

THE EXPERIENCE OF REJECTION SENSITIVITY IN WOMEN'S INTIMATE  
PARTNERSHIPS: AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

The theory of *rejection sensitivity*, suggests that early experiences of rejection (e.g. parental rejection, peer rejection) can result in the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection by significant others in future relationships. An abundance of quantitative research has suggested that rejection sensitivity has significant implications regarding one's thoughts and actions within intimate partnerships (e.g. Downey & Feldman, 1996); however, little is known about the lived experience of the women who are sensitive to rejection. The present research sought to move beyond the developmental perspective of the theory of rejection sensitivity (as presented in the first two chapters) by aiming to gain an understanding of how women *experience* rejection sensitivity within their intimate partnerships and how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours have impacted their romantic lives.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore the lived experience of women who identified with rejection sensitivity. Data generated during two interviews with three participants was transcribed and analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach. An over-arching theme of *I won't let it happen again: a journey of self-protection* emerged that was representative of the women's shared experience of protecting themselves from experiencing further rejection in their romantic relationships and was further illustrated throughout three secondary themes: *I can control things so I won't let it happen again*, *Wait...is it happening anyway?*, and *A continuous journey*. Based on the present findings, considerations for further research and practice are offered. Given lack of research aimed at understanding the experiences of women who identify with rejection sensitivity, the value of the present study is twofold: This research makes a notable contribution to current literature, but also encourages women, and those devoted to helping them, to understand their own unique relationships with

rejection sensitivity and navigate their own journeys with a sense of hope for mutually satisfying and beneficial romantic relationships in their futures.

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## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The need to belong is seen as a fundamental human motive, with an evolutionary basis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Downey & Feldman, 1996). Central to the human character is a desire for acceptance and a desire to avoid rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Demonstrated in the belongingness hypothesis is a drive that compels humans to form and maintain lasting and significant interpersonal relationships in their lives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Satisfying this drive involves first, engaging in frequent, pleasant interactions with others and second, demonstrating that these interactions are stable and reflect concern for the welfare of both parties involved (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The idea that humans are motivated to create lasting interpersonal bonds stems far back in psychological research, but is made especially clear in Bowlby's attachment theory (1969, 1973, 1983). Bowlby asserted that attachment, the "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194) aids survival and is basic to human nature. While Bowlby's research focused on maternal-infant bonds, a large amount of research on the need to belong has concentrated on adult attachment and the need for interpersonal relationships in general. Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that this need can be focused toward any human and if one relationship is severed, that relationship can be, to some degree, replaced by another. The enormous obstacle of forming a new relationship takes time, intimacy and shared experience (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Further, it is suggested that contact with others is desired because it satisfies the first step in forming a long term bond with another person (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Given that the need to belong is deemed to be a fundamental drive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Downey & Feldman, 1996), direct emotional responses are consequences of success and failure to satisfy this need. Specifically, positive effects should be achieved when successful interpersonal relationships are made and negative effects should result when a relationship is broken or refused (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The extent of the positive effects that follow successful relationships and the negative effects that follow broken relationships are largely dependent on the individual (Levy, Ayduk, & Downey, 2001). When examining individual's responses to interpersonal rejection, this is especially apparent. Hostility, dejection, emotional withdrawal, and jealousy are only a few of a large variety of negative responses demonstrated by individuals who perceive themselves to have been rejected (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). There is also discrepancy between individual's willingness to perceive and react to rejection. Some people respond to rejection indifferently and maintain an avid lifestyle in the wake of rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Others over-perceive intentional rejection by readily identifying rejection in the smallest of situations, leading to over reactive behaviour which can compromise their relationships and overall wellbeing. The term *rejection sensitivity* has been applied to people who "anxiously expect, readily perceive and overreact to rejection" (Downey & Feldman, 1996, p. 1327).

### **Researcher Interest**

"The topics of many studies come from a researcher's personal experience" (Van Den Hoonard, 2012), which is true of my topic that stems from my personal experiences of rejection. It has been proposed that rejection sensitivity develops partially as a protective reaction to parental rejection (Feldman & Downey, 1994). While raised in a loving home, it was a home affected by alcohol abuse. I have seen and experienced, firsthand, the effects that this abuse can

have on a family and the negative feelings and emotions that can result from living amid this disease. I feel that the message of rejection that I was exposed to growing up has significantly impacted my own identity and how I experience romantic relationships; thus, I identify with the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity.

I have experienced several romantic relationships in the last five years, and two occasions of romantic rejection stand out as particularly damaging. At 17, I was emotionally scarred by my first boyfriend, and while this is an experience most women go through, I feel that my reaction to this rejection was particularly intense. I believe this experience strongly contributed to my already established anxiety towards relationships and fear of relationship dissolution. Three years later, I found myself in a healthy relationship with a man I once believed would be my life-partner. After over two years of dating he terminated the relationship, and again, my fear of rejection intensified. I am currently in a committed relationship with a loving partner but sometimes find myself anxiously responding to perceived potential rejection. I am continually working to override these negative thoughts and emotions with the goal of participating in a mutually beneficial relationship.

As a researcher who fits the description of the proposed participant, I understand that the data collected was inevitably filtered through a particularly biased lens. My personal experiences have resulted in several assumptions and biases regarding the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of women who believe they are sensitive to rejection. As a result, understanding my subjective reality as a researcher was a crucial part of conducting the present research. I strived to remain aware of my researcher biases throughout the research process with the intention of reducing, as much as possible, any influence I may have on the participants or data generated.

My experience as a woman with a sensitivity to rejection has caused me to question the impact of rejection sensitivity on women's intimate partnerships and how others with similar experiences are alike or unlike my own. I am truly passionate about gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon and hope that while simultaneously contributing to the expansion of the theory, the findings of the present study will encourage women to examine their own experiences, gain an understanding of their unique relationships with rejection sensitivity, and lead them towards seeking and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will be the method used to guide the research process and answer the question: How do women experience 'rejection sensitivity' within their intimate partnerships and how have their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours impacted their romantic relationships?

### **Statement of Purpose**

Research on rejection sensitivity in the context of interpersonal relationships has been conducted by Downey and colleagues at Columbia University. Downey has sought to investigate the effect of rejection sensitivity on people's behavior using various research methods including established social cognition paradigms, experimental studies, physiological recordings, brain-imaging, and diary studies. While informative, this collection of research has not yet utilized a solely qualitative approach to gain an understanding of the first-hand experience of rejection sensitivity. A great strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex descriptions of how people experience a given phenomenon (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). It provides information about the "human" side of an issue often outlining contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals (Mack, et al., 2005). I

strongly believe that studying the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity through a qualitative lens will provide a level of understanding that has not yet been reached in past research.

An abundance of quantitative research has suggested that rejection sensitivity has significant implications regarding how people think, feel, and behave in their intimate relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000; Ayduk, Downey & Kim, 2001; Downey, Bonica, & Rincon, 1999). Despite this knowledge, we know little about the lived experience of the rejection sensitive woman. How do women experience ‘rejection sensitivity’ within their intimate partnerships? To explore this phenomenon, a qualitative research approach is applicable. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, the present study aims to gain an understanding of how women experience ‘rejection sensitivity’ within their intimate partnerships and how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours have impacted their romantic lives.

Understanding the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity from a first-hand perspective has promising implications for the expansion of knowledge in the fields of personality and counselling psychology. Knowledge gained from the research may provide insight into the developmental trajectories of women; specifically, the development of the self within intimate relationships. Further, understanding the unique perceptions of women who are sensitive to rejection may allow us to gain further understanding of what influences their feelings and behaviours in regards to distress surrounding their romantic lives and will also allow us to consider the role that perceived rejection potentially plays in triggering damaging behaviors that have previously been associated with rejection sensitivity (e.g. hostility, diminished support, jealous controlling behavior, avoidant or overinvestment strategies) (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Gaining an understanding of this phenomenon is important as the knowledge gained from the



proposed research will not only deepen our understanding of rejection sensitivity, but may also encourage women, and those devoted to helping them, to understand their own unique relationships with rejection sensitivity and navigate their own journeys with a sense of hope for mutually beneficial romantic relationships in their futures.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Rejection Sensitivity:** Consistent with previous research, sensitivity to rejection is defined as “an internalized legacy of early rejection experiences that mediates the impact of such experiences on interpersonal relationships” (Feldman & Downey, 1994, p. 232). Sensitivity to rejection is viewed as a motive to avoid rejection; thus, the term *rejection sensitive* is applied to people who anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

**Romantic Relationship/Intimate Partnership:** For the purpose of this study, either of these terms refers to a committed relationship between two people.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

When conducting research using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) identify two goals of the literature review portion of the research: To expand one's knowledge of the topic at hand and to identify a gap in the literature which one's research question seeks to address. Reflective of this logic, the following chapter will review the current literature on the topic of rejection sensitivity.

I will begin by conceptualizing the theory of rejection sensitivity then move on to discuss the measurement of rejection sensitivity, the development of rejection sensitivity, behavioural implications of rejection sensitivity, and the social relationships of rejection sensitive individuals. Further, gender differences pertaining to rejection sensitivity will be identified followed by a discussion of women's identity development in the context of interpersonal relationships. The chapter will close with the identification of the gap in the literature that the present study seeks to address and its potential contributions to the current body of knowledge.

### **Background Information**

#### **Conceptualizing Rejection Sensitivity**

Influenced by traditional interpersonal theories, the rejection sensitivity model (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Feldman & Downey, 1994) was designed in an attempt to answer the question: Why do individuals respond uniquely to perceived rejection (Levy, Ayduk & Downey, 2001)? Drawing on key components of attachment and social cognitive theory, the theory of rejection sensitivity proposes that early rejection experiences leave a psychological legacy that has the significance to influence subsequent relationships throughout life (Downey & Feldman, 1996, 2004).

**The influence of attachment theory.** The influence of attachment theory is apparent in the idea that people bring expectations from one relationship and apply them to subsequent relationships (Downey, et al., 1999). Bowlby proposed that individual's expectations for relationships are derived initially from their early childhood bonds with their caregivers (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980). Consistent with Bowlby's description of secure attachment, when a child's needs are consistently met in the early years of life, they develop healthy models of relationships and expect to be supported and accepted in future relationships. When a child's needs are rejected, however, a healthy model is not developed and the child becomes fearful and doubtful concerning support and acceptance from others. In attachment theory, the three remaining strategies describe distinct means of coping with rejection anxiety stemming from the caregiver (Bowlby, 1973). Some children will become anxious-avoidant and avoid contact with their caregiver altogether, some will adopt an anxious-ambivalent strategy and display bouts of hostility towards their caregiver combined with recurrent demands of reassurance, and others will demonstrate a disorganized attachment style characterized by a seeming lack of a coherent strategy and contradictory behaviours (Bowlby, 1973).

Although Bowlby's work primarily focused on infant-caregiver attachments, he suggested that attachments characterize a lifelong human experience (Fraley, 2004). There is a large body of research stemming from the original attachment theory that focuses on adult attachment, particularly in the context of romantic relationships. Hazen and Shaver (1987) were the first to report that the emotional bond that grows between adults in romantic relationships is comparable to the attachment system demonstrated between infants and caregivers. Several similarities between the two relationships have been identified (e.g., both feel safe when the other is in proximity and responsive; both engage in close, bodily contact) (Hazen & Shaver,

1987). Further, it has been acknowledged that similar individual differences in the dynamics of infant-caregiver relationships can be demonstrated in adult romantic relationships. Some adults, for example, are secure in their relationships and feel confident that their partner is trustworthy and caring. In contrast, others are insecure displaying anxious or avoidant attachment styles and worry that they are unloved or avoid becoming dependent on their partner (Fraley, 2004). These strategies appear to be largely expanded upon in the rejection sensitivity model (which will be discussed below), and negative consequences of using the aforementioned insecure strategies are defined (Downey, et al., 1999).

**The influence of social cognitive theory.** Social-cognitive approaches emphasize the interaction between moment-to-moment processes that influence behaviour in particular situations (Feldman & Downey, 1994). The rejection sensitivity model adds to this approach by viewing experiences of early rejection and strategies to cope with such rejection as schemas (Downey, et al., 1999). Individuals organize their lives based upon these schematic knowledge structures that have the capacity to influence how information is perceived, interpreted and recalled (Downey, et al., 1999; Kramer, Bernstein, & Phares, 2009). Once a schema is formed subsequent relationships are held up to these initial ideas. It is important to note, that these schemas are forever changing and being modified with experience (Downey, et al., 1999).

As demonstrated, components of attachment and social cognitive theory act as building blocks for the rejection sensitivity model. Attachment theory contributes the notion that individuals bring expectations from one relationship and apply them to subsequent relationships. Social cognitive theory contributes the concept of rejection as a schema that becomes an ingrained predisposition in one's life. Tying these concepts together forms the basis of the rejection sensitivity theory, which proposes that early rejection experiences leave a psychological

legacy that has the significance to influence subsequent relationships throughout life (Downey & Feldman, 1996, 2004).

### **Measuring Rejection Sensitivity**

**Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire – Personal (RSQ).** The Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ) was developed as a means to operationalize and validate the concept of rejection sensitivity. Downey and Feldman's (1996) model proposes that at the core of rejection sensitivity are the anxious expectations of rejection by significant others; thus, rejection sensitivity is operationalized as "anxious expectations of rejection in situations that afford the possibility of rejection by significant others" (Downey & Feldman, 1996, p. 1329). To validate this construct, Downey and Feldman (1996) tested the idea that anxious expectations of rejection increase an individual's odds of perceiving intentional rejection in the ambiguous behaviour of others. A measure was developed based on the assumption that situations in which individuals express personal needs to a significant other are likely to trigger anxiety surrounding acceptance and rejection, thus their level of anxiety would define their rejection sensitivity score (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Following this assumption, two versions of the RSQ have been developed (8 item and 18 item) that present respondents with various hypothetical situations in which they must make a request of another individual. They are first asked to identify whether they would be concerned or anxious about the response of the individual pertaining to their request. They are then asked whether they would expect the person to comply or reject the request. The assumption is that a rejection sensitive individual would be anxious about the outcome of the request and expect an outcome that would leave them rejected. The RSQ includes a diverse list of situations involving parents, friends, teachers, romantic partners, potential romantic partners and potential

friends. The RSQ was specifically designed for use by young adults in a university setting, as the items describe situations that typically occur in this target population.

**Expanding rejection sensitivity measures.** As an expansion to the rejection sensitivity model, additional measures were created which were designed to tap into more specific areas of rejection. Interviews with children revealed that while older adolescents tend to feel anxious or nervous in anticipation of rejection, younger children report feeling angry (Downey, Lebolt, Rincon, & Freitas, 1998). The definition of rejection sensitivity was expanded to include feelings of anger, and the Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (CRSQ) was developed (Downey, et al., 1998).

Further studies assessing the concept of rejection sensitivity added a race-based component to the original model (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002). In particular, this theory proposed that race can be at the core of some individual's anxious expectations of rejection. The Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire – Race (RSQ-Race) was developed and operationalized as anxious expectations about the possibility of race-based rejection in relevant situations. Rejection of this sort can encompass exclusion, mistreatment or discrimination based on the individual's race (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002).

The Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ), an adaptation from the original RSQ was designed for use on a general sample of adults (Berenson, Gyurak, Ayduk, Downey, Garner, Mogg, Bradley, & Pine, 2009). Questions were re-worded to eliminate references to college life and additional items about potential rejection situations in adult's lives were added. The nine item questionnaire correlated highly with the original measure and has been used in place of the RSQ in studies with adult populations who are not attending university (Berenson, et al., 2009).

