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ORIGINAL PAPER

Rejection Sensitivity and Self-Regulation of Daily Interpersonal Events

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Abstract
The present research case sought to illustrate how self-regulatory patterns of interpersonal behavior manifest within a rejection sensitive individual at the daily level. Cross-sectional research has demonstrated negative relational outcomes associated with rejection sensitivity, but less attention has been paid to how this manifests in daily relational events. Expanding upon prior research evaluating the daily interpersonal functioning of those with high rejection sensitivity in a large sample, the research case study of Mary demonstrates how findings from research may manifest within a rejection sensitive individual who was asked to rate her interpersonal events over the course of a week. For Mary, covariations among her interpersonal perceptions suggest a negativity bias that may be basis of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which her rejection expectancies come to be realized through her treating agency as unfriendly behavior. The implications for psychotherapy of interpersonal patterns typically observed in rejection sensitive clients are discussed.

Keywords Rejection sensitivity · Interpersonal problems · Self-regulation · Experiencing sampling · Psychotherapy

Rejection sensitivity is a cognitive-affective processing disposition to anxiously expect and reacts to rejection (Downey and Feldman 1996). With sureness that rejection will be the likely outcome of an interpersonal exchange, people with rejection sensitivity are often bracing themselves for signs impending rejection. Such selective attention may create a response bias, such that indications of acceptance are quickly overlooked in the service of confirmatory signs of nonacceptance. When these indications of rejection are noted, people with rejection sensitivity often react with intense emotional responses.

The processing vulnerability created by rejection sensitivity may disrupt the capacity for self-regulation (De Panfilis et al. 2015; Meehan et al. 2017). The ability to regulate one's emotional response is not an enduring trait, stable across contexts and over time. In fact, our capacity for self-regulation is highly variable and often driven by contextual factors (Bauer and Baumeister 2011). We have finite self-regulatory resources that we are continually shifting according to the pressures on us at any given moment. For rejection sensitive individuals, the allocation of resources that stems from vigilantly scanning for signs of interpersonal danger may cut into other regulatory domains that would otherwise foster better interpersonal connections. For example, Eisenberg et al. (1989) have found that individuals high in self-regulation tend to experience sympathy (an other-oriented response to another's condition) rather than personal distress (a self-focused response to another's emotion). Put differently, those with sturdy self-regulation are able to direct their resources out to empathize with and attend to the emotional states that others are experiencing. However, when anxious expectancies such as rejection sensitivity overwhelm the capacity for self-regulation, resources may need to be allocated inward in the service of calming oneself down, and this may be at the expense of being able to see and identify with the emotional experiences of others.

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In fact, research has consistently demonstrated that rejection sensitivity acts as a vulnerability towards a range of negative relational outcomes with romantic partners, friends, and family members (Romero-Canyas et al. 2010). Once signs of rejection have been perceived, the person may exhibit desperate and often maladaptive responses to either shore up the perceived distance (e.g., excessive attempts to ingratiate others), escape the threatening context (e.g., social withdrawal), or even retaliate against the perceived aggression (e.g., hostile behaviors). Such maladaptive responses likely create a vicious circle in which the very response that had been feared is now elicited—what may have started as a misperception of rejection has become a reality (Mischel and Shoda 2008; Wachtel 1997).

Rejection Sensitive Interpersonal Behaviors

Despite a significant body of research demonstrating the negative relational outcomes of rejection sensitivity (Romero-Canyas et al. 2010), less attention has been paid to the specific interpersonal patterns by which such behaviors emerge in rejection sensitive individuals. Much of what is known about precipitants of rejection sensitive responsivity has been evaluated in patients with borderline personality disorder (BPD), who are characterized by high reactivity to social threat (Herpertz and Bertsch 2014). Performance on computer-based social cognitive tasks, such as identifying facial emotions, have indicated perception biases in patients with BPD towards identifying social threat (e.g., faster at detecting anger in another's face), which emerge quite early in the reflexive stages of processing (Bertsch et al. 2013). However, these perception biases have largely been cross-sectionally evaluated in lab-based tasks on patients who meet full criteria for BPD (Jeung and Herpertz 2014), which may have limited ecological validity and leave unclear how a fuller spectrum of rejection sensitivity unfolds in daily interactions.

One framework that has been applied to examining the daily interpersonal functioning associated with rejection sensitivity is the interpersonal circumplex (IPC; Leary 1957). The IPC is rooted in interpersonal theory, which posits one's interpersonal style can be described using two orthogonal dimensions: dominance and warmth (Wiggins 2003). The dominance dimension ranges from assured/agentic to unassured/passive behavior. The warmth dimension ranges from friendly/warm to unfriendly/cold behaviors. Along the interpersonal circle, each octant represents blends of the underlying dimensions (i.e., cold-dominance or warm-submissiveness; see Fig. 1) that offer useful summary descriptors of interpersonal behavior (Pincus and Ansell 2012).

