

Research Paper

“No One will Ever Love Me” - The Impact of Romantic Rejection on Intrapersonal Communication (A Qualitative Study)

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ABSTRACT

Romantic rejection has an important impact on self-image, self-esteem, and social motivation. Although past research has successfully explored the negative impact of rejection on an individual's mental and physical health, the effects on intrapersonal communication may need more exploration. The present study aims to investigate the impact of romantic rejection on inner dialogue, analyzing the changes in linguistics and cognition and the effects on physical and psychological well-being. A qualitative approach was chosen as the research method, using six semi-structured interviews, with both men and women who have recently been abandoned by their romantic partners. The results of the study indicate that the inner dialogue tends to be concentrated on self-shaming, self-accusations, and self-criticism. The analysis of the interviews revealed the frequent use of nouns and adjectives that describe pain, the use of adjectives in self-addressed insults, and adverbs of frequency such as “never”, used in future tense constructions to predict negative outcomes. Another finding was that the negative inner dialogue is expected to continue until the individual receives a suitable cognitive closure for the rejection. Intrapersonal communication following romantic rejection appears to be dominated by rumination and the predominant emotions were found to be: sadness, shame, anger, despair, and social anxiety. Rejection is a significant threat, followed by a drop in self-esteem and this study illustrates its negative impact on inner dialogue. The present study is intended to provide the basis for continued research in intrapersonal communication post-rejection and could serve as a framework for cognitive-behavioral therapy. Future research is planned to monitor and determine the duration of the negative self-talk predisposition, post-romantic rejection.

Keywords: *Romantic Rejection, Pain of Rejection, Negative Self-Talk, Intrapersonal Communication, Negative Inner Dialogue*

Humans have evolved by living in cooperative societies and the need for belonging has become fundamental to the individual's well-being and survival. With the facilities of today's modern world, a person can survive physically without belonging to a group, but this type of existence would be a very unhappy one. Studies on social engagement show that loneliness can negatively impact mental health and can trigger depression, anxiety, and psychosis (Mann et al, 2022).

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Scientists (Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams, 2003) found that social rejection activates many brain regions involved in physical pain. It has been argued that the social attachment system may have been connected to the physical pain system, using the pain signal to indicate when social connections are threatened (Panksepp, 1998). The findings of an MRI study are consistent with the idea that the experience of social rejection, or social loss, is uniquely associated with physical pain (Kross, 2011).

Rejection seems to be the most common emotional wound that humans experience in the course of life. Evolutionary psychologists believe that everything started when we were living in tribes. Belonging to a group increased an individual's chances of survival by assuring access to shared resources (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981). People could not survive in isolation, thus being excluded from the tribe was the equivalent of a death sentence. As a result, humans have developed a quick warning mechanism when they are in danger of being excluded from the tribe (rejected by their peers/other members of society). Humans have developed a fundamental need to belong which continues to have consequences on their mental processes to this day.

Following rejection, individuals continue to aggravate their emotions by engaging in negative self-talk as a coping mechanism (“I am a fool”, “I am unworthy of love”, “I can't do anything right”). Hackfort and Schwenkmezger (1993) defined self-talk as an internal dialogue, in which the individual interprets feelings and perceptions, regulates cognition, giving instructions and reinforcement to the self (p. 355).

The Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 1996) suggests that inner voices exchange thoughts and ideas between at least two “I-positions” representing different points of view. However, the present research also found the use of the singular second person pronoun (“you”) in inner dialogue, as later will be illustrated in the study. The functions performed by self-talk have been found to be self-criticism, self-reinforcement, self-management, and social assessment (Brinthaupt et al., 2009).

Negative self-talk is acting like an inner critic, thought to have evolved from negative past interactions of the individual with figures such as parents, teachers, coaches, and peers (Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2013). The impact of constant criticism or insults (e.g. “You are a fool”, “You can't do anything right”) has a lasting effect on the individual's life. In early childhood, parents and adult figures are perceived as flawless and omniscient. This creates a narrative in the children's minds, who perceive themselves as being the source of problems and the one to blame. Inner speech has been proven to be an essential part of cognitive development for children. Criticism that comes from adults can create in children feelings of self-doubt that can manifest in the form of negative self-talk: “I'm so stupid,” “Nobody likes me,” or “I'm a bad child.” It is possible that negative self-talk may be rooted in the person's childhood.

The human defense mechanism is organized around avoiding pain. The inner authority (critic) believes that a person's survival depends on the critic. Psychodynamic Theory (in which Freud and his collaborators explain the origins of human behavior) argues that negative self-talk is a defense mechanism to protect the individual from harm, providing a sense of control and comprehension of the situation. Despite its initial role as an emotional regulator, negative self-talk has been proven to be maladaptive. Researchers suggested that

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negative inner dialogue triggers mental health problems (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008 and Borkovec, 1985), and physical chronic conditions.

