

# Testing sociometer theory: Self-esteem and the importance of acceptance for social decision-making<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

The present study examined the sociometer's role in guiding social behavior. The authors hypothesized that low self-esteem people (LSEs), but not high self-esteem people (HSEs), base their social decision-making on acceptance. Undergraduate participants were invited to join a social group and were led to believe that acceptance either was guaranteed, or was likely but not guaranteed. HSEs always were eager to join the group, whereas LSEs were keen to join the group only when acceptance was guaranteed. Furthermore, mediation analyses indicated that LSEs' willingness to join the group was dependent on their anticipated social outcomes, which were contingent on acceptance from the group, whereas acceptance did not affect HSEs' decision-making. These results support a sociometer account of social decision-making.

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Our doubts are traitors,  
And make us lose the good we oft might win  
By fearing to attempt.

*Act I, Scene IV, "Measure for Measure" by William Shakespeare*

Jill spent 5 weeks traveling solo in Europe and was never lonely because she always met people wherever she went. In Prague, she met Melanie, who was feeling terribly lonely. She had been traveling alone for 4 weeks and had not spent a single day with another person. Jill was amazed and said, "Wow! I usually just walk up to people and ask if I can spend the day with them. Why don't you do that?" Melanie

looked surprised and replied, "What if they didn't like me? That would be horrible!" Jill and Melanie just stared at each other in silence, each puzzling over the other's seemingly strange point of view.

Our goal in this paper is to understand the social conditions that would allow someone like Melanie to take a social risk. To Melanie, this goal may seem strange, because she thinks her behavior is perfectly reasonable—it achieves her aim of avoiding the hurt feelings that she seems to expect. To Jill, who rarely anticipates rejection, Melanie's approach seems peculiar. One explanation for these opposing social expectations is that Jill and Melanie differ in self-esteem. Sociometer theory proposes that self-esteem is a barometer of one's perceived past, present, and future relational value (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Therefore, people high in self-esteem (HSEs), like Jill, feel that they were, are, and will be valued by others, whereas people low in self-esteem (LSEs), like Melanie, doubt their value as relational partners, and project these doubts onto future relationships (see Anthony, Holmes, & Wood, submitted; Study 5; Leary et al., 1995; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000).

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We argue that the differing social expectations of LSEs and HSEs have a marked influence on their social strategies. Specifically, we posit that HSEs' belief that they will be accepted leaves them relatively impervious to signs of rejection, whereas LSEs' doubts about their value cause them to be overly vigilant for and reactive to cues regarding their relational value. This hypothesis is supported by research on attachment insecurity (Bellavia & Murray, 2003; Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002), the need to belong (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004), and rejection sensitivity (Pietrzak, Downey, & Ayduk, 2005), all of which are associated with low self-esteem (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Murray, 2005; Pickett et al., 2004). In the present research, we apply this reasoning to the initiation of new social relationships. We hypothesize that HSEs' high sense of their relational value and consequent expectations of acceptance act as an emotional buffer against possible rejection. This buffer allows them to adopt a high threshold for acceptable social risk, which permits them to enter novel social situations more blithely, with little fear of rejection. In contrast, LSEs adopt a low threshold for acceptable social risk, for two reasons. First, because LSEs doubt their relational value and expect rejection, they are particularly attuned to cues of potential rejection. Second, although interpersonal rejection is painful for everyone (Brown & Dutton, 1995; Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; MacDonald & Leary, 2005), it is especially damaging to LSEs (Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997; Sommer & Baumeister, 2002). Hence, we expect LSEs, who can ill afford additional drops in their sociometers, to be hesitant to enter novel social situations.

These ideas can be phrased in the language of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). When deciding on a course of social action, people calculate the *goodness of outcomes*. In the current paper, we refer to this concept as *anticipated social outcomes*, which is a person's net calculation of the rewards, minus the costs, of behaving a certain way in a social situation. When considering the possibility of initiating new relationships, the primary cost is rejection, whereas the primary reward is the creation of new friendships. Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton (1989) described two behavioral orientations that reflect people's relative focus on such social rewards and costs, which they termed *self-enhancement* and *self-protection*, respectively. They proposed that HSEs adopt a self-enhancing orientation, reflecting their underlying motivation to seek rewarding social experiences, whereas LSEs exhibit a self-protective orientation, characterized by a fundamental desire to avoid the embarrassment of social rejection. Applying this reasoning to relationship initiation situations, HSEs' typical focus on social rewards should encourage them to seek new relationships, whereas LSEs' typical focus on the social costs of rejection should cause them to be hesitant to attempt to form new relationships.