Using this framework, Brookings, et al. (2003) found that college students who scored high on rejection sensitivity also endorsed unassured-submissive and aloof-introverted interpersonal traits in their relationships with others. This suggests that highly rejection sensitive individuals are likely to avoid rejection by distancing themselves rather than by seeking intimacy, moving away from others rather than moving toward them. We expanded this literature by evaluating multifaceted interpersonal profiles (including interpersonal problems, sensitivities, and values) of those with high rejection sensitivity across two diverse samples (Cain et al. 2017). While rejection sensitive individuals were found to report problems with being socially avoidant, they also report valuing connections with others and high levels of sensitivity to cold, remote behavior by others. This suggests that individuals who are highly anxious about rejection value experiencing connection and closeness in their social interactions; their desire for connection is so strong that they are attuned to others keeping their distance, a sign of impending rejection. However, this expectancy of rejection leads to an anxious avoidance of relationships, creating an irresolvable tension of simultaneously longing for and retreating from social relationships (Downey and Feldman 1996; Romero-Canyas et al. 2010).

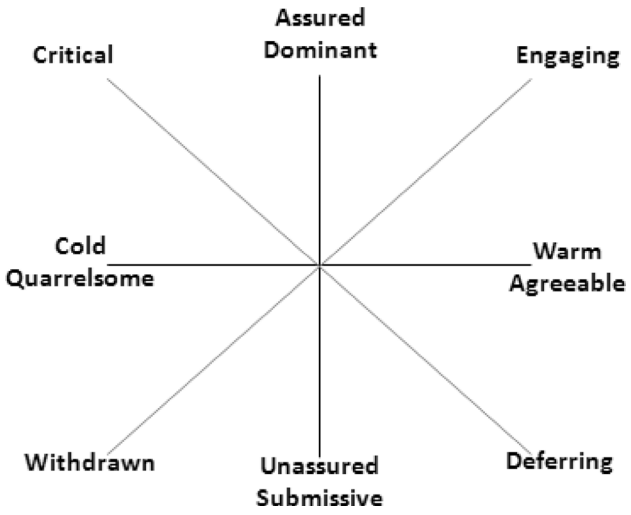

Fig. 1 The interpersonal grid. Adapted from Moskowitz and Zuroff (2005)

Contextual Interpersonal Patterns

While this research has been fruitful in articulating the complex and often contradictory needs and concerns that foster interpersonal vulnerabilities in those with high rejection sensitivity, asking people to self-report their generalized tendencies may obscure specific contexts within which interpersonal behaviors are elicited over time. The Cognitive-Affective Processing System (CAPS; Mischel 1973; Mischel

and Shoda 2008) provides a model for understanding how situational contexts and individual trait differences interact, such that we have a relatively stable personality that varies behaviorally based on the situation. Personality manifests as a complex system of situational inputs *("ifs")* and behavioral outputs *("thens")* that are shaped by an individual's unique values, motives, emotions, memories, and expectancies. These individual differences give rise to a stable pattern of situation-behavior contingencies, or "*if-then*" behavioral signatures (Mischel and Shoda 2008). While a diverse and flexible array of behavioral signatures is a part of any healthy personality, when chronically accessible and over-applied these signatures may result distorted perceptions or failure to differentiate between situations, leading to maladaptive responses (Eaton et al. 2009).

Interpersonal theory can be used to conceptualize how "*if-then*" behavioral signatures may manifest in relational exchanges. *Interpersonal complementarity* describes the give-and-take of agency and warmth as an interpersonal exchange unfolds (Cain and Ansell 2015; Fournier et al. 2008; Pincus and Ansell 2012). For example, perceiving the other person as dominant (*if*) invites one to be more submissive in kind (*then*), creating *reciprocity*. Perceiving the other person as warm (*if*) invites one to be warm in kind (*then*), creating *correspondence* (Carson 1969; Kiesler 1983). Studies tracking interpersonal transactions over time have generally confirmed this patterning of reciprocity and correspondence (Fournier et al. 2008), while chronic deviations from these patterns may lead to ruptures in relationships (Pincus et al. 2009).

Rejection Sensitive Interpersonal Patterns in Daily Life

Prior research on rejection sensitivity has been limited by its reliance on self-report questionnaires, lab-based social cognitive tasks, and cross-sectional designs. Ecological momentary assessment (EMA) methods are particularly well suited to evaluate if-then contingencies in daily interpersonal functioning. In EMA, sometimes referred to as longitudinal experiential sampling, people are asked to provide very quick and immediate ratings on a smartphone—following an event or a prompt by the researcher—that reflect how they perceive or feel at that very moment. Collecting a large number of these 'experience samples' (usually multiple times a day, over many days or weeks) allows us to not only look at differences in the average perceptions or feelings that self-report and lab-based measures tend to reflect (between-person associations) but also *if-then* associations that tend to occur within a given moment (within-person associations; see Bolger et al. 2003).

