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Moving Up or Giving Up: How Professional Rejection Sensitivity Impacts Career Success

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ABSTRACT

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Professional rejection is a widespread phenomenon—most, if not all of us, have or will experience it in our lifetimes. However, some are more adept at handling it than others. This paper explained individual differences in how people interpret and handle professional rejection, proposing a construct called professional rejection sensitivity. I focused on how this construct predicts decreased self-promoting behaviors and increased self-silencing behaviors, and subsequently, whether that impacts career success for junior faculty. Moreover, I investigated whether women may be disproportionately predisposed to professional rejection sensitivity because they tend to experience more discrimination in the workplace than men. I collected self-report data (i.e., individual differences) and biodata (i.e., curriculum vitae) from 300 junior faculty and found gender differences, such that women are higher in professional rejection sensitivity than men. I also found that individuals who are higher in professional rejection sensitivity are more likely to practice self-silencing behaviors. This paper serves as the first step in demonstrating the existence of professional rejection sensitivity, which can guide future research that addresses how individuals can overcome this disposition. To support this path of research, I conclude with suggestions for potential interventions.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Rejection is an inevitable part of our professional lives. Although professional rejection—such as losing a sale to a competitor, being declined for a promotion, or even getting fired—can clearly be a painful experience, it can also serve as “an amazing catalyst for evolution, and it’s as much a part of every good leader’s story as their successes” (Wiederkehr, 2015), and many times it is an “opportunit[y] for personal growth” (Llopis, 2013). How rejection is anticipated and handled may alter the experience. Consider that William Golding’s classic novel, Lord of the Flies, was rejected by publishers 20 times, Oprah Winfrey was fired from her job as a news reporter because she was “unfit for television news,” and Walt Disney was let go from one of his first animation jobs because he “lacked imagination and had no good ideas” (Gillett, 2015; Jiang, 2015). After suffering a rejection in their career, some individuals may give up while others will overcome the rejection and carry on. This raises the question: Who prevails in the face of rejection, and who succumbs to defeat?

Lived experiences may determine how an individual develops their response to rejection moving forward. The current investigation is concerned with individual differences that could explain this phenomenon. Moreover, it is particularly interested in the experiences of women in the workplace. Although there have been institutional efforts toward equality, women still face many subtle forms of discrimination that may explain why women still have difficulty advancing to the highest levels of occupations and tend to have lower salaries than men (Good, Aronson, & Harder, 2008; Heilman & Eagly, 2008; London et al., 2012; Rabinowitz & Martin, 2001). The discrimination that women face in the workplace may create an additional burden for them in approaching scenarios of potential rejection. Later in this paper, I will discuss how women may
be disproportionally predisposed to professional rejection sensitivity, but first I will discuss the existing literature on rejection at a broader level.

Researchers have demonstrated a deep understanding of rejection in social contexts, as well as individual differences in handling such rejection. However, there is still a need to understand more about individual differences in handling rejection in a professional context. In response to this knowledge gap, this study initiates a discussion on the neglected topic by first providing an operationalization of professional rejection. Indeed, professional rejection is a common, and often difficult, occurrence throughout one’s career span. For example, in academia, scholars must submit their research for peer review, often garnering criticism and rejection. In response to this, Day (2011) expressed discontentment with the lack of research on the topic, suggesting that “[Considering] the frequency with which nearly all of us experience rejection, this silence seems inappropriate and perhaps destructive” (p. 705). The present study provides a theory of professional rejection to answer this call.

In addition, this study also aims to explain individual differences in how people interpret and handle this form of rejection, proposing a construct called professional rejection sensitivity. In support of this effort, I conducted a study to demonstrate how professional rejection sensitivity predicts whether an individual’s disposition toward professional rejection impacts work-related behaviors and outcomes within academia, namely, self-promoting and behaviors and their impacts on career success among junior faculty. Additionally, this study also investigates how women may develop disproportionally higher levels of professional rejection sensitivity due to experiencing greater perceived gender-based discrimination in the workplace. This study serves as the first step in demonstrating the existence of this disposition, which can guide future research that addresses how individuals can overcome their professional rejection
sensitivity. To support this path of research, I conclude with suggestions for potential interventions.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Before elaborating on individual differences in professional rejection sensitivity, two key terms must be defined: social rejection and failure. These are widely researched phenomena that are closely related to professional rejection. I also provide an operationalization of professional rejection because this topic is not clearly recognized in the literature.

Social Rejection

In studying rejection, social scientists have, by and large, focused on social rejection. Social rejection is the refusal of a social connection that an individual desires (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009). Social rejection occurs when an individual attempts to associate him- or herself with someone else and the other party declines. Studies on rejection have examined two types of social rejection: demarcated rejection and ostracism. Demarcated rejection occurs when the individual is directly told they are being rejected, either explicitly or implicitly through behavior. Explicit demarcated rejection occurs when the individual is addressed clearly (for example, being told “I don’t like you”), whereas implied demarcated rejection would be less assertive (e.g., “someone was chosen over you,” “you can’t join”).

Ostracism is a stronger form of rejection that involves the refusal of social interaction through the continual and deliberate refusal of acknowledgement of someone who is making an effort to engage in communication (Williams, 2001, 2007). Cyberball is the most salient example of a psychological experimental manipulation used to study ostracism, which has been used on nearly 20,000 participants (Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015). This virtual ball-tossing game manipulates the degree of social inclusion and exclusion by the number of ball...
tosses that are made to the participant. A person can experience complete ostracism, which is the lack of receiving any attention (e.g., never being passed the ball), or eventual ostracism, which is the gradual exclusion over time (e.g., initially receiving ball tosses and then being excluded). Regardless of the form of ostracism, it is often perceived as the most powerful type of rejection (Gerber & Wheeler, 2009). Whereas demarcated rejection is an acute incident, ostracism is the chronic manifestation of rejection. Both forms of rejection can cause lasting negative outcomes, as elaborated below.

Social rejection can be a powerful force, as evidenced by compelling empirical work. Neuroimaging studies have shown that the neural system responses associated with social rejection resemble those resulting from physical pain (Eisenberger, Jarcho, Lieberman & Naliboff, 2006; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Kross, Berman, Mischel, Smith, & Wager, 2011). This suggests that the effects of rejection may emulate those of pain. Additionally, a large body of literature focuses almost exclusively on social rejection and its effects on the receivers’ attitudes and behaviors (Blackhart et al., 2009; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009), and meta-analyses have found that social rejection causes more negative affective states than social acceptance and control conditions (Blackhart et al., 2009). Moreover, social rejection moderately lowers mood ($d = -0.50$) and self-esteem ($d = -0.70$), possibly because it disturbs individuals’ need for belonging and control (Gerber & Wheeler, 2009). Individuals may then respond in prosocial or aggressive ways to regain influence when they do not have an opportunity to restore equanimity (Gerber & Wheeler, 2009). Clearly, the theory and research behind social rejection is robust and nuanced, highlighting how the strength, explicitness, and other aspects of rejection may affect an individual.
Failure and Operationalizing Professional Rejection

In order to clearly understand the significance of professional rejection sensitivity, it is first critical to operationalize professional rejection, which has yet to be formally defined. I begin with Cannon & Edmondson's (2001) operationalization of failure:

[A] deviation from expected and desired results. This includes both avoidable and unavoidable negative outcomes of experiments and risk taking. It also includes interpersonal failures such as misunderstanding and conflict […] Our conceptualization is deliberately broad, encompassing failures of diverse types and magnitude, because I propose that opportunities for learning exist in both minor misunderstandings and major mishap. (p. 162)

Given this definition, professional rejection can be seen as a subcategory of failure. Professional rejection, however, requires subjective judgment from another party. Whereas failure can involve an objective result (e.g., inability to meet a standard of performance), professional rejection specifically deals with a deviation from a subjectively desired result. Because of this, professional rejection also tends to be more ambiguous, as compared to other types of failure. For example, if an individual submits a manuscript for publication and does not follow prerequisites (e.g., observing the word count limit or anonymizing personally identifiable information), the manuscript would be disqualified from consideration—this is a failure. Conversely, even if it meets baseline requirements, reviewers can reject a manuscript for more ambiguous or discretionary reasons.