Most recently, the Gender Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Gender-RSQ) was developed in order to measure the prospect of gender based rejection sensitivity (London, Downey, Romero-Canyas, Rattan, & Tyson, 2011). Through focus groups and a survey of the gender discrimination literature, situations were selected that appeared equally stressful for men and women, but were likely to activate variable levels of concern about gender based rejection among women. The measure has been used to successfully measure rejection sensitivity elicited by concerns about one's gender in a population of women attending an elite, competitive university program (London, et al. 2011).

### **Development of Rejection Sensitivity**

Several contributing factors to rejection sensitivity have been identified. Previous research has focused on parental rejection as a primary factor contributing to rejection sensitive tendencies; however, peer rejection, race-based rejection, gender-based rejection and romantic rejection have also been given recognition.

**Parental rejection.** Perhaps the most damaging type of rejection is parental rejection, the first form of potential rejection a child faces in life (Feldman & Downey, 1994; Downey, Khouri, & Feldman, 1997). Downey and colleagues propose that rejection sensitivity develops partially as a protective reaction to parental rejection. This theory has gained support through several retrospective studies which explore college student's experiences of past abuse, maltreatment, neglect and their potential impact on rejection sensitivity.

In an exploration of the contributions of parental maltreatment to rejection sensitivity, it has been suggested that the core message that stems from parental maltreatment of a child is rejection (Feldman & Downey, 1994; Downey, et al., 1997). Similar profiles of personal and interpersonal difficulties have been found in children that have suffered from physical or

emotional parental abuse, or live in a home where family violence is present. This demonstrates the idea that while the abuse itself can create lasting scars, the core emotional message all types of abuse and maltreatment send can be equally detrimental: A feeling of rejection (Feldman & Downey, 1994; Downey, et al., 1997).

In a sample of college students, Feldman and Downey (1994) assessed the impact of family violence on adult interpersonal relationships as a marker of exposure to parental rejection. Results provided ample evidence linking family violence to difficulties in adult relationships. Participant's exposure to family violence (including parent-to-child and parent-to-parent conflict) was measured using the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1987 as cited by Feldman & Downey, 1994). As children's expectations about rejection can be learned both directly (i.e., child abuse) and indirectly (i.e., spousal abuse) through observation, this particular measure was important. As expected, rejection sensitivity was found to be indicative of participant's reports of family violence (Feldman and Downey, 1994). College student's exposed to family violence in the past were also found to be at a higher risk of demonstrating insecure attachment styles in their adult relationships.

Parental neglect has also been found to be a contributing factor to rejection sensitivity (Downey, et al., 1997). Using an index of emotional neglect created specifically for this study, together with the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ), a sample of 460 college students were assessed in hopes of finding a link between non-physical parental neglect and high rejection sensitivity scores (Downey, et al., 1997). Pilot testing revealed that physical neglect rarely occurred in the sample, thus questions concentrated on emotional aspects of neglect (e.g. "My parents were more concerned with what I achieved than what I needed or wanted"). Results



supported the hypothesis and demonstrated that rejection sensitivity increased linearly as emotional neglect scores increased (Downey, et al., 1997).

The aforementioned studies provide support for the theory linking family violence and emotional neglect to rejection sensitivity. It must be noted; however, that these studies focused primarily on mild cases of child maltreatment. The samples used were college students who typically had not experienced severe maltreatment as children. Research by Downey, Lebolt, and Rincon (as cited by Downey, et al., 1997) used a sample of early adolescents in grades five through seven. This study served to test whether children who were severely rejected by their parents demonstrated higher expectations of rejection from their peers and teachers. Over a one year period, children completed the Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (CRSQ) at the beginning of the study and again at the end. Their primary caregiver was asked to complete a questionnaire which assessed the level of hostile rejection they had demonstrated towards their child. As expected, a high level of parental rejection predicted an increase in the child's behaviour which demonstrated angry expectations of rejection by peers and teachers (Downey, et al., 1995, as cited by Downey, et al., 1997). A second study which utilized the CRSQ, self-reports, teacher reports and official school records of discretions also found that rejection sensitive children who had experienced parental neglect, report experiencing increased difficulties with peers and teachers (Downey, Frietas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). These results suggest that experiences of parental rejection impact a child's expectations of rejection by those outside their family.

Further research by Downey, et al. (1998) reiterated the idea that children's expectations of rejection outside the home are affected by their experiences of parental rejection. Another study using grade school adolescents, investigated whether high rejection sensitive children were

more likely to perceive rejection in their peer's ambiguous behaviour than low rejection sensitive children. Participants were asked to pick a partner with whom to participate in the experiment. They were then told that their partner had decided against doing the experiment with them, and were not given a reason explaining their partner's decision. It was found that children who scored higher on the CRSQ responded more negatively and were more distressed by their partner's rejection than low rejection sensitive children (Downey, et al., 1998).

The aforementioned studies provide significant evidence for the theory that rejection sensitivity develops as a protective reaction to parental rejection. Abuse has a lasting effect on a child and the message of rejection that goes hand in hand with an abusive environment is carried on in relationships outside the home (Feldman & Downey, 1994; Downey, et al., 1995, 1997, 1998). These relationships are known to include peers, teachers, and future romantic partners (Feldman & Downey, 1994; Downey, et al., 1997, 1998).

While parental rejection is likely the leading predictive factor of rejection sensitivity, there are a few identified contributing factors that may lead an individual to anxiously expect and readily perceive rejection. Although less emphasized by the model, peer, minority-based, and gender-based rejection have also been suggested to be predictive of rejection sensitive tendencies (Downey, et al., 1997; Asher & Coie, 1990; Coi, 1990; Mendoza-Denton, et al., 2002).

**Peer based rejection.** During childhood and adolescence, most individuals experience some rejection from their peers (Downey et al., 1997). The intent of the rejection is a key aspect in analyzing the potential effects of peer rejection (Downey, et al., 1997). Childhood and adolescent rejection is communicated by peers in several forms. Physical or verbal victimization, bullying, exclusion, rumour spreading and ignoring are all behaviours containing malicious intent, which are likely to contribute to an individual's expectations of rejection (Asher & Coie,

1990). Coie (1990) proposes that the thoughts, feelings and responses of a child are deeply affected by experiences of peer rejection. It is speculated that a heightened sensitivity to rejection is only one of the many ways a child is negatively affected by peer rejection (Downey, et al., 1997).

**Minority based rejection.** Many individuals experience rejection based on characteristics such as their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. Negative experiences which involve rejection based on these factors more than likely lead individuals to anxiously expect, readily perceive and overreact to rejection (Downey, et al., 1997; Mendoza-Denton, et al., 2002). Mendoza-Denton et al. (2002) examined how expectations of rejection based on membership in a stigmatized social category or status group affect people's experiences in social institutions where majority dominates. Results indicated that high race-based rejection sensitive individuals experienced more frequent negativity due to their race, and felt more alienated following these negative experiences than low race-based rejection sensitive individuals (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). Overall, findings suggest that rejection based on being part of a stigmatized social group results in expectations that are different and separate from expectations of rejection for personal reasons (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). These types of rejection expectations affected people's sense of acceptance and well-being, their social relationships and their achievement within a social institution that reflected the values and norms of a higher status group (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002).

**Gender based rejection.** The prospect of gender based rejection was examined by London, et al. (2011) in a study that sought to examine how expectations and concerns about rejection based on one's gender affect how women experience and manage the possibility of sexism in the judgments of important members of prestigious institutions (e.g. elite law schools).

Results found that high rejection sensitive women detected gender-based rejection more often than non-rejection sensitive women and they engaged in self-silencing behaviour, avoiding optional evaluative opportunities. These behaviours led them to feel alienated and less motivated (London, et al., 2011). Overall, this study demonstrated the consequences of perceived gender inequities and how women's coping mechanisms in response to gender inequality depend on their preexisting level of concern about the role of gender in their treatment (London, et al., 2011).

**Romantic rejection.** The impact of rejection by a romantic partner has been given some recognition. It has been suggested that negative relationship experiences (i.e., rejection by a prospective romantic partner, being belittled or demeaned by a partner, or being “dumped”) may destabilize one's self-confidence in romantic relationships (Downey, et al., 1999). Due to a negative experience in a romantic relationship, individuals may choose to abstain from future relationships. For those who decide to become involved in subsequent relationships, they may be “overly cautious and their defensive expectation of rejection may prompt a self-protective readiness to perceive rejection” (Downey, et al., 1999, p. 168). It is recognized that the effects of an extremely strong negative relationship experience, such as having an abusive partner, can have an enormous impact on an individual's self-confidence and confidence in others (Downey, et al., 1999). Overall; however, it is stated that “rejection sensitivity that results from a bad experience in a single romantic relationship is probably more easily undone and less likely to generalize beyond romantic relationships than rejection sensitivity that results from parental rejection” (Downey, et al., 1999, p. 168).

As demonstrated, several contributing factors to rejection sensitivity have been identified (i.e. parents, peers, romantic partners, minority-status, gender) all of which have been shown to

affect many different relationships and areas of life. Due to this, the behavioural implications of rejection sensitivity are vast.

### **Behavioural Implications of Rejection Sensitivity**

The prospect of possible rejection is highly distressing to a rejection sensitive individual (Downey, et al., 1997). As a result, rejection sensitive individuals tend to display certain behaviours in hopes of minimizing the chance of being rejected. Two main behavioural strategies practiced by rejection sensitive individuals have been identified (Downey, et al., 1997). First, individuals who use the avoidance method abstain from social relationships, thinking that if they avoid getting close to others, they reduce their chance of being rejected. Second, individuals who use the overinvestment method hope to avoid rejection by attempting to prematurely secure extremely close relationships with others, in hopes of attaining intimacy or unconditional love (Downey, et al., 1997).

Perceived rejection tends to elicit both behavioural and affective responses in the rejection sensitive individual (Downey, et al., 1997; Downey, et al., 1998). Such reactions often include anger, hostility, anxiety, despondency, counter-rejection, jealousy and attempt to control other's behaviour (Downey, et al., 1997). These behaviours tend to destabilize relationships and increase the possibility of rejection by the peer or romantic partner involved which makes rejection sensitivity a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The construct of the self-fulfilling prophecy was assessed by Downey et al. (1998) in an examination of rejection sensitive individual's romantic relationships. An initial study instructed participants to keep daily diaries for one year in an attempt to capture relationship conflict, post conflict behaviours elicited by the rejection sensitive individual, and the outcome of such conflicts. Results suggested that rejection sensitivity predicted relationship termination for both

men and women (Downey et al., 1998). Such findings imply that examining conflict is a successful way to study the processes which lead to the achievement of the expectations of a rejection sensitive individual (Downey et al., 1998).

A second study, addressing the limitation of the daily diary approach, focused on determining if the behaviour of a rejection sensitive individual during conflict could lead to rejecting responses by their partner post conflict (Downey, et al., 1998). Couples were placed in a video recorded laboratory setting and asked to discuss an unresolved issue in their relationship. Results supported the self-fulfilling prophecy hypothesis for women only. High rejection sensitive women reported more anger than low rejection sensitive women post conflict and displayed more negative behaviour during discussion of an unresolved issue (Downey, et al., 1998). It is probable that the increased negativity accounted for the angry post conflict behaviour of their partners (Downey, et al., 1998).

The aforementioned studies provide support for the idea that rejection expectations can lead people (especially women) to behave in ways that educe rejection from others (Downey, et al, 1998). These findings provide foundations for a process where one individual's beliefs regarding relationships which were likely formed based on past relational experiences, can guide couples to engage in destructive interactional patterns (Downey, et al., 1998). Such results propose that the relationship history of one person has the power to form the quality of their partner's experience in subsequent relationships (Downey, et al., 1998).

### **Social Relationships of Rejection Sensitive Individuals**

Research suggests that rejection sensitivity may cause individuals to act in a way that weakens their chances of sustaining healthy, close, relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996). The effects of rejection sensitivity on relationships have been demonstrated in literature

pertaining to relationships with strangers as well as relationships with intimate partners (Downey & Feldman, 1996). In addition, unique effects have been identified in adolescent populations in regards to romantic relationships (Downey, et al. 1999).

**Implications of rejection sensitivity on relationships with strangers.** Downey and Feldman (1996) conducted a multi-part study which examined the implications of rejection sensitivity for intimate relationships. A portion of their study assessed the hypothesis that people who anxiously expect rejection are more likely to perceive rejection in the ambiguous behaviour of someone with whom they just exchanged friendly conversation. Participants were introduced to a stranger of the opposite sex and informed that this person would be their partner for the upcoming experiment. After exchanging pleasantries, the participant was informed that their partner had cancelled their participation in the experiment. A combination of mood scales, interaction questionnaires and the observations of the experimenter, provided the result that high rejection sensitive individuals had increased feelings of rejection compared to low rejection sensitive individuals (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Qualitative debriefing also revealed that high rejection sensitive individuals were more inclined to ruminate over their actions that may have caused their experiment partner to reject them (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

**Implications of rejection sensitivity on romantic relationships.** When rejection sensitive individuals become involved in a romantic relationship they tend to “perceive intentional rejection in their partner’s ambiguous behaviours, feel insecure and unhappy about their relationship and respond to perceived rejection by their partner with hostility, diminished support, or jealous controlling behaviour” (Downey & Feldman, 1996 p. 1328). This statement was supported in Feldman & Downey’s (1996) study that assessed whether individuals who begin romantic relationships anxiously expecting rejection tend to attribute hurtful intent to their

new partner's insensitive behaviour. Also tested was whether the impact of anxiously expecting rejection on attributions of hurtful intent can be distinguished from the impact of related constructs (i.e. social anxiety and attachment style). A longitudinal component of the study identified eligible participants who filled out several questionnaire measures. Results demonstrated that anxious expectations of rejection tested prior to the beginning of a romantic relationship predicted the extent to which individuals would attribute hurtful intent to their partner's insensitive behaviour (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Utilizing measures that assessed attributions of hurtful intent, interpersonal sensitivity and distress, social avoidance, and attachment style, it was also concluded that this attribution was not a product of third possible variables such as social anxiety, attachment style, self-esteem, neuroticism and introversion (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

A secondary study hypothesized that high rejection sensitive individuals would experience increased concern over the possibility of being rejected by their romantic partner and that such insecurity would be apparent to their partner (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Further, it was predicted that such insecurities are likely to compromise the satisfaction of both partners in the relationship (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Participants included non-married couples who completed the RSQ and responded to a variety of questions which measured levels of concern about their current relationship. Results suggested that rejection sensitivity undermines romantic relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Rejection sensitive individuals were found to feel insecure and dissatisfied with their new relationships and exaggerated their partner's dissatisfaction with the relationship and also their desire to leave the relationship (Downey & Feldman, 1996). A gender difference was also established. Rejection sensitive men tend to elicit jealous and controlling behaviour and women tend to express hostility and diminished emotional



support (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Regardless of the type of behaviour demonstrated by rejection sensitive individuals, their partner's found the relationship less satisfying due to the behaviour (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Overall, these studies suggest that rejection sensitivity has significant "implications for how people think, feel and behave in their intimate relationships" (Downey & Feldman, 1996, p. 1341).

