples in which one partner shows high rejection sensitivity (HRS), maladaptive techniques, such as self-silencing behaviors (Norona, Roberson, & Welsh, 2016) are often employed in an effort to maintain the relationship.

It is common for individuals who are high in rejection sensitivity to develop a fight-or-flight response toward their partner when they perceive cues of rejection, either choosing to engage with their partner by being physically or verbally aggressive towards them, or choosing to withdraw completely from their partner (Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Oberle et al., 2017). Seeing as HRS can create such negative behavioral patterns and dissatisfaction within romantic relationships, it is possible that engaging in infidelity is one way that HRS individuals choose to cope with the rejection cues they perceive from their partner. While previous research has found that HRS can create a number of issues within a relationship such as depressive symptoms, reactive aggression, and self-silencing behavior (Ayduk et al., 2008; Norona et al., 2016), research has yet to determine whether HRS individuals are more likely to engage in infidelity as a reaction to the rejection that he or she perceives. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature by testing whether rejection sensitivity predicts higher rates of infidelity in romantic couples.

#### Present Study

Given the detrimental nature of infidelity on both individual and dyadic functioning, infidelity research has sought to identify individual, dyadic, and environmental characteristics that create a context in which infidelity is more likely to occur (Allen et al., 2005). Given that rejection sensitive individuals tend to anxiously anticipate, analyze, and react to potential forms of rejection (Lou & Li, 2017), it is reasonable to question whether HRS individuals may engage in infidelity as a reaction to this perceived rejection. Further, given that previous research findings indicate that there is negative correlation between rejection sensitivity and relationship satisfaction, the present study seeks to determine whether rejection sensitivity is predictive of infidelity and whether relationship satisfaction mediates this relationship. Specifically, I hypothesize that there will be a positive correlation between rejection sensitivity and infidelity, suggesting that the more rejection sensitive an individual is, the more likely he or she is to commit infidelity. Further, I hypothesize that relationship satisfaction will serve as a mediator for this relationship.

## Method

### *Participants*

Data were collected from 327 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Tennessee Knoxville (77 males, 249 females, 1 other,  $M$  relationship length = 16.21 months,  $SD$  = 24.648 months; See Table 2 for sample demographics). Participation in the study was limited to undergraduate students who were at least 18 years of age, were currently in a romantic relationship, and completed the online informed consent form.

### *Procedure*

Undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Tennessee Knoxville were recruited to participate in the study through the University of Tennessee Participation in Research (HPR) website. Students earned extra credit points toward their final grade for participating in the study. Students were informed in writing of the intent of the study, general procedures, time involvement, potential benefit of participation, potential risks of participating, and right to cease participating in the study at any time without consequence. Undergraduate students who were at least 18 years of age, were currently in a relationship, and consented to participate in the study were asked to complete an anonymous online survey that took approximately one hour to complete. No identifiable personal information was collected.

### *Measures*

**Demographics.** Participants reported their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, employment status, age, gender of their current partner, relationship with their current partner (i.e. married, engaged, or in a relationship but not married or engaged), and relationship length. See Table 2 for sample demographics.

**Relationship satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured using the 16-item Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-16; Funk & Rogge, 2007). The CSI-16 is an abridged version of the original 32-item measure. The 16-item measure has been established as a more precise and sensitive measure than other commonly used relationship satisfaction measures (Funk & Rogge, 2007). The measure assesses one's overall satisfaction with their relationship using a Likert scale, with higher values representing greater levels of relationship satisfaction. Items include "please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship" which is rated on a scale from 1 (extremely unhappy) to 6 (perfect) and "in general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" which is rated on a

scale from 0 (not at all) to 5 (completely). This measure has shown high internal consistency,  $\alpha = .98$  (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Internal consistency for the present sample was .98.