Accordingly, I define professional rejection as the refusal of a work-related product, service, or effort, given a subjective value judgment from another person. Rejecters may be employers, editors, funding agencies, colleagues, leaders, consumers, or other stakeholders in an
organization. An employer may reject a person for a position, promotion, salary increase, form of recognition, involvement in a promising new project, or other focus of desire in the workplace. Examples of professional rejection abound: a colleague may refuse to collaborate or help with work-related tasks, leaders and colleagues may reject a proposed idea for a product, and consumers can boycott or simply lack interest in a product. Indeed, professional rejection can occur through a number of avenues, but it is always marked by three key characteristics. First, professional rejection focuses on an individual’s refusal as a result of a work-related factor; this contrasts with social rejection, which involves the dismissal of a person solely for interpersonal reasons. Second, it must occur in an organizational context. Although professional rejection does not need to take place on company grounds, it must be connected directly to the organization in terms of value and repercussion. Colleagues dismissing one another’s work at an after-hours event does not constitute professional rejection. However, the same complaint within a formalized peer review process may result in professional rejection by tying values into the process. Third, professional rejection must involve a subjective value judgment from another party who is tied to the organization. This model suggests that professional rejection is more specific than the overarching construct of failure and its sister, social rejection.

That said, I must consider the ways that social rejection and professional rejection may coincide. To illustrate, a colleague declining an invitation to have lunch would be considered social rejection. Even though it takes place in an organizational setting and the rejecter is a colleague, the rejection does not involve refusal of a work-related product, service, or effort. Other situations, such as coworkers passing on an individual’s project, are less clear as to whether the rejection is due to the quality of the idea, the rejecter’s dislike for the person, or some combination thereof. This would be an example of rejection ambiguity, in which
professional rejection overlaps with social rejection. At face value, the rejection of a project idea is the literal refusal of a work-related product; however, it is possible that the other party’s rejection was motivated by interpersonal reasons. Thus, social rejection and professional rejection are based in perceptions of attribution. Although social and professional rejection can be related and overlap, drawing from established theories (Burke & Tully, 1977; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Stryker, 1968) such as social identity theory (Turner, 1985), rejection sensitivity theory (Feldman & Downey, 1994), and attribution theory (Kelley, 1987; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Weiner, 1974), I argue that individuals can have considerably different approaches and reactions to both forms of rejection. I also reason that professional rejection should have a stronger impact on job-related outcomes, such as career decision-making, because of its more proximal relationship to the workplace. I will elaborate further on this relationship later in this paper.

It is reasonable to think of professional rejection as a stressful event that is typically met with dread and anxiety (Janis & Leventhal, 1968), making it an undesirable experience that could potentially lower career decision self-efficacy and persistence in career-related tasks. For example, receiving a rejection for a promotion could cause an individual to question their own fit and capabilities because many individuals hope to advance in their careers (Mahoney, 1979). Similarly, those who are not promoted are known to experience decreased intrinsic motivation, whereas promoted individuals experience higher intrinsic motivation following advancement (Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970). These effects are also seen in experiences outside of status and role. Acceptance of a product or idea is typically accompanied by a reward of some sort (e.g., commission, award, title), which could increase satisfaction and motivation, in contrast to rejection. Thus, professional rejection can lower career decision self-efficacy through
perceived loss of advancement, status, opportunity, reward, and other positive associations. However, the experience can be either attenuated or amplified based on individual differences, which this study aims to identify. In a survey of more than 25,000 people who were asked to select their reaction a hypothetical promotional rejection, 32% said they would “focus on getting the next promotion,” compared to 20% who said they would personalize the rejection (Murphy, 2018). This demonstrates that a personality trait may explain how this form of rejection is anticipated and handled.

**Operationalizing Professional Rejection Sensitivity**

The result of professional rejection may largely depend on an individual’s rejection sensitivity to this form of rejection—which I label *professional rejection sensitivity*. In this section, I will elaborate on rejection sensitivity theory (Feldman & Downey, 1994), which serves as the guiding model that I extend to the organizational setting in order to develop the foundation for the more specific construct of professional rejection sensitivity.

**Rejection Sensitivity Theory.** One of the most robust theories concerning rejection involves rejection sensitivity (Downey, Feldman, Khuri, & Friedman, 1994; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Although rejection is universally unpleasant, individuals who exhibit high rejection sensitivity experience a heightened reaction to it, including greater difficulty controlling their attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors. Individuals with high rejection sensitivity “anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection” (Downey & Feldman, 1996, p. 1327). Similarly, another construct—interpersonal sensitivity—is defined as the “undue and excessive awareness of, and sensitivity to, the behavior and feelings of others” (Boyce & Parker, 1989).

Attachment theory contributes substantially to the origins of rejection sensitivity, in that children’s early relationships can create the foundation for future relationships (Bowlby, 1969).
Indeed, rejection sensitivity is a maladaptive tendency that arises from interpersonal difficulties during childhood, including abuse and bullying (Downey, Khouri, & Feldman, 1997; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Thus, a personal history of rejection conditions individuals to expect relational insecurity, creating heightened vigilance and more intense reactions to potential rejection events. Although rejection sensitivity develops during early life experiences, its effects can reach into adulthood and result in a variety of interpersonal difficulties. Those who exhibit high rejection sensitivity have been shown to react anxiously or angrily to rejection experiences, among other detrimental long-term outcomes (Downey & Feldman, 1996). On a more individual level, rejection sensitivity has been linked to depression, avoidance of opportunities for further help, and negative problem-solving approaches (Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001; Galliher & Bentley, 2010). The effects of high rejection sensitivity may even be extended to academic and job performance; it has been negatively related to school performance, interpersonal competence, and self-esteem (Boyce, Parker, Barnett, Cooney, & Smith, 1991; Butler et al., 2007; McCabe, Blankstein, & Mills, 1999).

Importantly, thus far, the literature on rejection sensitivity has mainly examined personal relationships, particularly among adolescents. Given that individuals with high rejection sensitivity have been shown to react maladaptively to social rejection, they may also struggle similarly with professional rejection. On the other hand, it is also possible that social interactions are internalized and processed differently from work-related events (e.g., rejection of a journal article submission). Therefore, rejection sensitivity may not generalize to all forms of professional rejection.

To further illustrate: Is an individual who fears the potential rejection in an interpersonal situation (e.g., asking a person on a date) equally likely to fear possible rejection in a work-
related situation, such as asking for a promotion? I argue that this form of sensitivity to professional rejection is unique from general rejection sensitivity by drawing upon role-identity theory (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Professional rejection sensitivity, which has yet to be researched, deviates from the aforementioned constructs because it is specific to forms of rejection that are work-related, and it identifies who will (1) anticipate professional rejection, and (2) react to professional rejection in a maladaptive manner. Sensitivity to professional rejection may be quite unrelated to other forms of rejection (e.g., social rejection). This may depend on the extent to which an individual’s identity is tied to their professional life versus their personal life. I believe there are two main factors that determine whether an individual is high in professional rejection sensitivity: (1) the strength of their work identity, which is elaborated on below; and (2) the level of general rejection sensitivity characteristics. Thus, the intersection of these two factors can help predict an individual’s level of professional rejection sensitivity, such that high work identity and high general rejection sensitivity generate high professional rejection sensitivity.

