

## Self-esteem moderates preferences for accepting versus rejecting interaction partners

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### *Abstract*

*Two experiments compared the social orientations of people with high and low self-esteem (HSEs vs. LSEs). In Experiment 1, participants received positive or negative interpersonal feedback from an accepting or rejecting evaluator. HSEs chose to interact with a rejecting evaluator more often than LSEs did. In Experiment 2, participants received solely negative interpersonal feedback from an accepting or rejecting evaluator of high or low social status. This time, both HSEs and LSEs chose an accepting/high-status evaluator over a rejecting/low-status one, but only HSEs chose a rejecting/high-status evaluator over an accepting/low-status one. Implications are discussed. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Although people have a fundamental desire to feel socially accepted and included (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), they differ in the way they experience and manifest this desire. An important individual difference in this regard is level of *self-esteem* (Leary & MacDonald, 2003; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003).

Relative to people with high self-esteem (hereafter HSEs), people with low self-esteem (hereafter LSEs) feel lonely (Levin & Stokes, 1986) and socially isolated (Hobfoll, Nadler, & Leiberman, 1986). They display insecure, preoccupied or fearful attachment styles (Brennan & Morris, 1997). They also experience elevated social anxiety (Leary & Kowalski, 1993) and question their partner's feelings for them (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). In addition, compared to HSEs, LSEs are more concerned about the possibility of rejection (Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996). In particular, they are attuned to rejection cues (Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997), are dispositionally high in rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996), are preoccupied with social acceptance (Harter, Stocker, & Robinson, 1996), are motivated to avoid social disapproval (Tice, 1993), and are inclined to behave agreeably towards others (Schuetz & DePaulo, 1996) so they will be liked (Schuetz, 1998). Furthermore, LSEs perceive their past as replete with episodes of rejection, and have weak expectations of future social acceptance (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Sommer & Baumeister, 2002).

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HSEs, in contrast, perceive their past as replete with episodes of acceptance, and have strong expectations of future social acceptance (Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995; Leary, Tambor et al.).

We are concerned in this article with the social orientation of HSEs and LSEs, particularly after receiving negative interpersonal feedback. Suppose that both HSEs and LSEs are faced with the choice of interacting with either an accepting evaluator or a rejecting evaluator. Will their choice of interaction partner differ?

Based on the literature review above, we hypothesize that LSEs will choose an accepting evaluator over a rejecting one. However, we suspect that the social orientation of HSEs will be more nuanced. It is known, for example, that HSEs do not take potential threats to self-esteem lying down. Relative to LSEs, they display a compensatory surge in self-confidence and optimism (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Wolfe, Lennox, & Cutler, 1986), focus on strengths rather than weaknesses (Dodgson & Wood, 1995), emphasize their personal abilities (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Schuetz & Tice, 1997), seek competence feedback rather than interpersonal feedback (Vohs & Heatherton, 2001), and affirm themselves by making downward rather than upward comparisons (Vohs & Heatherton, 2004). Indeed, HSEs are particularly concerned about proving themselves to others, especially in domains central to self-worth (Crocker & Park, 2004). For example, following negative feedback about academic performance, HSEs self-promote by pinning their self-worth on future academic successes, whereas LSEs self-protect by disengaging their self-worth from the academic domain (Park & Crocker, 2005). On the basis of these findings, we hypothesize that HSEs—unaccustomed to social rejection, rebounding in self-confidence, and persevering in the face of failure—will choose more often than LSEs a rejecting over an accepting evaluator.

Some research has already bears on whether HSEs differ from LSEs in preferring accepting or rejecting evaluators. Unfortunately, this research has been sparse, and its findings inconclusive. To begin with, Dittes (1959) manipulated group acceptance by allowing participants to view ratings that had supposedly been made by the discussion group to which they belonged. He then found that, relative to LSEs, HSEs were more attracted to groups who rated them less favorably. Jones, Knurek, and Regan, (1973) also found that, relative to LSEs, HSEs were more attracted to, and keener to interact with, someone who had rejected them. Rudich and Vallacher, (1999) found that HSEs chose interaction partners who viewed them positively, regardless of whether they formally accepted or rejected them, whereas LSEs chose interaction partners who accepted them, regardless of whether those partners viewed them positively or negatively. Finally, Anthony, Wood, and Holmes (in press) found that LSEs expressed a willingness to join a group when their acceptance was guaranteed rather than likely, whereas HSEs were equally likely to join a group regardless of whether acceptance was guaranteed or likely.