Berenson et al. (2011) used EMA (5 daily random prompts for 21 days) to identify a relationship between momentary feelings of (*if*) perceiving rejection and (*then*) feeling rage; this was only observed in those with high but not low borderline personality disorder (BPD) features (of which rejection sensitivity is a primary characteristic). In a study of couples (making nightly ratings for 28 days), Downey et al. (1998, Study 1) found that instances of conflict (*if*) predicted greater dissatisfaction and thoughts of ending the relationship the following day (*then*) for partners of high (but not low) rejection sensitive women. In turn, rejection sensitive women perceived their partners as less accepting and more withdrawn on days following conflict (see also Ayduk et al. 1999, Study 3). Sadikaj et al. (2010, 2013) found in an EMA study of patients with BPD that perceiving colder behavior in others (*if*) predicted increased negative affect (*then*), leading to more quarrelsome behavior. Taken together, these experience samples suggest if-then signatures related to rejection sensitivity in which moments of rejection and distance elicit feelings of rejection and subsequent anger, coupled with a withdrawal that likely only intensifies negative affect and lays the groundwork for repeating this vicious cycle.

The Current Research Case

Ours was the first study to evaluate rejection sensitivity using an interpersonal framework at the daily (within-person) level (Meehan et al. 2018). A total of 228 undergraduate students completed an EMA study (3 daily event-contingent ratings × 7 days), and perceptions of warmth and agency were evaluated, with rejection sensitivity as a moderator of those relationships. Those with high rejection sensitivity were found to view themselves as more submissive overall and were less likely to initiate or match their interaction partner's moments of positive approach. Further, those with high rejection sensitivity tended to see themselves as acting with a greater range of cold, unfriendly behaviors, and were less likely to be warm towards those perceived to be sad or withdrawn. Taken together, this suggests a dynamic interpersonal profile in which rejection sensitive individuals tend to self-protect by presenting themselves as somewhat cold and submissive, not too quick to warmly and agentically approach others, even if the other person is perceived as positive/pleasant.

The present research case sought to evaluate how these interpersonal dynamics manifest within an individual. Roche et al. (2014) have described the value of person-specific analyses in EMA data. Given the complexity of the multilevel models used to evaluate EMA data (Bolger et al. 2003), contextual relationships observed in a single research case may be generative of hypotheses to be evaluated in a larger sample. Further, a focus on a single

research case may elucidate patterns that are clinically relevant to that individual; providing data for how the person regulates interpersonal moments, suggesting relational themes that may become a focus of psychotherapy (and transference patterns that may emerge with the therapist).

Using a person-specific approach, Roche et al. (2014) have evaluated within single cases the covariation of agency and communion—meaning the degree to which agency and communion track together in perceptions of others and reports of one's own behavior (see also Fournier et al. 2009). When ratings others, perception covariation refers to the association between (*if*) perceiving another as dominant and (*then*) also perceiving them as warm/friendly or unfriendly. When rating oneself, behavior covariation refers to the association between (*if*) perceiving oneself as dominant and (*then*) also perceiving oneself as warm/friendly or unfriendly. Unlike complementarity, there are no normative expectations for these covariations, and negatively skewed associations (i.e., dominance = unfriendly) might be understood as negative perception biases (Roche et al. 2013).

A person-specific approach also allows for an evaluation of the contexts within which these relationships may emerge, including the type of relationship (e.g., attachment versus nonattachment relationships) and role within a given interaction (e.g., in a dominant versus submissive position). This is important, because rejection expectancies may be contextually elicited; with affects more or less present depending on how socially threatening the interpersonal context is experienced (Dimaggio and Lysaker 2015). Further, differing motives across relationship types may lead to differences in interpersonal perceptions (Liotti and Gilbert 2011). Expectations of rejection in attachment relationships, which are motived by dependency needs, would have a very different meaning than rejection in nonattachment relationships, which may have more bearing one's sense of self-esteem and social potency. The following research case illustrates how experience sampling data may be used to elucidate such associations, and their implications for psychotherapy.

Method

Participant

"Mary" is a 19-year-old Latina female, undergraduate student who participated in a two-part study for course credit. Mary was chosen as a research case for closer study due to her high level of self-reported rejection sensitivity (> 2 SD above sample mean on the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire; Downey and Feldman 1996) while remaining in the average range on measure of personality disorder pathology.

