

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REJECTION SENSITIVITY,  
CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS AND COPING WITH  
BREAKUP AMONG ADOLESCENT COUPLE**

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**Abstract**

Adolescence is a period characterized by immense physical, cognitive, social and mental changes. The adolescent faces complex tasks and challenges, in order to maintain his or her physical and mental health (Feldman & Elliot, 1990). Romantic relationships are a central feature of social development that emerges at this age (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009a). Various researchers assume –in light of the short duration of relationships in adolescence –that breakups are also common and frequent during adolescence (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009b; Fisher, 2006). Therefore, yet another feature of the romantic experience is facing its end and the emotional pain a breakup carries.

Over the past decade, many different research laboratories have begun to explore the nature and processes of adolescent romantic relationships (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999), and observed a high variance in the way teenagers acquire the skills required for maintaining relationships. The purpose of the current study is to examine whether two main variables – 'Rejection Sensitivity' and 'The ability to solve conflicts', can predict the duration and dissolution of a relationships. Further, the

purpose of this study is to examine whether these variables can predict the breakup distress.

The first variable is 'Rejection Sensitivity' (RS). RS is a personality disposition to expect rejection anxiously or angrily, perceive it readily, and react to it intensely. RS is a cognitive-affective processing system, which becomes activated in social situations in which rejection is possible (Downey et al, 1998). The overreaction in these social situations sometimes occurs without the occurrence of an actual rejection. Past research has shown that RS may lead individuals to behave in ways that undermine their chances of maintaining intimate, supportive relationships. In the current research, we assume that the theoretical RS model may provide insight on the ways adolescence approach the difficulties emerging in their romantic relationships, such as conflicts and disagreements. Therefore, the second variable in this study is 'The ability to solve conflicts'. Conflicts are an inevitable part of romantic relationships (Laursen, 1993), and were found as a unique quality enables long term relationship (Shulman, Toval-Mashiach, Levran & Anbar, 2006). Moreover, the ability to solve conflicts is widely accepted as a key parameter in determine the quality of the relationship.

Taking these assumptions under account, this study aims to examine: (1) The possible correlation between rejection-sensitivity and the ability to solve conflicts amongst adolescents participating in romantic relationship; (2) Whether these variables may predict the longevity and the dissolution of the relationships; (3) How teenagers manage the emotional pain and distress caused by the dissolution of the romantic relationship.

### **Research Hypothesis:**

H1: Rejection sensitivity will be negatively associated with the ability to solve conflicts. More specifically, low scores of RS will be shown with better ability to solve conflicts, and high scores of RS will be shown with poorer ability to solve conflicts within the romantic relationships.

H2: High scores of RS and poorer ability to solve conflicts will be associated with shorter duration of the relationship.

H3: High scores of RS and poorer ability to solve conflicts will be associated with the dissolution of the relationship.

H4: Low scores of RS will be associated with better ability to solve conflicts, and taken together they will predict lower levels of breakup distress. In addition, high scores of RS will be associated with poorer ability to solve conflicts, and taken together they will predict higher levels of breakup distress.

**Research population:** The first study was held in the year 2011, included 55 heterosexual couples (110 Israeli boys and girls). The current study is a follow-up study, regarding the same sample.

**Methods:** The self-reported measures, included: RS questionnaire, conflict resolution style questionnaire, relationship problems questionnaire, breakup distress questionnaire. In addition, observation of partners' interaction while discussing a disagreement was conducted.

**Procedure:** The subjects were teenagers living in the central district of Israel. In the first study (2011), 55 teenage couples completed the RS evaluation and the conflict solving questionnaires separately, and then were given a conflict solving task. These results were recorded and analyzed. In the follow-up, we contacted the couples by telephone every three months, and asked them whether their romantic relationship

was still intact. If they reported that the relationships had dissolved, both of the subjects were asked to complete the breakup distress questionnaire.

**Results:** In order to assess the questions of this study, correlations between the variables were conducted, also using the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) of dyadic relationships. Results showed:

1. Positive correlation between boys that reported high levels of RS and the Avoidance conflict resolution style (Actor-effect). A Partner-effect was found as well, so that the actor's RS was associated with the partner's ability to solve conflict; a correlation between boys reported high levels of RS and the Compliance conflict resolution style of their girlfriends was found.

2. RS did not predict the dissolution of relationships. However, a negative correlation between RS and relationships duration was found amongst girls.

3. Girls' Compliance conflict resolution style predicted lower possibility for dissolution. In contrast, girls' Avoidance conflict resolution style predicted higher possibility for dissolution. Additionally, the Confrontation resolution style, representing the interaction between partners, predicted higher possibility for dissolution.

4. RS and conflict resolution style were not associated with breakup distress.

These results allow an understanding of adolescence ability to manage and maintain a romantic relationship. However, there is a need for a further examination of the breakup experience in adolescence. The finding of the study and their educational Implications are discussed in detail.