Identity. An individual’s identity encapsulates how they perceive themselves and how they present themselves to the world (Charon, 2010). Identities play a pivotal part in the human experience, suggesting “what to do, think, and even feel” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 417) and what roles individuals thereby assume (Katz & Kahn, 1966). An individual forms an identity through comparison and classification against other people in an environment (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Turner, 1982; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). By attaching meaning to their roles, people are able to feel as though they both belong to, and are differentiated from, their community (Hewitt, 1989; Pettigrew, 1986).
Identities thus play a critical role in an individual’s innate need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and, conversely, an individual’s reaction to rejection.

Given the amount of time that adults typically spend working, it follows that their profession can strongly develop and shape their self-concept (Gini, 1998). Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, and Schwartz (1997) unpacked the ways in which individuals can frame their work identities. For example, individuals may view their work as jobs, careers, or callings, which may consequently impact the strength of their identification with their profession. Someone who feels that their work is a higher-order calling may more closely identify as a member of the profession; this is less true if that person sees his or her job as a mere means to a paycheck.

**Identity Centrality.** However, it is important to remember that individuals usually hold multiple identities, which manifest themselves according to the environments in which the individual is operating (e.g., supervisor, colleague, friend, parent). Oftentimes, these identities and their attendant expectations and responsibilities may conflict or require management. During such instances, identity centrality—or the importance of psychological attachment that individuals place on their identities—can be a powerful influence (Settles, 2004). Identity centrality can influence the ways in which individuals cope with negative events (e.g., Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Thoits (1991) theorized that identity-relevant experiences (i.e., events related to an identity highly valued by the individual) are more threatening or enhancing compared to identity-irrelevant experiences (i.e., events that are unrelated to the roles highly valued by the individual). Hammen and colleagues (1985) found that people with a central interpersonal self-schema became depressed after negative interpersonal events, whereas those with self-schemas related to achievement activities became depressed in response to failure events. If a passionate researcher,
who holds research as a value important to their identity, tries to publish their own theoretical paper and it is continually rejected by journals, this could be seen as an “identity-interruption,” to use the term coined by Burke (1991). That researcher may begin to question their own value to science, putting a strain on their professional identity.

CHAPTER 3: Hypothesized Model

Gender, Perceived Discrimination, and Professional Rejection Sensitivity

I posit that professional rejection sensitivity, like general rejection sensitivity, is a disposition that is developed through life experiences, particularly perceived discrimination. Perceived discrimination is an individual’s belief that they are being treated unfairly because of a characteristic that is stigmatized (e.g., gender). Discriminatory behavior may be subtle, making it difficult for outsiders to recognize when it is taking place (Ruggs, Martínez, Hebl, & Law, 2015). Nevertheless, if an individual perceives themselves to be a target of discrimination, they can be negatively affected, both psychologically and physiologically (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). In general, such discriminatory experiences in the workplace may be more commonplace in women’s lives compared to men. To illustrate, it has been found necessary to take legal actions to remove barriers to women and other underrepresented groups pursuing work-related goals—yet they remain subject to considerable marginalization. Women still experience discrimination, leading to reduced feelings of belonging and, consequently, hindering their pursuit of professional goals (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002).

Research surrounding rejection sensitivity has revealed that women’s perception of gender-based rejection can lead to diminished motivation and other negative outcomes (Ahlqvist, London, & Rosenthal, 2013; London, Downey, Romero-Canyas, Rattan, & Tyson, 2012; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). Women may also experience discrimination through a lack of
resources that many men possess to help them handle potential professional rejection. For instance, The Rockefeller Foundation and Global Strategy Group (2016) reported that 83% of women who aspired to be leaders lacked support from mentors, who typically make promotions available.

Furthermore, an argument can also be made that women receive fewer opportunities for growth via developmental work experiences. A developmental work experience can be defined as a challenging situation that individuals can learn from to modify their behavior and advance within organizations (Morrison & Brantner, 1992; Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986). Researchers have discovered that even “benevolent sexism” can prevent women from experiencing and benefiting from these types of events (Hebl, King, Glick, Singletary, & Kazama, 2007; King, Botsford, Hebl, Kazama, Dawson, & Perkins, 2012). Benevolent sexism involves the prejudice belief that women need to be protected by men (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Without being allowed into developmental experiences where one may be rejected, it is virtually impossible to “climb the ladder.”

Additionally, women in particular may struggle more with having multiple conflicting identities that they feel are central to their identity (e.g., mother and professional). Indeed, Settles (2004) found that female researchers who identified strongly as both women and as scientists reported more interference between these two roles than those who did not possess distinct dual identities. Moreover, although Settles posited that identity centrality would have buffering effects against the conflicts generated by these roles, participants’ well-being actually suffered. This suggests that attacks on one’s centrally held identities (such as those suffered by female scientists of color) may negatively impact both job performance and personal well-being (Settles, 2004). Other studies have demonstrated that negative events that deprive an individual of their
central identity can lead to feelings of hopelessness and, eventually, depression (Brown & Harris, 1978; Hammen, Marks, Mayol, & DeMayo, 1985). This may impact how women internalize professional rejection and subsequently increase their sensitivity to rejection.

Rejection sensitivity can be activated in a variety of ways. An individual can experience rejection sensitivity when he or she experiences discrimination leading to rejection. For example, a female coworker may constantly feel as though her ideas are being ignored in meetings, or she may be excluded from meetings entirely. Evidence has found that perceiving that experienced rejection is based on gender can lead to negative outcomes. For example, in a longitudinal study, Ahlqvist, London, and Rosenthal (2013) discovered that women pursuing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors who are high in gender-based rejection sensitivity (i.e., when an individual is more likely to attribute the threat of rejection to their gender) have lower STEM engagement and lower academic performance in STEM classes. Because STEM fields are stereotype-relevant domains for women, rejection becomes salient and thus develops and activates rejection sensitivity (Ahlqvist et al., 2013; London et al., 2012).

This dynamic touches upon the construct of stereotype threat, in which individuals behave in ways predicted by negative societal perceptions of the groups to which they belong—a self-fulfilling prophecy (Steele, 1997). Repeated and systematic discrimination toward a stereotyped group can lead to increased identity-based rejection sensitivity, leading to poorer performance and outcomes. As shown, the research on these group-based forms of rejection sensitivity has been more directly related to workplace outcomes than general rejection sensitivity has been. Therefore, I posit:

_Hypothesis 1: Women are higher in professional rejection sensitivity than men, on average._
Hypothesis 2: Discrimination will moderate the relationship between gender and professional rejection sensitivity, such that women who report high discrimination will be higher in professional rejection sensitivity than those who report low discrimination.

Professional Rejection Sensitivity on Self-Silencing and Self-Promoting Behaviors

This study aims to identify how an individual’s level of professional rejection sensitivity impacts behaviors related to career success. To do so, I focus on professional rejection sensitivity’s potential impact on self-promoting and self-silencing behaviors. Rejection sensitivity theory suggests that when an individual who is high in rejection sensitivity experiences rejection, they become more fearful of future rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). In this case, it can be assumed that the individual would avoid situations where they could potentially face another rejection, resulting in lower engagement over time (Ahlqvist, London, & Rosenthal, 2013).