Although self-esteem predicts people's preferences for self-protection versus self-enhancement, even HSEs would self-protect if they did not possess a "psychological insurance policy" that allows them to ignore the potential costs of social rejection (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, *in press*). HSEs' feelings of social self-worth act as an insurance policy, allowing them to adopt their typical approach orientation (Heimpel, Elliot, & Wood, *in press*) to social situations. For LSEs, although their low sociometer reading causes them to crave belonging, it also causes them to fear rejection because it heightens the risks associated with cultivating new relationships. These opposing messages spawn an approach-avoidance conflict, which LSEs self-protectively resolve in favor of the safety of avoidance.

Preliminary support for these ideas is offered by a study that we designed to test a different hypothesis, which we describe in more detail elsewhere (Anthony et al., *submitted*; Study 5). Participants were invited to join an existing social group and, in the condition of interest here, were given no information about the group's likelihood of accepting them. As our present arguments predict, in that *No Feedback* condition, LSEs were less willing than HSEs to join the group. LSEs also expected that the group would like them less, relative to HSEs. Consistent with their self-protective orientation, LSEs appeared to be more cautious than HSEs about forming new relationships.<sup>1</sup>

In the current study, we sought to overcome LSEs' hesitance to enter novel social situations by providing them with the psychological insurance policy that they typically lack. In one condition, we provided LSEs with obvious evidence that they would be accepted by the group that they were invited to join. This acceptance information should eliminate the risk of rejection from LSEs' anticipated social outcomes, which in turn should encourage them to join the group. In a second condition, we again provided participants with evidence that the group would accept them, but this time that acceptance was more ambiguous and reserved. When acceptance from the group was not wholehearted and completely guaranteed, we expected that LSEs' anticipated social outcomes would be lower, making them hesitant to enter the social situation.

We predicted that HSEs would behave differently. HSEs, like LSEs, should base their willingness to join the group on their anticipated social outcomes. However, HSEs' high threshold for acceptable risk means that they can overlook small variations in anticipated acceptance. Obvious versus ambiguous acceptance should not enter into HSEs' assessment of the net profitability of joining the group, so they should be equally willing to join the group in both conditions.

To our knowledge, no previous research has examined sociometer theory in the context of people's actual choices

<sup>1</sup> These specific comparisons between LSEs and HSEs in the No feedback condition were not presented in Anthony et al. (*submitted*) because that study was designed to test a different hypothesis. The details of these results may be obtained from the authors.

to develop new relationships. Indeed, surprisingly little research has examined the hypothesized social-motivational side of the sociometer's function at all (for exceptions, see Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004; Haupt & Leary, 1997). Most sociometer research has focused on the effects of rejection on people's moods and state self-esteem (e.g., Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001; Leary et al., 2003; Leary et al., 1998). Our study is unique in several respects: (a) its behavioral dependent variable—a commitment to join (or not join) a new social group, (b) its focus on the effect of acceptance, rather than rejection, on social decision-making, and (c) its use of mediation analysis to test whether acceptance affects LSEs', but not HSEs', perceptions of social outcomes and subsequent decision to join the group.

## Method

### Participants

During a mass testing session, potential participants completed Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (1965), which was modified to include nine-point response scales rather than the original four-point scales. Participants in the current study were women selected from the top third (HSEs;  $n=21$ ;  $M=7.94$ ) and bottom third (LSEs;  $n=19$ ;  $M=5.28$ ) of the distribution of scores. Women were selected for this study based on pilot research that suggested that women were generally more interested than men in joining a focus group.

### Procedure

Sessions were run by a female experimenter who was blind to participants' self-esteem and to the participants' experimental condition. To increase the meaningfulness of the decision-making process, an elaborate cover story was devised. In an individual lab session, each participant was told that the experimenter was a representative of the "Center for Group Dynamics," and that she was currently recruiting a replacement member for a five-person market-research focus group. She informed the participant that her lab conducts not only market research, but research on group dynamics. The participant was informed that the focus group meets about once a month to assess a product, and that group members usually are allowed to keep the products that they assess (e.g., running shoes and cell phones).