*Implications of rejection sensitivity in adolescent romantic relationships.* Typically, adolescence is the developmental stage in life when individuals embark on their journey into romantic relationships. Because it is the beginning of an individual's romantic life, this is also the time when the legacy of difficult parental and peer relationships is first uncovered (Downey, et al., 1999). Like adults, the core manner through which rejection from past relationships affects an adolescent is by altering their expectations of acceptance and rejection in their subsequent relationships. Although identifiable at this stage, it is probable that this pattern is not ingrained as deeply as it would be by adulthood, thus, adolescence is a prime time for intervention (Downey, et al., 1999). By definition, a rejection sensitive adolescent is an adolescent who has "developed defensive expectations of rejection as a result of experienced rejection initially by parents, and subsequently by peers" (Downey, et al., 1999, p. 148) leaving them more sensitive to rejection from a romantic partner.

Similar to adults, rejection sensitive adolescents display a variety of typical behaviours as a result of their past rejection experiences. It is likely that a rejection sensitive adolescent will either avoid or limit their involvement in romantic relationships altogether, destroying chances of acceptance, or begin romantic relationships in anticipation that they will find the acceptance they did not achieve in their previous relationships (Downey, et al., 1999). Adolescents who employ the latter strategy are likely to demonstrate defensive expectations of rejection and perceive

minimal or ambiguous behaviour as rejection, consequently undermining the relationship and leading it to failure (Downey, et al., 1999). While this behaviour is comparable to rejection sensitive adults, adolescents differ in ways that demonstrate their individual developmental history, age, gender and culture (Downey, et al., 1999).

Concern over romantic rejection is likely to be heightened in adolescence since in this developmental stage of life individuals are discovering their identity and intimacy (Downey, et al., 1999; Erikson, 1968). Some concern over these issues can be attributed to normal developmental apprehension. Conversely, if an adolescent was rejected by their parents or peers, this concern is prone to be more exaggerated (Downey, et al., 1999). Adolescents tend to show one of two primary overreactions to perceived rejection. The first is reflective responses: a desire to control situations in the belief that something can be done to prevent rejection and gain acceptance from others (Downey, et al., 1999). This strategy can be displayed coercively or with compliance. The second is reflexive responses: the individual expresses their instant affective reaction to rejection (i.e. withdrawal, dejection, helplessness, anger, etc.) (Downey, et al., 1999). The reaction to perceived rejection is both dependent on the particular individual as well as the source of rejection.

Like adults, it has been found that rejection sensitivity affects adolescent's relationships (Downey, et al., 1999). Rejection sensitive adolescents employ one of two strategies for entering romantic relationships. Some will avoid or postpone the transition into forming romantic relationships preventing themselves from becoming invested in another person, thus, avoiding rejection (Downey, et al., 1999). For adolescents, this strategy also prevents the individual from learning the necessary skills needed to form intimate relationships throughout life. Other rejection sensitive adolescents will overinvest in a journey to find security and love (Downey, et

al., 1999). These adolescents will likely begin dating before their peers and base their emotional well-being on the success of the relationship. It has not been determined why some adolescents choose one strategy over another, but it is suggested that the source of the initial rejection could be a prominent factor (Downey, et al., 1999).

The source of early rejection is liable to influence a rejection sensitive adolescent's behaviour in subsequent relationships. Parental rejection, an individual's first source of rejection in life, is expected to be the most powerful influence on an adolescent's subsequent relationships (Downey, et al., 1999). It is noteworthy; however, that parental influence whether positive or negative, affects a child's entrance into relationships. For example, children who were accepted by their parents may delay or speed up entry into romantic relationships in hopes of maintaining their parent's approval. Accepted children will likely look to their parents for input regarding their romantic relationships throughout their lives. Rejected adolescents are less likely influenced by their parent's views of romantic relationships (Downey, et al., 1999). These individuals often have decided they will never achieve acceptance from their parents and look to romantic relationships to fill this void (Downey, et al., 1999). As a result, these individuals may hurry the process of entering into romantic relationships and the speed that they become invested in them, which can be healthy or unhealthy depending on the relationship.

The influence of peers is also a contributing factor to the entry of romantic relationships for rejection sensitive individuals. Close friends and norms within the peer group contribute to the views and expectations of an adolescent's romantic relationships (Downey, et al., 1999). Adolescents who seek acceptance in a tight knit peer group may be provoked to form romantic relationships to gain acceptance and approval from their peers (Downey, et al., 1999). Rejection

sensitive individuals likely structure romantic relationships to find the acceptance they are not receiving from their peers (Downey, et al., 1999).

Like adults, research with adolescents has suggested that rejection sensitivity predicts break-ups (Downey, et al., 1999). During this developmental stage, adolescents experience a series of relationships beginning and ending with a higher frequency than most adults (Downey, et al., 1999). Couples which include one rejection sensitive individual tend to erode due to the behaviour of the rejection sensitive individual. It is also possible that rejection sensitive adolescents end relationships hastily in an attempt to do the rejecting, not be rejected (Downey, et al., 1999). Some adolescents will stay in relationships hoping to gain acceptance from their parents and peers (Downey, et al., 1999). Unfortunately, many of these relationships are unhealthy, but the rejection sensitive adolescent often would rather stay in an unhealthy relationship to retain a feeling of acceptance (Downey, et al., 1999).

### **Rejection Sensitivity and Gender**

**Male reactions to rejection sensitivity.** As previously stated, rejection sensitive men and women tend to elicit very different behaviours in the wake of perceived rejection. Downey, Feldman and Ayduk (2000) conducted a study assessing the male tendency to express aggression and violence. It is thought that violent behaviour is an outcome of perceiving rejection to have a negative, hostile intent (Downey, et al., 2000). College age male participants were tested with the goal of linking rejection concerns to dating violence in highly invested relationships. Participants filled out the RSQ along with a variety of questionnaires assessing personal investment and involvement in their relationships. Results suggested that rejection sensitivity predicts dating violence in college men that report high investment in romantic relationships (Downey, et al., 2000). For rejection sensitive men who were low in intimate investment, anxious expectations of

rejection resulted in decreased involvement in close relationships with both friends and romantic partners and increased distress in the face of social situations (Downey, et al., 2000).

**Female reactions to rejection sensitivity.** While rejection sensitive men are prone to resorting to violence and aggression, rejection sensitive women have a higher likelihood of becoming depressed as a result of rejection (Kim & Downey, 1997, as cited by Downey, et al., 1997). One study assessed whether rejection sensitive women display increased susceptibility to depressive symptomology following rejection from a romantic partner. College age participants completed the RSQ and the Beck Depression Inventory at the beginning of college and again at the end of the year. They were subsequently asked if they had experienced a break-up of a romantic relationship in the last year, and if yes, who initiated it. Results found that the greatest increase in depressive symptoms of rejection sensitive females was reported by those who had experienced a break-up over the course of the year (Kim & Downey, 1997 as cited by Downey, et al., 1997).

A study by Harper, Dickson & Welsh (2006) also assessed the potential link between depressive symptoms in females and rejection sensitivity in romantic relationships, but added a third component: the act of self-silencing. The authors hypothesized that rejection sensitive individuals are likely to engage in behaviours, such as self-silencing (the suppression of ones thoughts and opinions in attempt to maintain intimate relationships), in attempt to avoid rejection. Using a series of quantitative, self-report measures, rejection sensitivity was found to be positively correlated with higher levels of depressive symptomology as well as reports of self-silencing behaviours. It is noteworthy that previous research has suggested individuals who define their sense of self based on their relationships are more likely to display self-silencing tendencies (Jack, 1991).

While the literature has suggested that there are general patterns to male and female reactions to rejection, it is important to note that these findings are indeed, patterns. The research findings presented do not suggest that men never experience depressive symptomology or all men react aggressively to perceived rejection. Further, the findings do not suggest that women will never react aggressively. It is important to recognize that while there may indeed be gender differences present in regards to rejection sensitivity, these differences should not be viewed as polarizing. Individuals experience rejection uniquely and gender is only one factor that contributes to how an individual may respond in the wake of rejection.

### **The Self-In-Relation and Women's Identity**

The distinct differences between the genders in the behaviours associated with rejection sensitivity are consistent with the notion that there are imperative gender differences in the experience and construction of one's identity and self (Surrey, 1991). There is a sizable body of literature dedicated to the central idea of "relational growth" as the organizing factor in women's lives (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). It has been suggested that a woman's sense of self is largely organized around the ability to make and maintain affiliation and relationships with others (Miller, 1976); thus, suggesting the importance of responsive relationships as a powerful determinant of women's psychological reality (Gilligan, 1977, 1982). The finding that disagreement and conflict in relationships tends to elicit stronger rejection concerns in women than men is consistent with 'self-in-relation' theory, which suggests that women's sense of self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships (Surrey, 1991).

The capacity for empathy, consistently found to be more developed in women than men, can be seen as the central organizing concept in women's relational experiences (Surrey, 1991).

Central to self-in-relation theory is the assumption that “the self is organized and developed through practice in relationships where the goal is the increasing development of mutually empathic relationships” (Surrey, 1991, p. 54). Similar to rejection sensitivity theory, self-in-relation literature points out the importance of the parent-child relationship, especially the mother-daughter dyad, as it represents the beginning of a lifelong process of self-identification which can be developed further in other significant relationships that follow throughout life. First, the model emphasizes that girls pay attention to their mother’s feeling states and mothers tend to use language involving feeling and affect with their daughters over their sons (Surrey, 1991; Emmanuel, 1992). This behaviour serves as the basis for young girl’s capacity for empathy and emotional development. Second, as a result of the open relationship between a mother and daughter, girls feel more “connected, understood, and recognized” (Surrey, 1991, p. 59). Mutual sharing between the mother and daughter fosters a sense of reciprocal understanding and connection which facilitates psychological growth of the self in connection to others (Emmanuel, 1992). Third, a sense of mutual empowerment and self-esteem is developed as the mother and daughter accurately senses one another’s needs. The mother-daughter relationship is viewed as “practice” for applying skills of perceiving, responding, and relating to the needs and feelings of others in subsequent relationships throughout life (Emmanuel, 1992). To sum, while all individuals probably feel the need to be understood by others, for women, this need is emphasized from an early age, thus, becoming pertinent to women’s self-growth and development (Surrey, 1991).

### **Stopping the Cycle of Rejection**

Not all individuals who are sensitive to rejection are destined to anxiously expect and readily perceive rejection in relationships for the entire duration of their lives. While rejection

sensitivity is deeply ingrained in the individual, research suggests that romantic relationships with a supportive and committed partner can act as a model for healthy expectations in a relationship and provide highly motivated rejection sensitive individuals with the opportunity to change destructive thoughts and behaviours associated with rejection sensitivity (Downey, et al., 1999). It has been suggested that this is only possible; however, with an extremely dedicated partner and a highly motivated rejection sensitive individual who truly wants to change (Downey, et al., 1999).

### **The Gap in the Literature**

When addressing a research question using quantitative methods, a deductive approach is taken in which the researcher begins with a theory, then tests the theory in the empirical world (Van Den Hoonard, 2012). For example, Downey and Feldman (1996) sought to test the theory of rejection sensitivity by introducing participants to a stranger of the opposite sex, informing them that this person would be their partner for the experiment, and then later telling them that their partner had cancelled their participation. The research question was established prior to the start of the study, and data collection planned. While quantitative methodologies have their merit, this design leaves little room for the unexpected and can be described as inflexible (Van Den Hoonard, 2012, Mack, et al., 2005). Quantitative methodologies tend to reveal the external face of the phenomenon at hand, ignoring the richness, depth, and complexity of the participants experiences and values (Morris, 1991). As seen in this chapter, the current understanding of the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity is largely developmental and rejection sensitivity is presented as a theory rather than a human experience. The previous published literature on the topic of rejection sensitivity seems to be biased in that the authors view rejection sensitivity



through a negative lens, suggesting that individuals should attempt to “overcome” it, as opposed to considering it a normal part of life.

The present study proposes to address the richness, depth, and complexity of the participant’s experiences that have previously been ignored. Mack, et al. (2005) states that when used in conjunction with quantitative data, qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation; therefore, it was my intention to build upon the previously established primarily quantitative body of literature by studying the same phenomenon through a qualitative lens. I hope to gain an understanding of the “human” side of the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity by focusing on the unique experiences of a small number of participants (Mack, et al., 2005). In doing so, it is my goal to shift our understanding of the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity to one that honours the complexity of human experience and views the phenomenon as normal, rather than pathologizing.

## **Summary**

Central to the human character is a desire for acceptance and a desire to avoid rejection by others (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Unfortunately for many, rejection is unavoidable. Attachment theory suggests that individuals bring expectations from one relationship and apply them to subsequent relationships (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980). The influence of the attachment model is apparent in the theory of ‘rejection sensitivity’, which suggests that early experiences of rejection can result in the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection by significant others in future relationships (Feldman & Downey, 1994; Harper, et al., 2006; Asher & Coie, 1990; Downey, et al., 1999). As demonstrated in the outlined research, several contributing factors to rejection sensitivity have been identified including parental

rejection as a primary factor, and peer rejection, minority-based rejection, gender-based rejection and romantic rejection as possible alternative contributing factors.

As this chapter highlighted, research suggests that rejection sensitivity may cause individuals to act in a way that compromises their chances of sustaining healthy, close relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996). When individuals who are sensitive to rejection become involved in romantic relationships they tend to “perceive intentional rejection in their partner’s ambiguous behaviours, feel insecure and unhappy about their relationship, and respond to perceived rejection by their partner with hostility, diminished support, or jealous controlling behaviour” (Downey & Feldman, 1996 p. 1328). Two main behavioural strategies practiced by rejection sensitive individuals have been identified (Downey, et al., 1997). First, individuals who use the avoidance method abstain from social relationships, thinking that if they avoid getting close to others, they reduce their chance of being rejected. Second, individuals who use the overinvestment method hope to avoid rejection by attempting to prematurely secure extremely close relationships with others, in hopes of attaining intimacy and unconditional love (Downey, et al., 1997). Each of these behavioural strategies tends to destabilize relationships and increase the possibility of rejection by the romantic partner involved, which makes rejection sensitivity a self-fulfilling prophecy (Downey, et al., 1998). Consistent with ‘self-in-relation’ theory, which suggests that women’s sense of self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships (Surrey, 1991), the prospect of disagreement and conflict in relationships tends to elicit stronger rejection concerns in women than men; thus, the strategies discussed are more typically portrayed in rejection sensitive women (Downey, et al., 1998).

Fortunately, not all rejection sensitive individuals are destined to anxiously expect and readily perceive rejection in relationships for the entire duration of their lives. Research suggests

that romantic relationships with a supportive and committed partner can act as a model for healthy expectations in a relationship and provide highly motivated rejection sensitive individuals with the opportunity to change destructive thoughts and behaviours associated with rejection sensitivity (Downey, et al., 1999).

While an abundance of quantitative research has suggested that rejection sensitivity has significant implications regarding how people think, feel, and behave in their intimate relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, et al., 2000; Ayduk, et al., 2001; Downey et al., 1999) we know little about the lived experience of the rejection sensitive woman. The research outlined in this chapter presents rejection sensitivity as a developmental process (i.e. early experiences of rejection influence individuals experiences in subsequent relationships). Rejection sensitivity is presented as a troubling phenomenon that ideally, should be overcome by those who experience it. Using IPA methodology, the present research sought to move beyond the developmental perspective of the theory of rejection sensitivity by aiming to gain an understanding of how women experience rejection sensitivity within their intimate partnerships and how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours have impacted their romantic lives. In the following chapters, participant's experiences will be presented in the context of research that considers rejection sensitivity as a human experience and honours the complexity of the phenomenon.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The following chapter presents my rationale for qualitative inquiry, my role as the researcher, and how the methodological approach interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to gain insight into the women's lived experience of rejection sensitivity in intimate partnerships. Participant selection, the methods used to generate data, and the process by which the data will be analyzed is outlined. Lastly, ethical issues that will be considered throughout the research process are highlighted.