The existing motivation and self-regulation literature has demonstrated that many of our behaviors are driven by motivations to either attain a reward or positive outcomes (appetitive/approach) or to avoid punishments or negative outcomes (aversive/avoidance) (e.g., Atkinson, 1958; Higgins, 1998; Lewin, 1935; Skinner, 1938). This may also explain whether individuals will approach or avoid scenarios of potential professional rejection. Gray’s (1987) reinforcement sensitivity theory (RST) suggests that two brain-based systems are activated separately depending on the stimuli: the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), which relates to avoiding aversive stimuli, and the behavioral activation system (BAS), which relates to approaching an incentive. People may have different sensitivities for both systems because the control over each system can vary. In other words, one individual may respond more readily to anxiety-relevant cues if their BIS is stronger than their BAS (i.e., high BIS). The inhibition and
activation systems may be antecedents for dispositions, such as professional rejection sensitivity, that determine whether an individual will approach situations of potential professional rejection, and how such rejection is handled if encountered. As Sherf and colleagues (2021) suggested, self-silencing may be an inhibition-oriented behavior in response to the behavioral inhibition system, in contrast to the promotive voice, which may be a change-oriented behavior in response to the behavioral activation system. Therefore, individuals high in professional rejection sensitivity potentially have stronger behavioral inhibition systems than behavioral activation systems, which would make them more likely to self-silence and less likely to self-promote.

Below, I concentrate specifically on the research surrounding self-silencing and self-promoting behaviors.

Jack and Dill (1992) conceptualize self-silencing as a response in which an individual suppresses their own beliefs and opinions to fit perceived requirements to gain approval. Within academia, junior faculty may self-silence by agreeing to work on research projects they have no interest in or that do not help them obtain tenure. They may also self-silence by studying research areas that are less aligned with their personal research interests because they want to fit the expectations of others in their department. Although this approach to conform may initially seem useful in achieving career success, typically, the individual will eventually experience burnout (Merton, 1938). Women in particular may be more likely to follow this pattern within competitive institutions where men have typically received more preferential treatment (Heilman & Eagly, 2008; London et al., 2012; Steinpreis, Anders, & Ritzke, 1999; Trix & Psenka, 2003; Wennerås & Wold, 1997). Previous studies have shown that within close relationships, rejection sensitivity predicts self-silencing behaviors when the individual is exposed to rejection cues (Ayduk, May, Downey, & Higgins, 2003). This relationship has not been studied in the
workplace, but limited studies have found that self-silencing is a common approach to avoiding the threat of rejection in group settings (Dittes & Kelley, 1956; Eagly & Chrvala, 1986; London, Downey, Romero-Canyas, Rattan, & Tyson, 2012; Saltzstein, 1975; Schachter, 1951, 1959).

Theoretically, professional rejection sensitivity should have an inverse relationship with self-promoting behaviors. *Self-promotion* is defined as the extent to which an individual shares their talents and achievements in an effort to influence others’ perceptions of their competence (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Using self-promoting behaviors can be met with either positive or negative reactions. Heine and Renshaw (2002) found that self-promoters were perceived as being likable by other self-promoters. On the other hand, research has also found that individuals may sometimes be perceived as threatening when they use self-promoting behaviors (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). For example, women have been met with backlash for self-promotion, potentially for perceived violation of gender norms (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010; Rudman, 1998). The uncertainty of the outcome may deter individuals who are high in professional rejection sensitivity from using self-promoting behavioral strategy in the workplace.

**Hypothesis 3:** Individuals who are low in professional rejection sensitivity will have (a) higher self-promoting behaviors and (b) lower self-silencing behaviors than those who are high in professional rejection sensitivity.

**Hypothesis 4:** Professional rejection sensitivity will partially mediate the relationship between gender and (a) self-promoting behaviors and (b) self-silencing behaviors, such that women are higher in professional rejection sensitivity, which partially explains why they have lower self-promoting behaviors and higher self-silencing behaviors, on average.
Professional Rejection Sensitivity on Career Success

Although there is limited research on rejection sensitivity and work-related outcomes, previous research has found that rejection sensitivity is related to avoidance of opportunities for help, negative problem-solving approaches, decreased school performance, interpersonal confidence, and academic self-confidences (Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001; Boyce, Parker, Barnett, Cooney, & Smith, 1991; Butler et al., 2007; McCabe, Blankstein, & Mills, 1999). Thus, the effects of rejection sensitivity may also extend to career-related behaviors and outcomes, such as career success. Career success can be interpreted in a number of ways. This study considers career success within academia as a scholar’s productivity, citation impact, and their ability to hold positions at a research institution (Bornmann & Daniel, 2007). Research has found that compared to using a promotive voice, self-silencing has a stronger relationship with burnout, which intuitively should impair career success (Sherf et al., 2021). In contrast, self-promoting behaviors can lead to positive outcomes if they are not perceived as threatening. In general, self-promoting behaviors seem to be positively related to hiring and promotion assessments (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Kacmar & Carlson, 1994; Kacmar, Delery, & Ferris, 1992; Rosenfeld, 1997; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Wiley & Eskilson, 1985). Professional rejection sensitivity may increase an individual’s self-silencing behaviors while decreasing self-promoting behaviors, which may, in turn, negatively impact a junior faculty member’s success in academia.

**Hypothesis 5**: Individuals who are low in professional rejection sensitivity will have more career success than those who are high in professional rejection sensitivity, which is mediated by low professional sensitivity individuals having (a) higher self-promoting behaviors and (b) lower self-silencing behaviors than those who are high in professional rejection sensitivity.

Figure 1 displays the relationships between all of the tested variables.
CHAPTER 4: Study Methods

In this study, I will demonstrate how professional rejection sensitivity impacts self-silencing and self-promoting behaviors and, subsequently, career success. I also aim to demonstrate that heightened professional sensitivity is more common for women because they disproportionately experience greater discrimination. I test Hypotheses 1–5 by surveying junior faculty and collecting biodata. The procedure is elaborated on below.

Study Participants

An *a priori* power analysis revealed that 210 participants (105 men, 105 women) must be obtained (Appendix A). The final sample size was 300 junior faculty. Participants ranged in age from 27–59 years, with a mean age of 36.05 years (SD = 4.68). Of the sample, 133 (44%) participants were female and 162 (54%) were male, and 5 (2%) did not report gender. 217 (72.3%) respondents were White, 38 (12.7%) were Asian, 18 (6%) were Latino/a or Hispanic, 7 (2.3%) were Black or African American, 8 (2.7%) were Other, 6 (2%) were Mixed/Biracial, 1 (0.3%) was American Indian or Alaska Native, and 1 (0.3%) was Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Participants reported duration in their position based on the semester they started in their position. Number of semesters in the position ranged from 1 to 24, with a mean of 7.25 semesters (SD = 4.72).
Study Procedure

Junior faculty were recruited via e-mail using snowball recruitment techniques (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Participants completed a short survey for a $20 Amazon gift card or the option to have USD 20 donated to Direct Relief’s Coronavirus Outbreak Response. 157 participants opted to donate the compensation, so we raised USD 3140. The survey included self-reported measures of professional rejection sensitivity, self-silencing behaviors, self-promoting behaviors, perceived discrimination, demographic information, and their expectations to receive tenure. The participants were also asked to provide their updated curriculum vitae.

Study Measures

This study contained self-reported data for the independent variables, mediators, and moderators, as well as objective biodata for the outcome variable. In this section, I will describe the measures used for each construct. See Appendix B for the full measures.

Demographics. Participants were asked to disclose their age, gender, race, duration in the position, and field.

