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Some individuals have chronic doubts about the extent to which they are valued by their relationship partners, and these insecurities have been shown to have a substantial impact on the functioning of interpersonal relationships. Individual differences in relationship insecurity are often indexed by attachment anxiety, which is characterized by fears of abandonment by close others (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987); rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996), which is characterized by anxious expectations for rejection; and low self-esteem (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000), or global negative or neutral evaluations of the self. Although these constructs emphasize different facets of chronic insecurity, they seem to share a common core because they all tap chronic doubts about whether one is accepted and valued by others. Moreover, as I describe later, they tend to have similar effects on cognition, motivation, and behavior in interpersonal relationships. Hence, in the current chapter, I will use the term “chronic insecurity” to refer to these various constructs.

These insecurities appear to have a profound impact on the functioning of interpersonal relationships. Indeed, some studies suggest that these insecurities can ultimately lead to relationship demise. Below I refer to this view as the “self-fulfilling prophecy” view. However, in the current chapter, I argue that this self-fulfilling prophecy view is incomplete. It overlooks the active role of partners in regulating insecure individuals’ feelings of relationship security. After describing the self-fulfilling prophecy model, I introduce a model of the interpersonal regulation of security, which proposes an active role of partners in managing relationships with insecure individuals. After describing this model, I review the results of studies that were conducted to test this model. A novel and important contribution of this new model is that it underscores that interpersonal (and personal) security cannot be understood without considering dyadic processes.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy View of Insecurity in Relationships

A self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when an initially erroneous belief has an influence on behavior in ways that ultimately render the belief true (Merton, 1957). Behavioral confirmation, a specific type of self-fulfilling prophecy, occurs when people hold initially erroneous expectations that
guide their behavior in ways that lead other people to confirm those beliefs (Darley & Fazio, 1980; Merton, 1957; Snyder & Stukas, 1999; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). Much of the theorizing and empirical findings in the literature on the effects of chronic insecurity on close relationships suggest that chronic insecurity can produce these behavioral confirmation effects. A model that summarizes this perspective appears in Figure 8.1. For reasons that will become apparent later, in Figure 8.1 I refer to individuals who may have chronic insecurities as “targets” and their relationship partners as “perceivers.”

The process begins with chronically insecure targets developing initially unfounded beliefs that they are devalued by their relationship partners (Path A in Figure 8.1). They may develop these beliefs because insecure individuals tend to overgeneralize their global perceptions of being devalued onto their specific relationships, and because chronic insecurity alters specific cognitive processes such as attention, interpretation, and memory in ways that create perceptions of devaluation. For example, people with low self-esteem tend to underestimate how much they are valued by their romantic partners (Murray et al., 2000; Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001). They interpret minor relationship threats and mundane events in relationships as indicative of their partner’s negative regard (Bellavia & Murray, 2003; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002), and they discount the meaning of their partner’s accepting behavior (Lemay & Clark, 2008a; Lemay & O’Leary, 2012). Similar processes occur for attachment anxiety (see Mikulincer & Shaver, this volume). Relative to secure people (or those low on anxiety), anxiously attached people seem to have doubts about how much they are valued by their partner, as indicated by less trust in their relationship partners’ care and commitment (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer, 1998; Simpson, 1990). Similarly, they view their partners’ behavior as less considerate and supportive (Collins & Feeney, 2004), and they attribute their partners’ unresponsive behaviors to lack of care or commitment (Collins, 1996; Collins & Feeney, 2004; Collins, Ford, Guichard, & Allard, 2006). Attachment insecurities also bias memories of partners’ prior behaviors (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Cassidy, 2003). Rejection sensitivity, another index of chronic insecurity, has similar effects. People who are high in rejection sensitivity tend to perceive intentional rejection in their romantic partner’s insensitive behaviors, and they underestimate their partner’s commitment (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Hence, there is substantial evidence for Path A in Figure 8.1—chronically insecure individuals tend to perceive that they are devalued by their romantic partners.

Consistent with a self-fulfilling prophecy, these perceptions of being devalued by partners tend to guide insecure individuals’ behaviors in their relationships (Path B in Figure 8.1), and usually these behaviors are aversive. For instance, anxiously attached people report more anger and hostility and engage in more negative conflict resolution behaviors during relationship conflicts (Collins, 1996; Collins et al., 2006; Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Anxious people also provide less responsive support to their partners (Collins & Feeney, 2000). These negative responses appear to be mediated by anxious individuals’ doubts.
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about their partner’s love (Murray et al., 2001). Low self-esteem individuals have similar responses. Low self-esteem individuals appear to respond to their own insecurities about being accepted by their partner by derogating their partner and defensively claiming that the partner and relationship are not important to them, presumably as a way of protecting themselves from the prospect of rejection (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006; Murray et al., 2000). They also respond to perceptions of a partner’s negative regard with hostile intentions (Bellavia & Murray, 2003). A similar pattern is found in studies using rejection sensitivity as an indicator of chronic insecurity. People who are high in rejection sensitivity enact aversive behaviors such as expressions of jealousy and hostility, and they are less supportive of their partners (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Therefore, across various ways of conceptualizing chronic insecurity, insecure individuals appear to enact aversive behaviors in response to their doubts about their relationship partners’ acceptance (Path B in Figure 8.1).