#### **Qualitative Inquiry**

Qualitative inquiry is characterized by an aim to understand social phenomena within the context of the participants' perspectives and experiences (Merriam, 2002). Of utmost importance in conducting qualitative research is "to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). In using this method of inquiry there is an attempt to gain access to the life-world as it is lived by the human beings participating in the study (Polkinghorne, 2005). In the present research, I seek to gain access to the life-world of women who believe that they are sensitive to rejection and gain an understanding of how each participant views and experiences rejection sensitivity within the context of her intimate partnerships.

All qualitative research can be logically situated within a paradigm or a basic worldview, which guides the researcher's actions (Morrow, 2007). The present research can best be understood through the lens of the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, which asserts a relativist ontology in which there are as many realities as there are participants, plus the researcher him/herself (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Morrow, 2007). Meanings are co-constructed by

the participant and the researcher, suggesting a transactional and subjectivist epistemology; that is, findings are jointly created as the study unfolds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The interpretivist-constructivist paradigm assumes and accepts that researcher values exist and subjectivity is embraced as an essential part of research (Morrow, 2007). In regards to the present study, it is assumed that the participants, I the researcher, and all who read the study possess unique interpretations of reality in regards to the experience of rejection sensitivity. These interpretations are time and location specific; thus, it is important to note that no assumption is absolute. Findings of the present study reflect the lived experience of the participants at a fixed time within a specific context.

When one's goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, a qualitative research approach is applicable. I have always been fascinated by people and their unique experiences and interpretations of events that take place in their lives; thus, I found qualitative inquiry's emphasis on how individuals experience life appealing. As the research question aims to gain understanding of individual's lived experiences, qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate for the present research question. In addition, the majority of previous research that focuses on rejection sensitivity has utilized quantitative methodologies and I strongly believe that studying the phenomenon through a qualitative lens will provide a level of understanding that has not yet been reached. The goal of this study is to give rejection sensitive women a voice and the opportunity to speak freely about their understanding surrounding the experience of rejection sensitivity in intimate partnerships.

### **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the methodology chosen to answer the question: how do women experience 'rejection sensitivity' within their intimate partnerships and

how have their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours impacted their romantic lives? IPA is performed with the goal of exploring, in detail, how participants make sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 1998; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The approach is phenomenological as it includes a comprehensive examination of each participant's lived experience in an attempt to understand the individual's personal perception or account of an event (Smith & Osborn, 1998; Smith, et al., 2009). As the majority of previous research on rejection sensitivity suggests, mainstream psychology is strongly committed to quantitative and experimental methodology (Smith & Osborn, 1998). IPA deviates from this norm by employing in-depth phenomenological analysis, an effective tactic to study how people think about what is happening to them (Smith & Osborn, 1998). With origins in the mid 1990's IPA, is a relatively new approach; however, it draws from three key tried and true areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith, et al., 2009).

Phenomenology can be described as a philosophical approach to the study of experience (Smith, et al., 2009). It is concerned with what the experience of being human is *like*; thus, phenomenological philosophy aims to provide an understanding of how to examine and comprehend lived experience (Smith, et al., 2009). Four major phenomenological philosophers have largely influenced the development of the IPA approach: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Smith, et al., 2009). Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, suggested that experience should be examined in the way that it occurs and in its own terms (Husserl, 1982). He emphasized the importance of both experience itself and the perception of experience, coining the term 'bracketing': the ability to put aside the "taken-for-granted" world, in order to concentrate on our perception of that world (Husserl, 1982; Smith, et al., 2009). While Husserl was primarily concerned with the essence of experience and process of reflection, IPA differs in

its focus which is on capturing particular experiences as experienced for particular people (Husserl, 1982). Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre each furthered the work of Husserl by contributing to a view of the person as “embedded and immersed in a world of objects and relationships, language and culture, projects and concerns” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 21). These philosophers moved away from the sole description of experiences and toward an understanding of the influence of an individual’s involvement in the world, including their relationships within it, and its effect on their perceptions of their experiences (Smith, et al., 2009).

Hermeneutics, “the theory of interpretation”, is the second foundational theory that contributed to the development of IPA (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 21). Most notable in the IPA approach are the influences from hermeneutic theorist, Heidegger, who focused on how a phenomenon appears and interpretation of the phenomenon (Smith, et al., 2009). In opposition to Husserl, Heidegger suggested that one cannot interpret information without the influence of prior experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions (Smith, et al., 2009). Such fore-conceptions present obstacles to true interpretation; however, after interaction with new stimuli, one is in a sound position to understanding what their preconceptions may be (Smith, et al., 2009). Also important is the concept of the hermeneutic circle: “to understand any given part, you look at the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 28). The theory behind the hermeneutic circle is pertinent to the analysis process in IPA research. When analyzing the data, one thinks about the data in different ways, and attributes meaning to the data at different levels, offering different perspectives on the part-whole coherence of the text (Smith, et al., 2009).

Idiography, a concern with the particular, is the final major influence on IPA, and functions on two levels. First, there is an emphasis on detail seen in terms of the depth of

analysis in IPA research (Smith, et al., 2009). Second, IPA research focuses on a particular phenomenon and how it is understood by a particular person in a particular context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2008; Smith, et al., 2009). This emphasis on the particular leads to primarily small sample sizes in IPA studies which allow the researcher to move from examination of a single case to more general claims (Smith, et al., 2009).

A combination of the theoretical underpinnings described above has led to IPA as an effective approach to conducting research. IPA is an appropriate method to study rejection sensitive women's experiences in intimate partnerships because it is primarily concerned with understanding the lived experience of an individual; thus, explores an individual's personal experience with a particular phenomenon. As a researcher employing this methodology, I must commit myself to exploring, describing, interpreting and situating the meanings by which the participants of the present study make sense of their experiences (Smith, et al., 2009). As demonstrated, at the heart of IPA research lies an emphasis on phenomenology; that is, the claims and concerns of the participant (Larkin, et al., 2008). The underlying assumption is that humans are not passive perceivers of an objective reality. Instead, they formulate their own biographical stories in a way that makes sense to them; hereby, interpreting and understanding the world they live in (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

As with any approach to research, criticisms are present. IPA theoretically views individuals as cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical beings and assumes that there is a connection between what they say and their emotional state (Smith & Osborn, 1998). At the same time, it is assumed that the researcher must interpret the mental and emotional state of the participant based on what they say; however, people often struggle to effectively express what they are thinking and feeling, or simply choose not to disclose this information. This is perhaps,



the greatest limitation of IPA research: the understanding gained is dependent on the participant's ability and/or desire to effectively verbalize their thoughts and feelings (Smith & Osborn, 1998). It has also been suggested that when conducting IPA research, mental processes can be confused with cognitions (Langdrige, 2007). This criticism has little merit; however, as IPA does not claim to explore a phenomenon itself, but how an individual makes meaning of the phenomenon in his or her world.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As an IPA researcher, I approached the present study with two aims. First, I attempted to understand the participant's world and describe what it is like, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of interest (the participant's experience of rejection sensitivity in their intimate partnerships) (Larkin, et al., 2008). In doing so, I realized that this experience is both partial and complex (Smith & Osborn, 1998); that is, it is impossible to achieve a truly genuine first-person account of one's experience. The account is continually constructed by both the participant, and I the researcher, so I aimed to achieve a "coherent, third-person, and psychologically informed description, which tried to get as 'close' to the participant's view as is possible" (Larkin, et al., 2008, p. 104). Second, IPA demands an interpretive analysis process, which required me to relate the data to a wider social, cultural, and theoretical context (Larkin, et al., 2008). That is, I attempted to understand what it meant for the participants to have made certain claims and expressed certain feelings and concerns in relation to the phenomenon of interest (Larkin, et al., 2008). Inevitably, neither of these steps could take place without the influence of personal bias. Consistent with the views of Heidegger, I believe that any interpretations made in the present study were produced through the lens of my prior experiences, assumptions, and preconceptions. In my interactions with the participants, I strived to minimize researcher influence with effective

listening and attending skills (Polkinghorne, 2005). In order to gain authentic results, I maintained an awareness of my biases throughout the research process in order to reduce the possibility of producing results based on personal expectations (Polkinghorne, 2005). As a woman who identifies with rejection sensitivity, my prior experiences are especially pertinent to the present study as I found myself identifying with the participants; therefore, it was of utmost importance that I identified and acknowledged these biases prior to the onset of the study. To do so, I kept a researcher journal outlining my personal experiences of rejection sensitivity and continued to record my biases throughout the research process with the intention of separating any expectations I had with the authentic accounts of the participants.

**An evolution of understanding.** It is worth noting the evolution of my understanding of rejection sensitivity that occurred throughout the research process. As captured by my research journal, I entered this study with certain biases and assumptions based on my personal experiences. In general, I believed that the experience of rejection and therefore, rejection sensitivity, was negative. When recalling one's experiences of rejection, it is only natural to think about the sadness or the hurt that occurred as a result of feeling rejected. What does not come to mind as readily, are the positives that transpired despite the feelings of sadness and hurt. In thinking about my own life, I now realize that if I had not been rejected by a certain partner, I would not have gone travelling across the world in search of a feeling of independence and personal growth. I would not have met subsequent partners, and therefore, would not currently be in a relationship with a loving partner who shares my values and supports me in achieving my goals. In considering my own experiences and learning from the participant women as the project unfolded, I began to view rejection as an inevitable and perhaps normal life experience that brings forth a wide range of both positive and negative consequences and reactions that are

largely dependent on the individual's life circumstance. In essence, rather than seeing rejection sensitivity as a predictable set of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours as outlined in previous research, my understanding of the phenomenon broadened, and I came to view rejection sensitivity as a complex phenomenon.

## **Data Generation**

### **Participants**

IPA is primarily concerned with the detailed account of individual experience (Smith, et al., 2009). The methodology honours quality over quantity to respect the complexity of human phenomena; thus, encourages researchers to concentrate on a small number of cases (Smith et al., 2009). Following this rationale, Smith and Osborn (1998) suggest that an appropriate sample size for a study of this nature is three; thus, using purposive sampling, three women were recruited for participation. Purposive sampling allows for the purposeful selection of participants (Morrow, 2007) on the basis of their ability to provide the researcher with an understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2002; Polkinghorne, 2005).

Respondents were invited to participate in the study through the use of poster advertising throughout the University of Saskatchewan campus (See Appendix A). Initial contact was made through an email that had been set up specifically for the study. Once the participants had made contact via email, I conducted a telephone screening interview to ensure the participants satisfied the inclusion criteria (See Appendix B). Participants who met the following criteria were selected to participate in the study:

1. Female, between the ages of 18 and 30.
2. The participant perceives themselves to fit the definition of 'rejection sensitive' (one who anxiously expects, readily perceives and overreacts to rejection).

3. The participant feels that they have experienced some type of rejection in the past (e.g. parental, peer, romantic, etc.)
4. The participant has been in, or is currently in, a heterosexual committed romantic relationship.
5. The participant is able to commit up to 4 hours to partake in two interviews and to review the transcript after the initial interview.

A female, heterosexual, college-age sample was well suited for the present study for numerous reasons. First, as demonstrated, the prospect of disagreement and conflict in relationships tends to elicit stronger rejection concerns in women than men; thus, the strategies discussed are more typically portrayed in rejection sensitive women. In addition, previous research has suggested that rejection sensitive men and women tend to elicit very different behaviours in the wake of perceived rejection; thus, limiting the study to a female population allowed for a better understanding of how women specifically experience rejection sensitivity. Second, the majority of previous research on the implications of rejection sensitivity in intimate relationships has been conducted using female, heterosexual, university students, as the original RSQ was designed for this age group specifically; thus, using a comparable sample allowed for more sound connections to be made between the past and present research.

Overall, selecting a sample in which the participants are similar to one another allows for more accurate between-participant comparisons of the participant's experiences (Morrow, 2007). This reasoning provides further rationale for limiting the study by gender and sexual orientation. Despite these limitations; however, I chose not to limit participant selection in regards to cultural background which lead to a sample of women from three different countries of origin; namely, Taiwan, Trinidad, and Canada. While it could be argued that culture contributes largely to a

women's experience of intimate partnerships, it is noteworthy that all three women were currently attending the same university and living in Saskatchewan, Canada. It was decided that the women's satisfaction of the original participation criteria was sufficient and their identification with the phenomenon separate from their country of origin was of utmost importance.

## **Interviews**

As the purpose of the present study was to gain an understanding of the participant's personal perception or account of their experience as a rejection sensitive woman navigating an intimate relationship, data was generated in semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Smith, et al., 2009). The interviews were designed to get as close to the lived experience of the phenomenon as possible by encouraging participants to provide rich, detailed, retrospective accounts of their experiences in their own words (Smith, et al., 2009). In IPA studies, interviews are set up as events that facilitate the discussion of relevant topics which in turn, allows the research question to be answered via analysis (Smith, et al., 2009); thus, an interview guide with a series of open-ended questions and potential probes (Van Den Hoonaard, 2012) was created for the interviews with each participant and was used to loosely guide the interaction and ensure that relevant topics were covered (See Appendix C). Questions were worded openly to ensure assumptions of the researcher were not being transmitted to the participant leading them towards particular answers (Smith, et al., 2009). Of utmost importance was viewing the interviews as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Smith, et al., 2009) to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of the rejection sensitive individual.

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant and were audio-recorded for analyses. The first interview was conducted with the purpose of gaining initial

insight into the experiences of participants. Three general questions were posed regarding their history of romantic relationships, experiences of rejection, and their experiences as a rejection sensitive woman in an intimate relationship. A fourth and final question, which focuses on any positives that the participant may have taken away from their experiences, was posed at the end of the interview with the intent of bringing the participant back to "neutral" after discussing potentially difficult topics. Prior to the second interview, participants were presented with a transcript of the first interview and invited to add, alter or delete any portion of the transcript they feel did not accurately reflect their depiction of the phenomenon. This was done to ensure that the participants' perspectives were authentic and the themes generated, genuine. A second interview was then conducted with the purpose of presenting the participant with the themes generated from the first interview and engaging in a discussion regarding the accuracy of the initial analyses (Van Manen, 1990). Any additional data obtained from the second interview was also transcribed and analyzed for further themes. During the second interview, participants were asked to sign a data release form for the use of their data collected in the interviews (See Appendix D). All interviews took place in a private study room in the main library on the University of Saskatchewan campus.

**Experience of interviewing.** As this was my first experience with semi-structured interviewing, prior to meeting with the participants, I found myself nervously anticipating how the conversations would unfold. My main concern was that the subject matter would surface negative emotions for the women, leading them to feel uncomfortable in the interview process. In actuality, my concern was unwarranted as each interview seemed to flow naturally and comfortably. In fact, opposite to my worry, throughout the interviews, I found myself noticing a juxtaposition between the tone of the story and the conveyed emotion of the participant while

sharing it. While my conversations were unique with each woman, overall, I would describe the conversations as light-hearted. Despite the intense emotional undertones of many of the participant's experiences, all three women often laughed at their own recollections of their thoughts and behaviours within their relationships. While this ease of conversation led to a smooth interview, I wondered and continue to wonder about the meaning of the inconsistencies between the women's stories and experienced emotion.