Although informative, these studies, viewed from the vantage point of our research objectives, have some methodological shortcomings. Anthony et al. (in press) did not contrast acceptance with outright rejection. Dittes (1959) did not report the content of the evaluations made by the discussion group members. Thus, these evaluations may have confounded negative feedback with rejection. In light of this, Rudich and Vallacher (1999) attempted to unconfound these variables. However, they in turn did not hold feedback constant when assessing how the receipt of accepting versus rejecting feedback influenced participants' choice of interaction partner. In addition, neither Dittes (1959) nor Jones et al. (1973) asked participants to actually choose the person they would like to meet: they merely measured attitudes towards them. This omission is problematic because, in principle, one might like an evaluator, yet be reluctant to interact with them, or might dislike an evaluator, yet feel obliged to interact with them.

In our research, we sought to rectify these methodological shortcomings, so as to provide a more rigorous test of the hypothesis that, whereas LSEs will predominantly choose an accepting over a rejecting evaluator, HSEs will show a more mixed preference. In particular, we introduced the

following methodological improvements. First, participants were exposed to the content of the evaluations provided by the prospective interaction partners. Second and relatedly, we unconfounded inclusion feedback (i.e., accepting vs. rejecting) from evaluation feedback (i.e., positive vs. negative) by manipulating them orthogonally. Finally, and most importantly, participants actually chose the person whom they would like to meet.

## EXPERIMENT 1

We hypothesized that most LSEs would choose to interact with an accepting rather than a rejecting evaluator but that this preference would be significantly reduced or reversed for HSEs.

### Method

#### *Participants and Design*

Participants were 148 introductory psychology student volunteers (89 women, 59 men) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH).

The experiment featured a 2 (Inclusion: Acceptance, Rejection)  $\times$  3 (Self-esteem: Low, Moderate, High)  $\times$  2 (Gender: Female, Male)  $\times$  2 (Evaluation: Positive, Negative)  $\times$  2 (Inclusion Order: Accepting Feedback First, Rejecting Feedback First)  $\times$  2 (Inclusion Paring: Order A, Order B) mixed design, with repeated measures on the first factor.

#### *Procedure and Measures*

One week prior to the experimental session, participants completed the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI, Form A; Helmreich & Stapp, 1974), a reliable and valid measure of social self-esteem ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). We opted for the TSBI because of the present research's focus on the social orientation of the HSEs and LSEs. Indeed, the TSBI has been used extensively in research on interaction partner selection (Rudich & Vallacher, 1999; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992), in view of the utility of measuring social rather than global self-esteem when researching interpersonal behavior (Baumeister et al., 1989; Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001).

The TSBI consists of 16 items, each answered on a 5-point rating scale. Possible scores range from 16 to 80, with higher scores reflecting higher self-esteem. Sample items include 'I have no doubts about my social competence' and 'When in a group of people, I have trouble thinking of the right things to say' (reverse-scored). In line with previous pertinent research (Rudich & Vallacher, 1999; Swann et al., 1992), we classified participants scoring below the 30th percentile (raw score = 52) as LSEs, and those scoring above the 70th percentile (raw score = 63) as HSEs. Intervening participants (hereafter MSEs) were classified as having moderate self-esteem.

Next, participants completed a self-description questionnaire. They listed three important personal goals, three characteristics they looked for in a friend, some activities they engaged in for fun, some emotions they experienced on a typical day, and some personal hobbies. Participants were told that this information would be shown to two same-gender persons, each of whom would provide a written evaluation of it. These evaluations—in fact contrived—were then made available to participants in a second experimental session. During that session, participants read both evaluations, and then chose, on

that basis, which of the two evaluators to interact with, for the purposes of a 30-minute getting-acquainted conversation.