On a cognitive level, the fear of rejection confirms some of the individuals' biggest concerns: that they might be predestined to live alone or that they are worthless people. Intrapersonal communication occurs in reaction to a certain event or in anticipation of a situation. The inner voice engages in a variety of communication types, including questions and answers, agreements, or disagreements with each other (Hermans, 2010).

In his book “Frames of Mind”, Howard Garner introduced the theory of multiple intelligences outlining 8 types of intellectual competencies: Visual-spatial, Linguistic-verbal, Logical-mathematical, Body-kinesthetic, Musical, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Naturalistic. Intrapersonal intelligence is described as the capacity to recognize and regulate one's thoughts and emotions. This intellectual skill shapes self-perception and inner dialogue. It has been argued that social rejection reduces intelligent thought and self-regulation (Stillman and Baumeister, 2013).

This research proposes to examine the impact of romantic rejection on intrapersonal communication and its effects on self-esteem. To do so, the following objectives have been established:

- To evaluate the effects of romantic rejection on inner dialogue;
- To explore different attitudes and experiences of romantic rejection;
- To determine how individuals cope with their feelings and thoughts post-romantic rejection.

Exploring the psychological impact of romantic rejection on the individual's day-to-day life and understanding the changes in the internal dialogue language, the data obtained may be used by professionals to develop new approaches in therapy and counseling.

METHODOLOGY

The research used semi-structured interviews with 6 participants (3 men and 3 women) aged 26-51 and were conducted via Skype video call. The interviews lasted between 62 minutes – 98 minutes (respectively 62, 63, 68, 76, 90, and 98 min.), with a mean duration of 76 minutes. Semi-structured interviews are considered effective tools for qualitative research. They provide more flexibility and a better conversational flow, which allows the interviewer to explore more aspects of the problem and collect in-depth data as they give the interviewees the opportunities to fully express themselves (Appadurai, 2006). All participants were asked the same set of questions, mainly open-ended (with the exception of a few questions used to determine the demographic data, the length of the relationship and the time elapsed since the rejection). An example of an open-ended question used in the interview is: “How can you describe your emotional state after the rejection?”

Open-ended questions provide a better exploration of the topic, with the participant being free to choose what and how much to share. A type of supplementary request used in the interview was: “Walk me through your entire experience of rejection!” This gave the interviewee the chance to give more details and to reveal aspects that were not previously foreseen by the interviewer.

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The study’s inclusion criteria were people who have gone through romantic rejection during the last year and were selected from the audience of a YouTube channel² (with over 40,000 subscribers) dedicated to relationship advice and coaching.

6 people were interviewed over a period of two weeks until sufficient data was collected. All participants were asked to sign a consent form in which they were explained the purpose of the research and were ensured confidentiality throughout the study. All participants are Romanian nationals living in different countries in Europe. The reason for all being Romanians was the language used by the YouTube channel which served as a recruitment basis.

Table 1: The demographic data of all participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Time since the rejection	Number of children
1	Female	26	5 months	0
2	Male	41	4 months	2
3	Female	51	6 months	2
4	Female	28	4 months	1
5	Man	38	4 months	1
6	Man	47	2 months	2

The interview with each participant in the study was structured into the following 6 sections (see Appendix 1):

- Personal Information (used to determine the demographics);
- Background (the relationship between parents, the relationship with the parents/childhood history);
- Relationships History (including the rejection);
- Emotional/Psychological and Physical Well-Being
- Elements of Inner Dialogue
- Motivation and Social Life Dynamics

RESULTS

After all the data was collected and analyzed, various aspects were identified, such as the impact of romantic rejection on an individual’s intrapersonal communication, and the relevance of the linguistic elements in relation to self-esteem and emotional well-being. The study focused on the words the participants used to describe their emotions in relation to the rejection. Here is a summary of each participant’s background and answers as they resulted from the interview:

Participant 1 is a 26-year-old female living in Bucharest, Romania. Her parents had been divorced since her early childhood and she grew up under the care of her maternal grandparents. She was recently abandoned by her long-term partner (of 4 years), this being her first romantic relationship. The participant spent up to 5 months insisting that her ex-partner rekindle the relationship, with no success.

