Rejection Sensitivity in Pomona Transfer Students

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Abstract

Past studies have looked at rejection sensitivity in romantic settings (Vorauer, Cameron, Holmes, & Pearce, 2003) and impersonally in interracial interactions between peers (Vorauer & Sakamoto, 2006). Most research regarding rejection sensitivity between peers in the school setting is limited to general studies of transfers’ experiences (Alexander 2009) which, though insightful, neglect rejection sensitivity as a specific issue. The present study looks at the levels of rejection sensitivity of community college students who have transferred to a 4-year university compared the levels of rejection sensitivity of non-transfer students. Some circumstances show that transfer students are less active on campus as opposed to other students. A possible explanation for this could be that transfer students have higher levels of rejection sensitivity. The present research took place at a public university in Southern California. The study examined rejection sensitivity on campus, with transfer students being more sensitive to rejection than non-transfer students. Rejection sensitivity was measured by method of a questionnaire focused on campus interaction between peers and several questions involving the classroom setting. The questionnaire collected demographic information and measured the level of rejection sensitivity of each participant through vignettes, an adjusted extroversion test, and reactions to questions involving classroom situations. Results will be discussed in terms of intimidation coming into new settings and how universities can make transfer students feel more comfortable with university engagement.
Rejection Sensitivity in Pomona Transfer Students

There is some degree of research conducted on freshmen entering into a university directly out of high school but less conducted on students who transfer from a community college to a university. Last year, there were roughly 1,400 students who transferred to Cal Poly Pomona in the fall quarter alone. There are over one thousand students who transfer yearly, making the field an important factor to schools and the programs they offer. Over a thousand of these newly enrolled fall students transferred from a community college (*Institutional Research and Academic Resources Cal Poly Pomona*). Some people choose to go to community colleges first and then transfer to a more prestigious school because it saves money, but this choice may leave students to pay a hefty price. Students in general go through many social and academic adjustments when they shift between grades, classrooms, and educational institutions, especially changes from one schooling level to another (Alexander, 2009).

Transitions from high school to college have been seen as a life experience that is especially stressful (Alexander, 2009). Some students may develop feelings of not belonging. Feelings of isolation may appear as well when students transfer because they did not start at the school at the same time as others of their standing. After two years or so of building up a sense of superiority and adapting to the community college, the transfer student is pushed back to almost a freshman status to adapt and learn about the rules and standards of a new school. With this loss of status, some students may become reluctant to interact with others. Some students are less likely to engage in social situations because of a fear of social rejection. It has been found that heightened stigma anxiety, which sometimes accompanies fear of social rejection and rejection sensitivity, “increases avoidant behavior and hypervigilance for cues of prejudice and discrimination, and to hinder academic performance in natural and experimental settings”
(Alexander, 2009, p. 6). This may explain why some students may avoid interaction with others. Transfer students may participate in campus activities less frequently than other students because of rejection sensitivity.

"Rejection sensitivity" is the anxious expectation of being rejected because of certain factors or characteristics. Research shows that rejection sensitivity may be prevalent in transfer students. Alexander found that while different campuses discovered different factors related to rejection sensitivity, such sensitivity was more prevalent in transfer students. A rejection sensitivity level is essentially how a person reacts to rejection. Everyone has different levels of rejection sensitivity, some on a higher level than others. Research suggests that social bonds may contribute to increased self-esteem, happiness, physical health, and longevity; and that close personal bonds usually improve the general quality of lives (Vorauer et al., 2003). It is also important to acknowledge the fact that some students may have desired to go to a university directly out of high school and had the aspiration to continue their education at such a level, but did not qualify for it either because of monetary or academic reasons. There is a chance of devaluation or illegitimacy that sometimes follows those who transfer (Alexander, 2009). Transferring to a new school places a student in a very vulnerable state of sensitivity because of the new environment.