Measures and Procedure

Mary first completed an in-person portion of the study, in which she was evaluated on self-report measures of rejection sensitivity, interpersonal problems (Inventory of Interpersonal Problems-Short Circumplex (IIP-SC); Hopwood et al., 2008), and other measures of personality disorder pathology (for more detail on measures, see Cain et al. 2018 and; Meehan et al. 2018). The second part of the study involved longitudinal experience sampling of interpersonal events. Specifically, Mary was asked following an interaction lasting at least 5 min (to ensure the event was substantial enough to rate) to follow a provided link on her smartphone to an online survey platform that allowed her to rate the relational event that just happened. Mary was asked to enter these event-contingent experience samples at least 3 times a day for 7 days. The experience survey collects very basic data on the interpersonal situation (number of people, nature of the relationship, i.e., coworker, stranger, romantic partner, family member, etc.), after which Mary was presented with an image of the interpersonal grid (adapted from Moskowitz and Zuroff 2005; see Fig. 1) and asked to touch the place on the circumplex that represents how she perceived the other person to behave, and then how she perceived herself to behave. In the first session of the study she had previously been taught how to navigate the circumplex, and practiced rating hypothetical events with the grid. (For example, this instructional period was itself used as an example, with the researcher explaining the study with an assured dominance, and the participant is—usually—deferring and agreeable in kind.)

Mary entered a total of 28 events, from which this data is based. We used intercorrelations of event-level ratings to evaluate what patterns of relatedness emerged in her daily life (for more detail see Roche et al. 2014). These events were divided into those with significant (romantic, family) versus nonsignificant (stranger, coworker) others in order to evaluate relationship closeness as a context variable.

Results

Interpersonal Problems

Mary self-reported her interpersonal style on the IIP-SC, which was evaluated using the structural summary method for circumplex data (Gurtman and Balakrishnan 1998; Wright et al. 2009). Her data indicates that she has problems with being nonassertive in her relationships (300°), meaning that she tends to let others dominate or control the interaction, and tends to responds with passivity. Her ratings indicated that she strongly conforms to this style ($R^2 = 0.83$); these behaviors are rigidly adhered to (Amplitude = 1.28)

and subjectively experienced as moderately distressing (Elevation = 0.66).

Interpersonal Complementarity

At the daily level, we first evaluated whether Mary follows the "interpersonal rules" of complementarity (i.e., *if* I perceive you as warm, *then* I respond with warmth in kind) (Carson 1969; Kiesler 1983). Additionally, we evaluated whether those complementary relations are contextual; specifically, do these interpersonal associations vary according to whether she interacting with a significant versus nonsignificant others.

Mary was found to demonstrate communal complementarity; she rated herself as matching another's warmth with her own warmth ($r = .46$, $p = .02$). No relationship context emerged for this finding; complementarity around friendliness seemed to be present across relationship types (see Fig. 2).

Mary was also found to demonstrate the opposite of agentic complementarity (i.e., *if* I perceive you as agentic, *then* I respond with agency in kind)($r = .50$, $p = .01$). As discussed above, *reciprocity* in relationships would predict perceiving the other person as agentic invites one to be more submissive in kind (i.e., if you are talking, I should listen). While this may sound like Mary is showing a deviation from the "interpersonal rules," in fact this pattern was found to be normative in our larger undergraduate sample (Meehan et al. 2018) and other undergraduate samples as well (Wang et al. 2014). The discrepancy is understood to be related to the period of time being evaluated—if we were tracking Mary's interactions at a second-to-second level we may see the expectable turn-taking of agency and submission, but then when Mary steps back to make a summative experience of the last 5 min her perception is one in which both parties were agentic. However, this pattern was less evident on the other side of the axis, Mary did not necessarily match submissiveness with her own submission ($Z_{diff} = 3.64$, $p = .001$). Again, no relationship context emerged for this finding; she rated herself as matching another's agency with her own agency across relationship types. Taken together these findings do not suggest any notable deviations; Mary seems to be complementary in her interactions.