**Rejection sensitivity.** Rejection sensitivity was measured using the 18-item Rejection-Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ; Downey & Feldman, 1996). The RSQ-18 is a widely used self-report questionnaire that assesses the degree to which individuals are sensitive to rejection in specific situations. The questionnaire presents a scenario followed by questions to gauge participants' rejection sensitivity. Items include, "You ask your boyfriend/girlfriend to move in with you. How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not he/she would want to move in with you?" Responses range from a 1 to 6 Likert scale (1 = "very unconcerned," 6 = "very concerned"). Internal consistency is strong ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

**Infidelity.** Infidelity was assessed using the 11-item Infidelity Scale, a self-report questionnaire adapted from *Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia* 1999. The scale assesses varying degrees of romantic attraction to someone other than one's current romantic partner. Questions include "How attractive did you find this person?" and "How physically intimate were you with this person?" Possible responses range from 0 to 8 (0 = "Not at all/Never," 8 = Extremely/A great deal/Very often. Instructions were slightly modified to apply to a cross-sectional study rather than a longitudinal study.

## Results

Mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2012). Recall, I predicted that relationship satisfaction would mediate the association between rejection sensitivity and infidelity. Results revealed that rejection sensitivity negatively predicted relationship satisfaction (a path:  $\beta = -.86$ ) and that relationship satisfaction negatively predicted infidelity (b path:  $\beta = -.41$ ). However, rejection sensitivity did not significantly predict infidelity. Thus, mediation was not supported for the hypothesized model. See Figure 1.

## Discussion

Rejection sensitivity refers to a specific style of thinking that is characterized by anxious expectations of rejection in interpersonal relationships (Cervone & Pervin, 2016). Previous research suggests that some individuals are more prone to being highly rejection sensitive than others and that these individuals spend more time worrying about being rejected by their romantic partners than those who are low in rejection sensitivity (LRS). HRS individuals tend to worry about their partners terminating the relationships even when the relationships are considered relatively strong (Cervone & Pervin, 2016). These worries can result in the HRS individual acting out in various ways when

they perceive even minimal cues of rejection. Specifically, researchers have found that HRS individuals either respond to rejection by withdrawing emotionally and physically from the relationship or by engaging in aggressive behaviors intended to keep their partners engaged in their relationship such as attempting to control their partners, or exhibiting jealousy, anger, and hostility (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Galliher & Bentley, 2010).

Recall, I hypothesized that HRS individuals would be more likely to commit infidelity than LRS individuals and that relationship satisfaction would mediate this relationship. Interestingly, the present study revealed that HRS individuals are not more likely to commit infidelity than LRS individuals. This nonsignificant finding is surprising given the proneness of HRS to engaging in such negative affective and behavioral overreactions against their partners coupled with the tendency to be less satisfied in their relationships than LRS individuals. It appeared possible that engaging in infidelity would be an additional negative behavior that HRS individuals might engage in when they feel rejected and unsatisfied in their romantic relationship.

Additionally, consistent with previous research, there was a significant correlation between rejection sensitivity and relationship satisfaction as well as a significant correlation between relationship satisfaction and infidelity. However, my hypothesis that relationship satisfaction would serve as a mediator between rejection sensitivity and infidelity was not supported by my findings. Perhaps the findings of this study lend support to the claim that attitudes (e.g. “Oh, I would never cheat on my partner.”) do not necessarily predict actual behavior. As previously stated, research has found that although most people have highly negative attitudes towards infidelity, infidelity rates are continuing to rise among all age groups in the United States (Fincham & May, 2017). It could be possible that a similar inconsistency between attitudes and behaviors exist between attitudes of HRS individuals in relation to their behaviors. While HRS individuals have been found to harbor negative attitudes towards their partners because they fear rejection, these data suggest that they do not tend to commit infidelity as a way of acting out these negative attitudes. Though the present data yielded unexpected results, they further our understanding of the specific characteristics and contexts that may or may not make an individual more likely to engage in infidelity. Although it is important to correctly identify which factors lead to couples being at-risk for infidelity, it is equally important to identify which factors do *not* lead couples to being at-risk for infidelity, as both types of factors contribute to enhancing our understanding of the complex matter of infidelity in romantic couples.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