A self-fulfilling prophecy view of chronic insecurity proposes that these behavioral responses to insecurity may ultimately elicit rejection from relationship partners (Path C in Figure 8.1). Indeed, partners of chronically insecure individuals often report less satisfaction and commitment in their relationships (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Collins & Read, 1990; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Simpson, 1990), and some findings suggest that relationships involving these individuals are especially likely to dissolve (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988). This dissatisfaction, reduced commitment, or abandonment may confirm insecure individuals’ expectations of devaluation that initiated the process (Path D in Figure 8.1).

Hence, this body of research suggests that chronic insecurity about acceptance from others can bias perceptions of acceptance and care from specific relationship partners, causing insecure targets to underestimate the extent to which their partners love and care for them. These unjustified perceptions of devaluation, in turn, tend to elicit aversive behaviors from insecure individuals, which may cause their partners to feel dissatisfied and ultimately motivate them to flee the relationship. Through such a process, perceptions of rejection elicit rejection and confirm and bolster insecure individuals’ doubts about being accepted by others.

Limitations of the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy View

Although several findings are consistent with the self-fulfilling prophecy argument, this view has some limitations. It seems that other processes occur beyond a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. For instance, some investigations have found no effects of self-esteem and attachment anxiety on the stability of romantic relationships (see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994), and some investigations have even reported positive effects of attachment anxiety on stability (Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994). That is, some studies suggest that relationships involving anxiously attached individuals are more likely to persist. Hence, many chronically insecure individuals have enduring relationships. In such relationships, their partners presumably found ways of coping with this insecurity other than fleeing the relationship. How do they do it? There is no clear answer in the literature. In general, in dyadic studies, partners of insecure individuals typically are treated as “outcomes” to demonstrate insecure individuals’ destructiveness. For example, some researchers incorporate partner reports to demonstrate that insecure individuals have dissatisfied partners. In addition, partners of insecure individuals are often treated as “benchmarks” to demonstrate that insecure individuals have illusory perceptions. For instance, sometimes partner reports are collected to demonstrate that insecure individuals underestimate their partner’s affections or see their relationship more negatively than their partner perceives it. However, in addition to serving as passive victims of insecurity’s destructiveness and as informants on insecurity’s irrationality, partners of insecure individuals have the role of pursuing their own goals, including maintaining harmonious relationships. Through
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this role, they may serve as buffers of insecurity’s destructiveness. This is the role that the literature has tended to overlook. The existing research literature has not adequately addressed partners’ cognitive and behavioral responses to insecure individuals that may function to maintain relationships with these individuals.

Moreover, there is reason to expect that many partners of insecure individuals would resist the operation of a self-fulfilling prophecy that would undermine their relationships. Research on self-fulfilling prophecies suggests that responses to others’ expectations are goal-driven. People confirm others’ beliefs, thereby contributing to self-fulfilling prophecies, primarily when doing so is consistent with their interaction goals (Snyder & Haugen, 1995; Snyder & Stukas, 1999). When others’ beliefs impede those goals, destructive self-fulfilling prophecies may be unlikely. Instead, people may strive to disconfirm others’ beliefs and establish new beliefs that are more goal-congruent (for example, see Swann & Ely, 1984). Accordingly, perceivers may attempt to disconfirm insecure targets’ expectancies for rejection, as these expectancies may often be incongruent with perceivers’ desires to maintain harmonious bonds. Research on partner regulation also hints at the possibility that people would try to quell chronically insecure individuals’ insecurity. This research suggests that when a relationship partner’s qualities fall short of desires, people often enact behaviors to “regulate” their partner, or encourage their partner to change so that the partner’s qualities are more in line with desires (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009). Given that people usually desire secure partners (Chappell & Davis, 1998; Klohnen & Luo, 2003), people involved in relationships with insecure individuals may often strive to make them feel more secure.

Research on relationship maintenance also hints at the possibility that destructive self-fulfilling prophecies may not always occur. This research suggests that people who are invested in relationships respond constructively and inhibit destructive impulses during conflict, a process called “accommodation” (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). They also sacrifice personal goals for the welfare of the relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997). These processes may extend to how perceivers respond to insecure targets’ destructive behaviors; perceivers may inhibit impulses to retaliate and instead respond in ways that preserve harmony, even at personal cost.

Research on communal relationships also suggests that people may not react to partners’ insecurities with rejection. Most close relationships are communal relationships in which members care for each other’s welfare (Clark & Lemay, 2010; Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010). In such relationships, people try to respond to a partner’s expressions of distress or need with supportive behaviors (Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Collins & Feeney, 2000). Accordingly, people may respond to the knowledge that their partner is insecure with behaviors designed to dispel doubts and alleviate distress.

Finally, the notion that partners may resist and try to improve destructive relationship processes is consistent with a more general perspective on interpersonal relationships that focuses on dyadic processes. From the perspective that relationships function as interdependent systems characterized by mutual influence (see Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000), interpersonal interactions and relationships are a product of the behaviors enacted by two people—the perceiver and the target partner. Hence, in contrast to the more individualistic assumption that chronically insecure individuals’ insecurity should predict relationship demise, their partners’ responses also may determine the trajectory of these relationships and how insecurity affects the relationship.