In a school setting rejection sensitivity can be blatantly observed; whether in the classroom, or on campus. Impersonal relationships between classmates are social interactions that play an interesting role in the life of a student. These interactions have many possibilities. They are potential doorways to deeper relationships, either romantic or platonic. The classroom setting is a safe place where discreet casual endeavors can be conducted with a limited amount of consequence. These classroom interactions could be considered testing the waters of other
students for transfer students. Transfer students may do so with group assignments, relying on classmates for forgotten supplies, or etc. the classroom is where direct and indirect interaction with classmates is almost guaranteed on a weekly basis. The classroom is also a setting where rejection can be scarring. If students' endeavors are rejected, they would have to repeatedly be reminded and face that rejection every few days for the remainder of the school session. The more obvious the attempt, the greater the risk of a large group, being the whole class, knowing of the rejection. This social stigma of the whole class knowing of a student’s failure could convince the student to avoid taking the risk at all and limiting social interactions; with this a higher level of rejection sensitivity might develop. If students transfer from a community college to a 4 year university, they may be more sensitive to rejection.

**Fears of Rejection and Signal Amplification Bias for Romantic Relationships**

Psychological and physical well-being seems to be at least partially dependent on an individual’s ability to successfully make social bonds, both personal and impersonal (Vorauer, Cameron, Holmes, & Pearce, 2003). Obviously this ability appears to be pertinent to well-being. Romantic endeavors can cause one much stress with the fear of rejection. Researchers Vorauer et al. try to find if there is a direct relationship between fears of rejection leading others to show a signal amplification bias. The study was conducted in Canada, where relationship endeavors would not differ too greatly from that in the United States. The study focused on the initiation of romantic relationships in a Western cultural background. Vorauer looks at relationships where individuals rationalized that their relationships don’t form because feelings involved are not mutual, but even in some of these situations the feelings are mutually represented but misinterpreted. The reason for this misinterpretation may be signal amplification bias which is often prompted by fears of rejection. The signals individuals send may be amplified in their
minds so that they believe that their social overtures are stronger than how they are actually viewed as. Vorauer found that people are often restricted from making social overtures by fears of rejection; they may even attempt social overtures but these overtures may be so indirect and ambiguous that it is not detected by others. It is commonly referred to as self-protective ambiguity. The purpose of the ambiguity is to be able to reject having made an overture, if needed, to avoid rejection; but it also reduces the likelihood of relationship formation. The hypothesis was that those whose actions were ambiguous would not realize that ambiguity was present in their overtures and feel they committed more romantic attraction than in actuality. In addition, researchers also looked at traits, goals, and feelings of individuals to be perceived as more readily apparent to others.

Differences in attachment anxiety and avoidant scores were computed. Those with attachment anxiety may be more likely to look for positive responses to their social overtures that may have been undetected by their potential partner because its ambiguity. Four studies were made to test whether fear of rejection was associated with “a bias toward exaggerating the degree of romantic interest communicated by one’s social overture” (Vorauer et al., 2003, p. 8). The first study used a questionnaire with scenarios to obtain information. The second was conducted under controlled interaction with video tapes, while the third was done with a more natural face-to-face interaction. The forth study aimed to find a more causal connection between fears of rejection anxieties and signal amplification bias. The forth study was conducted by manipulating the focus of participants on the possibility of rejection but was similar to the previous studies.

The results of study one showed that individuals who were high or moderate in attachment anxiety thought that more romantic interest would be communicated by their actions
than those who were low in attachment anxiety. Study two found that senders high or moderate in attachment anxiety overestimated how much romantic interest their videotaped message would depict to receivers. Study three, as the previous others, was also proven except with face-to-face interactions. It was interesting to note that for those who were higher in anxiety attachment, the more interest they showed in their partner, the less romantic interest they exhibited. This unfortunate observation seems counterproductive to their goal, yet continues to go unnoticed leaving participants to come to conclusions other than ambiguity, which is the real reason, as to why romantic interest was not returned. The fourth and final study strengthened the argument even further, proving that rejection anxiety fosters signal amplification bias. The forth study also proves it unlikely that a third variable interfered and contributed to the retrieved results. More results state that rejection anxieties weren’t significantly related with signal amplification bias with the low-risk conditions that they tested for. These results may seem to counter my research hypothesis, but I believe that it is incorrect if applied to other low-risk situations like in a classroom. The fear of rejection and signal amplification bias was found to become more severe with negative experience. Overall though, the research was able to successfully prove its hypothesis on different levels of interaction.