Next, the experimenter showed a short video of another group meeting (i.e., *not* the group that the participant could join), to give the participant "an idea of what the meetings are like." The tape was about 1 min long and showed a mixed-sex group ostensibly testing cell phones, eating pizza, and having a good time. The participant was then told that the current focus-group members (i.e., the group that the participant could join) had viewed some anonymous attitude and personality questionnaires from the mass-testing session that she had been involved in, and that a sample of

the participant's questionnaires was among those viewed by the group. Supposedly, the group had been asked to provide feedback about what they thought of the people who filled out the questionnaires, as part of the lab's research on group dynamics. The participant was assured that the group did not know which questionnaire was hers.

The experimenter gave the participant an envelope containing the feedback from the group and excused herself from the room so that the participant could read the feedback privately. This feedback constituted the experimental manipulation, which will be described shortly. The envelopes were prepared in advance by a research assistant who randomly assigned participants to condition, with the restriction that HSEs and LSEs were evenly distributed between conditions. When the experimenter returned to the participant's room, she requested that the participant complete a questionnaire, which contained the dependent measures for this study. These measures of participants' evaluations of the group will be discussed in the Results section.

After participants completed the questionnaire, the experimenter thoroughly probed for suspicion. The experimenter then debriefed participants as to the real purpose of the study and provided them with partial credit towards their course as compensation for their time.

### Experimental conditions

The feedback from the group consisted of what appeared to be hand-written comments made by the group members in response to the typed question, "Do you think this person will be a good addition to your group?" So that the comments would appear realistic, in both conditions one group member ostensibly wrote, "I'm not sure but I'm willing to give it a try." Participants in the *Obvious acceptance* condition received the following three additional comments:

"I get a good vibe from her responses. I think we'd get along well right away."

"I think she'll really gel with our group in no time at all."

"This person seems like the sort who will fit in easily and quickly with us."

The comparison condition was designed to give an overall message of acceptance, but in a more reserved or ambiguous manner. Thus, participants in the *Ambiguous acceptance* condition received the following three additional comments:

"This person sounds like someone I could grow to really like."

"I hope she joins us, I'm looking forward to the chance to get to know her better."

"I think we'll get along well after we really get to know each other."

## Results

Two HSEs in the Ambiguous condition revealed during the debriefing that they either doubted that the group was real or doubted the feedback. Therefore, their data were excluded from all analyses.

All dependent measures were assessed at the same time in one questionnaire package, and used nine-point Likert scales, on which low numbers represented disagreement with the statement and high numbers represented agreement with the statement. For each dependent variable, a  $2 \times 2$  (Self-Esteem Group  $\times$  Feedback Condition) ANOVA was conducted unless otherwise specified.

### *Anticipated acceptance from the group*

Participants estimated the group's current impression of them by answering the questions: "How much does the group like you now?," "Does the group have an accurate impression of you?," "Does the group expect to like you immediately?," and "Does the group expect to like you after getting to know you?" Participants also estimated the group's opinion of them on six positive traits: "kind," "warm," "socially skilled," "considerate," "interesting to talk to," and "exciting personality." Finally, they were asked to imagine that they joined the group and anticipate, "How much will the group like you after four meetings?" We averaged participants' positive-trait estimates ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and then included that average with responses to the other five acceptance items in a "perceptions of acceptance" composite ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

The experimental feedback created the desired impression. Participants in the Obvious Acceptance condition perceived greater acceptance than participants in the Ambiguous Acceptance condition ( $M_s = 7.33$  and  $6.56$ , respectively),  $F(1, 34) = 12.78$ ,  $p < .001$ . As intended, self-esteem was not associated with participants' perceptions of acceptance, as indicated by a non-significant main effect of self-esteem and a non-significant interaction between self-esteem and feedback condition, both  $F_s < 1.0$ . These results indicate that, as intended, although participants who received the Obvious feedback anticipated greater acceptance than did participants who received the Ambiguous feedback, participants in the Ambiguous condition still perceived that the group was likely to accept them (i.e., had scores above the midpoint of the scale).<sup>2</sup> Also, because self-esteem did not moderate these acceptance perceptions, potential differences between HSEs' and LSEs' willingness to join the group cannot be attributed to differential perceptions of the likelihood of acceptance.