This participant used the participial adjective “devastated” to describe her emotional state post-rejection. When asked how the rejection affected her psychological well-being, the

²Sfaturi de iubire – Beatrice Baiu, Youtube

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participant answered that she started gaining more weight and isolated herself from her family and friends, spending a lot of time playing video games. When asked to exemplify some of the words/phrases she uses in her internal dialogue, the participant mentioned: “No one wants me”, “No one loves me”, and “I am too fat”. To the question “Do you think that your inner dialogue dynamic has changed since the rejection?”, this participant answered that she noticed a more intensified self-talk. The participant declared that her goal for the future was to lose weight and to rekindle the relationship with her ex-partner who had abandoned her. When asked to describe how she feels at present, the participant used the adjectives: “hurt” and “sad”. The participant stated that her dominant thoughts at present are centered on receiving closure that will allow her to figure out why the relationship has ended.

Participant 2 is a 41-year-old male, living in Kerpen, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. He was raised in a traditional family, with both parents and three brothers. He is married with 2 underage children and had been romantically rejected by a female co-worker with whom he had carried out an extra-marital affair. The participant admits that he continued his romantic pursuit for over 3 months post-breakup, and he was constantly rejected. The 41-year-old describes his emotions related to rejection using the adjective “painful”. When asked how the rejection affected his physical and psychological well-being, the participant stated that it impacted his job performance, causing him to miss important deadlines. The most frequent words/sentences in his inner dialogue were found to be: “I am such an idiot” and “I never do anything right.” This negative syntactic construction of the adverb “never” used in a future tense statement drew special attention, as it appears to be definitive for the participant’s fatalist outlook on life. Asked to describe his present emotions, the participant used adjectives such as: “upset”, “frustrated” and “angry”. When asked if he noticed any changes in his inner dialogue dynamic, this participant stated that he does not necessarily notice a difference between his pre and post-rejection self-talk habits. The participant stated that his future goal is to reconnect with the person who rejected him or at least to find closure.

Participant 3 is a 51-year-old female living in Carmagnola (Turin), Italy. She is a mother of 2 adult children from her previous marriage and had recently been divorced from her second husband. She grew up in a traditional family of two working parents, whom she characterizes as “emotionally unavailable”. The participant describes the rejection experience using the adjective “hurtful”. To the question “How did rejection affect your physical and psychological well-being?”, the participant replied that she spent a lot of time sleeping and avoiding social interaction. Asked to exemplify elements of inner dialogue, the participant mentioned: “You are ugly”, “You are old”, “You are stupid”, and “No one will ever love you”. In this participant’s inner dialogue dynamic, the use of the “You” position can be noticed instead of the “I” position suggested in The Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 1996). The participant mentioned that she continued to pursue her ex-partner for 6 months post-divorce. She stated that her future thoughts and goals are all oriented toward personal growth and towards enhancing psychological and physical health. In reply to the question “How do you feel at present?”, the participant said she was feeling “embarrassed”. To the question “Do you think that your inner dialogue dynamic has changed since the rejection?”, this participant explained that she has inner dialogues that involve two positions of the self, as well as vivid conversations between her and her ex-partner. The participant stated she is still preoccupied with finding a sense of resolution to the situation.

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Participant 4 is a 28-year-old female, living in Bucharest, Romania. She is a single mother of one toddler and she is still living with her two natural parents, who are compassionate and protective. She has recently been broken up with the father of her child. This participant continued to contact the ex-partner for 4 months post-breakup in an attempt to rekindle the relationship, but was rejected each time. The 28-year-old woman used the adjective “heart-wrenching” to describe the rejection experience. When asked how the rejection affected her psychological well-being, the participant answered that she needed psychotherapy after the breakup and that she is currently attending a mindfulness course. When asked to describe her inner dialogue, the participant exemplified by sentences such as “I am a fool”, “I am so unlucky”, and “No one will ever marry me”. To the question “How do you feel at present?”, she answered with nouns such as “sadness” and “anger”. This participant mentioned that her periods of inner dialogue post-rejection have significantly increased. Her future goal is to further her education.

Participant 5 is a 38-year-old man, living and working in Paris, France. He is currently going through the initial stages of the divorce initiated by his wife of 8 years, with which he has one underage child. He grew up in a monoparental family with a working mother. The divorce had a significant impact on his self-esteem and caused him depression and anxiety (he is currently working with a therapist). This participant describes his emotional experience as “painful”. When asked to give some examples of his most frequent inner thoughts, the participant mentioned sentences such as: “You are a fool”, and “You are impotent”. The participant used adjectives such as “embarrassed” and “upset” to describe his current emotions. The use of the “You” position can be remarked once again, as an element of inner dialogue. To the question “Do you think that your inner dialogue dynamic has changed since the rejection?”, this participant answered that he had a more intensified inner dialogue. His future thoughts are to reconcile with his wife and to reunite the family.