**Impersonal Relationships**

Rejection sensitivity has been researched in multiple settings. Unlike much popular research, this experiment examines impersonal relationships. Vorauer and Sakamoto studied rejection sensitivity in cross-group friendship formations at a Canadian university (2006). Though the experiment was conducted at a Canadian university, race relations should not differ too greatly. The study looked specifically at signal amplification bias and defensive distancing, both of which may be large contributors to fear of social rejection. Signal amplification bias is a
heightened awareness of either one’s actions or another’s actions toward that person. It is the concept that “individuals feel they have communicated more interest than their interaction partner” (Vorauer & Sakamoto, 2006, p. 327). With feeling they have made more of an attempt than their interaction partner, the researchers hypothesize that defensive distancing then takes affect by the individuals. Defensive distancing, which can be subconscious, occurs when a person distances themselves away from committing that initial embarrassing and scarring act. Ways defensive distancing occurs could be by rejecting the potential friendship so that they are not later rejected. By doing this, the individual has distanced themselves from any negative or positive event from occurring. This defensive distancing might also be able to be applied to rejection sensitivity. Vorauer and Sakamoto use the term signal amplification bias referring to all types of signals; negative, positive, and mutual; whereas the current study expresses a particular interest in the amplification of negative signals.

The study by Vorauer and Sakamoto aimed to show that signal amplification bias hinders friendships between out groups such as different races. Intragroup and intergroup communication was observed. Participants, which were either White or Chinese, were randomly paired with either a White or Chinese partner. There were three pair types of White-White, Chinese-White, and Chinese-Chinese. Participants were tested before hand for racism and how much direct personal contact each participant had with persons the other race.

The experiment began with participants solitary. Participants continually answered questions throughout the experiment. The first questionnaire determined initial feelings of the participant toward their partner before they met and were aware of their partner’s race (Vorauer & Sakamoto, 2006, p. 327). The second sets of responses were presented after a brief visual encounter with their partner. Next, researchers provided participants with an opportunity to make
social overtures through audiotapes. Multiple questionnaires were given to determine how much interest they conveyed to their partner and how much they thought their partner conveyed with the audiotapes. Participants estimated the ethnicity of their partners as a final step.

The results showed that in most occasions White participants tended to believe that they communicated more interest in the interaction with a mixed partner than had in the same ethnicity pair. Researchers were looking specifically at defensive distancing because of rejection. Results showed that after believing that they had been rejected by their Chinese partners, Whites had a withdrawal of interest over time that was not present with the White-White pair. Chinese participants showed no evidence of signal amplification or a difference in who communicated more interest with different partner ethnicities. Because of low levels of intergroup contact, signal amplification in intergroup interactions was more common with those who had little experience with the out-group before the experiment. This supports the theory that signal amplification may hinder the development of relationships. The feeling of rejection activated a self-protective response and resulted in defensive distancing to “save face”. Results may also indicate a tendency to form social bonds within one’s own ethnic group to avoid such perceived rejection.

**Transfer Students and Other Nontraditional Students**

Alexander conducted a two-year research experiment on nontraditional college students, transfer students in particular, and their adjustment to a university (2009). A nontraditional student includes those continuing college after a long hiatus, those transferring, etc. Because of previous experiments showing transfer student stigma, research on transfer based discrimination concerns appeared to be very relevant. Relying on much information from past research, the
experiment focuses of psychosocial variables and their influence on well being, institutional belonging, and academic achievement.

The experiment tested for three research questions: whether transfers who anxiously expect to be rejected because of their transfer status feel a lower sense of belonging to the school than others who anxiously expect rejection less, whether there was a relationship between rejection sensitivity of transfer students and well-being, and if a relationship between transfers’ rejection sensitivity and academic achievement existed. Because the experiment took place at a prestigious university, University of California Berkley, being a transfer student from a community college might induce additional feelings of not being worthy of attending such a prestigious university.