Hence, a number of perspectives converge on the notion that self-fulfilling prophecies culminating in rejection and relationship loss are only one possible outcome of chronic insecurity, and that many relationships may feature more creative and pro-relationship solutions to this relationship problem.
Interpersonal Security Regulation Model

I developed a model of interpersonal security regulation that addresses many of these issues. This model, and how it fits into a model of self-fulfilling prophecies, is depicted in Figure 8.2. The self-fulfilling prophecy model described above appears in gray. New additions that are predicted by the security regulation model appear in white. This model proposes that chronically insecure targets’ behaviors communicate their insecurities to perceivers. These behaviors may include frequent emotional overreactions, direct expression of worries or sensitivities about being devalued, and frequent reassurance seeking. After observing these behavior patterns, perceivers may become aware that targets are insecure, and processes that disrupt a self-fulfilling prophecy may begin. (This is why the term “perceivers” is used to refer to partners of insecure individuals and why insecure individuals are referred to as “targets.” Partners of insecure individuals are perceivers because they perceive that their partner is insecure. Insecure individuals are targets because they are targets of behaviors that could regulate this insecurity.) Perceivers’ detection of targets’ insecurity is depicted as Path E in Figure 8.2.

Once perceivers have learned that targets are insecure, they should develop vigilance, or anxious alertness, with regard to targets’ security, and goals to regulate partners’ security (Path F in Figure 8.2). That is, because targets’ feelings of insecurity are both undesired and probable, perceivers may feel anxious about, and have the goal of regulating, targets’ perceptions of regard and care. This is consistent with models positing that anxiety is the result of the combination of high desire to avoid a negative outcome and the belief that the negative outcome is likely (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Schlenker & Lear, 1982). This vigilance should tune perceivers’ cognitive systems in a manner that optimizes their ability to detect and diffuse targets’ transient feelings of insecurity. Specifically, vigilant perceivers should exhibit heightened attention to and memory for information related to targets’ insecurity, consistent with the idea that anxieties and goals facilitate attention and memory (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000; Lemay & Neal, 2013; Maner, Miller, Rouby, & Gailliot, 2009; Mathews, Mackintosh, & Fulcher, 1997; Pratto & John, 1991).

In turn, perceivers’ vigilance about targets’ security should impel perceivers to enact behaviors aimed at regulating targets’ security (Path G in Figure 8.2). These behaviors are thought to involve cautious expression of sentiments that communicate valuing of the target and the relationship, and inhibition of behaviors that may communicate devaluing. In other words, once perceivers realize that targets are insecure and have become motivated to avoid this state of affairs, perceivers may engage in behaviors that communicate positive regard and avoid enacting behaviors that could communicate negative regard. Colloquially, these behaviors are often referred to as “walking on eggshells.” Why should this occur? Given that insecure targets readily infer devaluation or apathy from even ambiguous behaviors, vigilant perceivers may be reluctant to engage in behaviors that could communicate these negative sentiments (i.e., criticism, negative emotion, or selfishness). Instead, to bolster targets’ fragile security, they may provide praise that is exaggerated relative to private views and exhibit an unmitigated and subjectively controlled form of caregiving. That is, to convince insecure individuals that they are, in fact, valued, they may feel that they have to provide requested benefits, even when those benefits come at significant costs.

Perceivers’ attempts to regulate chronically insecure targets’ relationship security may effectively help targets feel secure, as these behaviors deprive targets of behavioral cues they might use to infer devaluation. That is, when perceivers censor their complaints, express glowing praise and adoration, and go out of their way to provide help or render favors, chronically insecure targets may not have much evidence to support their expectations of being devalued. Hence, chronically insecure targets may feel relatively secure in specific relationships with perceivers who enact these compensatory behaviors. In other words, the link between targets’ chronic insecurity and their
relationship-specific perceptions of devaluation, the link that can initiate destructive self-fulfilling prophecies, may be weakened (see Path H in Figure 8.2). Chronically secure individuals may not be so dependent on these compensatory behaviors. Given that secure individuals have a higher threshold for perceiving devaluation, they may feel valued even when their partners express some negative sentiments or are occasionally selfish.

**Supportive Evidence for Interpersonal Security Regulation Processes**

Several studies have provided support for the interpersonal security regulation model. First, a number of studies have demonstrated that perceivers tend to detect targets’ insecurities, including their friend’s or romantic partner’s attachment anxiety, trait self-esteem, and proneness for hurt feelings. Hurt feelings arise when people feel devalued by their partners (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998; Lemay, Overall, & Clark, 2012); hence, proneness to hurt feelings is also an indicator of chronic acceptance insecurities. For each of these variables, studies have revealed significant associations between targets’ reports of their own insecurity and perceivers’ perceptions of targets’ insecurity (see also Downey & Feldman, 1996; Lemay & Clark, 2008a; Lemay & Dudley, 2011). As described earlier, this detection of insecurity is the first step in the current model of security regulation (Path E in Figure 8.2).