The two evaluations that participants received (labeled I and II) were either both positive or both negative (*Evaluation*). The positive evaluations characterized participants as socially confident, whereas the negative evaluations characterized participants as socially insecure (Appendix A; adapted after Rudich & Vallacher, 1999; Swann et al., 1992; Swann, Wenzlaff et al., 1992). After receiving each evaluation, participants were notified whether the evaluator had either accepted them or rejected them (*Inclusion*). That is, each participant learned either: (a) that they had been accepted by one positive evaluator and rejected by another; or (b) that they had been accepted by one negative evaluator and rejected by another. The accepting evaluator expressed satisfaction with the participant's responses, and indicated a willingness to meet and befriend the participant. In contrast, the rejecting evaluator expressed dissatisfaction with the participant's responses, and indicated a reluctance to meet and befriend the participant (Appendix A).

The order in which participants received feedback pertaining to inclusion was counterbalanced: half read the accepting feedback first, half the rejecting feedback first (*Inclusion Order*). Also counterbalanced was which evaluation, I or II, was paired with accepting or rejecting feedback (*Inclusion Pairing*). For half the participants, evaluation I was paired with accepting feedback, and evaluation II with rejecting feedback; for the other half, evaluation I was paired with rejecting feedback, and evaluation II with accepting feedback. Finally, participants chose the evaluator with whom they preferred to interact (*Evaluator Choice*). This constituted our dependent measure. Debriefing followed.

## Results and Discussion

Initial analyses revealed no significant main effects for, or interactions involving, Gender, Inclusion Order, Inclusion Pairing, or (intriguingly) Evaluation. We therefore omitted these variables from further consideration.

The crucial Self-Esteem  $\times$  Inclusion interaction was significant,  $X^2(2) = 15.84$ ,  $p < .01$  (Table 1). We broke it down by conducting two Fisher's Exact Tests. These tests evaluate the significance of the difference in preferences for accepting versus rejecting evaluators across different levels of self-esteem.

A significantly higher proportion of HSEs than LSEs chose to interact with the rejecting than with the accepting evaluator,  $p < .01$ . Additionally, a marginally greater proportion of HSEs than MSEs chose to interact with the rejecting than the accepting evaluator,  $p < .07$ . Finally, a significantly greater proportion of MSEs than LSEs chose to interact with the rejecting than the accepting evaluator,  $p < .03$ . Inspection of Table 1 also reveals that HSEs were roughly equally likely to choose an accepting versus rejection interaction partner, whereas LSEs were roughly nine times more likely to choose an accepting

Table 1. Evaluator choice as a function of Self-Esteem and Inclusion in Experiment 1

Inclusion	Self-Esteem		
	High	Moderate	Low
Acceptance	54% (26)	73% (40)	91% (41)
Rejection	46% (22)	27% (15)	9% (4)

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate frequencies.

over a rejecting interaction partner. The corresponding ratio for MSEs was intermediate, a little under three-to-one. These results are consistent with our hypothesis.

## EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 2 sought to clarify further the social orientation of HSEs and LSEs, this time in regard to the *status* of the evaluator. The procedure and design resembled those of Experiment 1. One noteworthy modification was that participants now received only *negative* feedback. This simplification was warranted by the fact that feedback valence did not predict choice of interaction partner in Experiment 1.

As before, participants also received contrasting evaluations from two prospective interaction partners. However, participants this time had different choices to make. Half had to choose between an accepting evaluator of low social status and a rejecting evaluator of high social status, whereas the other half had to choose between an accepting evaluator of high social status and a rejecting evaluator of low social status.

