Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity and Regulatory Focus Theory to Explain College Students’ Class Engagement

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The current study investigated the relationship between undergraduate students’ sensitivity to rejection and their level of participation in positive classroom engagement. One hundred and thirty-five undergraduate students from an upper-Midwest university volunteered to participate in a survey as part of their Psychology 101 course. As hypothesized, there was a negative correlation between students’ sensitivity to rejection and their level of participation in positive class behaviors. We also found that this relationship was moderated by the regulatory focus, “prevention pride.” The greater a student’s prevention pride was, the more likely the student was to have an average amount of participation in positive class behaviors, regardless of their sensitivity to rejection. These findings suggest that students who do not become engaged in positive classroom behaviors may be afraid to do so for fear of rejection by peers and/or instructors, and that this relationship is moderated to a large degree by the students’ prevention pride.

1. Introduction

Some students seem to avoid interpersonal contact with peers and instructors while others openly engage in all manner of positive class behaviours. Still others are so engaged that they will not stop talking long enough to allow their peers a chance to contribute to classroom discussion. College student engagement has become an important variable of interest in higher education research [1]. The present study builds on previous research to develop and test hypotheses that attempt to answer some questions that are central to understanding and improving student engagement [2] in their higher education experience. Specifically, this study explores some personality characteristics that predict student engagement in positive class behaviours.

Hyde and Ruth [3] found that students who exhibit lower levels of class participation most frequently attribute this to shyness. There is a large scientific literature relevant to the shyness construct (see [4, 5] for reviews).

Preparedness, or more specifically, “appropriate preparedness,” was the second most commonly reported reason. Rather than being afraid of having insufficient knowledge of the subject matter, students reported feeling intimidated when attempting to perceive and mould their personal opinions to those of the instructor [3]. Some students reported that they curtailed their participation out of fear that peers and instructors would perceive their opinions as racist or sexist. Interestingly, and perhaps more relevant to the questions addressed in this paper, students reported greater concern for what peers, rather than instructors, would perceive of their opinions, and the students felt that this concern was influential in their decisions to engage in classroom discussions [3].

Neer and Kircher [6] investigated apprehension-evoking classroom factors that influence students’ class participation. Findings indicated that students who were highly apprehensive about participating in class discussions liked getting to know fellow students on a personal level before participating. Highly apprehensive students reported that participating in small group discussions before a general class discussion alleviated some of their discomfort [6]. Finally, highly apprehensive students’ reported a higher likelihood
of participation if they perceived “interpersonal approval or acceptance from classmates” [6, page 73]. It is this last finding that is most relevant to the hypotheses of the present study.

2. Hypothesis 1: Rejection Sensitivity

Downey and her colleagues have documented an association between children’s needs being acutely or continually rejected by significant others and their children’s later development of anxious expectations of rejection from significant others [7–9]. Downey and her colleagues call this phenomenon rejection sensitivity (RS) and defined it as the disposition to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection [7, 10]. Rejection sensitivity can be measured with the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ; [8]; see Section 4.3 below for details about the RSQ). People who score high on the RSQ tend to experience high levels of anxiety and low expectations of acceptance when expressing their needs to significant others, and they tend to anxiously expect rejection from significant others [8].

Drawing on these theories and research, the present study predicted that a negative association exists between students’ rejection sensitivity and their level of participation in positive class behaviors (PCBs), an important indicator of student engagement. Students high in RS were expected to participate less in PCB because they anxiously expect rejection from their peers and instructors. Conversely, students who are low in rejection sensitivity were expected to participate more in PCB, because they expect and are less anxious about receiving acceptance from their peers and instructors.

3. Hypothesis 2: Prevention Pride and Rejection Sensitivity

According to regulatory focus theory all goal-direct behavior is regulated by two distinct motivational systems [11]. One of these motivational systems—the one of primary interest in the present study—is called “prevention pride.” Prevention pride develops from a subjective history of success in the obtainment of safety and fulfillment of responsibilities through “vigilance strategies” (prevention/avoidance of negative outcomes that disrupt safety and fulfillment of responsibilities) [11]. This results in a feeling of achievement pride. When individuals with a prevention pride motivational system are presented with a new task goal, they tend to focus on obtaining safety and fulfilling responsibilities by avoiding aspects of the new task goal that may result in a failure to obtain these two desired end states [11].

We hypothesized that the negative relationship between RS and PCB that we predicted in the first hypothesis would be moderated by the students’ levels of prevention pride. We expected that the greater a student’s prevention pride, the more likely that student will be to participate in PCB an average rate, regardless of their level of rejection sensitivity. We expected this because, naturally, in any given class the average frequency with which individuals exhibit PCB is seen as the safe, expected amount of positive class participation. In sum, we expected that students who are higher in prevention pride will avoid participating in PCB far above or below the average because they perceive this as a mismatch to their desired end states. Those end states are the obtainment of safety and the fulfillment of responsibilities.

Conversely, students with low prevention pride were expected to be more likely to participate in PCB at varying rates above and below the average because they do not perceive the need to obtain safety or fulfill responsibilities by participating in PCB at an average frequency.

4. Method

4.1. Participants. Sixty-seven males, sixty-five females, and three gender-unreported (N = 135) Psychology 101 students participated in this study. Ages ranged from 18 to 53 (M = 21.1, SD = 4.8).

4.2. Procedure. Students volunteered to participate in this study through the university’s Experimetrix program for course credit. Participants took the survey in person at scheduled times and in locations that were convenient for the participants. Though one hour was given for completion of the survey, nearly all of the participants finished within 45 minutes.