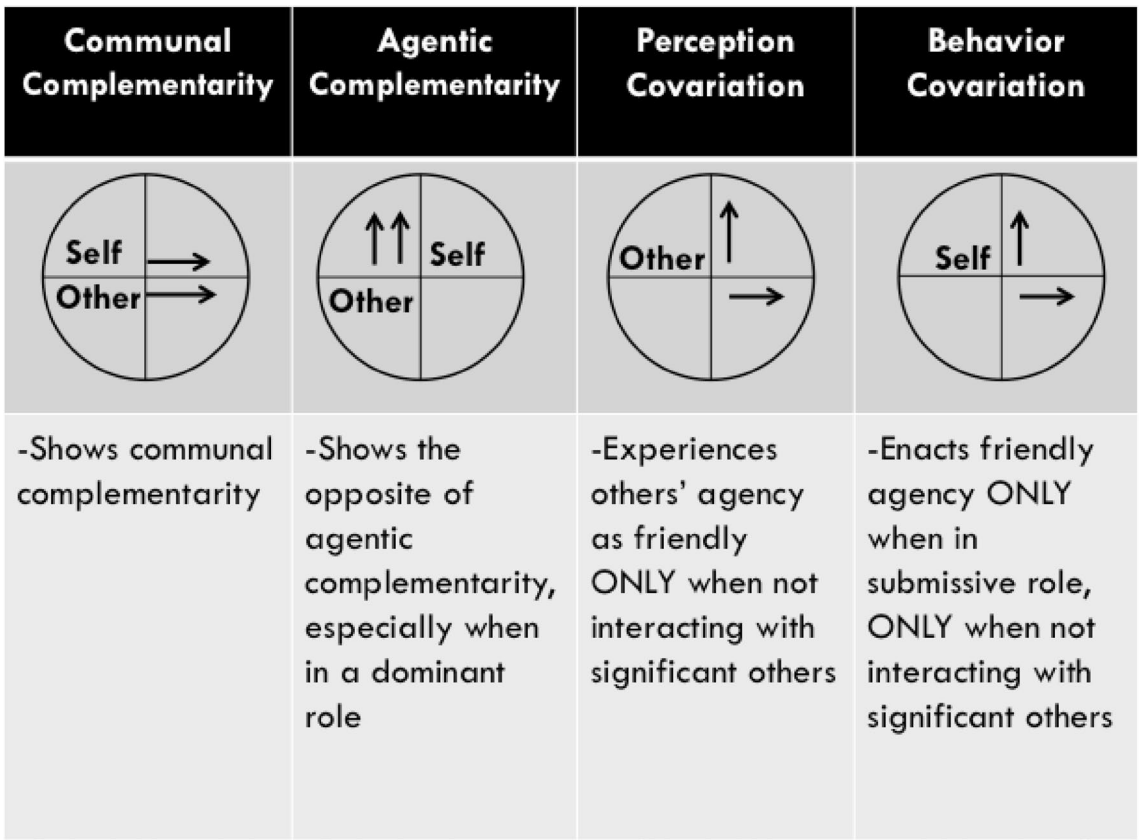

Fig. 2 Summary of relationships among Mary's perceptions of self and others. *Note*. Arrows represent if-then relationships; if Mary touched towards one location on a circle, it was significantly related to then touching another location on the same (covariation) or another (complementary) circle

Interpersonal Covariance

At the daily level, we next evaluated the covariation of agency and communion in the participant's perceptions and behaviors (i.e., the degree to which my agency feels friendly, your passivity feels cold) (Roche et al. 2014). We again evaluated the relationship context, and in fact we find that how Mary perceives and behaves in these interpersonal moments depends on the closeness of the relationship.

In terms of covariation in how she perceives others, she has no general pattern, in that she is no more likely to perceive another's agency as warm or cold ($r = .10$, $p = .12$). However, a difference emerges by context ($Z_{diff} = -2.50$, $p = .01$); she can experience others' agency in a friendly manner only when *not* interacting with significant others. The opposite is observed when she's with significant others—*if* she perceives them as dominant *then* she also sees them as unfriendly, whereas *if* she sees them as submissive *then* she sees them as warmer (see Fig. 2).

Regarding covariation of her own behavior, she shows a general pattern of perceiving her own agency as warm ($r = .30$, $p = .001$). However, a difference emerges by context ($Z_{diff} = -2.21$, $p = .03$); only when *not* with significant others does she experience her own dominance as friendly, warm behavior. The opposite is observed when she's with significant others—*if* she acts dominant *then* she also feels herself to be unfriendly, whereas *if* she acts more submissive *then* she sees herself as being warmer. The covariation of agency and warmth are plotted at the daily level in Fig. 3; agency and warmth track with one another when she is interacting with non-significant others, but separate from one another in the context of interacting with significant others.

Discussion

The research case example of Mary sought to illustrate how rejection sensitivity may evidence itself within an individual as self-regulatory patterns of interpersonal behavior at the daily level. Prior research had identified nonassertion and social avoidance as interpersonal problems that are both characteristic and highly distressing to those with high rejection sensitivity (Cain et al. 2017). Mary's self-reported interpersonal problems are consistent with this—she struggles to assert herself agentically, and allows others to dominate social interactions—though notably she describes herself as somewhat warmer (300°) than the mean of rejection sensitive samples (234°; 247°). Thus while she may struggle with nonassertion in her relationships, she may not resort to the hostile withdrawal that is sometimes seen in highly rejection sensitive individuals (Meehan et al. 2018). This is also borne out in her daily ratings, in which she demonstrated interpersonal complementarity, able to match another's warm approach with her own warm approach in kind.