We expected to find, as in Experiment 1, that HSEs would choose rejecting evaluators more often than LSEs. However, we also wanted to explore the possibility that the social orientation of HSEs and LSEs might differ. For example, might it be that, whereas the social orientation of LSEs hinges primarily on evaluator *acceptance*, the social orientation of HSEs hinges primarily on evaluator *status*? The latter possibility is congruent with research showing that HSEs regard themselves as more socially influential and dominant than LSEs do (Barkow, 1975; Hamilton, 1971; Heaven, 1968; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991). Stated otherwise, LSEs derive self-esteem from acceptance, HSEs from status. Consequently, we made two predictions. First, we predicted that, when faced with the choice of an accepting evaluator of high status and a rejecting evaluator of low status, both HSEs and LSEs would mostly choose to interact with the former. Second, we predicted that, when faced with the choice of an accepting evaluator low in status, and a rejecting evaluator high in status, only LSEs would mostly choose to interact with the former; HSEs, in contrast, would mostly choose to interact with the latter.

## Method

### *Participants and Design*

Participants were 163 (108 women, 55 men) introductory psychology student volunteers from UNC-CH.

The experiment featured a 2 (Inclusion: Acceptance, Rejection)  $\times$  2 (Evaluator Status: High, Low)  $\times$  3 (Self-Esteem: Low, Moderate, High)  $\times$  2 (Gender: Female, Male)  $\times$  2 (Inclusion Order: Accepting Feedback First, Rejecting Feedback First)  $\times$  2 (Inclusion Paring: Order A, Order B)  $\times$  2 (Evaluator Status Order: Order C, Order D) mixed design, with repeated measures on the first two factors.

### *Procedure*

In a mass-testing session, participants completed the same questionnaires as in Experiment 1. Based on their TSBI, Form A scores ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ), participants were classified as HSEs, MSEs, and LSEs using the

same percentile cutoffs as in Experiment 1. Participants then returned a week later for the second session. They were told that two (fictitious) evaluators had reviewed their responses to the self-description questionnaire and had expressed their resulting impressions in writing. Matters were arranged so that one evaluator expressed acceptance whereas the other expressed rejection (Appendix A). Participants read what the evaluators had written and completed two preliminary measures: *evaluator favorability* (How favorable was the evaluator?) and *expected interaction quality* (To what extent did you anticipate having a good interaction?) on a 9-point rating scale (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*). Next, participants received status-relevant information about each evaluator. One evaluator was described as being high in status, the other low.

We constructed the high-status and low-status evaluator vignettes on the basis of consultations with our undergraduate research assistants. In UNC-CH undergraduate student culture, high-status is indicated by intelligence, attractiveness, sociability, social involvement, and confidence. Thus, participants learned that the high-status evaluator had made the Dean's list, was dating, had an active social life, was involved in several campus organizations, was confident about his or her opinions, and was keen to express them. In contrast, participants learned that the low-status evaluator had poor academic credentials, did not date, had a dismal social life, was not involved in campus organizations, was not confident about his or her opinions, nor keen to express them. The intuitions of our research assistants were confirmed. In a pretest, we presented the vignettes of high-status and low-status evaluators to 58 (30 men, 28 women) UNC-CH introductory psychology student volunteers and instructed them to rate the evaluators' social status (1 = *very low*, 9 = *very high*). We matched the evaluator gender to the participant's while counterbalancing the order of the contrasting evaluators. Participants indeed perceived the high-status evaluator ( $M = 7.89$ ) as having much higher social status than the low-status evaluator ( $M = 3.39$ ),  $t(57) = 15.10$ ,  $p < .01$ .

For half of participants, the accepting evaluator was described as high-status, whereas the rejecting evaluator was described as low-status. For the other half, the accepting evaluator was described as low-status, whereas and the rejecting evaluator was described as high-status. Participants then chose the evaluator with whom they preferred to interact. This was the key measure. Debriefing followed.

## Results and Discussion

Initial analyses revealed no significant main effects for, or interactions involving, Gender, Inclusion Order, Inclusion Pairing, or Evaluation Status Order. We therefore omitted these variables from further consideration.

We analyzed the two preliminary measures via a 2 (Self-Esteem)  $\times$  2 (Inclusion) mixed ANOVA, using the appropriate pooled error term for all analytical comparisons. We then added Evaluator Status as an additional factor, using Chi-square to analyze choice of interaction partner.