Participant 6 is a 47-year-old man, living and working in London, United Kingdom. He has 2 adult children from his previous marriage and was recently rejected by his short-term girlfriend, who has never been committed to the relationship. The 47-year-old man mentioned that the rejection affected his sleeping pattern and eating habits and that he is using alcohol to cope with his emotions. This participant describes his experience using the adjective “sad”. His inner dialogue contains the frequency adverb “never” used in future tense constructions such as “No one will ever love me”, present tense sentences (e.g. “I am unlucky in love”), and present conditional statements (e.g. “I should stop trying to find a partner”). This participant describes his present emotions using nouns such as “shame”, “guilt” and “regret”. When asked “Do you think that your inner dialogue dynamic has changed since the rejection?”, this participant answered that his inner dialogue has significantly intensified. His hopes and thoughts for the future are to continue pursuing the person who rejected him and to find closure in the situation.

Table 2: The frequency of the words related to pain, shame, and anger:

Participant	Sadness	Shame	Anger	Pain
1	devastated (<i>participial adj.</i>) sad (<i>adj.</i>)			hurt (<i>participial adj.</i>)
2	sadness (<i>noun</i>)		frustrated (<i>participle adj.</i>) angry (<i>adj.</i>)	painful (<i>adj.</i>)

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Participant	Sadness	Shame	Anger	Pain
3		embarrassed (<i>participial adj.</i>)		hurtful (<i>adj.</i>)
4	sadness (<i>noun</i>)		anger (<i>noun</i>)	heart-wrenching (<i>adj.</i>)
5	upset (<i>adj.</i>)	embarrassed (<i>participial adj.</i>)		painful (<i>adj.</i>)
6	regret (<i>noun</i>) sad (<i>adj.</i>)	shame (<i>noun</i>) guilt (<i>noun</i>)		

Table 3 Negative inner dialogue post romantic rejection

Participant	Negative Self-talk	Observations
1	“No one wants me.” “No one loves me.” “I am too fat.”	<i>The use of “I” position Present Tense (Indicative)</i>
2	“I am such an idiot.” “I never do anything right.”	<i>The use of “I” position. Present Tense (Indicative)</i>
3	“You are ugly.” “You are old.” “You are stupid.” “No one will ever love you.”	<i>The use of “You” position. Present Tense (Indicative) Future Tense (Indicative)</i>
4	“I am a fool.” “I am so unlucky.” “No one will ever marry me.”	<i>The use of “I” position. Present Tense (Indicative) Future Tense (Indicative)</i>
5	“You are a fool.” “You are an impotent”.	<i>The use of “I” position Present Tense (Indicative)</i>
6	“No one will ever love me.” “I am unlucky in love.” “I should stop trying to find a partner.”	<i>The use of “You” position. Future Tense (Indicative) Present Tense (Indicative) Present Tense (Conditional)</i>

1. Within the self-structured interviews, 3 participants who have recently gone through romantic rejection used nouns such as “embarrassment” and “shame” to describe their emotions and their inner dialogue was centered on self-shaming, self-accusations, and self-criticism. As more data was needed to identify the sources of shame post-romantic rejection, the participants were asked supplementary questions, and the following types of “shame” were found:

- Shame derived from failure;
- Shame derived from rejection;
- Shame derived from post-rejection behavior (undesired pursuit, emotional reactions such as crying, threatening or insulting).

The interviews found that many elements of the negative inner dialogue post rejection are centered on shame, in the shape of negative predictions (prophecies) such as “No one will ever love me”, “No one will ever marry me” and “I will never find love”.

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2. When asked what their future thoughts and plans were, 4 participants mentioned that they hoped to find a resolution to why they were rejected. This may lead to the deduction that the negative inner dialogue will continue until the individual finds a suitable cognitive closure for the rejection. In the psychology of forms (Gestaltism or Gestalt psychology), the "law of closure" refers to an operation that the brain does to make sense of different visual elements, filling in the missing gaps to form a meaningful picture. Similarly, the human mind needs to see relationships as a complete story with an introduction, content, and conclusion. The present research indicates that when a relationship ends without a satisfactory motivation for the brain, the mind seeks to find the conclusion and thus the abandoned person will continue to pursue the initiator of the breakup in the hope of a resolution. According to social psychology, the individual's need to find closure is based on two sources: urgency (the need to find an explanation as soon as possible) and permanency (the need to maintain the result for as long as possible).