On the daily level we see how the closeness of the relationship plays a significant role in shaping Mary's experience of assertion versus passivity. Most notably, covariations among her behaviors suggest why assertion may be difficult

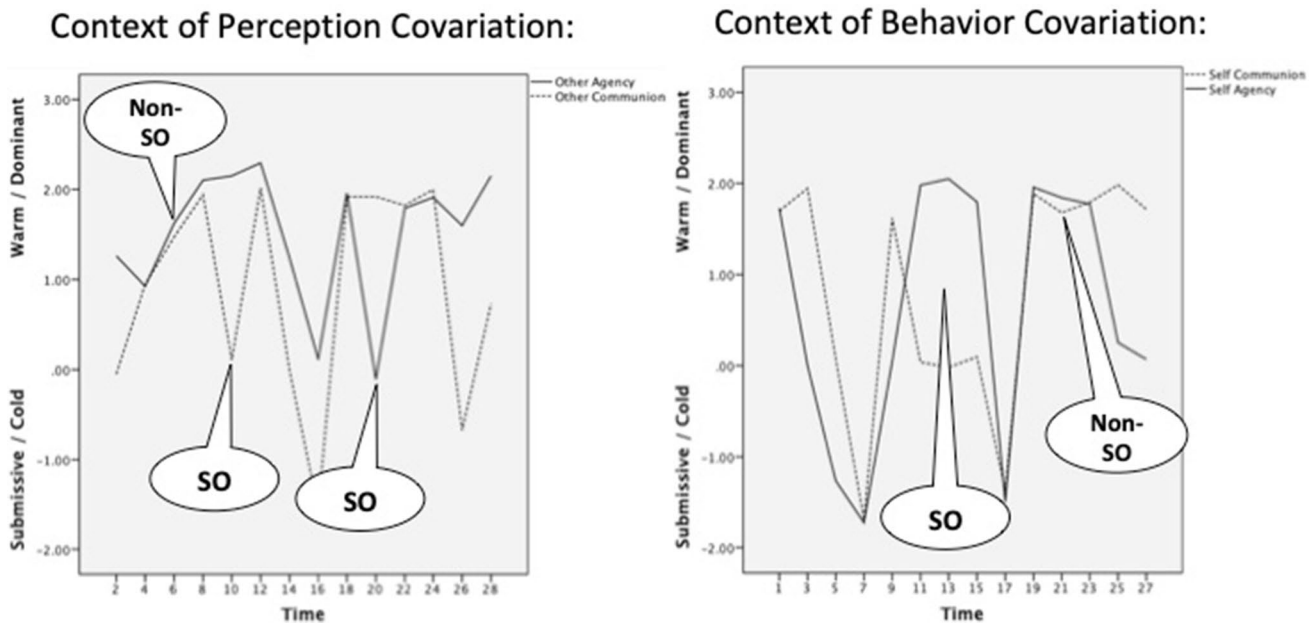

Fig. 3 Event-level relationships among Mary's perceptions of self and others. *Non-SO* non-significant other, which is the context in which high covariation tends to be observed (with solid and dotted lines tracking with one another), *SO* significant other, which is the context in which low covariation tends to be observed (solid and dotted lines separate from each other)

for Mary. Within herself, agentic behavior that asserts her own wants and needs may feel cold; only *if* stepping back into a nonassertive role can she *then* feel herself to be warmly engaging the people she cares about. We also see covariations among her perceptions that suggest why others dominating social interactions may be distressing for her. With others, she perceives their agency to be cold; only *if* not dominating an interaction can she *then* see close others as warmly engaging her.

What's most notable about these covariations is that they are only observed in her significant relationships. While her self-reported interpersonal problems do not specify with whom she evidences difficulty with nonassertion, we can assume based on her daily level ratings that problems asserting herself are somewhat specific to close relationships. Agency may have a very different meaning for Mary with people she doesn't know as well; in more distant relationships it does not appear that asserting herself would have such a negative connotation, nor might she fear others dominating the interaction.

This raises the question of what self-regulatory function nonassertion may be playing in her close relationships. Mary rated herself as highly rejection sensitive, and her data on the daily level suggests that it is with her significant others that rejection expectancies may become most evident. With more distant others she perceives their agentic approach to be a warm, friendly behavior; an association that suggests a perception of the other person as interested in her. However, this is not the case with significant others, whose agentic approach she perceives as cold—likely because she is anticipating rejection or other feared outcomes. Consistent with complementarity, she may match a perception of the other's coldness with her own cold behaviors in kind, thus adopting a defensive stance. As previously noted, following the "interpersonal rule" of complementarity is generally adaptive—it is safer to be more distant towards someone acting unfriendly. However, her daily-level data suggests that this tendency to see agency as cold may be a perception bias on Mary's part—a neutral observer of the interaction might not agree with this view of her loved ones. If Mary's perception of close others as cold is based on a biased assumption of what agency means in these relationships, then her cold response to the other person may feel to them like a rupture. If the other person hadn't really been acting cold before, in accordance with complementarity they may now adopt a cold stance towards Mary. This would be the basis of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which Mary's biased perception may come to elicit the feared outcome with loved ones (Mischel and Shoda 2008; Wachtel 1997).