In addition, studies have supported predictions regarding perceivers’ responses once they have detected that targets are chronically insecure. In a daily report study (Lemay & Dudley, 2011, Study 3), both members of romantically involved pairs completed questions about their relationship every evening for a week. Not only did perceivers detect targets’ chronic insecurity (i.e., low self-esteem, anxious attachment, or proneness to hurt feelings), but this detection then predicted perceivers’ heightened vigilance about upsetting the partner throughout the week. Vigilance was defined as fear about upsetting the partner, frequent thoughts about upsetting the partner, and motivation to avoid upsetting the partner. In other words, perceivers became motivated to dispel insecurity (Path F in Figure 8.2), which is an important step in the process of interrupting a damaging self-fulfilling prophecy. In turn, vigilance about upsetting the partner predicted a number of outcomes that were consistent with the model. First, perceivers who reported heightened vigilance about upsetting the target partner exhibited better accuracy at detecting the daily fluctuations in targets’ sentiments about the relationship. That is, they were better at understanding whether targets were upset with them on a particular day, whether targets felt worried about the
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relationship on that day, and whether targets felt secure and supported on that day. This heightened accuracy suggests that vigilant perceivers were especially attentive to threats in the relationship. Second, perceivers were asked to recall how targets felt about their relationship the previous day. Perceivers who reported high vigilance about upsetting the target partner exhibited better memory for how their partner felt about the relationship the previous day. These effects suggest that vigilance about upsetting the partner results in perceivers having cognitive systems that are better at detecting and retaining threat-related information. Such highly tuned cognitive systems would presumably aid perceivers in pursuing their goal of helping targets maintain feelings of security.

Although these findings support the security regulation model described earlier, these findings are from a non-experimental study, and they therefore do not provide any evidence that perceiving a target partner as insecure causes increased perceiver vigilance regarding the target’s security. Some recent findings provide evidence for causal effects. Participants were led to believe that their study partner (friend or romantic partner) was secure or insecure about interpersonal acceptance using a manipulation in which participants were exposed to bogus information about the partner’s insecurity dispositions. Participants read bogus answers to a questionnaire and were led to believe that their partner provided the answers. Participants who were informed that their partner was insecure reported more concern about the partner’s feelings of security and heightened motivation to regulate those feelings relative to participants who were informed that their study partner was secure. Participants were also given a task to assess attention. They were informed that their study partner had completed a series of questions about a variety of topics. Some of the topics concerned threat-related information regarding the partner’s negative emotion and dissatisfaction (e.g., things that make the partner hurt, upset, or angry; the partner’s insecurities, sensitivities, and triggers; things the partner dislikes about the relationship). Other topics were unrelated to the partner’s insecurity (e.g., recreational interests, future aspirations, strengths, weaknesses). This task was adapted from prior research on information seeking in close relationships (Rholes, Simpson, Tran, Martin, & Friedman, 2007). Participants were asked to indicate their interest in viewing the partner’s questionnaire responses in each topic area, with the belief that their ratings would determine which information they were allowed to view. Consistent with the model, participants who were informed that their study partner was insecure reported a greater interest in viewing the threat-related information relative to participants who were informed that the partner was secure. Self-reported vigilance about upsetting the partner mediated this effect, suggesting that informing people of their partner’s insecurity heightens vigilance about regulating the partner’s feelings, and this vigilance, in turn, drives attention to threat, consistent with the hypothesis that vigilance is associated with tuning of the cognitive system in a manner that aids in threat detection and management.

Studies also provide evidence for a link between vigilance about upsetting the partner and enactment of behaviors that should regulate the partner’s security (Path G in Figure 8.2). One set of findings comes from the daily report study described earlier. In addition to the findings described earlier, this study indicated that perceivers with heightened vigilance about upsetting their partners reported greater enactment of regulation behaviors across the sampled days, including concealing criticism and complaints about the partner, exaggerating praise and admiration for the partner, and going out of their way to provide help and render favors to the partner (Lemay & Dudley, 2011, Study 3). Highly vigilant perceivers were especially likely to engage in these regulation behaviors on days when their partners were feeling upset or worried about the relationship. This tendency to enact regulation behaviors on days when partners were feeling insecure suggests that these regulation behaviors were intended to address partners’ feelings of relationship threat.

One limitation of these findings is that they involved self-reports of regulation behaviors, which could be subject to bias. Another study provided more objective evidence for the enactment of these regulation behaviors (Lemay & Dudley, 2011, Study 1). At the start of the study (T1),
participants reported on their sentiments toward their study partner (friend or romantic partner), who was in an adjacent room. These sentiments included their care, regard, and commitment toward the partner. Before this assessment, participants were assured that these responses would not be seen by their study partner. They then completed a variety of self-report measures. Toward the end of the study, participants were randomly assigned to the public–private manipulation. Participants in the public condition were informed that their study partner would see their next questionnaire responses. Participants in the private condition were informed that their next questionnaire responses would remain private. Then participants completed a second set of measures assessing their sentiments toward the partner under these public or private instructions (T2). Of special interest is whether there is stability between T1 and T2 reports of sentiments toward the partner and whether this stability varies as a function of the public–private manipulation and perceptions of the partner’s insecurity. High stability between T1 and T2 is an indicator that participants are behaving in an authentic manner at T2, given that their reports align closely with the reports they made at T1, when they were guaranteed privacy. Low stability in the public reporting condition suggests that participants strategically modified their responses as a result of the belief that their partner would observe them.

The results of this study are displayed in Figure 8.3. The top panel of Figure 8.3 demonstrates the association between T1 and T2 sentiments (average of care, regard, and commitment for the partner) when participants perceived that their study partner was relatively secure, a composite of perceiving that the partner had high self-esteem and low attachment anxiety. T1 sentiments, which were assessed at the start of the study, strongly predicted T2 sentiments, which were assessed after the manipulation, and this was the case regardless of whether participants received the public or private version of the experimental manipulation. The manipulation had no significant effect on their subsequent reports. This suggests that when people perceived that their study partner was secure, expressions of feelings for this partner were relatively authentic, and this authenticity was not compromised even when they believed their partners would see their responses.