### **Data Analysis**

There is no prescriptive method of data analysis within IPA research (Smith, et al., 2009); however, an idiographic approach is suggested, beginning with one case at a time and slowly working up to more general categorizations or claims (Smith & Osborn, 1998; Smith, et al., 2009). The process of data analysis was completed in several stages (Smith, et al., 2009).

The initial step of IPA analysis involves immersing oneself in the data with the goal of ensuring the participant is the focus of the analysis (Smith, et al., 2009). As the interviews were audio recorded, the first step involved typing a verbatim account of the interview. Once typed, the transcripts were read and reread several times with the intent to develop an understanding of the overall structure of the interview and make note of any significant recollections I had of the interview process and my initial observations of the data (Smith et al., 2009). This stage can be seen as a free textual analysis as there were no rules regarding what I deemed interesting or significant (Smith & Osborn, 1998). Recording my initial impressions allowed me a certain level of comfort that I could return to my notes at a later time in the analysis process, and for the time being, remaining focused on the raw data.

After I felt that I had an understanding of the flow and structure of the participant's interviews and had recorded my initial impressions, I began the most complex and time

consuming portion of the analysis process: producing a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data (Smith, et al., 2009). This second step of the analysis process was completed by reviewing the transcripts with three different lenses: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. In the left hand margin, I began with descriptive comments that focused on describing the content of what the participant had said (Smith, et al., 2009). Descriptive comments generally included key words, phrases, and explanations that the responded used, highlighting the objects which structured the participant's experiences (Smith, et al., 2009). Next, I returned to the beginning of the transcript and recorded linguistic comments which focused on the use of language by the participant such as pauses, laughter, repetition, tone, and use of metaphors. Lastly, reviewing the transcripts at the conceptual level involved engaging the data in an interrogative way. At this point, I inevitably began to draw on my own experiential and professional knowledge in an attempt to understand the meanings behind the participant's words and made note of the questions and ideas about the data that were beginning to form (Smith, et al., 2009).

Upon completion of this second stage, I moved on to the third stage, which involved the development of emergent themes. Using the exploratory comments previously developed, in the right hand margin, I began noting relationships, patterns, and connections and eventually, reorganized the data into an initial list of themes. At this stage of analysis, I allowed myself to move away from the participant and include more of myself in the analysis. As a result, the themes produced at this stage not only reflected the participant's original words but my interpretation of their stories (Smith, et al., 2009). Upon completion of this stage, I compiled a list all the emergent themes for each participant in chronological order in preparation for the next stage of analysis.



In the fourth stage, I attempted to make sense of the connections between the emergent themes by identifying which themes clustered together and which stood out on their own (Smith & Osborn, 1998; Smith, et al., 2009). During this process, I continued to check back and ensure the themes matched the primary document (the transcript) which allowed me to make useful connections between themes and what was actually said by the participant (Smith & Osborn, 1998). Upon completion of this stage, a table was created in which the themes that represented key aspects of the participant's experience were coherently listed. Each cluster was named and considered a superordinate theme. During this process, less important themes were deleted, and other themes merged together, solidifying a final list of themes for each case. The second interview, which involved sharing the transcript and established themes with the participant, acted as a confirmation that the themes identified accurately represented the experience of the participant. Any additional data obtained from the second interview was transcribed and analyzed for further themes using the same process.

As per recommended by Smith et al., (2009) each case was analyzed in isolation, and only once analysis of all cases was completed, I began to look for convergence and divergence among the participants. Patterns were identified, recorded, and a master table of superordinate themes was constructed. At this point, I added an identifier (i.e. key words from the transcript and the page number) to aid organization of the analyses and facilitate finding the original source of each theme (Smith & Osborn, 1998).

In the final stage, I translated the themes into a narrative account of the data (Smith, et al., 2009). The master table of themes was utilized as the basis for an account of the participant's experiences and demonstrated with verbatim excerpts from the transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 1998; Smith, et al., 2009). It is important to note that the process of writing the results section

was not linear. Analysis and understanding continued throughout the writing phase as my interpretation of the data was continually evolving (Smith, et. al., 2009); thus, the data analysis was not complete until the results section was finalized.

### **Establishing the Quality of the Research**

The notion of trustworthiness in research begs the following question: How can one persuade audiences that their findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)? The trustworthiness of qualitative research is often questioned by those of positivist nature, likely because the concepts of reliability and validity cannot be assessed in the same way in qualitative work (Shenton, 2004). In response to like statements, Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggest that the nature of knowledge between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms differs; thus, each paradigm requires specific criteria for addressing rigour or trustworthiness in research. As such, four standards have been produced that may be addressed by qualitative researchers to ensure rigour and trustworthiness in their studies: Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following is a description of the methods I used through the course of my study to enhance the quality and ensure the trustworthiness of my research.

**Credibility.** Lincoln & Guba (1985) argue that credibility, which allows for an external check to ensure the accuracy of findings, is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness. A credible study is one that produces findings that are congruent with reality (Merriam, 1998); that is, the findings should resonate with the participants who experienced the phenomenon (Sandelowski, 1986). To ensure my study is deemed credible, I employed two methods: member checking and peer debriefing.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) consider member checking the single most significant factor contributing to a study's credibility. Member checking is the process in which the accuracy of the data and findings are assessed by the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Merriam, 2002). This process allows participants to evaluate how closely the researcher's interpretations represent their subjective realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). To increase the credibility of the present study, prior to the second interview, participants received copies of the transcripts from the first interview. They were given the opportunity to review the transcripts and add, alter, or delete any portion they deem inaccurate. The second interviews were then, conducted with the purpose of presenting the participants with the themes generated from the first interview and engaging in a discussion regarding the accuracy of the analyses (Van Manen, 1990). At this point in time, participants also signed a transcript release form consenting to the use of their data in my thesis and potential publications.

Throughout the research process, I engaged in peer debriefing (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Collaborative sessions allow for the expansion of the investigators vision through the discussion of others experiences and perceptions (Shenton, 2004). Thus far, such meetings have provided me with an opportunity for respected others to provide feedback, to make suggestions, to deliver insights, and to provide support throughout the research process (Shenton, 2004). Bimonthly, I met with fellow graduate students who were in different stages of conducting their own research studies using qualitative inquiry. Meetings were facilitated by my supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin, who provided us with guidance and expertise on our methodology of choice and the research process. Peer debriefing sessions can be invaluable as they can enable the researcher to refine methods, develop greater understandings, and strengthen arguments in light of the comments made by peers (Shenton, 2004).

**Transferability.** The degree to which the findings of a study resonate with individuals who have experienced similar situations is referred to as transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, Merriam, 2002; Shenton, 2004). Research meets this criterion when the findings of a study fit into contexts outside the study situation that are similar and deemed a “goodness-of-fit” between the two contexts (Sandelowski, 1986). It is argued that the responsibility of transferability is less on the researcher him/herself and more on the individual hoping to transfer the findings to another situation or population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 1986). Since generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research, it is suggested that the issue of transferability has been addressed by the researcher if he/she presents sufficient descriptive data to allow comparison of situations or populations (Sandelowski, 1986). To ensure transferability of my research, I aimed to represent the data in a way that allows for such a comparison to be accurately made by readers. A thick description of the background data used to establish the context of the study, as well as a detailed description of the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity is given. In addition, the results and discussion sections of the study are presented with the inclusion of direct quotations of the participants from the transcripts to facilitate readers understanding of how I formulated my conclusions based on the original data.

**Dependability and confirmability.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that there are close ties between credibility and dependability and argue that, in practice, for both to be achieved, the same method can be applied. Where dependability speaks to the presentation of details regarding the research design, confirmability ensures that the study’s findings are result of the experiences of the participants rather than characteristics of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). An “audit trail” is the suggested method to obtain both of these criteria of trustworthiness and was utilized in the present study. Audit trails allow readers to trace the course of the research by having knowledge

of the decisions made throughout the research process and the procedures described (Shenton, 2004). The portion of the audit trail that discusses the procedural aspect of the study maximizes dependability, and the portion that allows similar conclusions to be made regarding the results of the study maximizes confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

I kept an audit trail in the form of journaling throughout the research process. In doing so, I hoped to reach two goals. One, to supply readers with enough information to truly understand the research process and the conclusions made; and two, to challenge me to recognize the ways in which my preconceptions and experiences may influence the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 1986).

### **Ethical Considerations**

In accordance with the University of Saskatchewan research requirements, an ethics application was submitted to the Behavioural Ethics Review Board for approval. All information regarding conflict of interest, participant recruitment, informed consent, data storage, and safety precautions taken throughout the study are outlined in more detail in the ethics application (Appendix E). Ethical approval was received July 26, 2012.

**Informed Consent.** Informed consent was obtained by all participants with a written consent form (See Appendix F) before beginning the first interview.

**Confidentiality.** All information provided by the participants remained confidential. To maximize anonymity and confidentiality, all identifying features were altered and pseudonyms are used throughout the study. To ensure confidentiality was extended to any third party individuals identified in the interview process, additional pseudonyms were assigned (Langdridge, 2007).

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, it was important to consider the possibility that participants may experience some discomfort discussing their experiences of rejection, past relationships, and their experience of rejection sensitivity within their romantic relationship potentially causing negative memories to surface and leaving the participant's feeling anxious or vulnerable after the interviews. To reduce the risk of emotional or psychological harm, participants were given a list of counselling agencies that they may contact to further discuss any emotional discomfort they may have experienced if they choose (See Appendix G).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

The findings of the present study emerged from an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the lived experience and meaning of rejection sensitivity within women's intimate partnerships. The results represent the "double hermeneutic" process quintessential to IPA research in that the findings reflect both the participants' interpretation of their own experiences and, as the researcher, my own interpretation of the participants' experiences (Smith, et al., 2009).

Supported by the participants' own words, the data is arranged in themes and sub-themes representative of the participants' accounts of the phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2004). As a goal of phenomenological research is to understand an individual's personal account of an event, the individual voices of each of the three participants were maintained throughout the presentation of the results with the use of pseudonyms to protect their privacy (Smith & Osborn, 1998; Smith, et al., 2009). While it was my goal to remain as close to the participants' words as possible, for ease of reading, repeated words and fillers (e.g. you know, umm, like, etc.) were replaced with ellipses. Words added to facilitate understanding of context are indicated with square parenthesis (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Chapter four begins with an introduction to the three participants which briefly outlines their history of rejection and history of romantic relationships. To follow is a discussion of the experiences and the meanings derived by the participants, Anna, Kiara, and Beth.

#### **Contextualizing the Data**

To partake in the present study, participants had to have felt that they experienced significant rejection in their lives, as well as identify with the current definition of rejection

sensitivity (to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection) (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Despite having these experiences in common, after talking with each woman individually, it became abundantly clear that each woman had a unique connection to the phenomenon and a story unlike any other. As IPA research aims to shed light on individuals' experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), I believed it to be most beneficial to begin this section by briefly outlining each woman's personal experience of rejection and their history of romantic relationships. Each participant's account ends with a quote which best summarized how they felt their experience of rejection affected their subsequent relationships. To follow, themes generated from the interpretive phenomenological analysis are presented with the intention of expanding our understanding of the lived experience of rejection sensitivity.

**Participant One: Anna.** At thirty years of age, Anna has participated in more than ten romantic relationships, but gives three the label of "very serious." She explained that her experiences of significant rejection stemmed solely from within these partnerships: "My friends, my parents, they're fine...it's just my romantic relationships that are very bad...I've started thinking maybe I have a problem." Anna's first romantic experience took place during her undergraduate years where she met Doug at a party. "It was love at first sight," she recalled. They dated for three years and the relationship ended after she caught him cheating multiple times. After the third incident she said, "You know what, screw you!" Anna views her second two-and-a-half year relationship in a more positive light, which she ended amicably due to a difference in future plans. Anna was quick to describe her third and most recent partner, Tom, however, as "an asshole" and explained that "he was the guy that made me feel rejected the most." Throughout this three year, long distance relationship, like her first partner, she caught him cheating. This time, Anna reacted with no reaction at all: "I caught him [but] the thing is, I



loved him too much, so I pretended I didn't know...for a whole year I pretended I didn't know.” After this incident, Anna found out that he was still participating in online dating activity and explained:

One day, I just couldn't stand it anymore. I'm like, 'You know what? I know what you've been doing! Either let's have a new beginning, or...just call it off' and then he was like, 'No, I love you, I'll stop doing it'! But then I caught him again! Like in a week! I was like...forget about this!”

Since then, Anna has remained single, and she identifies with the idea that her experiences of rejection have affected her relationships:

I don't know how other relationships end, but for me...relationships are really about cheating. I would say that...the experience of being cheated on made me like, very anxious and alert about my partner...I got more suspicious...I feel I can't trust people that much...not like, people in general, but boyfriends.

**Participant Two: Kiara.** At twenty-three years of age, Kiara has had an active dating life starting at age sixteen:

[The] first time I liked a guy, his name was Dan, and we were really good friends and I had really liked him [and] he had really liked me. But I was at the point in time when I was not interested in having sexual relationships...and there was another girl that he liked...and she didn't mind, so he chose her over me.

It took Kiara two years to “get over” Dan, at which point she started a relationship with another man who began as a good friend. She recalled:

He had broken up with his ex-girlfriend for me. We dated for a while. I also didn't want to lose [my virginity] to him yet...and he realized that he wanted that and I didn't so he went behind my back and he had been sleeping with his ex-girlfriend.

After ending that relationship, she tried yet again, but after explaining to her third partner that she was not ready for a sexual relationship, like the others, he told her, "You're too innocent for this and I'm not interested in holding back." At this point in time, Kiara realized that she missed Dan and rekindled her first relationship, and history repeated itself when they realized he still wanted a sexual relationship and she did not.

Kiara's most significant relationship began at age nineteen when she met Mike: "He was okay with the fact that...I didn't want anything more at the moment so I felt really comfortable." On her twentieth birthday, Mike was her first sexual partner. She recalled, "Somewhere about six months into the relationship, however, he started becoming really distant and only wanted to spend time with his guy friends". She remembered thinking:

As long as he doesn't cheat on me I should accept that...and being my first real, real, real relationship I was kind of like, 'okay, yeah sure, no problem!' so we wouldn't see each other for four to five months.

Kiara explained that she felt rejected, jealous, and that they used to fight all the time and shared: "I saw all my friends in relationships with guys who wouldn't let them leave their side". The relationship came to a mutual end after Kiara told him that she thought he "wasn't feeling it" and he agreed that she deserved better. Kiara immediately began dating Kent, a guy who she described, "fussed over me and made me feel all special." Her new interest did not last long, as she quickly realized that she was still in love with Mike. This marked the beginning of a tumultuous relationship in which she discovered him cheating numerous times and continuously

broke-up with him and took him back. The relationship came to a final end when she found out he was simultaneously dating her and another woman and once again, Kiara turned back to Kent. For the second time, Kiara found herself noticing that her boyfriend was “always with his guy friends...I never understood why he wouldn’t take me out with them”. Two weeks after she confronted him about his behaviour, Kent left the relationship only to contact her a month later to try again. She agreed but unfortunately, nothing changed, and Kiara recognized that his actions suggested that he was still “just not into it.” After witnessing him talking to other girls and “liking” other girls’ Facebook pages, she ended the relationship for good.