However, it is important to note that this pattern does not hold across all interpersonal interactions; a fact that Mary herself may lose sight of. Mary self-identified as someone whose nonassertion is both a highly characteristic and rigidly held style, suggesting that the aforementioned pattern in her close relationships has also become a part of her identity. Although she may not think of herself in this way, her daily-level data suggests that with nonsignificant others she actually can mobilize her agency, and match the warm approach of others with her own warmth and agency. It is likely the case that her rejection expectancies inhibit the warm approach she is able to mobilize in low-stakes relationships, thus excluding that aspect of her relational functioning from her conscious view of herself. She may even be somewhat attached to a nonassertive sense of herself, which is why she only described these problems as moderately distressing, despite their pervasiveness. Being submissive likely makes Mary feel safer in terms of her rejection fears—when the relationship feels threatened she may seek to shore up closeness by moving into a more nonassertive stance in which she feels herself to be warm. For Mary, nonassertion may feel like the more loving stance in a close relationship.

Implications of Rejection Sensitivity for Psychotherapy

While to date EMA has primarily been utilized as research data, Roche et al. (2014) argue that person-specific analyses provide data on interpersonal biases and behaviors that would have great utility in clinical settings. Further, EMA assessment could be weaved into practices that are already standards of care in a diverse array of treatments. More behaviorally oriented providers, who routinely give homework exercises, may feel themselves more at ease with the task of incorporating EMA into the treatment. While psychodynamic providers do not often assign tasks outside of the treatment session, there is a rich history of referral for psychological assessments that utilize cognitive, personality, and projective measures to identify patterns of social-emotional functioning that may a focus of treatment goals (Rapaport et al. 1968). It has become increasingly common for researchers utilizing EMA to offer their research participants a simple report describing if-then behaviors of interest as a way to incentivize participation; such an assessment report adapted for a clinical setting would be of significant utility. Therefore, future clinical applications might include EMA, alone or as part of a larger psychological assessment, to identify interpersonal patterns that may have direct implications for treatment. Through repeated EMA assessment, shifts towards more complementary interpersonal patterns and reductions in perception biases (covariation) over time may be indications of positive treatment response.

For example, the patterns identified by Mary's daily-level data have important implications for psychotherapy, were she to choose to address these relational concerns with a therapist. While Mary presented as a research subject and

not for psychotherapy, her covariation patterns reflect perception biases that would be important to convey to a potential future therapist, especially considering the challenges of treating rejection sensitive clients. Recommendations to the therapist could be further supported by treatment principles for working clinically with rejection sensitivity. On one hand, interpersonal concerns around nonassertion and rejection expectancies are the kinds of problems that people commonly present with in psychotherapy. On the other hand, the nature of these concerns will most certainly be evident in the psychotherapy relationship itself, in which agency and assertion of needs are often negotiated. Therefore, for rejection sensitive clients, the psychotherapy relationship may pose both a challenge and an opportunity.

A psychotherapy session is likely to activate the condition of a relationship with a significant other, often under intense affect states (Caligor et al. 2007). Given her sensitivity to agentic behavior in close relationships, based on Mary's EMA data it may be important to convey to a future therapist that she is likely to be attuned to their level of activity and assertion. Psychotherapy process research suggests that the therapist's level of activity and agency may have both good and bad effects on alliance and outcome depending on the delivery; a stance in which the therapist is very present and active in the here-and-now has been associated with positive outcomes, whereas a more confrontational and hostile therapist has been associated with negative outcomes (Binder and Strupp 1997; Kivlighan and Schmitz 1992). Confronted with a client who struggles with passivity and nonassertion, a therapist would have to walk the fine line between *pushing* for change without seeming *pushy*. However, given the perception bias seen in Mary's EMA data, it may be important to convey to a future therapist that she would likely perceive their activity (dominance) as cold, no matter how tactfully executed, and would be likely to withdraw in response. This would be especially challenging for a therapist using more agentic interventions, such as behavioral activation in a cognitive-behavioral treatment (Beck 2011) or interpretation in a psychodynamic treatment (Caligor et al. 2007). For those who are rejection sensitive, suggestions about what one might do or might consider may come to feel like a criticism. Fearing the rejection that may arise from the therapist's dominance, it may be safer to withdraw into cold passivity.

An emerging "chase and dodge" pattern, in which the therapist's eager attempts to be helpful are warded off by a client becoming increasingly quiet and withdrawn, is often frustrating to both clients and therapists alike (Beebe and Lachmann 2013). The therapist working with the rejection sensitive client is likely at that point to fall into one of two traps. One, more problematic though less common, the therapist may become visible frustrated, evoking a negative process in which hostility degrades the therapeutic process (Binder and Strupp 1997) and the client's worst interpersonal fear becoming realized with her therapist (Wachtel 1997). Two, less problematic though more common, the therapist may adopt a more passive stance, shifting into a supportive role in which the therapist empathizes with the client's struggle but makes little suggestion towards change.