### *Preliminary Measures*

*Evaluator favorability* Participants overall rated the accepting evaluator ( $M = 5.05$ ) more favorably than the rejecting evaluator ( $M = 2.00$ ),  $F(1,160) = 343.16$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, a significant Self-Esteem  $\times$  Inclusion interaction also emerged,  $F(2,160) = 3.31$ ,  $p < .04$ . In particular, HSEs ( $M = 4.19$ ) regarded feedback from the accepting evaluator as less favorable than either MSEs ( $M = 5.70$ ) or LSEs ( $M = 5.27$ ) did,  $t_s > 2.71$ ,  $p_s < .01$ ,  $F(2,160) = 15.18$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, HSEs ( $M = 1.72$ ) and LSEs ( $M = 1.81$ ) also regarded feedback from the rejecting evaluator as less favorable than MSEs did ( $M = 2.47$ ),  $t_s < -2.24$ ,  $p_s < .03$ ,  $F(2,160) = 4.27$ ,  $p < .02$ .

Table 2. Evaluator choice as a function of Self-Esteem and Inclusion in Experiment 2

Inclusion	Self-Esteem		
	High	Moderate	Low
Acceptance	48% (26)	63% (36)	73% (38)
Rejection	52% (28)	37% (21)	27% (14)

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicates frequencies.

*Expected interaction quality* Overall, participants believed that they would have a better interaction with the accepting ( $M = 6.30$ ) than the rejecting ( $M = 3.70$ ) evaluator,  $F(1,160) = 214.91$ ,  $p < .01$ . However, a significant Self-Esteem  $\times$  Inclusion interaction also emerged,  $F(2,160) = 5.34$ ,  $p < .01$ . Breaking down this interaction into simple effects, self-esteem did not influence expected quality of interaction in the case of the accepting evaluator,  $F(2,160) = 0.10$ ,  $p < .91$ . However, it did do so in the case of the rejecting evaluator,  $F(2,160) = 8.98$ ,  $p < .01$ . That is, compared to LSEs ( $M = 3.00$ ), both HSEs ( $M = 4.32$ ) and MSEs ( $M = 3.77$ ) were more likely to believe that they would have a better interaction with the rejecting evaluator,  $t_s > 2.08$ ,  $p_s < .04$ .

#### Key Measure: Evaluator Choice

As in Experiment 1, a significant Self-Esteem  $\times$  Inclusion interaction emerged,  $X^2(2) = 7.06$ ,  $p < .03$  (Table 2). A Fisher's Exact Test showed, as predicted, that more HSEs than LSEs chose to interact with a rejecting rather than an accepting evaluator,  $p < .02$ . However, MSEs did not differ reliably from LSEs in this regard,  $p < .31$ .

The predicted Self-Esteem  $\times$  Inclusion  $\times$  Evaluator Status interaction was significant,  $X^2(3) = 7.59$ ,  $p < .03$  (Table 3). We proceeded by examining the simple Self-Esteem  $\times$  Inclusion interactions separately for each level of Evaluator Status. As expected, no interaction emerged between Self-Esteem and Inclusion when participants made a choice between an accepting/high-status evaluator and a rejecting/low-status evaluator,  $X^2(2) = 0.50$ ,  $p < .79$ . The vast majority of HSEs, MSEs, and LSEs chose the former over the latter. However, also as predicted, a significant interaction emerged between Self-Esteem and Inclusion among participants who had to choose between an accepting/low-status and a rejecting/high-status evaluator,  $X^2(2) = 12.80$ ,  $p < .01$ . In particular, HSEs were more likely than LSEs

Table 3. Evaluator choice as a function of Self-Esteem, Inclusion, and Evaluator Status in Experiment 2

Inclusion/Evaluator Status	Self-Esteem		
	High	Moderate	Low
Accepting/high status	78% (21)	82% (27)	86% (18)
Rejecting/low status	22% (6)	18% (6)	14% (3)
Accepting/low status	19% (5)	37% (9)	65% (20)
Rejecting/high status	81% (22)	63% (15)	35% (11)

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicates frequencies.

to choose the rejecting/high-status over the accepting/low-status evaluator,  $X^2(1) = 12.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ; so were MSEs,  $X^2(1) = 3.96$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### *Summary*

Participants overall regarded the accepting evaluator more favorably than the rejecting evaluator. Also, participants overall expected to have a better interaction with the accepting than with the rejecting evaluator. More interestingly, HSEs (and MSEs) overall expected to have a better interaction with the rejecting evaluator than LSEs did.