Professional Rejection Sensitivity. I created an adapted version of the Interpersonal Sensitivity Measure developed by Boyce and Parker (1989). Boyce and Parker (1989) reported good internal consistency (α = .85) and test-retest reliability (r = .70). This general construct serves as the guiding model that I extend to the organizational setting to develop the foundation of the more specific construct: professional rejection sensitivity. For this study, I removed items related to separation anxiety and fragile inner self, as well as any other items that could not be modified to demonstrate face validity in an organizational setting, such as “I feel insecure when I say goodbye to people.” This resulted in 14 items with good internal consistency in this study (α = .86). Sample items include: “I worry about the impact I have on other people,” “I feel uneasy
working with new people,” and “After a disagreement with a colleague, I feel uncomfortable until we have come to a solution.” The items were averaged across for the total score.

**Perceived Discrimination.** Items for perceived discrimination were adapted from the survey used in Ruggs, Martinez, Hebl, and Law, 2015. The four items were: (1) *I feel I have experienced job discrimination in my department*, (2) *Other faculty in my department treat me unfairly because of my gender*, (3) *My department unfairly discriminates against my gender in the distribution of job-related opportunities (e.g., salary increases, promotions)*, and (4) *My department unfairly discriminates against hiring employees of my gender*. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from *Strongly disagree* (1) to *Strongly agree* (5). A total score was computed by averaging the items.

**Self-Promoting Behaviors.** Self-promoting behavior was assessed using the five-item self-promotion dimension from the impression management survey developed by Bolino and Turnley (1999). This measure asks individuals to rate themselves based on how frequently they used each strategy within the last six months on a five-point Likert scale from *Never behave this way* (1) to *Often behave this way* (5). Sample items include “I talk proudly about my experience or education,” and “I make people aware of my talents or qualifications.”

**Self-Silencing Behaviors.** Self-silencing behavior was assessed using the nine-item self-silencing subscale from the Jack and Dill’s (1992) Silencing the Self Scale. This measure asks individuals to rate themselves for each item on a five-point Likert scale from *Strongly disagree* (1) to *Strongly agree* (5). Sample items include: “I speak my opinions and ideas with my colleagues, even when it leads to problems or disagreements” and “When it looks as though my ideas can’t be accomplished, I usually realize that they weren’t very important anyway.”
**Career Success.** Career success was represented by: (1) Hirsch index, (2) number of publications, and (3) expectation of receiving tenure. Hirsch index ($h$ index) provides a robust estimate of a researcher’s scientific output by determining the visibility of their publications. Hirsh index is calculated as $h$ is the number of papers ($N_p$) that have at least $h$ citations each and the other papers ($N_p - h$) have fewer than $h$ citations each. For example, an $h$ index of 30 means that a scientist has published 30 papers that each have at least 30 citations (Hirsch, 2005). This index has been demonstrated to be a good predictor of scientific career success (Bornmann & Daniel, 2007). Hirsh index scores were collected from each participant’s Google Scholar Profile; the number of publications was taken from each participant’s curriculum vitae. Only peer-reviewed articles were included in the total number of publications. The $h$-index scores and number of publications were double-coded by the first author and a research assistant to avoid errors. Expectation of receiving tenure was a single self-report item: “*To what extent do you expect to receive tenure?*” Individuals responded using a seven-point Likert scale from *Extremely unlikely* (1) to *Extremely likely* (7). Z-scores were created for each of these proxies and then the average was calculated to determine the career success score. These three z-scores demonstrated reliability ($\alpha = .69$) (van Griethuijsen et al., 2015; Taber, 2018). Originally, I intended on including responses from tenured faculty colleagues on their perceptions of the junior faculty’s career success. However, there were only 66 responses, so these items were omitted from the overall career success score in order to maintain power when analyzing the data.

**Control Variables.** The control variables were duration in the position and the individual’s withdrawal score. Duration was used as a control variable because the longer an individual is in a program, the more opportunities they have to publish, inflating their score for
career success. Withdrawal is a sub-facet of neuroticism that involves feelings of anxiety, self-consciousness, and vulnerability (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007). It is a general trait that may not be specific or fine-grained enough in predicting an individual’s disposition to handle professional rejection as compared to professional rejection sensitivity; however, it may be related to similar outcomes. Someone high in withdrawal will most likely remove themselves from a situation that could potentially have undesirable outcomes, such as rejection (London et al., 2012). Withdrawal was measured using the 10-item dimension within the Big Five Aspect Scales (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007). The items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Very inaccurate (1) to Very accurate (5). Internal consistency for the current sample was $\alpha = .87$. Sample items for withdrawal include “I seldom feel blue,” “I am filled with doubts about things,” and “I worry about things.”

**CHAPTER 5: Results**

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and internal consistency of scales based on Cronbach’s alpha are displayed in Table 1. I checked for the assumption of normality of the residuals by observing a histogram with superimposed normal curve and a P-P Plot. The standardized residuals for each dependent variable appeared to be approximately normally distributed, so I proceeded to analyze the data (see Appendix C for histograms and P-P Plots). All analyses were performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).
Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M (SD)</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>1.45 (.50)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Perceived discrimination</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>1.81 (1.08)</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. PRS</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>3.16 (.66)</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Self-promoting behaviors</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>2.92 (.89)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Self-silencing behaviors</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>3.00 (.73)</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Career success</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>0.07 (.77)</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Duration</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>7.25 (4.72)</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Withdrawal</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>2.63 (.88)</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. **p < 0.01 level (2-tailed). *p < 0.05 (2-tailed). PRS = Professional Rejection Sensitivity. Bold numbers represent Cronbach’s alpha for each measure. Gender coded as 1 = Male, 2 = Female.

Hypothesis 1, which predicted that women are higher in professional rejection sensitivity than men, on average, was supported; \( t(292) = -3.74, p < .001, d = 0.46 \) (\( M_{\text{Women}} = 3.31, SD = 0.66; M_{\text{Men}} = 3.03, SD = 0.62 \)). Women also reported more discrimination than men; \( t(210) = -6.70, p < .001, d = 0.80 \) (\( M_{\text{Women}} = 2.24, SD = 1.22; M_{\text{Men}} = 1.43, SD = 0.75 \)). To conduct a moderation analysis for Hypothesis 2, I ran a hierarchical multiple regression and used Model 1 from PROCESS to conduct a moderation analysis. In the first step, two variables were included: gender and perceived discrimination. These variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in professional rejection sensitivity, \( R^2 = .06, F(2, 291) = 9.49, p < .001. \) Next, the interaction term between gender and perceived discrimination was added to the regression model, which did not account for a statistically significant amount of variance in professional rejection sensitivity; \( \Delta R^2 = .009, \Delta F(1, 290) = 2.66, p = .10, b = .13, t(290) = 1.63, p = .10. \) Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

To test Hypothesis 3a, I conducted hierarchical regression with participant withdrawal as the first step and professional rejection sensitivity as the second step predicting self-promoting behaviors. Hypothesis 3a was not supported, such that professional rejection sensitivity did not statistically significantly predict self-promoting behaviors; \( F(2, 292) = 0.78, p = .46. \) Running
the analysis without the control variable generated similar results; \( F(1, 293) = 0.007, p = .93 \). In support of H3b, a hierarchical regression—with withdrawal as the first step and professional rejection sensitivity as the second step predicting self-silencing behaviors—displayed a statistically significant positive relationship; \( F(2, 293) = 36.52, p < .0001 \) (see Table 2). \( R^2 \) for the overall model was 20% with an adjusted \( R^2 \) of 19.4%, indicating a medium to large effect size (Cohen, 1988). Without controlling for withdrawal also generated a statistically significant result; \( F(1, 294) = 56.80, p < .0001 \).