<sup>2</sup> We also analyzed the items that compose this composite individually and found that self-esteem did not moderate any of the individual items, nor did it moderate the growth in liking that participants anticipated over time.

### *Willingness to join the group*

We hypothesized that this difference in anticipated acceptance from the group would affect LSEs', but not HSEs', social decision-making. Our primary dependent measure was participants' willingness to join the group, which was assessed through three items. One question asked, "How much would you like to join this focus group?," and the remaining two assessed participants' behavioral commitment: "How many meetings would you like to attend?" (response choices ran from one to eight meetings), and "How willing are you to attend meetings held late in the evenings, and on Saturday and Sunday mornings at 8:00 am?" Responses to these items were averaged to form the "wish to join" composite ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

Fig. 1 presents the results. On average, people were more interested in joining the Obvious group than the Ambiguous group,  $F(1, 34) = 8.97$ ,  $p < .01$ , but this effect was qualified, as predicted, by an interaction between self-esteem and condition,  $F(1, 34) = 5.18$ ,  $p < .05$ . Simple-effects analyses (Howell, 2002) revealed that HSEs' willingness to join the group was equally strong in both conditions,  $F(1, 34) < 1.0$ . In contrast, LSEs were much less interested in joining the Ambiguous group than the Obvious group,  $F(1, 34) = 13.88$ ,  $p < .001$ . LSEs' interest in joining the Obvious group equaled that of HSEs,  $F(1, 34) < 1.0$ , but in the Ambiguous condition, LSEs were much less willing to join than HSEs,  $F(1, 34) = 5.16$ ,  $p < .05$ . Overall, these results are consistent with our hypothesis that obvious acceptance from the group can overcome LSEs' hesitation to enter into new social situations.

### *Anticipated social outcomes*

Five items assessed participants' anticipated social outcomes if they joined the group: "How much do you think that you will like the group?," "How likely do you think it is that you will get along with the group?," "How likely is it

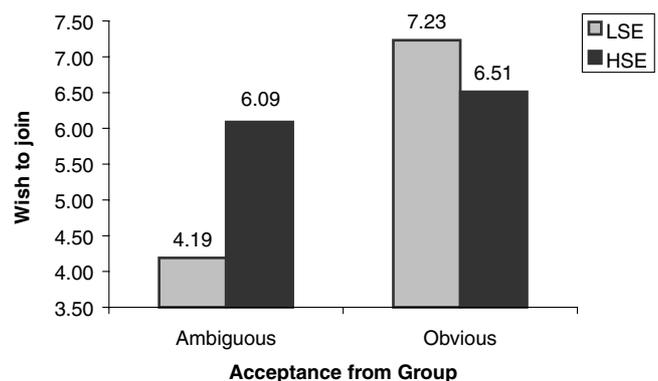


Fig. 1. Effect of experimental feedback on participants' willingness to join the group as a function of self-esteem.

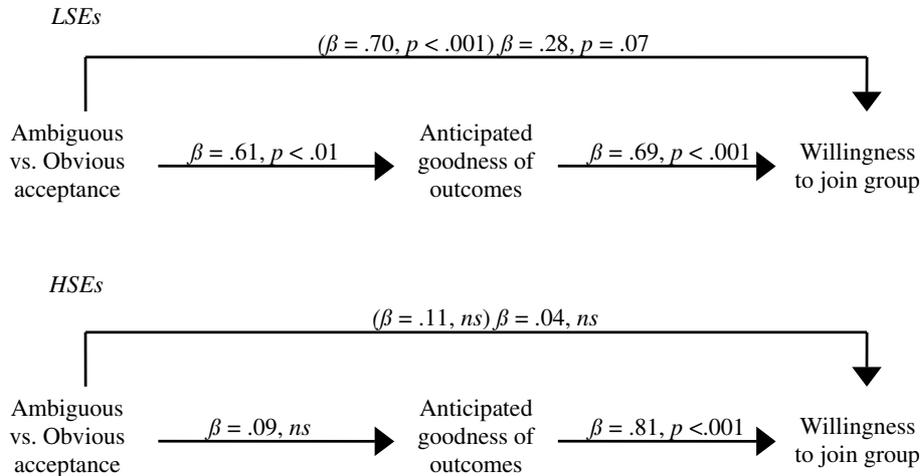


Fig. 2. Mediation analyses for LSEs and HSEs examining the associations between experimental feedback, anticipated goodness of social outcomes, and willingness to join the group.

