

[RESEARCH](#) [PEOPLE](#) [GRADUATE](#)[UNDERGRADUATE](#) [CLINIC](#) [RESOURCES](#)[POST BAC](#)

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Research Area:

[Social-Personality](#)

Laboratory:

[Relationships and Social Cognition Lab](#)

Accepting Students: Yes

Research Interests:

Close relationships; emotion regulation; development of self-regulation in children

 Research Description

My research interests fall into three related but distinct domains. One is concerned with the role of negative interpersonal schemas as a social-cognitive mediator of personal and interpersonal adjustment. The second one focuses on the role of self-distancing in enabling emotional regulation. The third one examines the precursors, correlates and the consequences of children's ability to delay gratification.

Social-cognitive mediators of interpersonal adjustment
Although rejection by significant others elicits a wide range of psychological problems including depression, low self-esteem, and intimate violence, not everybody who faces rejection experiences these negative outcomes to the same extent. So how can we explain such variability in how effectively people cope with rejection?

Most of my earlier research focused on individual differences in Rejection Sensitivity (RS) -- a personality disposition that develops out of early experiences of rejection, and is characterized by heightened fears and expectations of rejection. In a nutshell, this work demonstrates that rejection sensitivity is associated with negative overreactions to perceived rejection (anger/hostility, or depression), with relationship difficulties (breakups, borderline personality features), and with problems in the self-concept (reduced self-concept clarity).

In related work, we have shown, however that the link between rejection and maladjustment is moderated by

self-regulatory competencies particularly for people who have negative interpersonal schemas, such those high in RS or low in self-esteem. Using various measures of self-regulation at multiple levels of analysis (e.g., attentional control, behavioral measures of delay of gratification, physiological measures such as respiratory sinus arrhythmia and brain activity), these findings indicate that people are at lower risk for responding to rejection maladaptively to the extent that they are good self-regulators.

In current work, we are focusing on two new questions. In one line of work, my students and I are examining whether rejection also elicits self-directed hostility and harm in people who are high in RS (e.g., self-cutting, binge eating). In another line of work, we are examining whether interpersonally vulnerable individuals (e.g., high RS or low self-esteem) process positive, acceptance-related information in a biased fashion (e.g., do vulnerable individuals forget acceptance feedback faster?).

Self-distancing and emotion regulation

In this domain, my efforts have focused on empirically distinguishing adaptive from maladaptive forms of self-reflection in collaborative work with Dr. Ethan Kross. A fundamental assumption in theory, research, and clinical practice on emotion regulation is that it is helpful to process and work-through experiences that heighten negative affect. However, efforts to constructively analyze one's emotions can easily be undermined as individuals find themselves entangled in rumination that further increases negative affect. Therefore, the question we are trying to address is: how can individuals think about negative past experiences in a way that allows them to

change their underlying representation so that the experience is no longer a source of distress yet do so without falling into rumination or reverting to avoidance en route?

In an attempt to address this question, our research has shown that whether individuals experience heightened reactivity (in the form of negative affect, physiological arousal, accessibility of negative thoughts or rumination) in response to negative autobiographical experiences, depends on the self-perspective from which they attempt to reflect on their reactions. More specifically, these studies show that focusing on negative experiences from a self-distanced, 3rd person perspective compared to a self-immersed, 1st person perspective attenuates subjective experiences of emotional reactivity. Moreover, these beneficial effects on reactivity persist over time. These findings hold regardless of whether self-distanced perspective is situationally induced in experimental studies or is spontaneously used in individual difference studies. Self-distanced analysis is more effective in down-regulating negative affect than self-immersed analysis partly because it attenuates people's tendency to simply recount what happened to them, while facilitating attempts to reconstrue the meaning of their experience as revealed by content analysis of their narratives.

Many questions remain unanswered in this program of research that we are pursuing in ongoing work. Of specific importance is to test the utility of the self-distanced perspective in clinical populations (e.g., people with depression or PTSD) to assess its boundary conditions. Furthermore, our research to date has focused exclusively on coping with negative emotions related to past

experiences. Therefore, our current work has begun examining the implications of self-distancing for coping with negative experiences as they unfold in vivo, for example, when one is arguing with a significant other, or is facing a stressful performance situation. A related project is exploring the usefulness of self-distancing for down-regulating worry about future anticipated negative events. Finally, we are also investigating the link between self-distancing and resource depletion asking whether distancing takes a hidden toll on individuals because of its more effortful nature.

Delay of gratification in children

In collaboration with Walter Mischel, I also study the developmental precursors and long-term consequences of the ability to delay gratification in children. For example, in past work, we have shown that sensitive parenting is an important precursor to the development of this competency in children. Our work has also documented that early delay ability in children predict a wide range of positive outcomes later in life, including better cognitive control in adolescence, and social-cognitive competencies in adulthood. As outlined above, we have also documented that delay of gratification ability serves as buffer against interpersonal vulnerabilities.

In current collaborative work, we are focusing on understanding the cognitive and neural basis of divergent developmental trajectories in delay of gratification. In one study, we are working with a group of participants who have completed the delay task when they were in preschool more than 40 years ago. Our goal is to probe whether differences in inhibitory control, working memory, or ability to suppress unwanted information

explain the differences between good and poor self-regulators. Additionally, we are exploring the neural correlates of performance differences in these three domains of cognitive control in an fMRI study. In a second study, we are working with 6 to 8 year children and running them through the delay of gratification task in an fMRI study to more directly examine the neural networks that may support this important competency.



Selected Publications



Teaching

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