Table 2

Hierarchical Linear Regression Predicting Self-Silencing Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>( B )</th>
<th>( SE )</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>( t )</th>
<th>( P )-value</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
<th>( \text{Adjusted} R^2 )</th>
<th>( \Delta R^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>18.08</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>6.55</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>8.99</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PRS</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. PRS = Professional Rejection Sensitivity.

Hypothesis 4a required mediation analysis, using Model 4 from PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). In Step 1 of the mediation model, the regression of gender on self-promoting behaviors, ignoring the mediator (professional rejection sensitivity) was not significant; \( b = .15, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.06, .36], t(290) = 1.41, p = .16 \). Step 2 showed that the regression of gender on the mediator (professional rejection sensitivity) was statistically significant; \( b = .15, 95\% \text{ CI} [.01, .28], t(290) = 2.14, p = .03 \). Step 3 of the mediation process showed that the mediator (professional rejection sensitivity), controlling for gender, was not statistically significant. Step 4 of the analysis revealed that controlling for the mediator (professional rejection sensitivity), gender was not a significant predictor of self-promoting behaviors; \( b = .14, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.07, .36], t(289) = 1.32, p = .19 \). The indirect effect size, along with the bootstrapped
95% confidence intervals for professional rejection sensitivity, is \( .008 [-.02, .05] \). This confidence interval included zero; therefore, a mediation effect was not confirmed using this model, providing no support for Hypothesis 4a.

Hypothesis 4b required mediation analysis, using Model 4 from PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). In Step 1 of the mediation model, the regression of gender on self-silencing behaviors, ignoring the mediator (professional rejection sensitivity), was not significant; \( b = .12, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.02, .26], t(291) = 1.64, p = .10 \). Step 2 showed that the regression of gender on the mediator (professional rejection sensitivity), was statistically significant; \( b = .17, 95\% \text{ CI } [.03, .30], t(291) = 2.40, p = .02 \). Step 3 of the mediation process showed that the mediator (professional rejection sensitivity), controlling for gender, was statistically significant; \( b = .29, 95\% \text{ CI } [.08, .27], t(290) = 4.84, p < .0001 \). Step 4 of the analysis revealed that controlling for the mediator (professional rejection sensitivity), gender was not a significant predictor of self-silencing behaviors; \( b = .07, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.07, .21], t(290) = 1.01, p = .32 \). The indirect effect size, along with the bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals for professional rejection sensitivity, is \( .05 [.01, .10] \). A mediation effect was not confirmed using this model, providing no support for Hypothesis 4b.

To conduct a mediation analysis for Hypotheses 5a and 5b, I used Model 4 from PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). Once again, I controlled for withdrawal and I also included duration in the position as a covariate because the outcome variable was career success.\(^1\) In Step 1 of the mediation model, the regression of professional rejection sensitivity on career success, ignoring the mediators, was not significant; \( b = .002, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.20, .20], t(179) = \)

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\(^1\) Running the analyses without controlling for withdrawal still resulted in non-significant results for Hypothesis 5a and 5b.
0.02, \( p = .99 \). Step 2 showed that the regression of professional rejection sensitivity on the mediators was statistically significant for self-silencing behaviors; \( b = .33, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.18, 0.48], t(179) = 4.35, p < .0001 \). However, it was not statically significant for self-promoting behaviors; \( b = .03, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.21, 0.27], t(179) = .24, p = .81 \). Step 3 of the mediation process showed that the mediators (self-promoting behaviors and self-silencing behaviors), controlling for professional rejection sensitivity, were not statistically significant. Step 4 of the analysis revealed that controlling for the mediators (self-promoting behaviors and self-silencing behaviors), professional rejection sensitivity was not a significant predictor of career success; \( b = -.02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.23, 0.20], t(177) = -0.16, p = .87 \). The indirect effect sizes, along with the bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals, are as follows: self-promoting behaviors = .002 [-.02, .03] and self-silencing behaviors = .02 [-.04, 0.09]. Each of these confidence intervals included zero; therefore, a mediation effect was not confirmed using this model, providing no support for Hypothesis 5.

Table 3 provides a summary of the results based on each hypothesis.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hypothesis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1: Women are higher in professional rejection sensitivity than men, on average.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Discrimination will moderate the relationship between gender and professional rejection sensitivity, such that women who report high discrimination will be higher in professional rejection sensitivity than those who report low discrimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3a: Individuals who are low in professional rejection sensitivity will have higher self-promoting behaviors than those who are high in professional rejection sensitivity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3b: Individuals who are low in professional rejection sensitivity will have lower self-silencing behaviors than those who are high in professional rejection sensitivity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
H4: Professional rejection sensitivity will partially mediate the relationship between gender and (a) self-promoting behaviors and (b) self-silencing behaviors, such that women are higher in professional rejection sensitivity, which partially explains why they have lower self-promoting behaviors and have higher self-silencing behaviors, on average.

H5: Individuals who are low in professional rejection sensitivity will have more career success than those who are high in professional rejection sensitivity, which is mediated by low professional sensitivity individuals having (a) higher self-promoting behaviors and (b) lower self-silencing behaviors than those who are high in professional rejection sensitivity.

**CHAPTER 6: Discussion**

This section will cover theoretical and practical implications of the study, as well as its strengths and limitations. It will conclude by recommending potential future directions of research.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the existence and impact of professional rejection sensitivity. This study specifically focused on how professional rejection sensitivity impacts self-promoting and self-silencing behaviors, which in turn, impact career success. In summary, I found that women, on average, exhibit higher levels of professional rejection sensitivity than men. I also found that individuals who are higher in professional rejection sensitivity tend to practice more self-silencing behaviors than those who are lower in professional rejection sensitivity. I did not find support for a negative relationship between professional rejection sensitivity and self-promoting behaviors. Below, I elaborate on the importance of these findings.

First, a large contribution of this study to the literature is that it is the first to operationalize professional rejection and professional rejection sensitivity. It is also the first to
investigate the impact of rejection sensitivity on career-related behaviors and career success. Therefore, this study combines the literature on rejection sensitivity and organizational behavior. To my knowledge, other studies have alluded to rejection sensitivity having an impact in the organizational setting (e.g., Ahlqvist et al., 2013; London et al., 2012), but none have studied rejection sensitivity using an organizational sample. Demonstrating the existence of professional rejection sensitivity reveals a need for future investigations related to the topic. Presumably, professional rejection sensitivity can be caused by both genetic dispositions and environmental factors, which warrants further investigation to determine. It is also possible that levels of professional rejection sensitivity can fluctuate throughout one’s career lifespan based on changing experiences related to professional rejection. For example, gaining recognition may help reduce this disposition, while repetitive dismissals may increase it. On the other hand, reoccurring rejection may help build resilience to future rejection if combined with intermittent recognition. The current study considered how perceived discrimination may explain the development of professional rejection sensitivity. Although I did not find any support for this assumption, the relationship should be further investigated through longitudinal examination in future research.

Second, this study initiates an important discussion regarding gender differences in dispositional tendencies—mainly professional rejection sensitivity. These differences may potentially be explained by lived experiences, such as women facing greater discrimination in the workplace. Although the current study did not find that the interaction between gender and discrimination predicted professional rejection sensitivity, this might have been due to the limitation of using cross-sectional data. Professional rejection sensitivity that results from discrimination may develop over a longer period of time that was not represented in this study.
At this point, I can only speculate whether professional rejection sensitivity develops throughout the span of an individual’s career or before even entering the workforce. It is possible that women have early life experiences that make them more susceptible to professional rejection sensitivity. For example, adolescent girls may experience discrimination, such as stereotype threat in specific subjects, such as math (Casad et al., 2017), that leads to anxiously expecting and readily perceiving rejection related to the topic in their future careers.