However, the interaction preferences of HSEs and LSEs were moderated by additional factors. When the choice lay between an accepting/high-status versus a rejecting/low-status evaluator, both HSEs and LSEs chose the former. However, when the choice lay between an accepting/low-status versus a rejecting/high-status evaluator, HSEs chose the latter whereas LSEs chose the former. In addition, the pattern for MSEs was roughly intermediate between HSEs and LSEs. This suggests that, as far as choosing interaction partners is concerned, it is acceptance by, but not the status of, evaluators that matters to LSEs, whereas it is the status of, but not acceptance by, evaluators that matters to HSEs.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

We conducted two experiments, in which we tested whether people high and low in self-esteem differed in their willingness to interact with evaluators who provided accepting versus rejecting feedback. On the basis of past theory and research (Koch, 2002; Leary, 1999; Leary & Baumeister, 2000), we put forward our main hypothesis that HSEs, relative to LSEs, would more often choose to interact with a rejecting evaluator than an accepting evaluator. The findings of Experiment 1 supported this hypothesis. Moreover, these findings were duly replicated in Experiment 2.

Experiment 2 also threw light on the contrasting social orientations of HSEs and LSEs. First, relative to LSEs, HSEs disliked rejecting feedback more, and perceived it to be more inaccurate. Nonetheless, HSEs still anticipated a more positive encounter with the evaluator who rejected them. Second, LSEs chose to interact with evaluators on the basis of how accepting they were, not on the basis of their social status. HSEs, in contrast, chose to interact with evaluators on the basis of their social status, not on the basis of how accepting they were.

Our research has highlighted how HSEs and LSEs make contrasting choices of interaction partner based on the feedback that those partners provide. But what are the reasons for these contrasting choices? Why do HSEs choose to interact with a rejecting rather than an accepting interaction partner? One reason is that such a choice might afford them the opportunity of convincing their partners that they were mistaken to reject them. That is, HSEs—having a flattering view of themselves, and the confidence to prove a point—might strive to win over rejecting partners. A further possible reason why HSEs might choose to interact with a rejecting interaction partner is because they recognized a resemblance between themselves and that interaction partner, with similarity being a known predictor of attraction (Byrne, 1971). Relative to LSEs, HSEs see themselves as having more social alternatives at their disposal (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). Hence, they can afford to be choosier about interaction partners. However, ‘choosier’ here implies a tendency and ability to reject people—characteristics the rejecting evaluator manifests. Hence, HSEs are liable to see rejecting evaluators as more similar to them, and to like and choose to interact with them for that reason.

What are some of the implications of these contrasting interaction partner choices between HSEs and LSEs? The choices may influence behavior in contexts where acceptance and rejection play a prominent role. One example would be that of romantic relationships (Fitness, Fletcher, & Overall, 2003; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Sedikides, Ariely, & Olsen, 1999). In this domain, amorous advances are either returned or rebuffed by potential partners. HSEs, then, may often pursue potential partners who initially reject them in preference to partners who initially accept them, for two reasons. First, they may feel more optimistic about their eventual chances of success (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Baumeister & Tice, 1985). Second, they might interpret rejection feedback as having at least one positive consequence: that the candidate is more selective about romantic involvements, and hence higher in social status. LSEs, in contrast, might feel relatively pessimistic about their chances of success with a potential partners who initially reject them. Moreover, they might prioritize the goal of finding initially accepting potential partners who will shore up their fragile self-regard.

