If I can't Feel your Pain, I inflict Pain on you: Emotional Insensitivity underlying the Rejection-Aggression link

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Intro: The current work investigated whether emotional insensitivity mediates the relationship between social rejection and aggression. Prior work has shown a consistent relationship between social rejection and aggression (DeWall et al., 2009; Twenge et al., 2001; Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006). Rejection is painful and therefore may lead people to cope with their own pain instead of being sensitive to others’ pain. The current research examined how emotional insensitivity to others might play a pivotal role in terms of predicting aggression following social rejection. I predict that rejection reduces sensitivity to others’ distress, presumably because rejected people are focused primarily on their own pain. This insensitivity to others’ pain, however, may promote aggression.

Methods: Participants expected to meet a same-sex partner and were told the partner had to leave early (control condition) or the partner refused to meet the participant (rejection condition). Participants were then given the chance to empathize with another student who was suffering from a recent romantic break-up (Exp 1 and 2) or who suffered a recent physical injury (Exp 3). Participants were later given the chance to aggress toward the suffering student (Exp 1 and 3: blasting aversive noise, Exp 2: thwarting employment opportunity).

Results: Each experiment showed that social rejection increased aggression and reduced empathic concern toward the suffering student. More importantly, each experiment showed that the relationship between social rejection and aggression was mediated by reduced empathic concern.

Conclusion: These findings help explain why rejection increases aggression. Rejection is painful, which leads people to focus on their own pain instead of the pain of others. This reduced sensitivity to others, however, increases aggressive behavior.

Significant Publications:
Social exclusion and early-stage interpersonal perception: selective attention to signs of acceptance.
   Dewall CN, Maner JK, Rouby DA.

It's the thought that counts: The role of hostile cognition in shaping aggressive responses to social exclusion.
   DeWall CN, Twenge JM, Gitter SA, Baumeister RF.

Satiated with belongingness? Effects of acceptance, rejection, and task framing on self-regulatory performance.
   DeWall CN, Baumeister RF, Vohs KD.