4.3. Measures

(i) Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ). The RSQ [8] consists of 18 questions in which the respondent is asked to express two values: (1) the degree of anxiety they would feel when expressing a need to a significant other in a hypothetical situation and (2) their expectation that the significant other would accept their need. RSQ scores are computed by multiplying the anxiety part of each question by the acceptance part of the question, summing the products across all of the questions and then dividing by the number of questions. Also, while the original RSQ uses a 6-point scoring system, this study modified the questionnaire to have a 5-point system, which is consistent with each major questionnaire used.

(ii) Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ). The RFQ is an 11 item questionnaire designed to assess “individuals’ subjective histories of success or failure in promotion and prevention self-regulation” [11]. The present study was interested primarily in the five items that assess prevention pride.

(iii) Subjective Class Participation Questionnaire (SCPQ). The SCPQ was developed specifically for this study. It comprises twenty items that are designed to measure students’ self-reported levels of various positive class behaviors including raising hands, participating in groups, and completing assignments. The response scale ranged from (1) “never” to (5) “very often” and indicates how often in general the respondent participates in each PCB. Responses were summed and then divided by the total number of questionnaire items, resulting in a score for each student. Positive class behaviors included in this questionnaire were...
carefully chosen from a list of behaviors rated by professors as most appropriate in a study done by Landrum [12]. The appropriateness of these behaviors was reaffirmed through e-mails gathered from several university professors.

5. Results

Recall that our first hypothesis predicted a negative correlation between the participants’ scores on the RSQ and their self-reported PCB. This hypothesis was supported, $r = -0.27$, $P < .005$.

Our second hypothesis predicted that the association between students’ rejection sensitivity and PCB would be moderated by students’ prevention pride. Following recommendations by Aiken and West [13] we tested this moderation hypothesis using multiple regression and by first centering the two independent variables. We then computed the interaction predictor as the product of the two centered predictors and used it along with the two “main effect” independent variables to predict students’ PCB.

The overall model was significant, $F(3, 127) = 2.37$, $P < .05$, $R^2 = .11$. Rejection sensitivity was a significant predictor of PCB, $t(1) = -2.85$, $P < .01$, $\beta = -0.24$. Prevention pride was not a significant predictor of PCB, $t(1) = -.24$, ns, $\beta = -.02$. The interaction between rejection sensitivity and prevention pride was a significant predictor of PCB, $t(1) = 2.40$, $P < .05$, $\beta = .20$. This last result supports our second hypothesis by indicating that prevention pride does indeed moderate the relationship between students’ rejection sensitivity and their PCB.

This interaction effect is depicted in Figure 1, which indicates that students who are high in both rejection sensitivity and prevention pride tend to report average frequencies of PCB.

Students who are low in rejection sensitivity and low in prevention pride tend to report the highest levels of PCB, whereas students who are high in rejection sensitivity and low in prevention pride tend to report the lowest frequencies of PCB.

6. Discussion

The present investigation tested two main hypotheses. Our first hypothesis was that there would be a significant negative correlation between students’ rejection sensitivity and their self-reported frequency of positive class participation. The present study confirmed this hypothesis by demonstrating that students high in rejection sensitivity tended to report lower levels of PCB, while students who were low in rejection sensitivity tended to report higher levels of PCB.

These findings suggest that students who anxiously expect rejection are less likely to participate in behaviors that they perceive may elicit rejection from their peers and instructors. As rejection sensitivity develops from a history of acute and/or continual rejection from significant others, it is possible that students who report anxious expectations of rejection have a history of perceiving rejection from their peers and/or instructors. Although Hyde and Ruth [3] have demonstrated, in a limited context, that students may fear the opinions of their peers more than those of their instructor, future studies could examine whether students’ rejection sensitivity is mainly a function of fear of rejection from peers or, instead, a function of fear of rejection from instructors.

Our second hypothesis was that the negative relationship between students’ rejection sensitivity and PCB would be moderated by the regulatory focus “prevention pride.” This hypothesis was confirmed. Students who are low in rejection sensitivity and low in prevention pride tend to report the highest levels of PCB, whereas students who are high in rejection sensitivity and low in prevention pride tend to report the lowest frequencies of PCB. Also, congruent with our hypothesis, students who are high in rejection sensitivity and high in prevention pride and students who are low in rejection sensitivity and high in prevention pride tend to report a near average amount of PCB (see Figure 1).

Carrying these results a reasonable step further, we can theorize that our results are a consequence of students with high prevention pride having a subjective history of success in their attainment of safety and fulfillment of responsibilities by avoiding possible negative outcomes through “vigilance strategies.” In the case of PCB, the students’ vigilance strategy is to prevent the mismatch to obtaining the two desired end states by avoiding participating too much or too little, and instead participating at an average rate. As students who scored low in prevention pride participated in PCB far above and below the mean, we can reasonably conclude that their level of PCB was mainly a function of their sensitivity to rejection and was not affected by a desire to obtain safety and fulfill responsibilities through vigilance strategies.

Another important implication of these findings is that students enter college with varying characteristics that help
or hinder the students’ ability to become engaged in their college experience. These findings can also help postsecondary instructors know about the varying needs of their students, especially those students who are high in prevention pride and low in rejection sensitivity. These students may need more reassurance from the instructor and from peers in order to engage in more positive classroom behaviours and, thus, better engage in their learning experience.

Limitations of this study include the use of statistically untested measures. The subjective class participation questionnaire was specifically created for this study and has not been vetted as a valid and reliable measure. Future studies should assess this measure’s internal and test-retest reliability. Also, Burchfield and Sappington [14] found that students’ self-reported level of class participation did not significantly correlate with their instructors rankings of their participation; although instructor and peer rankings were significantly correlated. Future studies using student self-reported levels of class participation might modify study design to accommodate these findings. Greater external validity could also be established by testing a more diverse population than undergraduate psychology students.

References

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