The lower panel of Figure 8.3 demonstrates results for people who perceived that their study partner was relatively insecure (i.e., low self-esteem and high attachment anxiety). The manipulation had an effect on these participants. For these participants, there was greater stability in reports of sentiments toward the partner across T1 and T2 when participants received the private manipulation relative to when they received the public manipulation. This suggests that participants who believed that their study partner was insecure became less authentic when they thought their partner would see their responses. In addition, the sentiments reported in the public condition were more positive than the sentiments reported in the private condition only when participants initially reported negative sentiments toward the partner and believed the partner was insecure. In other words, consistent with the security regulation model, participants concealed their evaluations by expressing evaluations that were deceptively more positive when their true evaluations would upset their partner—when evaluations were negative and when the partner was perceived to be insecure. However, it is important to note that even participants in the public condition with an insecure partner did not express outright praise when their true sentiments were negative. Rather, they seemed to conceal their negative evaluations by expressing only mildly positive sentiments. A strength of these findings is that the concealment of negative evaluations toward insecure individuals was directly observed using a behavioral measure, rather than by relying on self-report.

According to the model, perceivers’ regulation behaviors, if they are effective, should disrupt the link between targets’ chronic insecurity and their relationship-specific feelings of security. In other words, even low self-esteem, highly anxiously attached, or easily hurt targets may feel valued and cared for by perceivers when those perceivers enact these regulation behaviors. The daily report study described earlier (Lemay & Dudley, 2011) supported this prediction. The results are displayed in Figure 8.4. On days after perceivers did not enact regulation behaviors (the left side of
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Figure 8.4, results were typical of those found in the literature; targets who were high in chronic insecurity (a composite of low self-esteem, high attachment anxiety, and high proneness to hurt feelings) reported more insecurity about their relationship (e.g., feeling upset with perceivers, worrying about the relationship, and perceiving a lack of acceptance and care) relative to targets who were low in chronic insecurity. However, this effect was erased on days following perceivers’ enactment of regulation behaviors (the right side of Figure 8.4), such that people with and without chronic insecurities felt equally secure in the relationship. In addition, perceivers’ daily regulation behaviors predicted reductions in daily feelings of insecurity only for targets who were chronically insecure. Chronically secure targets felt secure regardless of whether perceivers enacted regulation behaviors. These patterns have been replicated twice (see Lemay & Dudley, 2011, Studies 2 and 3).
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These findings demonstrate that chronically insecure targets report less insecurity about their partners’ care, regard, or commitment if those partners report enacting regulation behaviors.

Other studies also indicate that chronic insecurity can be regulated by partners’ behavior. Overall, Simpson, and Struthers (2013) examined whether people can buffer their romantic partners’ attachment avoidance during conflict discussions. Attachment avoidance is characterized by both lack of trust and discomfort with intimacy. These authors found that highly avoidant individuals felt more anger and exhibited more withdrawal during the conflict discussion, and these behaviors appeared to detract from conflict resolution. However, these detrimental effects of attachment avoidance were eliminated when partners used “softening communication,” which involved being sensitive to targets’ autonomy needs and conveying positive regard, similar to the security regulation behaviors described above. In addition, Simpson and colleagues (Simpson, Winterheld, Rholes, & Orina, 2007) found that avoidant individuals had more positive behavioral responses to conflict (i.e., expressing satisfaction and appearing calm) when their romantic partners provided instrumental support, which involved concrete advice or suggestions.

Taken together, this collection of findings provides compelling support for the security regulation model. Perceivers appear to detect targets’ proclivities for insecurity. This detection seems to elicit perceivers’ vigilance with regard to upsetting targets and is associated with attunements to perceivers’ cognitive systems that would enhance detection and management of information related to targets feeling insecure about the relationship, including increased attention to this information, greater accuracy in perceiving targets’ feelings, and better memory for targets’ feelings. This vigilance, in turn, appears to motivate perceivers to enact regulation behaviors, such as suppressing negativity, expressing highly positive sentiments, and providing benefits that demonstrate care. And these regulation behaviors seem effective in helping chronically insecure individuals feel valued and cared for in their specific relationships.

Additional Issues

My colleagues and I have addressed several other theoretical issues that arise when considering this model. One issue is whether this interpersonal regulation dynamic varies across domains as

![Figure 8.4. Targets’ insecurity the following day as a function of targets’ chronic insecurity and perceivers’ daily regulation behaviors.](Image)

Note: Daily regulation behaviors were centered on each perceiver’s mean score (across all days).
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a result of domain-specific insecurities. In other words, perhaps targets are insecure about their performance in particular domains, and this insecurity predicts perceivers trying to regulate targets’ feelings of security in those particular domains. We (Lemay & Clark, 2008b) drew on research on contingencies of self-worth (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003) to address this issue. Contingencies of self-worth are standards people must meet to feel high self-esteem. People feel worthwhile globally when they succeed in domains in which self-worth is staked, and they feel worthless when they fail in these domains. In contrast, performance in domains that are not self-worth contingencies does not strongly affect global self-esteem. Given the high degree of vulnerability regarding performance and feedback in domains of self-worth contingencies, these contingencies likely serve as sources of insecurity that trigger the process outlined above. That is, once people learn of their partner’s self-worth contingencies, they may be especially concerned with helping their partners foster positive self-evaluations in those domains.

