Earning the Right to Be Nice: How Feedback Affects Authenticity Doubts in Interpersonal Relationships

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Introduction

Individuals with low self-esteem (LSEs) may believe that their partners see them as negatively as they see themselves (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, 2000). However, partners of LSEs claim to see them positively. How do LSEs maintain the belief that they are devalued despite the contradictory evidence? One possibility is that they attribute affection and praise to an external source, such as their relationship partners "just being nice," rather than to their partners' true sentiments (Stroebe, Stroebe Eagly, 1977; Lemay & Clark, 2008a, 2008b; Lemay & Dudley, 2009).

The purpose of this research is to test a model of how LSEs' may become more trusting of their partners' authenticity. Our model posits that receiving negative feedback to LSEs should provide proof that their partners are willing to provide negative feedback and are not "just being nice." We call it the Negativity-As-Honestly Credentials hypothesis.

However, criticism also carries the potential to be seen as a sign of rejection which may decrease relationship security and commitment to partners and cause increased negative emotions. Criticism limited to a few areas, especially areas that are unimportant to the self or relationships, will be more effective, as it should reduce authenticity doubts and not have these costs.

Study 1: Method

Demographics
- 346 men and 299 women
- 41.1% Dating, 18.2% Cohabiting, 4.2% Engaged or 18.9 Married
- Mean age of sample was 31.7 years

Procedure
Participants self-esteem, traits and their relationship was assessed using:
- Trait self-esteem
- Frequency of criticism from the partner and authenticity doubts (beliefs that partner hides negative evaluations and feigns positive evaluations)
- In 15 domains (e.g., physical appearance, intelligence, social skills, athletic ability, sense of humor)

Study 1: Results and Discussion

Increases in Maximum Criticism (maximum frequency of criticism received from the partner across the 15 domains) tended to predict reduced authenticity doubts for LSEs and increased authenticity doubts for HSEs (see Figure 1).

These results suggest that LSEs felt more trust of partners' honesty when they received some criticism.

Other findings:

- Increases in average criticism (averaged across all 15 domains) did not have the same effect. Average criticism predicted higher authenticity doubts for LSEs. Hence, criticism across multiple domains seemed to undermine trust.
- Authenticity doubts predicted reduced feelings of relationship security (beliefs that the partner does not value the relationship).

Study 2: Method

Demographics
145 dyads consisting of 159 females and 116 males
Mean age 19 years
56% friendships, 19% roommates, 18% dating

Procedure
Evaluator provides feedback
Evaluator freely provides feedback for event 2

Study 2: Results and Discussion

LSEs exhibited less suspicion of partners' honesty after receiving negative (relative to positive) event 1 feedback, both with regard to event 1 feedback (see Figure 2) and event 2 feedback (see Figure 3).

These results suggest that LSEs felt more trust of partners' honesty when they received some criticism, both with regard to that criticism and with regard to subsequent feedback.

However, LSEs exhibited more negative affective reactions to criticism (relative to praise and HSEs; Figure 4). Additional analyses suggested this was primarily the case when the event was important to LSEs (Figure 6).

These results suggest that criticism can have both positive and negative consequences for LSEs. It reduced their authenticity doubts but made them upset. However, criticism in an unimportant domain reduced authenticity doubts and did not make them upset.

Other findings: Criticism also reduced LSEs interpersonal attraction, but only if it occurred in a high-investment domain.

General Discussion

Negative feedback produced significant decreases in reported authenticity doubts of LSEs compared to when they receive positive feedback. LSEs reported less suspicion about partners' dishonesty when they reported receiving frequent criticism in at least one other domain (Study 1). In addition, LSEs were able to trust subsequent positive feedback if they first received negative feedback, proving to them that their partner is honest (Study 2). Criticism helped LSEs take praise at face value rather than searching for concealed motives.

However, the negative feedback must be tactfully delivered so that LSEs do not feel upset or rejected. When LSEs received frequent negative feedback in all domains, they reported more authenticity doubts and insecurity (Study 1). When they received criticism in important domains, they also reported more negative affect and reduced attraction to partners (Study 2).

Partners of LSEs may need to walk a knife edge when trying to maintain LSEs' trust and affection. Feedback cannot be overly negative or overly positive. Overly positive feedback will cause LSEs to doubt partners' honesty. Overly negative feedback will cause LSEs to feel rejected.

References