As evidenced, Kiara’s experiences of rejection include repeated incidents of the man she was interested in choosing another woman: “I just don’t understand what exactly they’re looking for. I don’t understand after I’ve given so much time, effort, had so many great conversations...they still don’t want...” she trailed off. Her experiences of rejection also have a common theme of the men being unaccepting of a non-sexual relationship: “I went on little petty dates in between [my relationships]...and every time they stopped calling or stopped talking to me, I found out they were with another girl” When asked how she feels her experiences of rejection have impacted her romantic relationships Kiara said passionately:

I won’t care for a guy anymore...I’m not going to put out myself for them anymore...I’m not ever going to care for...like, I will, but right now...I guess at the back of my mind, it sounds bad that I’m planning for it, but I literally just want to find a guy to really likes me so I can do exactly what has been done to me.

**Participant Three: Beth.** At age twenty-four, Beth had significantly different experiences with rejection and with relationships than the first two participants. She is currently in a long-term, two-year relationship with Adam and described him as her first boyfriend: “I

went out with a few guys before that, but I've never been able to find anybody I liked before him...he's the first person I've said 'I love you' too...you know, that kind of stuff." For Beth, it was Adam who brought up the idea that her past experience with rejection may be affecting her present relationship. Beth explained that at age 17, she took part in an exchange program where she spent six months in Japan followed by a student staying in her home for the next six months: "I just felt like...I really felt kind of replaced," she shared, "I just was really close to my dad and I felt like basically that he took on a new daughter and kind of left me behind." Beth reacted by shutting down and cutting off her connection with her father:

I quit talking to him for a couple years. It was really funny because he didn't know why I quit talking to him and...as a young kid I just thought, 'How could you not know?'...I didn't realize how much that simple experience followed me and I had no idea it was impacting other parts of my life until I met my boyfriend recently.

Beth recalled Adam musing:

I think essentially...you have problems with rejection from that incident...I can tell because you're acting like...you know, just whatever you do, if...something comes up or you're vulnerable, you're immediately...on the attack, or like, shut down. Never like, really willing to deal with much.

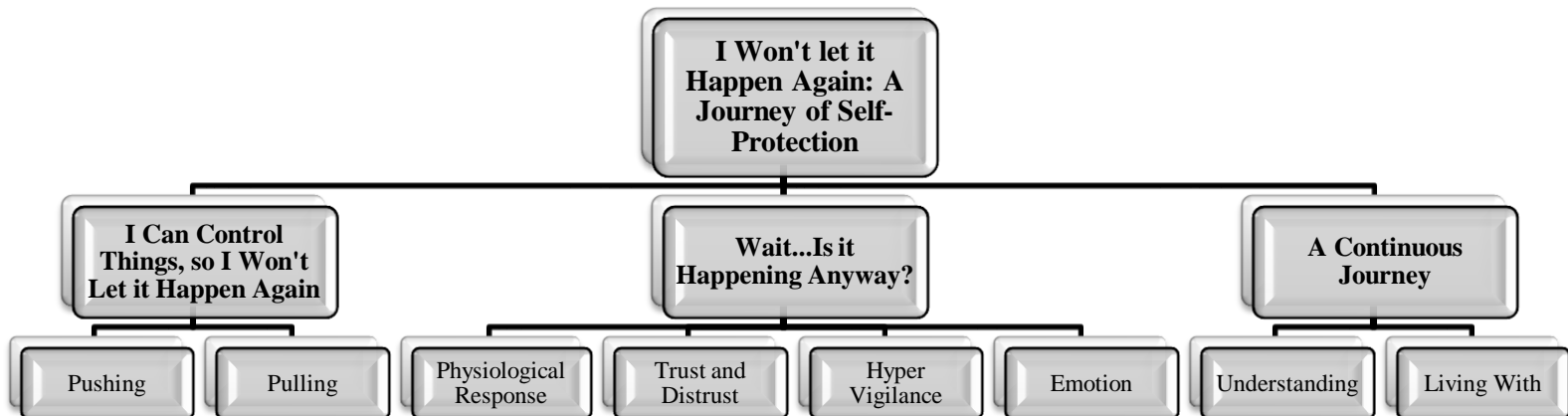
"Now we're working on it," Beth explained. Reflecting on what Adam suggested, she said:

With my relationship with my boyfriend now...nothing went bad with it...but I found myself getting really jealous of...people I shouldn't be jealous of...like anybody who wants to spend time with him. It's about anything that I feel could start pulling him away from me and I start getting kind of aggressive in a sense that I'm trying to pull him back even though there's no actual threat.

## The Lived Experience of Rejection Sensitivity in Women's Intimate Partnerships

The original data, or the transcripts depicting the words of each participant during their interviews, provided me with an extremely detailed look inside the lives of three women who identify with the current definition of rejection sensitivity; and therefore, feel that their experiences of rejection have impacted their subsequent romantic relationships. At the start of the analysis process, countless sub-themes were identified, but as the analysis progressed and a clearer picture began to form, and themes began to merge together. By the end of the analysis and writing phase, three sub-themes remained that I felt best demonstrated the lived experience of rejection sensitivity. Figure one provides a schematic representation of the themes and sub-themes.

Figure 4 – 1 The Lived Experience of Rejection Sensitivity in Women's Intimate Partnerships  
Overview of Themes and Subthemes



The overarching theme of *I won't let it happen again: a journey of self-protection* emerged as a connection between the other themes and can be best described as the interpreted motivation behind the women's experiences within their romantic relationships. As the women all identified that they had previously experienced significant rejection, it appeared that the

women operated with the intent of preventing themselves from experiencing further rejection in their romantic relationships. The women did so by first, attempting to control their relationships and interactions with partners as demonstrated in the theme *I can control things so I won't let it happen again*, which included strategies depicted by the sub-themes, *pushing* and *pulling*.

Despite attempting to remain in control in their relationships, the women often found themselves in situations where the threat of rejection felt very real. As illustrated by the theme *Wait...is it happening anyway?*, the women's responses to perceived threat included experiencing *physiological responses* that resulted in a battle between *trust and distrust*, *hyper vigilant* thoughts and behaviours, and inevitably, floods of *emotion*. Lastly, the women's experience with rejection sensitivity is explored in terms of *A continuous journey* which involves coming to a personal *understanding* of how they are affected by the phenomena and how they are presently *living with* their identified sensitivity to rejection. The following section aims to further illuminate the identified themes and the relationships between them.

### **I Won't Let it Happen Again: A Journey of Self-Protection**

"Everybody's gotta protect himself or herself, right?" Anna declared near the end of her first interview. I did not immediately appreciate the significance of her question, but as I spent time listening to each participant, I began to understand what she meant. Throughout the data analysis process, I continuously struggled to understand the motivation behind my participants' thoughts and actions. All three women's experiences of rejection were unique and history of romantic relationships was distinct, but in some way, they all expressed that their experiences of rejection influenced their subsequent romantic partnerships. As I became intimately familiar with the women's stories, a common thread emerged: many of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours the women expressed seemed to be carried out with the intention of protecting themselves from

experiencing further rejection in their romantic relationships. “Ultimately...I’m not going to risk losing another one,” Beth explained, demonstrating the link between her original experience of rejection, and intent to protect her subsequent relationships from the same fate. While each woman’s particular sensitivity and responses were unique, the shared experience of wanting to protect the self from further rejection became the basis for my understanding of the women’s reactions to potential threats within their romantic relationships.

Interestingly, the women’s sensitivities and reactions were not constant; that is, as the participants gained insight into how their past may be influencing their present, their thoughts and reactions evolved. This progression of understanding, however, was not necessarily linear, which speaks to the fact that each woman is navigating her own journey. As the following section illustrates, the women’s journeys often involved taking one step forward and two steps back, but ultimately lead to “gained awareness and personal growth.”

### **I Can Control Things So I Won’t Let It Happen Again.**

A common goal of wanting to be in control was evident throughout all of the women’s stories. In the context of the women’s experiences, a sense of having “control” seemed to mean a feeling of having the upper hand in the relationship or a sense of things being their choice as opposed to their partners choice, as demonstrated by Beth’s saying, “we’ll do this if I want to and won’t if I don’t want to.” While their actual attempts to maintain control looked different depending on their circumstances, the participants were all clearly able to articulate the importance of being in control in their relationships. When talking about her experiences of being cheated on, Anna stated:

For my first relationship, I didn’t know what to do. You just pretty much keep on crying...for my third relationship, since I had [the] experience of [being cheated

on]...after that moment, that very awful moment, I started to think, how can I work this out so I can get my control back?

It was with this goal in mind that Anna opted to pretend she was not aware of her partner's indiscretions and remain in her relationship for another year. "I don't want to get hurt," she explained, "I just want to be in control...I want to get power back...I want to know what's going on." For Anna, maintaining power became more important than her happiness in the relationship:

It certainly felt bad...I felt bad about the whole situation...like, I can't be myself, I can't just tell him what I want...but at the same time, I also feel that...the power is in my hand. I'm in control...he is the one who doesn't know what's going on.

Kiara's story was similar in that her actions were also motivated by a sense of seeking the power and control she felt had been taken from her: "I guess when I say I want to screw over someone, I want to just maybe get that power or control back," she muses. She further reflects by adding, "it will make me feel like I have the power or control over myself back...that I could tell someone 'no'..." suggesting that the goal to maintain power or control does not necessarily always mean control over one's partner, but having a sense of personal agency: "For the entire relationship, for two years, I figured he was the one in control of me. Telling me what I could do, what I couldn't do, what I had to accept...it's about time I get my way..." she shared. Whether or not the couple stayed together, Kiara wanted the choice to be hers, which is something Beth also related to: "I've never had somebody go on a date with [me]...and then reject [me]...I was always like, I knew if somebody got to that point...it was almost like it was my choice then," she explained in regards to her dating life prior to her current boyfriend. "And I usually never liked anybody so it was really easy...I don't like this about you...I don't like that about you..." she



laughed, further suggesting she was used to having the upper hand and making the final decisions about whether to pursue or reject a potential partner.

While all of the women spoke to the importance of having control in their romantic lives, the methods they employed to gain that control vastly differed. While at first glance it seemed that there was no relation between the women's actions, upon closer examination of their descriptions of their experiences, a commonality became evident. In their own unique ways, the women acted with the apparent intention of pushing their partner away from them or, alternatively, pulling their partner closer to them. I interpreted their pushing and pulling as attempts to maintain control over their situations, protect themselves, and ultimately avoid further rejection. It is noteworthy that each of the women utilized both strategies. As demonstrated below, at different points in their dating lives, Anna, Kiara, and Beth all pushed and pulled in a seeming attempt to maintain psychoemotional wellness within the context of their intimate relationships.

**Pushing.** Perhaps the most obvious way to avoid putting oneself in a vulnerable place is to avoid relationships all together. For Kiara, pushing potential partners away is a current reality: "I'm not even looking for a good guy..." she mused, "I just think guys at this age are so selfish. Chances are I'm not going to come across a good guy and if I do, because of how I feel right now, I'll avoid him." She proved this to be the case when she was recently asked to go on a dinner date with a fellow classmate: "Basically my response was 'no' and I walked off. I didn't even give an explanation...and he's a really nice person...it's just, no," she explained flatly. When probed about her motivation behind her behaviour, she spoke in a way that suggested a belief that, inevitably, if she began a new relationship it would end in rejection:

I'm not interested at all [in dating]. You think you find a nice guy...and he change[s] along the way...then you meet the next guy and they change on you, and then it's like, oh, there I go again, putting everything in for one person...to screw me over. So no...not until I can afford to lose my time and energy and all my emotional strength on someone again. I have too much to lose right now to spend it on anyone just for them to do something stupid to me again.

Anna had a similar view, especially in the case of marriage:

I don't want to get divorced. Nobody does. But then, marriage does end up bad for a lot of people...so you're pretty much taking a chance...so I guess that's my biggest concern...If I'm gonna end up divorcing, then I probably wouldn't bother to get married...I'd just have fun.

Having fun, for Anna, does not mean pushing men away altogether. Instead, she employs a different strategy: "I ended all of my relationships," she recalled, "I'm probably also the one who's been rejecting people. Like Kiara, her words suggest a belief that a relationship may begin "beautiful" but will evolve into something else:

I feel like when you're in a serious relationship...somebody will want to have a good ending, which means marriage...I'm kinda afraid of that. So maybe, this is also why I'm attracted to irresponsible guys...because I subconsciously know that it's not going anywhere...it's not going anywhere so it's going to be beautiful.

Anna's excerpt additionally brings to light the possibility to push partners away *within* a relationship which can be further demonstrated by Beth's experiences. In the beginning of Beth's relationship with Adam, she recalled:

I tested him or tried to push him away...I just said [to him], 'I'm not really sure if I want to be with you, but we'll just see how things go...' pretty much to tell him, don't be surprised if I break up with you.

Beth, however, did not receive the reaction she expected: "He pretty much got up and was like, 'fine, if I'm not good enough for you I'm leaving.'" Despite her attempt to push him away, her response suggests that her intent was not to actually push him away, but prove to her that he would stay:

I didn't expect him to have a backbone and just expected him to let me walk all over him...I didn't let him go...I basically had to tell him why he shouldn't leave because I actually really liked him! It really taught me a lot about him quickly because I knew that...we were equal and he wasn't doing me a favour by being with me.

Beth recalled, "I did everything possible [so] if he wanted to break up with me or not be with me [he could]...I told him...everything that you could think of that would make him leave me." For Beth, Adam passed her test and allowed her to feel safe to continue in the relationship: "We tested each other so much that I think we're both staying," she said confidently. Despite this confidence, this was not the last time she attempted to push Adam away.

It seems that once one is comfortable in a partnership, pushing takes on a different form, one which appears in response to a feeling of vulnerability:

My first inclination is either to fight or flight...it's either one of the two...I'll like, smack him or something like that. Or close the door or go to a different room. Or if he gets mad...if we're fighting...I'll go sleep on the couch or something...he gets so mad.

“I wasn’t willing to make myself vulnerable,” Beth reflected, “I wouldn’t put myself out there...even though it was really low risk.” Beth’s excerpt not only demonstrates behaviour that can be interpreted as “pushing” but one’s partner’s response to being pushed away:

I would get upset at him if he wouldn’t come give me attention, like a hug or a kiss or an ‘I love you’...and instead of going to talk to him I would like, smack him...just like, show him that I’m mad at him...it got to that point where he knew that me hitting him...was wanting affection.

While the motivation behind pushing may be to protect the self from the pain and vulnerability inherent in being rejected, it seems as though when a partner is pushed away, the result is not necessarily positive for the relationship: “I think this is really bad for relationships,” Anna reflects. She recalled her own experience of being in a relationship with someone she considered to be a “good guy:” “He actually said to me that ‘I don’t feel like you can trust me...I feel this wall around us...that you’re not letting me in’....people are not stupid.”

**Pulling.** Despite the participants’ attempts to push partners away, all three women also spoke about their experiences in the relationships which they allowed themselves to have. It seemed as though once the women let their guards down and let a man into their lives, they employed a new means of self-protection which I named *pulling*. The word pulling reflects attempts to keep one’s partner close, theoretically, reducing the chance of being rejected or hurt by them. Anna and Kiara had similar experiences in that they both stayed in relationships in which their needs were not being met by their partner. For both women, this meant staying in a relationship knowing that their partner was cheating on them. Anna explained:

It bothered me. I felt I couldn’t trust him anymore. Like I tried to trust him but I started to feel...I’m questioning him about everything he said. It was going out of control...we got

in more fights...it was really bad...it wasn't going anywhere...but I wanted him so badly...so I still let it happen.