We examined this idea within appearance and intelligence domains of performance (Lemay & Clark, 2008b). People whose self-worth was highly contingent on their appearance reported expressing a high degree of sensitivity regarding their appearance to their romantic partners, including seeking their partner’s feedback regarding their attractiveness, feeling hurt or angry when receiving negative appearance feedback from their partner, and expressing feelings of insecurity to the partner regarding their appearance. In turn, their partners perceived these expressions of sensitivity, which predicted that the partners would provide inauthentic feedback in the appearance domain, including exaggerating positive evaluations of attractiveness and concealing any negative attractiveness evaluations. This process also occurred in the intelligence domain; people whose self-worth was highly contingent on intelligence reported expressing sensitivity about their intelligence to their partners, which was detected by their partners and then predicted that their partners would provide inauthentic intelligence feedback. Importantly, there was little spillover across domains, suggesting that these processes operated independently within each domain. Perceivers may “walk on eggshells” in certain domains and at certain times, but not in others, depending on whether the situation is relevant to a domain known to trigger targets’ insecurities.

An additional study was conducted to decompose variance in important model variables, including perceptions of insecurity and security regulation behaviors. This study addressed a subtle but important issue that was not addressed in the studies described above. The results described above depict a process that occurs between just two individuals—perceivers and targets. Targets are thought to express insecurities to perceivers, and perceivers are thought to detect those insecurities and respond with behaviors intended to regulate those insecurities. This raises important questions regarding how this process unfolds across multiple relationship partners. Given that targets’ insecurities are thought to be individual difference variables that trigger this process, it is reasonable to expect that (a) the same target will be perceived as insecure by multiple relationship partners and (b) multiple relationship partners will claim to engage in regulation behaviors around the same target. Such a pattern would suggest that an individual difference variable of the target (i.e., chronic insecurity) is driving the process, eliciting more or less similar responses from multiple perceivers. In Kenny’s Social Relations Model (Kenny, 1994), this pattern would suggest a “partner effect,” because the characteristics of the particular partner explain variance (i.e., similarities) across multiple “actors.” I conducted a “triadic study”—a study of three-person groups—to test these ideas (Lemay & Dudley, 2011, Study 2). Using Social Relations Model analyses, I found significant partner variance components for both perceptions of insecurity and enactment of regulation behaviors. In other words, multiple perceivers had somewhat similar perceptions of a given target person’s level of insecurity and had similar reports regarding whether or not they engaged in regulation behaviors (i.e., exaggerating positive evaluations and concealing negative evaluations) toward that given target person. These results confirm that the process is at least partly driven by
targets' qualities, which elicit similar responses from their multiple relationship partners. This is exactly what one would expect if targets’ insecurities initiate the process.

Finally, the findings described above beg the question of what does and does not regulate an insecure partner’s security. Do other sentiments and behaviors that are often discussed in the literature, such as providing social support, caring for the partner’s welfare, or having positive regard for the partner, also help regulate chronically insecure individuals? Although social support, validation, and care are important benefits of relationships, these responses do not involve the same careful expression of positive sentiments and omission of negativity as described above for security regulation behaviors. In other words, social support and care are not specifically targeted at regulating targets’ security and managing chronic insecurity. Moreover, security regulation may be distinct from more ordinary social support processes and pro-relationship behaviors as they are typically studied and conceptualized. Many supportive behaviors are not behaviors that should regulate insecure targets’ security (e.g., providing instrumental support, encouraging exploration, and openly discussing problems with partners). In addition, perceivers with secure targets may balance providing support with some selfishness and support seeking (Clark, Graham, Williams, & Lemay, 2008), and they may openly express negative evaluations of partners (De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). In relationships with secure targets, perceivers may also prioritize other goals over regulating security, such as goals relevant to autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000), honest self-disclosure (Reis & Shaver, 1988), and accurate feedback to assist targets with self-assessment (Trope, 1980). Given that trust is critical for interpersonal harmony, and given that it is fragile for insecure targets, perceivers in relationships with insecure targets may prioritize regulating security over these other goals. Hence, there is reason to believe that processes involved in the regulation of chronically insecure partners diverge from more ordinary social support processes.

Indeed, results suggest that social support, care for partners, and positive regard for partners do not explain the effects of perceivers’ regulation behaviors. In the studies described above, chronically insecure targets felt secure in their specific relationships with perceivers who enacted the regulation behaviors described above, even after controlling for perceivers’ provision of social support, positive regard, and care. And these other variables did not regulate targets’ security (Lemay & Dudley, 2011). Hence, the regulation behaviors outlined above seem to be distinct from these other positive sentiments and behaviors that are often discussed in the literature. Perhaps the difference is whether they involve careful consideration of how to promote the security, and avoid triggering the insecurities, of chronically insecure partners.