that you will fit in with the group?,” “How enjoyable do you think it would be, to be a part of this group?,” and “How comfortable will you feel with this group?” When averaged, these items formed the “anticipated social outcomes” index ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

Overall, participants anticipated poorer social outcomes in the Ambiguous group than in the Obvious group,  $F(1, 34) = 5.62, p < .05$ . This effect was qualified by a marginally significant interaction between self-esteem and condition,  $F(1, 34) = 3.20, p = .08$ . Simple-effects analyses revealed that, as predicted, HSEs anticipated equal outcomes in the Ambiguous and Obvious conditions ( $M_s = 7.20$  and  $7.38$ , respectively),  $F(1, 34) < 1.0$ , whereas LSEs anticipated poorer outcomes in the Ambiguous condition than in the Obvious condition ( $M_s = 6.31$  and  $7.60$ , respectively),  $F(1, 34) = 8.65, p < .01$ . LSEs’ anticipated social outcomes in the Obvious group equaled those of HSEs,  $F(1, 34) < 1.0$ , but in the Ambiguous condition, LSEs anticipated poorer social outcomes than HSEs,  $F(1, 34) = 3.91, p < .05$ .

### Mediation analyses

We predicted that obvious acceptance from the group would increase LSEs’ willingness to join the group because it would improve their anticipated social outcomes. In contrast, we predicted that although HSEs’ anticipated outcomes would be associated with their willingness to join the group, acceptance would not predict their anticipated outcomes, and hence would not factor into their decision-making process.

The ANOVA results above already indicated that self-esteem moderated the effect of feedback on both anticipated outcomes (the mediator) and willingness to join the group (the dependent variable), such that feedback affected both of these outcomes for LSEs but had no effect for HSEs. Because there is no association between the predictor and dependent variable for HSEs, and we did not have reason to suspect suppression, we conducted

mediation analyses separately for LSEs and HSEs. As with simple-effects analyses, we used the error terms from the whole sample in calculating the reported statistics.<sup>3</sup>

Fig. 2 presents the results of the mediation analyses. The first regression analysis confirms the ANOVA results that LSEs strongly preferred to join the group that provided Obvious Acceptance feedback over the group that provided Ambiguous Acceptance feedback,  $\beta = .70, t(36) = 3.54, p < .001$ . The second regression showed that Obvious Acceptance predicted more favorable anticipated outcomes than Ambiguous acceptance,  $\beta = .61, t(36) = 2.85, p < .01$ . When we entered both feedback condition and anticipated outcomes simultaneously to predict LSEs’ willingness to join the group, anticipated outcomes predicted LSE participants’ willingness to join the group,  $\beta = .69, t(36) = 4.73, p < .01$ . Feedback remained a marginally significant, though diminished, predictor of LSEs’ willingness to join the group,  $\beta = .28, t(36) = 1.89, p = .07$ . Sobel’s test confirmed that anticipated social outcomes partially mediated the effect of acceptance on LSEs’ willingness to join the group,  $z = 3.56, p < .001$ .<sup>4</sup> For HSEs, the feedback had no effect on their anticipated outcomes,  $\beta = .09, t(36) = .16, ns$ , or their decision to join the group,  $\beta = .11, t(36) = 0.23, ns$ . Anticipated outcomes (controlling for feedback) were associated with HSEs’ willingness to join the group,  $\beta = .81, t(36) = 5.80, p < .001$ . These results are consistent with our hypothesis that

<sup>3</sup> These analyses remained significant when we used the error terms and degrees of freedom from the LSE group only.

<sup>4</sup> We also conducted this analysis including both HSEs and LSEs and using the interaction between self-esteem and condition as the predictor. The interaction term predicted anticipated goodness of outcomes to a marginally significant degree,  $\beta = -.26, t(36) = -1.63, p = .11$ . Anticipated goodness of outcomes predicted people’s willingness to join the group (when the direct effect of acceptance was controlled),  $\beta = .82, t(36) = 8.79, p < .001$ . Sobel’s test indicated that this indirect path was marginally significant,  $z = -1.60, p = .11$ .