Furthermore, we speculate that the contrasting choices of HSEs and LSEs may perpetuate preexisting differences in self-esteem. On average, social rejection lowers state self-esteem (Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; Leary et al., 2003). To counter the threat posed by such rejection, HSEs and LSEs might adopt different strategies. HSEs might be more inclined to confront a rejecting evaluator, either because they wish to rebut that evaluator's negative opinion of them or because they naturally identify with their higher status. In contrast, LSEs might be more inclined to shy away from the rejecting evaluator, and to seek solace in an accepting one. Note that the said HSEs strategy is riskier, as their quest to persuade may fail, whereas the said LSEs strategy is safer, as the possibility of failure is all but precluded. Indeed, LSEs are more risk-averse in general (Josephs, Larrick, Steele, & Nisbett, 1992; Tice, 1993).

However, the postulated HSEs' strategy, although riskier, is potentially higher-yield. To the extent that HSEs succeed in winning those who initially reject them over, several positive outcomes are likely. First, HSEs will enhance their level of social inclusion by increasing the proportion of people who accept them (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Second, to the extent that HSEs persuade people in high-status positions to accept them, HSEs' upward mobility may be objectively facilitated (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), with knock-on benefits for their self-esteem. Third, the very experience of winning over rejecting evaluators will, by boosting HSEs' self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), enhance their self-esteem. Finally, given that people who initially receive negative feedback but who later receive positive feedback are preferred to people who consistently receive positive feedback (Aronson & Linder, 1965), HSEs who belatedly achieve social acceptance are liable to be particularly liked, thereby solidifying any social gains they make.

In contrast, the said LSEs' strategy, although safer, is potentially lower-yield. It can only maintain the interpersonal status quo, given that it involves disdaining opportunities to promote social inclusion and raise social status. A parallel could be drawn here with phobias (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, pp. 405–411). One reason for the persistence of phobias is that those who exhibit them are negatively reinforced for avoiding the object they fear, thereby precluding therapeutic habituation through exposure (Mowrer, 1939; Vythilingum & Stein, 2004). An analogous dynamic may obtain for LSEs. Specifically, LSEs may perpetuate their lower social standing by consistently seeking out only those who already accept them, rather than by squarely facing and trying to win over those who initially reject them. If so, then LSEs would make small short-term gains (avoiding painful rejections) only at the expense of incurring a larger long-term loss (maintaining their lower social status).

Of course, this line of reasoning presumes that fortune favors the brave. But do HSEs win over enough rejecting interaction partners to secure the psychological or interpersonal benefits described? And if so, could LSEs match their success in principle, or would they be handicapped by their lower levels of self-certainty (Campbell & Lavalley, 1993; Baumgardner, 1990), their greater proneness to

demoralization (Brown & Dutton, 1995; Sedikides & Strube, 1997), and their suboptimal mood-regulation strategies (Heimpel, Wood, Marshall, & Brown, 2002; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, in press)? These are just a few of the interesting empirical questions that arise when considering the implications of how the social orientations of HSEs and LSEs differ. The area seems ripe for future research.

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## APPENDIX A

### Participant Evaluations in Experiment 1

#### *Positive Evaluations*

- I. ‘Based on this person’s responses to the questionnaires, I believe that this person is socially self-confident. He is at ease with people he does not know very well. He gives off an air of confidence. He is indeed very socially confident.’
- II. ‘From looking at this person’s responses, I can tell that he is at ease in social situations. When he is around other individuals, he knows the right thing to do or say. He likes being around people. He is usually comfortable with them.’

*Negative Evaluations*

- I. 'Based on this person's responses to the questionnaires, I believe that this person is socially insecure. He seems to be ill at ease with people he does not know very well and he seems to have doubts about his social competence. He is not very confident.'
- II. 'From looking at this person's responses, I can tell that he is definitely uncomfortable in social situations. There are times when he is around other people and just does not know quite what to do or say. In most situations he is uncomfortable and anxious, and makes others equally tense and uncomfortable.'

*Acceptance*

'I believe that this person's responses are good enough for me. I feel that I would get along quite well with him and we would make good friends. I am looking forward to meeting this person.'

*Rejection*

'I do not feel that this person's responses meet my standards. I do not believe that I would like this person or that we would make good friends. I am not looking forward to meeting this person.'