It would be alluring to adopt a passive-supportive approach with a rejection sensitive client like Mary. As noted in Mary's EMA data, nonassertion may feel like the more loving stance in a close relationship. It would also be more gratifying initially for the therapist, whose passivity would be viewed as warmth. While the therapist adopting a more passive-supportive role may feel comforting to both parties, the rejection sensitive client is likely to join the therapist in a complementary stance of warm passivity, leading to inertia. In our clinical and research experience, a supportive psychotherapy is unlikely to address interpersonal concerns around nonassertion and rejection expectancies (see Levy et al. 2017 for a review). A number of different treatment perspectives would concur that when working with rejection sensitive BPD patients (Dimaggio et al. 2017), or patients who are sensitive to ruptures that threaten the therapeutic alliance (Safran et al. 2011) it is important to actively clarify rejection concerns with interest and curiosity as they inevitably unfold in therapeutic relationship. Put differently, the rejection sensitive client's withdrawal from the therapist is not simply an impediment to the treatment, it *is* the treatment.

To give a clinical example of this treatment principle with a client in a long-term psychotherapy with one of the authors, a 28-year-old woman named "Jane", very similar to Mary in her rejection expectancies and interpersonal style, looked increasingly withdrawn and agitated in session. The therapist, rather than offering yet another suggestion said, "It occurs to me that I've now said about 5 things you should do or at least think about, which is a lot…I wonder if that feels like disapproval? Like a lot of people in your family, it sounds like I'm asserting all of the ways you need to be different, as someone who doesn't accept you would do?" This led to a discussion of how for Jane a more hands-off, "you be you" stance felt more loving and accepting, and yet because she struggled with passivity Jane often felt lost and in need of guidance. We identified an irresolvable conflict in which she both wanted and resented help—including from the therapist. Her ambivalence about the therapist's efforts shifted into a prime example of what she struggles with in relationships, rather than a threat to the treatment.

Another goal of therapy with a rejection sensitive client would be to increasingly bring into conscious awareness aspects of her functioning that don't necessarily conform to her passive, rejection sensitive self-conception (Caligor et al. 2007; Dimaggio and Lysaker 2018). For example, based on Mary's EMA data her warm agency is unlikely to be easily

observable, given that her data suggests such behavior may only be evident in low-stakes relationships and therefore not immediately obvious. A recommendation to the therapist might include efforts to identify split-off signs of her warm agency, which her data suggests may only be evident in low-stakes relationships and therefore not immediately obvious to the therapist.

To give a clinical example of this treatment principle, as psychotherapy with Jane continued it was notable that warm agentic behavior was rarely how she presented. A few months later, just prior to a session, the therapist saw Jane across the lobby of his office building loudly and sarcastically joking with the building's maintenance worker. As the session began with her now familiar agitated withdrawal, the therapist paused and said "I know the Jane interacting with me now fairly well—I push and you look pained—but who was that Jane I saw in the lobby a few minutes ago? Tell me about her!" Though not fitting with her identity, Jane could acknowledge that with people she "doesn't really care about" she could be quite expressive "because I'm not thinking about everything they say—what did that mean?, why did he say that?—so I can just talk." Over time Jane came to view her more agentic self as stifled by fear, rather than absent altogether, and began asserting herself more in her relationships—including with the therapist.

While EMA data has only recently been integrated into psychotherapy research trials, such data would be extremely valuable to a therapist—highlighting interpersonal patterns outside of the therapeutic relationship, and possible outside of the client's awareness, that an otherwise chance encounter was needed to discover. It took an unexpected observation in the lobby to clue in Jane's therapist to a behavioral style that had been curiously absent in the treatment thus far. If the therapist was presented with this data as part of an initial psychological assessment, then potential therapeutic pitfall as well as opportunities could be forecasted earlier in the treatment process.

In terms of limitations, Mary is not a psychotherapy case (as far as we know) and no data is available beyond her research participation—greatly limiting the interpretation of the findings. Future research should apply EMA data to ongoing clinical case material in order to evaluate the degree to which predicted patterns do in fact emerge in the clinical process. Future research should also evaluate the hypothesis that change in psychotherapy will be accompanied by shifts towards more complementary interpersonal patterns and reductions in perception biases (covariation) in the client's EMA data.

Conclusion

The present research case study sought to evaluate how self-regulatory patterns of interpersonal behavior manifest within a rejection sensitive individual at the daily level. There has been a wealth of cross-sectional research documenting negative relational outcomes associated with rejection sensitivity, but less attention has been paid to how this manifests in daily relational events. Our prior research has evaluated the interpersonal problems, sensitivities, and values (Cain et al. 2017) and daily interpersonal functioning (Meehan et al. 2018) of those with rejection sensitivity in large samples. The case study of Mary demonstrates how findings from research may manifest within a rejection sensitive individual who asked to rate her interpersonal events over the course of a week. For Mary, covariations among her perceptions of agency and warmth suggest a perception bias specific to significant others; taking agency in the relationship feels cold, and only when in a more passive, nonassertive stance does the relationship feel warm and close. This perception bias may be basis of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which her rejection expectancies come to be realized through her treating agency as unfriendly behavior. Though initially complicating psychotherapy, the emergence of such a negativity bias with the therapist may become the basis for its clarification and subsequent change.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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