Regardless, the gender difference in professional rejection sensitivity that was uncovered in this study points to a serious concern regarding women’s experience in the workplace. Women’s higher professional rejection sensitivity could negatively influence attitudes and behaviors that have long-term repercussions on their careers. It is important to decipher the causes of this disposition in order to help prevent its development. Organizations may be responsible for cultivating an environment that disproportionally increases levels of professional rejection sensitivity in women. For example, a woman might have higher levels of professional rejection sensitivity in a competitive male-dominant environment and less so in a more communal female-dominant environment.

In this study, I found that professional rejection sensitivity was related to higher self-silencing behaviors. Given the detrimental consequences of self-silencing behaviors (Maji & Dixit, 2020; Merton, 1938), professional rejection sensitivity may be an important antecedent to consider moving forward. Although, in the current study, I did not find support for a negative relationship between self-silencing behaviors and career success, previous research would suggest that self-silencing behaviors can negatively influence one’s psychological wellbeing and career growth, as well as impeding the growth of the organization (Maji & Dixit, 2020; Merton, 1938). In particular, Maji and Dixit (2020) interviewed female software engineers in India and
uncovered consequences of self-silencing behaviors that included psychological distress and a sense of helplessness. In turn, these feelings led to lowered job satisfaction and turnover. Once again, the current study may have not had the capacity to uncover this relationship due to its cross-sectional nature.

Given the widespread experience of rejection in our professional lives, it is important to recognize the potential practical implications this research has for workplaces. Career counselors and mental health professionals can take professional rejection sensitivity into consideration when assessing and supporting individuals who are seeking a new position or promotion, or who simply need to maintain a position yet struggle with a fear of rejection. They may help direct those who are high in professional rejection sensitivity toward careers that do not involve high levels of rejection, or they may develop interventions to address the issue of professional rejection sensitivity. Specifically, interventions may potentially reduce professional rejection sensitivity or attenuate its negative impacts by providing behavioral techniques to overcome it.

Interventions may not only help at the individual level, but may also be useful for organizations. For example, a job that requires employees to be resilient to rejection, such as marketing and sales, could find an intervention to be useful in decreasing professional rejection sensitivity during the onboarding process, which may lower turnover rates and improve financial outcomes. Interventions may also benefit organizations that depend on creative individuals. Occupations that involve creativity tend to be more personal for the individual developing the product. For example, writing a novel is an intensely personal experience wherein the writer typically feels strong ownership – making rejection that much more resonant. This rejection may then lead to burnout and a decrease in creativity. If an organization can provide training that helps reduce sensitivity to professional rejection, they may be able to maximize creative output.
In other words, if an organization invests in their employees upfront by providing an intervention to reduce professional rejection sensitivity, it may benefit the organization as a whole.

**Study Strengths and Limitations**

A number of strengths and limitations should be noted. Among this study’s strengths, the sample of junior faculty used in this study has strong external validity for individuals working in academia or similar careers involving research and publishing. Another strength was the avoidance of single-source bias by collecting both self-reported and objective biodata. The main dependent variable, career success, was assessed using objective data (i.e., $h$-index and number of publications). I attempted to collect reports from senior faculty who were familiar with the junior faculty participants, but I received a low response rate. I also controlled for potential confounding variables, namely the individual’s level of withdrawal and the length of time they had spent in their position.

As for limitations, the junior faculty in this study came from many different programs. The field and relative rigor of each program may influence the publishing habits of their faculty. To mitigate this issue, I used the $h$-index, which is a universal estimate of a researcher’s publication record. However, this cannot account for individual circumstances regarding tenure requirements and expectations for career success. In other words, a junior faculty member may be deemed as having low productivity when compared to other junior faculty across the nation, yet still be perfectly on track for a successful career within their specific program. I plan to collect data on the tenure status of the participants in the future. This data will help more concretely assess whether professional rejection sensitivity is related to career success.

Relatedly, the study used a cross-sectional design, thereby limiting the ability to infer causality. When testing whether professional rejection sensitivity is related to career success, the
current study would not be able to conclusively determine whether the individual’s level of professional rejection sensitivity influenced their publishing habits, or whether the faculty member’s experience in publishing influenced their level of professional rejection sensitivity. Within the next few years, collecting follow-up data on the junior faculty member’s career success could help indicate the causality of professional rejection sensitivity on career success. Regarding the relationship between professional rejection sensitivity and self-silencing behaviors, we can theoretically speculate that a trait-like disposition, such as professional rejection sensitivity, would lead an individual to behave a certain way, but there is a possibility that other experiences lead individuals to practice self-silencing behaviors, which then lead to an increase in professional rejection sensitivity. Alternatively, reciprocal causation could be occurring, or they could be causally unrelated.

Also, for the current study I adapted an existing measure (i.e., Interpersonal Sensitivity Measure; Boyce & Parker, 1989) to more closely fit the conceptualization of professional rejection sensitivity. This adapted measure demonstrated face validity, discriminant validity from withdrawal, and predictive validity for self-silencing behaviors. In order to facilitate participation in the study, I did not include other measures related to professional rejection sensitivity to test the validity of the measure. Therefore, a future study should conduct a more thorough psychometric evaluation of a scale for professional rejection sensitivity to ensure that it is a reliable and distinct construct from general rejection sensitivity and other related constructs.

**Potential Future Research Directions**

As mentioned in the previous section, I plan to collect follow-up data in the next few years to more accurately assess career success. I will track whether the participants in this study
were successful in attaining tenure. With that data, I can retest the relationship between professional rejection sensitivity with career success, while inferring causality.

The current study also points to a question that may lead to significant practical implications: Is it possible for an individual to learn how to handle to professional rejection and become more resilient toward it? To this end, I have outlined a number of interventional techniques that would be worthwhile to explore in future research.

The majority of the literature on rejection focuses on the damaging effects of the rejection experience. As discussed previously, it is widely accepted that repeated experiences of rejection from others can cause an individual to become more sensitive to rejection (Downey et al., 1997; Feldman & Downey, 1994). Research has less often focused on the possible benefits of experiencing rejection. Although rejection sensitivity theory suggests that experiencing more rejection, particularly during childhood, leads to higher rejection sensitivity (Feldman & Downey, 1994), I challenge this assumption by drawing from leadership literature. As many accomplished individuals insist, it frequently takes multiple rejections to finally succeed; simply avoiding rejection is not an effective strategy for growth (Ashkenas, 2012; Gibbs, 2017; Nelson, 2015). There is also evidence that experiencing rejection or failure can serve as a learning experience, positively influencing an individual’s development (Bennis, 1989; Howard & Bray, 1988; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). The question, then, is not how to avoid rejection, but rather how to engage with it productively.

Indeed, researchers have attempted to operationalize and investigate opportunities for growth. A developmental work experience can be defined as a challenging situation during which individuals learn to modify their behavior and advance in organizations (Morrison & Brantner, 1992; Schmidt, Hunter, & Outerbridge, 1986). Such instances often involve moments
of vulnerability and possible rejection—but without such risk, it is virtually impossible to “climb the ladder” to a higher position (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). Therefore, rejection can have a dual route for professional development—not only hindering, but under some circumstances, also helping individuals develop.

I posit that one of the deciding factors between the help and hindrance paths is the frequency of rejection. There may be a curvilinear relationship between experiences of rejection and development. An absence of experienced rejection would be unconstructive and overly sheltering, but experiencing excessive rejection may reach a point of diminishing returns—an inflection point—after which positive outcomes decline. This model implies that although professional rejection sensitivity is a trait-like disposition, it is malleable and can be alleviated under certain conditions, so individuals can ultimately overcome maladaptive tendencies and advance in their development.