**Directions for Future Research**

Additional empirical research is needed to answer a number of questions about interpersonal security regulation. First, it is important to understand whether the dynamics described above can have implications for the long-term trajectory of relationships. It is possible that these security regulation behaviors help improve the persistence of relationships involving chronically insecure partners. Consistent with this possibility, people who had an insecure attachment history exhibited better relationship persistence if their partners were able to disengage from conflicts (Salvatore et al., 2011). Perhaps this disengagement from conflict is a way of intentionally avoiding negative interactions that could enflame insecure partners. On the other hand, it is possible that partners of insecure individuals feel frustrated with the felt need to be cautious and inauthentic around those individuals, and perhaps this frustration culminates in relationship dissolution. Such a result would suggest that chronically insecure individuals do behave in ways that elicit rejection from their partners, although the process would be more complex than suggested by the traditional self-fulfilling prophecy model because it suggests that relationship termination is initially resisted...
and does not occur until after a taxing struggle to convince insecure partners that they are valued. Consistent with this idea, some research suggests that engaging in regulation behaviors is associated with reduced concurrent relationship satisfaction. However, this pattern was not consistent, and prospective analyses did not suggest that perceivers’ enactment of regulation behaviors predicted future declines in perceivers’ satisfaction (Lemay & Dudley, 2011).

The link between perceivers’ enactment of regulation behaviors and their own relationship satisfaction may be weak for at least two reasons. First, given that these regulation behaviors often help improve the felt security of chronically insecure partners, these behaviors may produce a relationship benefit that at least partially offsets the personal unpleasantness of having to enact those behaviors, which could result in a weak overall association between regulation behaviors and relationship satisfaction. Second, other personality and relationship variables may determine whether people find it unpleasant to enact these regulation behaviors. Those who highly value the caregiving role, are highly interdependent with insecure individuals, or are motivated to maintain relationships may find these regulation behaviors more harmonious with their chronic goals. Indeed, people who are highly communally oriented, which involves chronic care for others’ needs, tend to experience positive emotion while sacrificing for their partners (Kogan et al., 2010), and people who have an interdependent self-construal, a tendency to include interpersonal relationships as aspects of their self-definition, experience boosts in personal and interpersonal well-being if they suppress negative emotions during sacrifice for their partner (Le & Impett, 2013). Along these lines, perhaps perceivers do not experience negative personal consequences when “walking on eggshells” around their insecure partners if they care strongly for others’ welfare or identify with them.

In the same vein, it is important to understand the moderators that determine whether perceivers are willing and able to enter into the security regulation dynamics described above. These moderators include dispositional and relational motivational and ability factors. With regard to motivation, not all perceivers may tolerate having to “walk on eggshells” around chronically insecure partners. In fact, some research suggests that perceived partner insecurity predicts reduced support provision (Cobb, Davila, & Bradbury, 2001). The same may be the case for the security regulation behaviors—some people may refuse to tip-toe around insecure people. Perhaps the same variables described above (e.g., care for others’ welfare, identification with others) determine whether people are willing to sacrifice for their insecure partners. In addition, the personality trait termed agreeableness reflects a concern with maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships (Graziano & Tobin, 2009). Hence, agreeableness may also reflect motivation to regulate partners’ security and moderate the dynamics described in this chapter.

With regard to relational sources of motivation, research on willingness to sacrifice personal goals for the welfare of the relationship suggests that such willingness is strongly predicted by commitment to the relationship (Van Lange et al., 1997), which suggests that commitment may increase willingness to make the more specific sacrifices involved in regulating chronically insecure partners. Given that low quality of alternatives to the relationship, high investments in the relationship, and satisfaction with the relationship also tend to enhance commitment and pro-relationship orientation (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), these variables may also motivate people to regulate the security of insecure partners.

It is important to understand ability factors that contribute to perceivers’ effectiveness in managing relationships with chronically insecure individuals. Undoubtedly, suppressing and downplaying negative thoughts and feelings, focusing exclusively on positive sentiments, and expressing care via rendering favors require an ability to inhibit impulses to behave in a selfish manner or reciprocate insecure individuals’ negativity. Hence, self-control and impulsivity may be important moderators of perceivers’ successful enactment of regulation behaviors, which would be consistent with other research demonstrating the moderating role of self-control in relationship-maintenance behaviors.
Edward P. Lemay, Jr.

In addition to self-control, successful detection of partners’ insecurity and enactment of regulation behaviors may require a high degree of social or emotional intelligence. Regulating the security of chronically insecure targets may be difficult because regulation behaviors must convey positive sentiments while also being believable. However tempting, the seemingly straightforward strategy of behaving in an overly saccharine manner may be limited by the transparency of this strategy, a dilemma often discussed in the literature on ingratiation (Jones, 1964). Directing these regulation efforts at chronically insecure individuals may further compound this difficulty because these targets are especially unlikely to believe expressions of praise or affection. Chronically insecure individuals often suspect that their partners’ expressions of positive regard are inauthentic even when their partners claim to be authentic (Lemay & Clark, 2008a, 2008b; Stroebe, Eagly, & Stroebe, 1974, 1977). The regulation behaviors described above may be ineffective if they are suspected of being inauthentic, and this suspicion is likely when partners are insecure. These behaviors may even backfire and cause insecure individuals to feel more insecure about their partners’ true sentiments. Perceiving that partners have behaved in an inauthentic manner may give insecure individuals reason to doubt more genuine expressions of positive regard, thereby exacerbating their insecurities about acceptance (Lemay & Clark, 2008a).