3. Romantic love was found to activate the pleasure centers of the brain releasing “feel good” neurotransmitters (Acevedo et al., 2011). When someone is rejected, the hormones and the neurotransmitters that used to bring the individuals the satisfaction of their love life, are no longer primary chemicals in the brain. It has been indicated that neural responses (Yoon et al., 2023) following rejection are associated with rumination. Rumination is the brain's way of signaling that there is an emotional wound that needs to be healed. Another conclusion resulting from the interviews is that the rejected individual continually overanalyzes the details of the romantic experience. A significant contributor to this situation is that most of the people who were romantically rejected are not given a clear reason as to why they were dismissed. Therefore, lack of closure could be an important contributor to prolonged rumination.

LACK OF CLOSURE → RUMINATION → NEGATIVE SELF-TALK

4. The analysis of this research results also suggests that romantic rejection could be a severe emotional wound, because it confirms some of the individual's biggest worries: the worry that they might not be attractive and the worry that they might be inferior to their partner. This set of beliefs is expected to impact the individual's internal communication long term.

DISCUSSION

Studies have argued that the individual's attachment style may be associated with a negative model of self (Buren and Cooley, 2002). Attachment styles with a negative self-concept are associated with depression and social anxiety, which presumptively can result in a negative impact on an individual's intrapersonal communication post-romantic rejection.

Other studies argue that self-criticism is likely to be rooted in insecure attachment. Inner speech has been examined through experimental methods in language and cognition. Researchers (Hélène Loevenbruck et al., 2018) have used the term endophasia (endo=inner, phasia=speech) to describe internal speech with no audible vocalization. fMRI tests have found activation in the left inferior frontal gyrus (Indefrey, 2011) in people who engage in self-talk. The purpose of the present research is to determine the effect of romantic rejection on intrapersonal communication from a psychological and linguistic perspective. It was found that the cognitive experience and the inner dialogue of those who have recently been rejected are centered on self-criticism, self-punishment, and self-insults. On a syntactic and

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lexical level, the study has identified the use of qualitative adjectives such as (stupid, old, and fat) used as self-addressed insults, participial adjectives (“devastated”, “hurt”, “embarrassed”), nouns (in statements such as “I am a *fool*”, “I am an *idiot*”), future tense constructions such as “No one will ever love me”, “No one will ever marry me”, with the use of the frequency adverb “never” to indicate negative predictions suggesting that the situation will continue permanently. Another type of grammatical construction was found to be the Present Conditional “I should stop trying to find a partner.” The use of the words expressing pain supports the theory that physical and emotional pain share a common source in the brain. The participants in the interviews describe their experiences of rejection with a vocabulary that is typically reserved for physical suffering, for example, “painful” and “hurtful”. The interviews were conducted in Romanian, but the Romanian language uses the same words to describe physical and emotional pain, similar to English and other languages (MacDonald & Leary, 2005).

Another finding of the present study is that Intrapersonal Communication has an important influence on the individual’s self-esteem and vice-versa. Self-talk can happen both consciously and unconsciously (without the individual’s awareness). Identifying the elements of negative intrapersonal communication is an important framework for Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy. Cognitive restructuring is one of the essential components of cognitive behavioral therapy and is mostly collaborative. The therapist helps the patient to acknowledge cognitive distortion and to challenge and replace negative thinking patterns through adaptive coping strategies. The present study is intended to provide a basis for continued research in intrapersonal communication post-rejection. Future research might also monitor and determine the duration of the negative self-talk tendency post-romantic rejection and the potential therapeutic approaches.

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Conflict of Interest

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APPENDIX 1

Interview questions:

Personal Information:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your country of residence?
3. How many children do you have?

Background Information:

1. What can you tell me about your parents’ relationship?
2. What can you tell me about your relationship with your parents? (Walk me through your childhood history!)

Information on Romantic History:

1. What can you tell me about your romantic relationship history?
2. How long have you been in a relationship with the person who rejected you?
3. How much time has elapsed since you were rejected?
4. How long have you pursued your ex-partner after the rejection?

Emotional/Psychological and Physical Well-Being:

1. How can you describe your emotional state after the rejection?
2. How did the rejection affect your physical and psychological well-being? (Walk me through your entire experience of rejection!)
3. How do you feel at present? (What are you feeling?)

Elements of Inner Dialogue:

1. Can you give me some examples of your most frequent inner thoughts?
2. Do you think that your inner dialogue dynamic has changed since the rejection? (Do you talk in your head more than you used to before the rejection?)
3. What are the most frequent words you are using in your inner dialogue in this period?

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Motivation and Life Dynamics:

1. What are your goals for the near future?
2. How did the rejection affect your relationship with your friends and family?
3. How did your attitude to life change after the rejection experience?
4. How did the rejection impact your daily activities?