In Kiara's story, *pulling* additionally took the form of repeatedly forgiving a partner's indiscretions and giving partners second chances at the relationship: "He kept on saying he loves me, he is in love with me...so I was like, alright, I understand," she recalled in regards to Mike's choice to spend his time with his friends over her. Kiara rekindled her dating relationship with Dan once and Kent twice but had an on-off relationship with Mike for two years:

The first six months were perfect. We were in our honeymoon stage...and then after that it was like, probably once every three months we would get in a fight, and then the last six months we got in a fight twice a month to the extent where we were like, yeah, we don't want to be together...let's end it. And then a couple days later, no I want to be with you. And then a week and a half after that...we would get in a fight again.

When prompted for her motivation behind giving her partners so many chances she explains:

I gave a lot of chances because I don't like to not have anyone. I guess at that point...I love[ed] to have someone fuss over me and give me attention...I thought if I had broken up with them, because of the person I am and I'm not very open with guys, I probably couldn't find a guy to give me attention for a long time so while I can get the attention, I'll keep it.

Both Anna and Kiara's stories seem to demonstrate a belief that it is better to be with the wrong partner than no partner at all. Thinking back to a relationship in which her partner slept with his ex-girlfriend while dating Kiara, she reflected:

I had someone who was treating me really nicely and it was all a lie. And I was like, I don't want to give it up though...I got obsessed with the fact that I just wanted attention and that's why I stuck in it.

Interestingly, her perspective has changed since the incident: "If I didn't crave that attention...which is something I'm realizing I don't need now...I would have left a long time ago." It seems that at the time of her relationship, she sought attention as a means of measuring her self-worth, but as her excerpt demonstrates, she no longer requires this type of validation. This insight suggests that one's relational needs are continuously evolving depending on the circumstances.

For Beth, the ideas of pushing and pulling occurred simultaneously as evidenced by her tendency to push other people away in an attempt to pull her partner closer:

I have a wall that I don't let people in...I'll be friendly...but I don't let people in...it's not that I'm consciously like, 'no I don't want you in' I've just noticed that I'm doing it...So I'm working on just letting them into our bubble.

She seems to believe that the closer others get to Adam, the further she will be from him.

As demonstrated, the women's tendencies to push romantic partners away or pull them closer can be understood as a means of protecting themselves against further rejection. The need to employ either of these strategies seems to come and go depending on the women's life circumstance at a particular point in time. The fluidity of these types of behaviours seems to suggest that rejection sensitivity is dynamic rather than constant.

### **Wait...Is it Happening Anyway?**

Despite the women's best efforts to attempt to control their romantic situations, the women still seemed to grapple with the likely possibility that they would be hurt again. Kiara

recalled her mother telling her, “You are looking for everything wrong that you could possibly find in every single guy and obviously something is wrong...because there is something wrong with everyone...including yourself!” This excerpt demonstrates Kiara’s lack of trust in partners and tendency to search for possible signs that rejection may occur with the intention of getting out before it’s too late. Struggling with trust and a continuous need for proof that one’s relationship is secure was a common thread between all three participants. Not only were the women’s minds continuously taunting them with perceived threats, the women also had the shared experience of feeling a physical reaction in response to a potential threat. It seemed as though an automatic physiological reaction acted as a warning for the women to proceed with caution and then go on to assess the potential threat in a more mindful, deliberate way.

**Physiological responses.** A common thread between the participants was evident in each of their descriptions of the physiological goings on in their bodies when they felt threatened in some way. While the perceived threat of potential rejection was unique to each participant’s circumstance, their visceral reaction to the threat took a similar form. In Anna’s case, the prospect of her partner cheating on her evoked a physiological response. “The first relationship I had...I caught him...three times cheating on me...I feel like with the third guy...I had the exactly same feeling...” she explains, suggesting her particular sensitivity to the prospect of a partner cheating on her. “You feel your heart kind of stop beating for like a second...and then...I feel myself sinking...and breathless...and just, I couldn’t believe this is happening.” Anna went on to discuss how “that moment reminded me of the first serious relationship I had” demonstrating her personal link to the initial experience of rejection and her automatic response to the possibility of it happening again.

Kiara talked about a similar experience. Her physical reaction occurred at the prospect of her current partner ending the relationship. “Mike and I got into a huge fight and I thought he was going to break up with me,” she recalled:

I got a panic attack and I couldn’t breathe...I started crying to the extent that I cried the entire night. I woke up the next morning with swollen eyes. I cried and I cried and I cried.

I didn’t eat for two days...I literally felt like I couldn’t walk because I was so weak.

She identified that her panic was solely in response to a fear that her partner would leave her and was prompted by a discussion that left her feeling vulnerable in the relationship: “I thought...he was starting to realize that we weren’t going to work out...that’s when I started freaking out.”

While Kiara identified this incident as the greatest extent to which she had a physical reaction to potential rejection, it was not an isolated occurrence. When her relationship with Kent took a turn for the worse she recalled, “I would start to feel sick because I always thought...Kent is the second guy that I’ve slept with so how is this happening to me again? I felt nauseous at the fact that I had such an intimate moment with somebody who’s treating me like this again.” This particular example highlights Kiara’s sensitivity to a partner leaving after having a sexual relationship with them.

Like Kiara, Beth also reported a feeling of panic: “it’s not just a panic, it’s a mean panic!” she explains, brought on by “a feeling of unease.” For Beth, this type of reaction occurs in response to “anything that takes him away or I think it might” which once again, is seemingly reflective of her original experience of rejection by her father.

**Trust and distrust.** Throughout the women’s stories, there was an interesting juxtaposition between trust and distrust. “A really good relationship for me would be the feeling that...I can trust this person and it’s comfortable to simply be with this person,” Anna explained,



demonstrating the believed importance of being able to trust one's romantic partner. Allowing trust to occur, however, seemed to pose a challenge for all three women. Anna shared:

I feel I have a problem trusting [boyfriends] so much...I've met guys who like, really love me...and then even though I know they love me...I still feel I have problems believing it...I would think, even if he doesn't [lie] now, maybe he would do it later.

Kiara agreed that "it's hard to trust."

Beth's story added another dimension to the trust-distrust continuum in that her partner could sense her lack of trust: "How do you not trust me? How am I supposed to trust you if you can't trust me?" she recalls him asking her, "He got really upset just based on that fact that he felt like I didn't trust him." She explained herself by saying, "It's not him that I don't trust...it's how much he can take sometimes." Despite the fact that she has a committed, loving partner, she expressed concern that one day she'll "push [his] buttons too far" and he'll decide to "throw in the towel." Anna too experienced a partner's questioning of her lack of trust and found it extremely difficult to explain to him why she felt the way she did: "How am I going to explain to my boyfriend that, you know, I don't trust you because my ex-boyfriend did so and so to me?" To her, opening up about a weakness "would make her look bad" and she worries that "it would be one of the reasons we fight in the future."

It would seem that the women's lack of trust stems from their prior experiences of having their trust broken. "I've learned not to trust people much," Anna mused reflecting back on her experiences of being rejected by romantic partners. While withholding trust may be learned as a protective mechanism, it can pose a challenge: "It does make it difficult for me to fall in love because if I'm always worrying and not trusting people, then there is no way I can fall in love," she reflected.

To reduce the risk inherent in trusting another person, Anna and Kiara both shared strategies that allow them to feel more comfortable: “For trust to happen I think one important thing is that we have to have some common friends...we have to kind of share the same circle...be in the same world,” Anna explained, “[If] everybody knows him I do feel safe...I guess it’s a form of social control.” Kiara takes a different approach with the same goal of lessening the risk:

I purposely make sure I’m their friend first just because I guess when you’re their friend long enough, you learn things about them and they confide in you certain things that they probably wouldn’t tell you if their first interest was to be with you...and from that, I can judge...the kind of person they are...instead of just getting into something and finding out later on and [having to face something] that could have been avoided.

**Hyper vigilance.** Perhaps one of the most prominent experiences shared by the women was that of anxiety due to suspicion. “I’ve become very sensitive about the details,” as Anna put it. The women’s overall lack of trust of romantic partners seemingly lead them to hyper vigilantly search for signs that rejection may occur. They then experience anxiety until they either gain proof that there is no threat, or convince themselves that there is no reason to be concerned. Anna gave the following example:

When I’m in a relationship and I try to call that person and the persons not picking up, I’ll get anxious...I’ll be thinking, what’s he doing? Is this a sign that he’s telling me that he’s lying to me? ...then I would be thinking, okay, I wanna find out what he’s doing...I might not be able to trust him...and...I would keep that thought in mind until I could prove it.

Kiara shared feeling a similar rush of anxiety after seeing her partner “like” other women’s Facebook photos. She rapidly shared with me the questions that flash through her mind when she sees this type of activity:

What do you like about it? Do you like her? Do you like how she looks? Do you like the scenery? Why do you like it? If she looks really good, does she look that good all the time and you like her all the time? Or is it just that she doesn’t look that good and you like how she looks in this picture? Are you trying to tell her to look like that more often so you do like her more often? I don’t know.

“It sounds so psychotic,” she conceded, in regards to her reaction. “I’m about a centimetre close to my phone ready to text them ‘why did you do that?’ But then I realize that kinda gives me the label ‘psycho girlfriend’ so I don’t do it.” In this case, Kiara recognized her response as a potential overreaction that may not be well received by her partner; thus, did not get the security she was looking for, leaving her to deal with the anxiety on her own. Anna agreed that it is not in her best interest to communicate her thoughts to her partner: “When I’m feeling really suspicious about his activities I usually don’t show,” she explained, “I know if I show...if he’s really doing something bad, he wouldn’t know that I know, so I usually try...to pretend nothing happened.” Instead of communicating her concerns, Anna launches an independent investigation:

Say this guy told me he was...a grad student...I will actually go online and search it...just to know...if he’s lying or not. But there are unsearchable things that he says that I will remember. I would say I have a very good memory...I remember it and I will try to prove it later on...I will try to bring it up in a conversation to see if it’s really true...I do things like that.

She further explained her motivation: “I don’t want to get hurt. I do have this fear that maybe it might not be true and it would be better if I catch him first.” Unfortunately, deciding to keep these types of worries to oneself can lead to an unhealthy build-up of anxiety: “When anything bugged me, or he did anything that made me a bit suspicious, and then something else was added onto it, it kept getting worse and worse...” shared Kiara.

In her committed relationship, Beth experienced similar feelings of anxiety; however, the situations which evoked anxiety as well as her reactions to the anxiety were unique. “Anything that takes him away, or I think it might, it just like, I don’t know, gets my spidey senses out or something!” she remarked. For Beth, anxiety tends to provoke a jealous reaction:

I found myself getting really jealous of people I shouldn’t be jealous of...like his mom and his parents and like, anybody who wants to spend time with him. It’s not necessarily jealousy about other girls it’s about anything that I feel could like, start pulling him away from me.

She shared that there was one particular incident in her relationship she found especially anxiety provoking, which took place during a time when the couple was forced to live in different cities; therefore, were only able to spend time together over the weekends:

I started feeling like that [the weekends were] my time that I would get to see him...but it turned into the time that his family got to see him...and I just started feeling really ripped off...because the weekends weren’t my time with him anymore...so it blew up out of proportion.

Since then, Beth shared that she felt particularly anxious when faced with a similar situation:

Ever since then, I notice whenever we are going to visit his family, I get really nervous about him not spending enough time with me in a sense...even though it’s been a long

time since, and that hasn't happened since, every single time I'm just like, what if it happens again?

As she shared her experience, she made it known that she is aware that there is no threat and her anxiety is an overreaction, but it's one that seemingly cannot be controlled easily: "Honesty, I did the same thing with my parents," she recalled, "I bring this new guy home and after a while they start really liking him...and [I] start to get like, 'back off guys!'" While the reaction may be automatic, Beth shared that she has been consciously working to override useless worries: "Initially I reacted to anything that could possibly be a threat...now my inclination might be to do that and then I can talk myself down a bit and be like, 'Beth, why would you be jealous of like, somebody's mom?' and it's just like, relax, back off, and open up..."

**Emotion.** It logically follows that one would experience a surge of emotion when in a place of threat, especially when one's anxiety turns out to be warranted. The majority of relationships that Anna and Kiara took part in did not provide them with a sense of security and both women were faced with responding to hurtful behaviour by their partners. Anna is quick to describe her ex-partner as an "asshole" and a "bastard." "He can go to hell," she remarked, exhibiting her anger towards her partner's indiscretions. A sense of wanting revenge was also shared by both women. "You hurt me, I want to hurt you back," Anna exclaimed recalling when she found out her partner was cheating on her. Kiara felt similar: "Guys are full of shit...I'm so sick of it...I think all of you should get cheated on!"

Reading between the lines, it was easy to sense the hurt and feelings of rejection masked by the anger the women expressed: "I don't know...I don't understand what's wrong with me. It pissed me off because he could never explain it and instead of letting me go, he kept me

[hanging],” Kiara recalls. Thinking about her ex-partners relationships with other women, she said:

He and the girl didn’t even get along to well...they just slept together all the time. So I was just like, okay, nothing’s wrong with that if that’s what you want but once again, he said whatever I had wasn’t good enough...not a good feeling for your self-esteem.”

Kiara’s excerpt not only demonstrates how this particular rejection caused her to feel significant hurt, but how a woman’s experiences within intimate partnerships can largely affect her identity and sense of self-worth.

### **A Continuous Journey**

While the women’s understandings of their own experiences are continually evolving, their lives are not at a stand-still meaning they are learning while experiencing. Listening to the women’s experiences allowed me to hear how each woman has seemingly accepted her own relationship with rejection sensitivity, turning it into a learning experience and opportunity to learn and grow. I believe the word journey best reflects the experiences the women are living. Their journeys seem to begin with an attempt to understand how their experiences of rejection have influenced other aspects of their lives, followed by an attempt to override the negative effects that may have stemmed from their original experience of rejection. The women’s stories have demonstrated that this is no easy feat, especially in terms of how their experiences of rejection have played a role in their romantic lives. It is quite possible that rejection sensitivity is a lifelong journey, as demonstrated by the following excerpt from Beth:

I would think it would be similar to...being an alcoholic. You can quit drinking and behave but...deep down, you still have that tendency and you can either choose to succumb to it or overcome it sort of thing. So it’s probably like that...if something pushes

you so far that you don't give a shit about something or whatever, maybe you're going to resort back to it. So I would say yes and no [to overcoming rejection sensitivity]...but no.

**Understanding.** Perhaps one of the most intriguing patterns I found in the women's stories was how their understanding of the self and relationships has evolved throughout their experiences, and how hope for mutually satisfying and beneficial relationship in the future has never truly left their side. It seemed as though the first hurdle the women faced in making sense of their experiences in romantic relationships was letting go of what "could have been." For Anna and Kiara whose identified experiences of significant rejection were also their first experiences of dating, restructuring their view of romantic relationships was inevitable. Prior to having experienced a romantic relationship, Anna had a significantly different view of what it would be like:

It was like how we learn it from fairy tale stories...you pretty much would just be with the one person...or it seems like that...and you think it's going to last forever and ever and things will just be good. That's the kinda image that I got for how a relationship should be before I really got in it...you learn that guys are not gonna act like prince charming.

Kiara shared an eerily similar view: "I figured in my fairy tale land...my first guy is going to be the guy that I marry...reality slapped me in my face." It seems as though a women's view of relationships is largely dependent on their experiences up to that point. For Anna, who has not yet had the experience of a trusting, committed relationship, her current view of relationships remained quite negative. She demonstrated her process with a metaphor:

When I was in undergrad, I thought grad students were cool! Now, when I'm a grad student, I feel...this life sucks! I just want to get out of it! Out of all the romantic

relationships I've been in, it's just like that...it doesn't look as good as it appears...before you started dating anybody...you want to experience that...when you started dating, it's not cool at all, it's not fantastic...it's actually really bad...there will be times you wish you'd never known this person.