How do perceivers overcome these challenges and enact behaviors that insecure individuals experience as both positive and believable? One possibility is that perceivers intentionally or inadvertently come across as authentic to insecure targets by delivering neutral or negative evaluations in domains that are irrelevant to relationship security while also regulating insecure targets’ security by providing highly positive evaluations in domains that are highly relevant to relationship security. By demonstrating a willingness to provide feedback that is less than glowing (albeit in unimportant domains), perceivers could convince insecure targets that they are, in fact, authentic. This confidence in perceivers’ credibility could facilitate targets’ acceptance of perceivers’ positive feedback where it counts—in domains in which global feelings of acceptance depend on receiving positive feedback. For example, a perceiver might praise his partner’s attractiveness while poking fun at her artistic abilities. The negative evaluation of her artistic abilities could provide the insecure partner with confidence that the perceiver is honest, but it should not elicit negative affective reactions if artistic abilities are unimportant to her. In turn, this confidence in the perceiver’s honesty could facilitate acceptance of the positive attractiveness feedback. This, of course, assumes that attractiveness is important to relationship functioning and artistic abilities are irrelevant. In relationships in which the opposite is true, insecure individuals would likely feel more secure through positive artistic feedback accompanied with more negative attractiveness evaluations. Consistent with these speculations, Lemay and O’Leary (2012) found that receiving criticism in domains that were judged to be irrelevant to relationship security reduced low self-esteem individuals’ doubts about their partners’ honesty but did not elicit negative relationship evaluations or negative affect. Receiving praise in important domains bolstered relationship security and elicited more positive affect (Lemay & O’Leary, 2012). Hence, they key to both regulating and being believable may lie not in providing unrealistically glowing feedback across the board but rather in selectively expressing positivity where it counts and, perhaps with a backdrop of positive affect, being willing to express less positive evaluations in relatively worthless domains. Future research should examine how perceivers learn which patterns are most successful in regulating their partners, whether this selectivity in expressing feedback is tied to perceivers’ empathic abilities and social skills, and whether these more nuanced patterns have prospective effects on partners’ relationship security. The truly skilled perceiver may avoid unrealistically gushing praise and know to express positivity in persuasive ways and in domains that really matter.

The current research focused on relatively chronic insecurity about interpersonal acceptance as a trigger of security regulation processes. However, temporary feelings of insecurity also may trigger these processes. For example, acute experiences of ostracism trigger feelings of insecurity, and people...
try to recover from this threat in various ways (Wesselmann, Hales, Ren, & Williams, this volume). Perhaps partners exhibit some of the same regulation processes described in this chapter to aid in this recovery. For example, they may be vigilant about upsetting victims of ostracism, express positive sentiments to victims, and offer high levels of support. This is an important avenue for future research.

Finally, future research should examine whether and how the security regulation processes discussed in this chapter vary depending on the chronic security of the perceiver. There are good theoretical reasons to expect two different types of moderation. On the one hand, perhaps chronically secure perceivers are in the best position to regulate insecure targets because they can effectively manage their own attachment concerns and focus on the security needs of their partners. In contrast, chronically insecure perceivers may be unable to focus on their partners’ experiences of security because they are inordinately focused on their own security needs, especially during relationship difficulties (see Gillath & Karantzas, this volume; Mikulincer & Shaver, this volume). This would suggest that the dynamics described in this chapter are strongest when perceivers are secure. On the other hand, perhaps chronically secure perceivers are less threatened by the prospect of upsetting their insecure partner, perhaps because they are better at regulating emotion and are more confident that their relationships can withstand adversity. As a result, chronically secure perceivers may prioritize other relationship goals, such as goals to communicate honestly and resolve relationship issues, and they may feel more able to focus on their own needs when they arise. This would suggest that the security regulation dynamics described in this chapter are strongest when perceivers are insecure. Hence, owing to these countervailing processes, opposing hypotheses could be advanced regarding perceivers’ own security. In the studies described above, perceivers’ own dispositions for insecurity did not significantly moderate the effects, perhaps because these countervailing processes canceled each other out. Future research may reveal differences in the motivations underlying regulation of insecure partners. For instance, secure perceivers may be more likely to regulate partners’ security for altruistic reasons, such as concern for the partner’s emotional welfare (see Gillath & Karantzas, this volume; Mikulincer & Shaver, this volume), whereas insecure perceivers may be more likely to regulate partners’ security for selfish reasons, such as to maintain the relationship or avoid an unpleasant interaction.

Conclusion

Most extant research on individuals with insecurity dispositions, such as people with low self-esteem and high attachment anxiety, paints a gloomy picture of their interpersonal lives, suggesting that these individuals expect rejection from their partners and respond to these doubts by engaging in aversive behaviors that ultimately elicit the rejection they fear. Yet by considering that partners also have an active role in shaping these relationships, the research reviewed in this chapter suggests that relationships with chronically insecure individuals are not destined for failure. Once people learn about their partners’ chronic insecurity, many of them exhibit cognitive and behavioral changes that signify efforts to manage the insecurity, and these attempts seem generally successful. More generally, this research underscores that a complete understanding of the psychological and interpersonal sequelae of personal insecurity, and perhaps most other personality variables, requires an understanding of the interpersonal relationships in which people are embedded, and this requires a consideration of how both partners shape those relationships.

References


Regulating Security of Insecure Partners