A large focus of the experiment was on nontraditional students and their status based rejection sensitivity. Prior to starting at the new institute participants responded to a questionnaire that included data collecting questions for rejection sensitivity specifically for transfers, extraversion, transfer identity, neuroticism, self-esteem, academic coping, underrepresented student status, gender and reentry student status, and academic major classification. A daily journal was completed online by a select amount of participants for the student’s first month at the university. The daily diary contained scenarios that gauged the types of rejection expected in the university because of their background of transferring from a community college. The diary also contained questions to measure negative and positive transfer experiences and feelings of well-being. Grade point average was retrieved from each of the 4 semesters after the transfer to view if there was a decline or not in academic achievement.

The experiment revealed that it was more likely for participants who reported that being a transfer student was important to their overall self-concept to claim having negative transfer
experiences as opposed to those who believed being a transfer student was less important to their overall self-concept. This shows that the status of being a transfer student is significant and affective to some students. In addition, results showed that having a strong transfer identity tended to depend on rejection sensitivity and major as well. It was not proven whether or not students with higher rejection sensitivity experienced less belonging at the university. Not to completely dispel the first research question, it was shown that those with high transfer identity and high rejection sensitivity felt more belonging at the university than those who were high in rejection sensitivity and low in transfer identity. Because of these findings, it is inconclusive as to whether rejection sensitivity and transfer identity is related to university belonging. Evidence also shows that it was more common for math and science majors to have negative experiences than non-math and non-science majors. Math and science majors also showed a decrease in GPA over the semesters, showing a possible effect of transferring. Research verified that positive transfer experiences was considerably linked to increased institutional belonging and that negative transfer experiences was significantly connected to lower institutional belonging. The transfer experiences of a student proved to be quite relevant in amount of belonging. Psychological well-being showed no significant difference over the period of 4 semesters. Transfer rejection sensitivity was negatively related to short term adjustment and appeared to be unrelated to long term academic achievement. Overall, how welcome students felt, feelings of fitting in, and happiness with the university were predicted by transfer identity and rejection sensitivity.

Research on transfer identity is a subject that continues to be debated over leading to various views on it. Some have argued that strong transfer student identity was helpful and contributed to institutional belonging. Others who compared research with races found that with
blacks, the identity was hurtful. The researcher uses race based research in some comparisons and groundings for her research; because of this not all of the comparison may apply. The experiment emphasizes the differences in many transfers, and on an individual level to treat students as individuals because not all transfer students take into effect the transfer identity the same as others.

**Are Transfer Students More Sensitive to Rejection than Others?**

The present study is intended to see if transfer students truly are more sensitive to rejection than other students in the classroom setting. The independent variable would be being a transfer student and the dependent variable would be rejection sensitivity. Research in the past has revealed that psychosocial variables may powerfully affect adjustments to institutions and academic standing (Alexander, 2009). If most transfer students select responses indicating more rejection sensitivity than others, then transfer students would be proven as more sensitive to rejection. I predict that transfer students will show more rejection sensitivity and thus are less likely to engage in social situations. Although there could be multiple factors the affect why transfer students are less likely to engage in social interactions, rejection sensitivity may be a large factor as to why.

**Method**

**Participants**

The research was conducted by method of a survey at California State University Polytechnic Pomona, a Southern California University. The study included a total of 84 participants (54 female, 38 male, 1 unknown, \( M_{age}=21.83, s_d=3.24, \) age range: 18-62 years). There were 29 transfer students (21 female, 8 male, \( M_{age}=25.28, s_d=7.60, \) age range: 21-62 years) and 55 non transfer students (33 female, 21 male, \( M_{age}=20.02, s_d=1.64, \) age range: 18-25 years).
years). Participants were collected through the school’s research conducting site, Sona-systems. Participants were taking psychology courses and participated either to fulfill class requirements or in exchange for extra credit in their course. The survey was open to all students who wished to take part in the questionnaire. Participants were college level students of various genders and ethnicity. The questionnaire was not limited to only transfer students, but students of all academic majors and standings.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed by the experimenter and completed by participants in a classroom on the university campus. The surveys were physically given to participants to complete. The surveys were printed on white copy paper with blank ink, stapled, and totaling six pages. Participants completed the survey with varying amounts of peers in the room, depending on the availability of other students. Each survey took approximately 10-30 minutes to complete.