While this study has explored a gap in the literature surrounding the relationships between rejection sensitivity, relationship satisfaction, and infidelity, it is important to note its limitations. In order to participate, participants had to be in a current romantic relationship at the time the study was conducted. This requirement may have been problematic because it is possible that the individuals who did commit infidelity were no longer in their romantic relationships due to their unfaithfulness; therefore, the study may have been restricted to sampling only those who were high in rejection sensitivity but did not commit infidelity. Additionally, as is the case in any study relying on survey-based methodology, it is possible that the participants in the present study were influenced by social desirability bias when they responded to the questionnaire items. Social desirability bias may play an especially large role in influencing the results of studies that target an emotionally-charged issue like infidelity even when participants are aware that their responses are anonymous, as was the case in the present study. Individuals may be reluctant to accurately report, or even consider, their actual propensity to engage in infidelity in self reports. The study was also limited to gathering data from university students from a single university. It is possible that the study would yield different results if conducted on diverse populations consisting of individuals varying in age, marital status, length of relationship, religious background, economic status, and geographic location. Gender was also disproportionately represented in this study, with individuals who identified as female comprising over three quarters of the study's sample.

Future research should attempt to replicate the present study using more diverse samples to determine whether significant results may be obtained. Additionally, future research should attempt to examine possible gender differences that may exist within the mediation model proposed in the present study. Finally, future research should continue to investigate the possible factors that may cause individuals to engage in infidelity and to put their romantic relationships at risk of dissolution.

Table 1

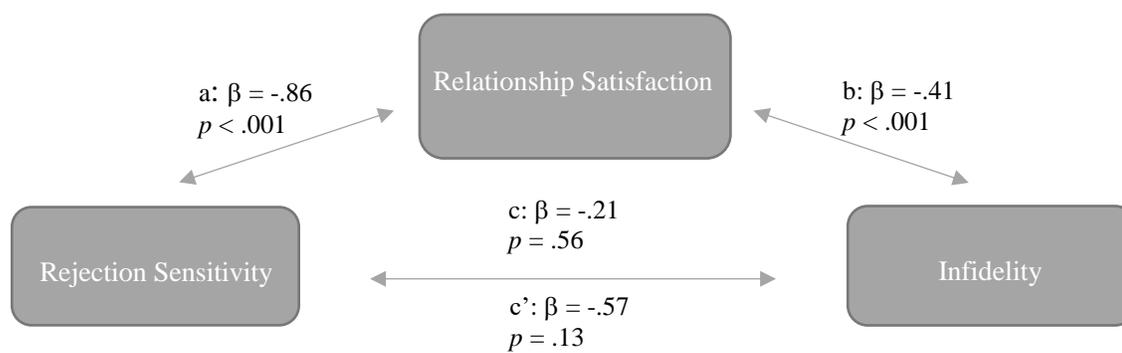


Table 2

## Present Sample's Demographic Characteristics

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>N (%) or Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Range</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	23.5%	
Female	76.1%	
Other	.3%	
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White/Caucasian	85.9%	
Black/African-American	4.6%	
Hispanic/Latino	2.1%	
Asian-American	3.7%	
Native American/Alaskan Native	.3%	
Indian/Middle Eastern	.3%	
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	.9%	
More than one race	.9%	
Other	1.2%	
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
Heterosexual	95.7%	
Gay	.9%	
Lesbian	.6%	
Bisexual	2.8%	
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Employed full-time for wages	1.5%	
Employed part-time for wages	30.9%	
Self-Employed	1.5%	
Out of work and looking for work	12.2%	
Out of work but not currently looking for work	47.4%	
A homemaker	.6%	
Unable to work	3.1%	
Prefer not to answer	2.8%	
<b>Gender of current partner</b>		
Male	74.2%	
Female	25.8%	
<b>Relationship with current partner</b>		
Married	1.5%	
Engaged	1.2%	
In a relationship, but not married or engaged	97.2%	
Age	19	17-49
Relationship Length (in months)	16.21	1-311

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