Seeking Connection or Protection in Close Relationships as a Function of Situational and Dispositional Factors

Lauren Reese, Honors Scholar, and Dr. Sadie Leder
High Point University

Introduction
The current work examines when people seek closeness vs. protection in their close relationships. Specifically, we investigated whether situational variables, like rejection salience, and dispositional variables, like self-esteem, influence when people approach best friends as opposed to romantic partners.

Previously it has been shown that individuals with low self-esteem prioritize protection while those with high self-esteem prioritize connection. Building from this knowledge, we hypothesized that participants would seek to balance connection and protection goals, as evidenced by their tendency to approach or avoid a close friend as compared to romantic partner.

This study investigates the differences between the relationship of a best friend and a romantic partner by means of self-esteem and commitment.

Methods
Participants: 92 (27 male) undergraduate students at High Point University identified as currently in both a romantic relationship and close friendship.

Procedure: Participants completed background questionnaires and a recall task designed to prime feelings of either acceptance or rejection. Then participants completed measures assessing their feelings of closeness and commitment to both their romantic partner and best friend.

Results
Closeness: We conducted a MANOVA examining the influence of self-esteem and rejection priming on ratings of closeness for both the romantic partner and the best friend. Results revealed a significant main effect of condition (p = .03), such that participants primed with rejection reported feeling less close to their friends as compared to participants in the acceptance condition.

Commitment: To assess participants’ commitment to each relationship, we created a composite score ($\alpha > .91$). MANOVA analysis revealed a significant effect of condition (p < .01), such that participants in the rejection condition reported less commitment to their best friends as compared to participants in the acceptance condition.

Conclusion
Overall, we found that participants report being relatively close and committed to both their romantic partners and best friends. However, when faced with the threat of rejection, participants distanced from their best friends. In line with risk regulation, this may be a self-protective strategy aimed at balancing competing desires for closeness and protection.

Although not significant, we also found a trend for participants to report greater closeness and commitment to their romantic partners when primed with rejection. This may demonstrate the unique ability of such intimate relationships to fulfill belongingness needs.