The survey contained four sections: demographic, reactions, personality, and vignettes. In the first section, participants answered a series of demography collecting questions for the purpose of gathering information such as transfer status, gender, age, participation, etc.

The reactions section contained questions with a two part answer per question. The replies were measured using a likert scale rating system for both parts. Part A of the question measures the level of rejection concern while part B is reverse scored and measures the level of acceptance expectancy. Many of the questions aimed to place participants in a situation where potential rejection is present. This section was an altered version of Downey and Feldman’s rejection sensitivity scale (1996). This format is similar to Alexander’s study (2009). The questions were altered, and some fabricated, because many of the questions in the original questionnaire were not relevant to all participants completing the survey. Another main factor
that led to the alteration was the focus of the survey on campus related events such as in the class
room or at campus organization events. Campus activities are ideal settings because they are
very controlled and natural settings with little unexpected events occurring. Altogether, this
discourages the idea that other variables affected the results that will be obtained. An example of
one of the questions would be: “A classmate does not want to work with you for a group.” This
would be followed by part A “How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not a
classmate wanted to work with you?” where participants rate how concerned or unconcerned
they are on a scale of one, unconcerned, to seven, concerned, and part B “I would expect that
they had a good reason” where participants measure how likely on a scale of one, unlikely, to
seven, likely.

The personality section was a ten-item personality inventory extroversion personality test
created by Gosling et al. and slightly adapted to make the section less obviously a personality
test and to relate to the theme of campus events (2003). The personality questions are projected
to determine whether or not participants are extroverts. Participants were presented with a
statement, such as “When you are at a club icebreaker party with your classmates, you are the
‘life of the party’ and very enthusiastic,” after which they rate the extent they agree with the
statement on a scale of one, for disagree strongly, to seven, agree strongly.

The final section, the series of vignettes, was created by the experimenters. This section
was an experimental pilot study aimed to test how well it would fare at measuring rejection
sensitivity. The questionnaire will have vignettes where situations will be presented and
participants will be asked to reply what they themselves would do in such occasions. The
participants’ reply will be structured with a choice of several prearranged options with varying
levels of rejection sensitivity per choice. In an example question: “It is the beginning of the
quarter. In class, the teacher has just announced that everyone is to get into groups for a project. Some people have already started to gather together. Who do you go to? A. The all male group, B. The all female group, C. The mixed male and female group, D. The group with some familiar people I recognize in it because of the level of comfort, E. The group with no familiar people in it because I want to try and get to know new people, F. Other, please specify.”

In the previous question, choice C. shows the highest level of RS because it has a lowest amount possible rejection while choice B. shows the lowest level of RS because it has the highest amount of possible rejection. Some of the questions were placed in the survey as dummy questions, thus the response was not used in the calculation of rejection sensitivity. This vignette shows a necessity to interact with others while allowing the choice of the level of interaction. The choice of most rejection sensitivity would be the least convenient choice of resolving the problem outside of the class, but most likely to receive acceptance.

Results

To determine if transfer status affected level of rejection sensitivity, level of rejection sensitivity was measured in section two by multiplying the response to question A with the reverse score of question B’s response. This would result in the rejection sensitivity elicited by the question. The mean of each of the overall questions in the section was the score of the overall rejection sensitivity of the participant. The mean score of rejection sensitivity for transfers was 9.34, while the mean for non-transfers was 10.13. Though differing, ANOVA showed that the relationship between rejection sensitivity and transfer status was not significant, $F (1, 82) = .67, MSE = 11.89, p = .42, \eta^2_p = .008$.

Participation on campus was measured in amount of organizations participated in or plans to participate in. Every individual organization a participant participated in counted as one point.
If a participant had plans to participate in, this counted as half a point per plan. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that participation on campus and transfer status had significant differences between groups, \( F(1, 82) = 3.99, \text{MSE} = 7.79, p = .049, \eta^2_p = .046 \). The means were 1.55 for non transfers (sd =1.53), and .91 for transfer students (sd =1.10). Further analysis was done on participation, transfer status, and gender. See Table 1 and Figure 1 for more details.