HSEs are insensitive to small variations in acceptance cues.<sup>5</sup>

As is often the case with mediation analyses, we cannot rule out alternative models definitively, including the possibility that willingness to join the group mediates the influence of our acceptance manipulation on anticipated social outcomes. That is, perhaps the decision to join the group or not inspired new thoughts about anticipated social outcomes, possibly in a post-decisional-dissonance-reducing fashion. We believe that our view of the causal sequence—namely, in the case of LSEs, that Obvious Acceptance led them to anticipate better social outcomes, which in turn allowed them to eagerly approach the social situation—is more plausible. Our participants were making what they believed to be a consequential decision about whether to join a new group, and they probably weighed the pros and cons thoughtfully. In line with *Thibaut and Kelley's (1959)* social decision-making model, it seems likely that the anticipated social outcomes would have been among the topmost considerations in that weighing.

## Discussion

### *Self-esteem and social decision-making*

We sought to explain why Melanie, our lonely traveler from the introduction, refrained from seeking the relationships she craved, whereas Jill, our popular traveler, easily sought strangers' company. Although their social approaches differ, a similar logic underlies both of their orientations. Interdependence theory holds that social decision-making involves an assessment of the social outcomes that could result from a particular behavioral option (*Thibaut & Kelley, 1959*). In assessing social outcomes, people take into account both the benefits that could be gained and the costs that could be suffered from behaving a certain way. Although the components of this equation are the same for everyone, the relative weighting of costs and benefits varies from person to person.

For HSEs like Jill, calculating social outcomes focuses on benefits more than costs. Jill's high self-esteem means that she has a strong sense of her relational value. As a result, she is relatively inattentive to cues signaling the primary cost of attempting to meet new people: Rejection. Like Jill, the HSEs in our study gave little heed to the differ-

<sup>5</sup> The finding that acceptance from the group did not affect HSEs' anticipated outcomes or willingness to join the group does not appear to be due to restriction of range on these variables. Levene's tests for equality of variance indicated that the self-esteem groups did not differ in variance in their perceptions of acceptance (LSEs'  $SD = 2.78$ , HSEs'  $SD = 3.14$ ), in their anticipated goodness of outcomes (LSEs'  $SD = 1.08$ , HSEs'  $SD = 1.00$ ), or in variation in willingness to join the group (LSEs'  $SD = 2.22$ , HSEs'  $SD = 1.83$ ). Moreover, these same results emerged in the No Feedback condition of the study that we reported in the introduction. LSEs in that condition again anticipated poorer social outcomes than did HSEs.

ing levels of acceptance conveyed by our experimental feedback. Presumably, their high sociometers buffered them against the possibility of a single, temporary social failure. Although HSEs' social decision-making was related to the social outcomes they expected, these expectations were unaffected by anticipated acceptance from the group.

This decision-making process is very different for LSEs like Melanie. Her low sociometer means that, typically, Melanie is not confident that she will be accepted by others, and the rejection that she fears is especially painful. This focuses Melanie's assessment of social outcomes on the cost of rejection. Consequently, like Melanie, LSEs who received ambiguous acceptance feedback anticipated poorer social outcomes and were less willing to join the group than HSEs. However, when we provided LSEs with clear evidence that they would be accepted by the group (i.e., obvious acceptance feedback), their anticipated social outcomes compared favorably with their threshold of acceptable risk, and they became just as interested in joining the group as HSEs.

### *Limitations of the present study*

One may ask whether the Obvious feedback encouraged, or the Ambiguous feedback discouraged, LSEs to join the group. We argued that LSEs are typically hesitant, relative to HSEs, to enter new, risky social situations, and that the Obvious feedback overcame this hesitation. But it is conceivable that LSEs ordinarily would have approached the situation as eagerly as HSEs, but that the Ambiguous feedback raised a specter of rejection that had not previously entered LSEs' minds. Although this second possibility is highly improbable and inconsistent with past research (e.g., *Leary et al., 1995; Murray et al., 2000*), without a no-feedback condition, we cannot definitively rule it out. However, the study that we described in the introduction that included a No Feedback condition may be instructive. In a group-joining context almost identical to the present one, when participants received no information about the group's acceptance, LSEs were less likely than HSEs to expect acceptance, to anticipate positive social outcomes, and to join the group. In the present Ambiguous Acceptance condition, LSEs and HSEs expected equal acceptance from the group, yet LSEs still expected poorer social outcomes and remained less willing to join the group. Only when LSEs were virtually guaranteed immediate acceptance by the Obvious feedback (e.g., "I think she'll really gel with our group in no time at all") did their expected social outcomes and willingness to join the group reach HSEs' levels.

