

Rethinking the rebound: Unexpected effects of rejection

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It's portrayed in movies again and again - a character gets rejected by someone attractive and then falls willingly into the arms of someone perhaps less attractive. According to a new study, it's not so simple: Rejection by an attractive man actually led women to socially distance themselves from an unattractive man, even when he offered acceptance.

"We hadn't expected to see derogation of the unattractive male when women had been rejected by the attractive male," says Geoff MacDonald of the University of Toronto and lead author of the new study in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. "But when we replicated the study, the effect was still there."

MacDonald studies social exclusion, an area of research that has by and large assumed that acceptance is the goal after rejection. The new study turns that idea on its head, highlighting that "what people want is not immediate acceptance per se but a sense of assurance that the person is acceptable to the sorts of people they want to be connected to," MacDonald says.

The new study sought to replicate more real-world dating scenarios in the lab. The researchers told heterosexual females that they would have the opportunity to meet two male participants after evaluating these men's dating profiles. The women first wrote profiles about themselves and then viewed the profiles of the men, along with photos, one of whom was more attractive and the other who was less.

"The woman, thinking the men have read her profile, then got feedback as to whether the men would like to meet her," MacDonald explains. "We randomly assigned the women to either acceptance or rejection from the attractive man, as well as acceptance or rejection from the unattractive man." The women then indicated if they wanted to meet each man and rate them.

The researchers chose to use attractiveness as a measure of social value, based on a large volume of literature backing the idea that in a relationship formation context, attractiveness is a highly valued attribute. "For example, in one speed dating [study](#)," MacDonald said, "regardless of what speed daters said they were looking for, one of the strongest predictors of interest was [physical attractiveness](#)."

As published today, the researchers found that not only did the women who were rejected derogate those men but they also rejected the unattractive [men](#), even if they offered acceptance. A possible reason for this effect, MacDonald says, is that "being affiliated with an unattractive man would make those [women](#) feel like that's the kind of man they 'deserve,' which puts their larger social goals at risk."

The work is important in shedding light on situations that may cause antisocial behavior, for example studies that have shown that [rejection](#) can lead to aggression. "Sometimes undermining immediate acceptance may be exactly the goal when that acceptance comes from someone you don't want to be identified with," MacDonald says.

On an anecdotal level, MacDonald says that many people who he has spoken with can relate to being harsh towards less-attractive others when their dating life isn't going so well.

More information: The paper, "Resisting Connection Following Social Exclusion: Rejection by an Attractive Suitor Provokes Derogation

of an Unattractive Suitor," by Geoff MacDonald, Patricia L. Baratta, and Rebecca Tzalazidis, was published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* online on May 12, 2015.

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