First, mere exposure to rejection can potentially help build a tolerance for it in future situations. A psychotherapeutic technique known as flooding, or in vivo exposure therapy, is a behavioral therapy that requires individuals to have intense encounters with the feared stimulus (in this case, rejection) until their fear response is eliminated (Stampfl, 1967; Stampfl & Levis, 1966). A meta-analysis found that exposure therapy significantly decreased heart rate (i.e., a biomarker demonstrating reduced symptoms of anxiety) in patients with anxiety disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and acute stress disorder (Gonçalves et al., 2015). Studies have not been conducted on the effectiveness of this strategy in terms of rejection; however, there are commercial products being sold to overcome a fear of rejection using this approach. Jiang’s (2015) anecdotal experience with “rejection therapy” has recently drawn public attention for essentially recreating exposure therapy targeting
rejection experiences. Scientists should empirically evaluate this approach to uncover its potential benefits and consequences for participants. Support for this interventional approach could help build the hypothesis that more rejection over time can make individuals less affected and more resilient to it.

Second, individuals can be taught how to reframe the way rejection is approached, understood, and processed. As discussed earlier, particular individual differences (e.g., hardiness or mastery orientations) may predispose people to more effectively handle rejection (Bonanno, 2004; Pintrich, 2000). That said, there is some evidence that these aspects are flexible and potentially trainable (Hystad, Olsen, Espevik, & Säfvenbom, 2015). For example, training programs aimed at increasing hardiness have been empirically proved effective, which incidentally may help individuals manage rejection (Maddi, 2002; Maddi, Harvey, Khoshaba, Fazel, & Resurreccion, 2009). In some hardiness training programs, trainees are guided on how to reconstruct their evaluation, or their “mental model,” of the situation, to view stressful circumstances from a broader, less detrimental, perspective (Hystad et al., 2015). Similarly, Dweck (2006) has maintained that a growth mindset, which emphasizes mastery orientations, can be taught.

Notably, rejection is unlike other forms of failure in that it often feels beyond the individual’s control and can also lack a concrete justification in its subjectivity. These characteristics underscore the potential power of cognitive interventions. By providing individuals with concrete tools to reframe rejection, trainings can focus on perspective and less on the unchangeable aspects of rejection. I encourage researchers to determine whether this form of training is useful for handling professional rejection.
Conclusion

Professional rejection is a widespread phenomenon - most, if not all, of us have, or will experience it in our lifetime. However, some are more adept to handle it than others. This study explained individual differences in how people interpret and handle professional rejection – proposing a construct called professional rejection sensitivity. I focused on how it predicts decreased self-promoting behaviors and increased self-silencing behaviors, and subsequently, whether that impacts career success for junior faculty. The main takeaway from this study is that I found evidence for the existence of professional rejection sensitivity by demonstrating that individuals higher in professional rejection sensitivity are more likely to practice self-silencing behaviors. Second, this study revealed gender differences, such that women are higher in professional rejection sensitivity than men, which may have disproportionate repercussions on their careers. Future research should investigate the impact this can have on an individual’s career. The next step would be to develop interventional techniques to address this dispositional barrier of professional rejection sensitivity. I provide recommendations for organizations to try to mitigate the impact of professional rejection sensitivity on their employees.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A: Power Analysis

![Power Analysis Diagram](image)

- **Test family**: t tests
- **Statistical test**: Means: Difference between two independent means (two groups)
- **Type of power analysis**: A priori: Compute required sample size - given α, power, and effect size

**Input parameters**
- Tail(s): Two
- Effect size d: 0.5
- α err prob: 0.05
- Power (1-β err prob): 0.95
- Allocation ratio N2/N1: 1

**Output parameters**
- Noncentrality parameter δ: 3.6228442
- Critical t: 1.9714347
- Df: 208
- Sample size group 1: 105
- Sample size group 2: 105
- Total sample size: 210
- Actual power: 0.9501287
APPENDIX B: List of Measures

Professional Rejection Sensitivity

Source:

Adapted Version of Interpersonal Sensitivity Measure:


Scale:
5 = Describes me extremely well
4 = Describes me very well
3 = Describes me moderately well
2 = Describes me slightly well
1 = Does not describe me

Items:
1. I worry about the impact I have on other people.
2. I avoid saying what I think for fear of being rejected.
3. I feel uneasy working with new people.
4. After a disagreement with a colleague, I feel uncomfortable until we have come to a solution.
5. I am always aware of how other people feel.
6. I worry about being criticized for my work.
7. I always notice if someone doesn’t respond to me.
8. I will go out of my way to please someone I work with.
9. I worry about criticizing other people.
10. If someone is critical of something I do, I feel bad.
11. I worry about what others think of me.
12. I am never rude to anyone.
13. I worry about hurting the feelings of other people.
Perceived Discrimination

Source:

Scale:
5 = Agree strongly
4 = agree a little
3 = neither agree or disagree
2 = Disagree a little
1 = Disagree strongly

Items:
1. I feel I have experienced job discrimination in my department.
2. Other faculty in my department treat me unfairly because of my gender.
3. My department unfairly discriminates against my gender in the distribution of job-related opportunities (e.g., salary increases, promotions).
4. My department unfairly discriminates against hiring employees of my gender.
Self-Promoting Behaviors

Source:

Scale:
In the last 6 months how frequently have you used each of the strategies described while at work when interacting with colleagues?
5 = Often behave this way
4 = Sometimes behave this way
3 = Occasionally behave this way
2 = Very rarely behave this way
1 = Never behave this way

Items:
1. I talk proudly about my experience or education.
2. I make people aware of my talents or qualifications.
3. I let others know that I am valuable to the organization.
4. I let others know that I have a reputation for being competent in a particular area.
5. I make people aware of my accomplishments.
Self-Silencing Behaviors

Source:

Scale:
5 = Agree strongly
4 = agree a little
3 = neither agree or disagree
2 = Disagree a little
1 = Disagree strongly

Items:
1. Instead of risking confrontations in colleague relationships, I would rather not rock the boat.
2. I try to bury my feelings when I think they will cause trouble in my relationship(s) with colleagues.
3. I speak my opinions and ideas with my colleagues, even when it leads to problems or disagreements.
4. When my colleagues’ opinions conflict with mine, rather than asserting my own point of view I usually end up agreeing with them.
5. I don’t speak my opinions to a colleague when I know they will cause disagreement.
6. When my colleagues’ opinions conflict with my own, I always state mine clearly.
7. I rarely express my anger at those I work with.
8. I think it’s better to keep my opinions to myself when they conflict with my colleagues’ ideas.
9. When it looks as though my ideas can’t be accomplished, I usually realize that they weren’t very important anyway.
Withdrawal

Source:


Scale:
5 = Agree strongly
4 = agree a little
3 = neither agree or disagree
2 = Disagree a little
1 = Disagree strongly

Items:
1. Seldom feel blue. (reverse coded)
2. Am filled with doubts about things.
3. Feel comfortable with myself. (reverse coded)
4. Feel threatened easily.
5. Rarely feel depressed. (reverse coded)
6. Worry about things.
7. Am easily discouraged.
8. Am not embarrassed easily. (reverse coded)
9. Become overwhelmed by events.
10. Am afraid of many things.
APPENDIX C: Histograms and P-P Plots

Histogram
Self-Silencing Behaviors

Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual
Self-Silencing Behaviors

Histogram
Self-Promoting Behaviors

Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual
Self-Promoting Behaviors