The cover story that participants received was very realistic; they believed that they were choosing to join an actual group that would exist into the future. This realism increases our confidence in the external validity of our results. However, our sample may limit external validity in two ways. First, because we studied only women, it is possible that the present results are not generalizable to men.

However, previous research on the function of the sociometer suggests that gender does not moderate previous sociometer findings (e.g., Haupt & Leary, 1997; Leary et al., 2001; Leary et al., 2003; Leary et al., 1995). Second, our sample included only university students. These young people, many of whom have moved recently to a new city, may have been particularly sensitive to acceptance and rejection cues. It is possible that LSEs in a more mature, married sample would have differed less from HSEs in their reliance on acceptance cues.

### Overcoming LSEs' self-protectiveness

The present findings are consistent with two previous articles, in two different domains, that have demonstrated that making a "risky" situation "safe" can overcome LSEs' self-protective tendencies. In the domain of social comparison, LSEs were especially likely to risk direct comparisons with a competitor when they were confident of a favorable outcome (Wood, Giordana-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994). In the domain of decision-making, LSEs made riskier financial decisions when they believed that the results of their decisions would remain unknown than when they anticipated learning the potentially negative results of their decisions (Josephs, Larrick, Steele, & Nisbett, 1992). The theme common to these studies and the present one is that LSEs' risk-averse behavior was reduced when the context minimized the chances of failure or rejection. When LSEs are virtually guaranteed a favorable outcome (Wood et al., 1994), are spared knowledge of a potentially unfavorable outcome (Josephs et al., 1992), or are explicitly guaranteed acceptance from a group of strangers (the present study), LSEs appear to take risks that they would not otherwise hazard.

### Implications of these results

One puzzling aspect of LSEs' interpersonal behavior is seen in research on dependence-regulation: When LSEs are concerned about their relational value, they distance themselves from loved ones rather than attempting to bridge the divide and protect their existing connections (for a review, see Murray & Holmes, 2000). Although LSEs' strong need to belong may cause a desire to approach their loved ones, their fear of rejection and hurt may negate that motivation, resulting in avoidance in the form of dependence-regulation. To test whether LSEs will attempt to gain the relationships that they desire, it may be necessary to remove LSEs' competing motivation to avoid the hurt of rejection. Our results suggest that LSEs' strong need to avoid rejection dominates their anticipated social outcomes, but clear evidence that they will not be rejected can overcome the need to protect their depleted sense of relational value. It is possible that clear evidence of a loved one's regard, especially in potentially "threatening" situations (e.g., when the partner is in a bad mood) could also overcome LSEs' dependence-regulation in intimate contexts.

Furthermore, the current findings extend the risk-management logic of the dependence-regulation model into the realm of relationship initiation. The dependence-regulation model contends that people's willingness to invest in a relationship is based on their confidence that they are valued by their relationship partner. Because self-esteem is strongly related to people's confidence that they are valued, it indirectly controls the level of investment that people are willing to risk. For example, given the same relationship situation (e.g., a partner's bad mood), LSEs adopt a low level of acceptable risk and withdraw investment, whereas HSEs adopt a high level of acceptable risk and remain close to their partner (Murray et al., 2002). In much the same way, HSEs in the current study overlooked small variations in the probability of acceptance, whereas LSEs were hesitant to invest and draw closer to the new group unless their doubts were removed.

The present study also stands as an important test of sociometer theory. First, it helps validate the definition of the sociometer, because variations in self-esteem were associated with congruent variations in social expectations: LSEs appeared to project their doubts about their relational value onto future social interactions, whereas HSEs projected their confidence. Furthermore, LSEs' anticipated social outcomes were highly calibrated to the level of acceptance that they expected from the group, whereas HSEs' anticipated social outcomes were not. These results support the idea that a depleted sociometer will make acceptance cues particularly salient (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Finally, this study also extended sociometer theory by showing that the calibration of the sociometer to acceptance governs actual social decision-making: People with depleted sociometers appear to guide their social behavior largely by the level of acceptance that they anticipate from others.

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