Section four was not scored because of complications with the scoring method. This section requires further refinement before another pilot study is attempted.

The extroversion personality showed that the mean score of extroversion for transfer students was 4.34 while the mean score for non-transfer students was 4.07.

**Discussion**

The current study was conducted to determine whether or not transfer students were more sensitive to rejection than non-transfer students. Unfortunately, results show that contrary to my hypothesis transfer students have slightly lower RS than non-transfer students, though these findings were not significant. There is some opposition following these results to be discussed in the limitations and complications.

Looking at participation on campus, measured in number of organizations involved with or plans to be involved, results have shown there is a difference between transfer students and non-transfer students. The analysis indicates that, as predicted, transfer students are less active on campus than non-transfer students. This finding was significant, though the majority of this difference was seen in females, as shown in Table 1. There was an interaction and main effect found in the analysis of participation between transfer status and gender (see Figure 1). This suggests that transfer status is still a possible factor to rejection sensitivity. Because of variance
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and a low number of male transfer participants (N=8) this apparent interaction did not reach significance, but with more participants it may be a significant finding.

The sample of males obtained did not reflect equal amounts for both groups and thus likely not generalizable. The extroversion personality test did not show a large difference between amounts of extroverts in both groups, thus ensuring that the results received was not likely because of personality type.

General support for the hypothesis that transfer students would be higher in rejection sensitivity was not found. There were many possible limitations as to why. Perhaps students that transferred to this specific university are simply not high in rejection sensitivity, or perhaps the scales were not sensitive or accurate enough to detect differences in rejection sensitivity. It could be that the altering of the rejection sensitivity scale affected its internal validity. It is also possible that the differences in year on campus or age were a factor, because most non-transfers were younger than transfer students, as shown earlier in the study. Because most of the transfer students were older than non-transfer students, they may be more resilient to rejection sensitivity because of experience with rejection over the years. Thus, this could explain why the results yielded transfer students with less rejection sensitivity than non-transfer students.

Complications did arise in the data collection period. Such complications included an unexpectedly low amount of transfer student participants, initially non-transfer students greatly outnumbered transfer students. After a few weeks of data collection, the criteria had to be revised so that data was collected from transfer students only. This was done to equalize the ratio of transfer students to non-transfer students; thus leading to the 1 to 2 ratio of transfer student to non-transfer student. Because of necessity to adjust the data collection criteria, collection took place over the course of two quarters, Fall and Winter.
Another possibility is that perhaps the lack of participation on campus by transfer students is an indication that they are actually sensitive to rejection. By not participating, students may be avoiding potentially rejecting situations, thus why rejection sensitivity could not be accurately measured. This would be an indirect measure of rejection sensitivity, though other factors may be interacting such as other responsibilities outside of school such as being a mother, working, etc. Though, of course this is just speculation.

For improved results, researchers may want to work on revising the vignettes and reaction questions to increase accuracy and sensitivity of the measurement. If proven, benefits from the research would provide a clearer insight on why transfers avoid social interaction on occasion. The results would assist in helping transfer students feel less rejected and help make a smoother adjustment to a new school. While feeling less rejected, the students would be more able to connect with others, such as other transfers. These social bonds would be a win-win situation with multiple students helping each other to feel more comfortable and welcome in a new setting. As previous research by Vorauer has stated, abilities to make social bonds are quite important to physical and psychological well-being (2003), emphasizing how essential it is to have strong social bonds. Future research may wish to collect data with equal amounts of participants from both groups, obtain a participant pool of groups of similar age differences, look at rejection sensitivity between genders, or look at rejection sensitivity in first time freshmen. Another strong suggestion is that research be done outside of the scope of a survey; an actual applied experiment to measure the extent rejection sensitivity affects students on campus.
References


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Table 1

*Number of Organizations Between Transfer Status and Gender*

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Female transfer students had very low participation compared to female non-transfer students.