Interestingly, while the women's current view of relationships is quite dark, both women exhibited the capability to look ahead to the possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship in the future, suggesting an aspect of hope, despite all that has happened to them. Kiara explained:

I do think [good guys] exist...the same guys that I think are bad now...I kinda think of it as a phase. I don't think everyone's bad...eventually I'm willing to settle down for the right person...I just think guys at this age...most of them are so selfish...eventually I'll want to be in a good relationship with a nice guy, but not right now.

Anna's actions also suggest an aspect of hopefulness for the future in the sense that she sought out her third relationship by joining an online dating site. "Maybe if, when one day, I find that person, then it would be good," she says in regards to being part of a long-term, committed partnership.

**Living with.** Upon listening to their experiences, it was clear that each woman is in a different place on her journey with rejection sensitivity. Despite where they are in their personal understanding of their experiences, it is important to recognize how the women continue to move forward in their journeys and live with their sensitivities.

For Anna, identifying with the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity has both pros and cons: "It's the same thing with every learning process. You learn the good things and bad things about it...and it's a learning process!" She explained that for her, the anxiety that she often feels can be useful:



The anxiety emerged after I was cheated on [but] now I'm better with... identifying what's a lie, what's not, and what might be cuz' you know, I've been thinking about this question all time...I don't want myself to lose that kind of ability.

She referred to her anxiety as an "adaptive strategy" and added "I believe in relationships that can last forever but...I believe that involves a lot of work, a lot of compromise, and courage...and stubbornness!" This excerpt demonstrates that her hardships in love have shaped her view of healthy relationships, perhaps, to something more attainable than her original view of "prince charming."

Kiara's learning process also included a renewed and more realistic view of relationships and a promise to herself that she would learn from her mistakes. For Kiara, this first involved overriding old views of self-blame and self-doubt: "I should be different. I should be easy going. I should be angelic and feminine and stuff that I usually wasn't," she once said, suggesting an old belief that the real Kiara was not good enough, and if she was different, her relationships may have worked out. Her current view has evolved greatly, and reflects a much healthier self-concept:

I've basically realized that most of my friends that are in relationships...strong ones...they didn't change for the person. I did change a lot and I tried to meet their needs instead of them meeting my needs...that's one thing I'm not going to do again and I realize... things are fine with me...it's just not the right person. Nothing is wrong with me. Everybody has faults and somebody likes them for it.

Kiara reflected on her experiences in her past relationships celebrating what was good and recognizing what could be improved in the future, which once again is illustrative of hope shining through:

When you're in a happy relationship, the happiness that I got out of the happy times [was]...so extreme that I don't even know how to explain how happy and how I couldn't stop smiling. Yeah, there were bad times, but the good times were so good that it made everything worth it and I guess if I could get more of that time in one relationships...more of that time than bad times, then it's not going to be as bad...maybe it will work out.

As Anna and Kiara learn from their experiences and look forward to mutually satisfying relationships in their futures, Beth is currently working with her committed partner to prevail over any negative side effects from her original experience of rejection that may be infiltrating her relationship with Adam. Beth's process of understanding began after Adam suggested that there may be a link between her behaviour and her feeling rejected by father:

It was kind of like a bit of a dagger. Not a hurtful one, but an epiphany in a sense...or a shock...because I had never thought about it...and for him to say something that was like, quite deep....it was just really eye opening...but I must have agreed with it, because I sure...responded to it.

Since the couple had an open dialogue about what was happening in their relationship, they agreed to work on it together: "Some days I don't want to work it," Beth laughed, "but he makes me now, because he's like, 'I'm just doing this because it's going to make our relationship stronger!'" For Beth, this meant stepping out of her comfort zone and asking for attention when she needed it: "So if I'll be like, stomping my feet or whatever I do...sometimes he'll be like, 'no, come get it!'" she explained, "Or if I want attention and I'm just like, hitting him...he'll completely deny me of what I want...and I hate it at the time, but he says it's getting a lot better...and I've even noticed myself." Prior to Beth making a change in her behaviour, her attempts to gain attention tended to elicit the opposite effect from Adam. Talking about a

particular incident afterwards, Beth recalled Adam telling her: “I knew I wasn’t giving you as much attention and at times maybe I was avoiding you because you would get such a bad attitude and who wants to be around that?” By having an open dialogue regarding the issue, both Adam and Beth came to recognize their role in the problem and are working towards a solution together. While her immediate “fight or flight” reaction may remain in response to potential threat, she has come to a place where she can recognize her automatic emotion and alter her reaction: “I know better and I work on it now,” she explained. Beth and Adam’s team approach seems to be leading them down a path of living with and learning from rejection sensitivity.

### **Summary**

This chapter explores the experiences of three women who self-identified with the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity. Reflective of IPA research, an attempt was made to gain an understanding of the lived experience of rejection sensitivity by examining individual’s personal accounts of the phenomenon. An overarching theme of *I won’t let it happen again: a journey of self-protection* was representative of the women’s shared experience of protecting themselves from further rejection experiences in their romantic relationships and was illustrated throughout the remaining themes: *I can control things so I won’t let it happen again*, *Wait...is it happening anyway?*, and *A continuous journey*. The women’s attempts to control their relationships and interactions with partners were explored in the theme *I can control things so I won’t let it happen again*. The women’s reactions to potential threats were further explored in the theme *Wait...is it happening anyway?* Lastly, the women’s experiences with rejection sensitivity were looked at as *A continuous journey* which involved exploring the women’s personal understandings of how they are affected by the phenomena and how they have come to *live with* their personal sensitivities to rejection.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present research was to gain an understanding of how women experience rejection sensitivity within their intimate partnerships and how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours have impacted their romantic lives. The following chapter will highlight the results presented in chapter four and present the findings within a wider context by integrating them with current literature. Strengths and limitations of the study will then be considered and the chapter will close with a discussion of implications for counselling practice and suggestions for further research.

While several studies looking at rejection sensitivity in the context of interpersonal relationships have been conducted (e.g. Downey & Feldman, 1994; Levy, et al., 2001; Downey & Feldman, 2004) the researchers have relied primarily on quantitative methods. By studying the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity through a qualitative lens, the present study aimed to address this gap in the literature and provide a level of understanding that has not yet been reached through past research: how women *experience* rejection sensitivity within their intimate partnerships. Upon listening to the experiences of the three women who participated in this study, it was evident that they believed their experiences of significant rejection impacted how they proceeded in their subsequent romantic relationships. An overarching theme that connected the experiences of all three women was *I won't let it happen again: A journey of self-protection*, which illustrated the women's all-encompassing goal to protect themselves from rejection, including the negative implications that experiencing further rejection may have on their self-concept. Three sub-themes were identified that further illustrated the women's experiences of self-protection. The first, *I can control things so I won't let it happen again*, explores the

women's attempts to maintain a sense of control over their romantic lives. Approaches used by the women are compared and contrasted to the avoidant and overindulgent strategies suggested in past research (Downey, et al., 1997). The second, *Wait...is it happening anyway?* contextualizes the trauma-like responses and intense emotion experienced by the women in the face of potential rejection. The third, *A continuous journey* illustrates the dynamic nature of the women's experiences of rejection sensitivity and their shared sense of hope for future relationships.

### **I Won't Let it Happen Again: A Journey of Self-Protection**

The theme *I won't let it happen again: a journey of self-protection* illustrated the interpreted motivation behind the women's thoughts and actions within their romantic relationships: namely, to protect themselves from experiencing further rejection. While the women did not explicitly state a belief that self-protection was the motivation behind their behaviours in their romantic lives, their seemed to be a common thread between each woman's experiences of anxiety and intense reactions in response to perceived potential rejection.

As demonstrated by the participants' experiences, the defensive responses associated with rejection sensitivity seemed to vary depending on the stage of one's relationship and the perceived potential threat (Romero-Canyas, 2010). For Anna and Kiara, who had similar experiences of being rejected by a romantic partner, sensitivity to rejection was apparent in their experiences of anxiety in response to potential threats to their relationships (e.g. a partner not answering his cellphone or liking another woman's Facebook picture). Their responses are consistent with past research that has suggested when an individual who has been previously rejected by a romantic partner becomes involved in subsequent intimate partnerships their defensive expectations of rejection stemming from that initial experience may prompt a self-

protective readiness to perceive rejection (Downey et al., 1999). While each woman's trigger indicating the potentiality of rejection occurring was unique, many of the situations that the women experienced as potential threats were ambiguous in nature; that is, it was just as likely that no actual threat was present. In Anna's discussion of her feelings of suspicion in response to her partner not answering his phone she shares, "he was probably busy doing something else," yet, her logic did not match her experienced feelings of anxiety, supporting the notion that those who are sensitive to rejection tend to readily construe intentional rejection in the ambiguous or negative behaviour of others (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Anna's, and the other women's, reactions in similar circumstances not only support previous findings, but shed light on how sensitivity to rejection can play out in intimate partnerships. The women approached their relationships with an "it would be better if I catch him first" kind of attitude, according to Anna, or "[it's better to find out now] than find out later on," as Kiara put it. It seemed that by constantly playing detective in their relationships, the women hoped to prevent rejection from their partners which is consistent with previous research that suggests reactions to potential rejection are intended to defend the self against further rejection and preserve the individual's social connections (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Although on the surface, it may seem that rejection sensitivity may perpetuate difficulties in intimate relationships, in actuality, the women's thoughts and actions are defensively motivated (Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Kang, 2010).

Overall, the women's tendencies to over perceive rejection by their partners fits well with the previous research on the phenomenon; however, the qualitative nature of the present research allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to protect the self from the pain of rejection. It seemed that the women were not just acting with the intention of protecting

themselves from being rejected but protecting themselves from the negative implications being rejected may have for their self-concept. Consistent with findings by Crocker and Park (2004) which suggest that individuals who are rejection sensitive tend to pursue self-esteem through the acceptance of others, the women in this study had a great deal more than a boyfriend to lose if their relationships ended. If a woman's self-esteem is already low, feeling unaccepted or rejected can result in a negative view of the self in relationships and the feeling that one is not valuable (Crocker & Park, 2004). "What was it with me?" Kiara mused at the end of a discussion in which she recalled that all of her partners treated their ex-partner's better than they treated her, demonstrating her attribution that *she* was lacking rather than her partner or the circumstance. In sum, self-esteem depends on the perceived success or failure in those domains upon self-worth is contingent (Crocker & Park, 2004); namely romantic relationships, for Anna, Kiara, Beth, and likely, other women who identify themselves as sensitive to rejection due to past experiences.

This investment in relationships is consistent with self-in-relation literature which suggests that responsive relationships are a powerful determinant of women's psychological reality and are pertinent to women's self-growth and development (Surrey, 1991). From a young age, girls are taught to notice others people's feelings and affect, encouraging development of the abilities to empathize and nurture; thus, women's identity and sense of self tends to be partially formed on the basis of their ability to make and maintain relationships with others (Surrey, 1991). As such, it has been found that women tend to feel that they carry the responsibility of the successes or failures of their intimate relationships (Sandfield and Percy, 2003). In a phenomenological study by Sandfield and Percy (2003), participant women tended to question whether they fulfilled their emotional obligations as partners following the termination of an intimate relationship. Similar to Kiara's reaction of "what was it with me?" in the present study,

the women in the 2003 study tended to assign blame to themselves and their perceived personal inadequacies for their relationships ending. These findings are consistent with research that suggests that the division of emotional labour in heterosexual relationships is not equal (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993). Duncombe and Marsden's (1995) literature review highlights women's consistent reports of feeling that men are incapable or unwilling to "do emotional intimacy"; thus, women take on the emotion work necessary for the success of mutually satisfying relationships. It logically follows that the experience of rejection could be uniquely distressing for women if they feel that they are responsible for maintaining the emotional intimacy in their relationships. Perceived failure could be particularly damaging to a women's self-concept if the end of a relationship results in a feeling of *I failed* but also a feeling of *I failed, therefore, I am worthless and it's my fault that the relationship ended* (Crocker & Park, 2004; Sandfield and Percy, 2003).

### **I Can Control Things so I won't Let It Happen Again**

Previous literature on the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity suggests that much of rejection sensitive individuals' behaviour within a romantic relationship becomes organized around the goal of avoiding rejection (Downey, et al., 1997). While the women's stories were consistent with this notion, their experiences added insight into what this may mean to a woman who is sensitive to rejection; namely, an apparent need to feel in control over the goings on in her relationship. All three participants shared a want to gain and maintain power and control in their dating relationships which seemed to be experienced as a need to feel that they were making choices within their relationships. While the words "control" or "power" were used directly by the participants, it is noteworthy that these words have a negative connotation in the context of relationships. While I did not want to replace the words of the women, I wonder if



what the women were experiencing could have been better articulated as a need to feel “empowered,” that is, a feeling of inner strength and self-determination (Surrey, 1987) rather than “powerful.” As personal empowerment can be sought and attained through mutually empathetic and mutually empowering relationships (Surrey, 1987) it is possible that a mutually empowering relationship was what the women were truly seeking.

The women in this study seemed to have negotiated their psychoemotional wellness within the context of their intimate relationships by taking a variety of actions within their partnerships. Two main behavioural strategies practiced by rejection sensitive individuals have been previously identified in the literature: avoidance and overindulgence (Downey, et al., 1997). According to Downey et al. (1997), individuals who use the avoidance method abstain from social relationships thinking that if they avoid getting close to others, they reduce their chance of being rejected. Alternatively, individuals who use the overinvestment method hope to avoid rejection by attempting to secure extremely close relationships with others (Downey, et al., 1997). Perhaps one of the most intriguing findings in the present study was that all three women’s behaviours within their various intimate partnerships could, at different times, fit into both of these categories. It seemed that the women went through phases in their dating life which included both avoidant and overindulgent behaviour as well behaviour that could fall somewhere in the middle; thus, it may be that these strategies are best viewed on a continuum rather than as alternative strategies.

In the present study, *pushing* and *pulling* were used to illustrate the dynamic experiences of the participants. Up to this point the literature has not recognized the grey areas that the women shared experiencing. The participants shared a variety of ways that women can “avoid” without avoiding relationships altogether which represent the different degrees of *pushing*, as

well as unique ways to *pull* their partners closer to them. At the time of the interviews, Kiara was representative of a woman who was pushing partners away, as she explicitly stated her current intention of avoiding potential partners. In her past, however, she has also attempted to pull partners closer as demonstrated by her repeated forgiveness of partners who were not meeting her needs and her mindset that it was better to have someone than no one. Anna has also pushed and pulled at different times in her life. She demonstrated the possibility of “avoiding” or pushing without avoiding relationships altogether, for example, by dating men who she did not see a long-term future with. She too, however, stayed with a partner that she knew was being unfaithful, which more closely represents the desire to pull a partner closer. It is noteworthy that Anna and Kiara’s efforts to rekindle relationships, despite often having been betrayed by their respective partners, are consistent with findings from past literature that suggest rejection sensitive women often respond to rejection with effortful attempts to salvage the relationship (Romero-Canyas, Downey, Reddy, Rodriguez, Cavanaugh, Pelayo, 2009).

As Beth was the only participant in a long-term partnership, she provided a distinct look at how pushing and pulling can play out in a committed relationship. Her reactions, such as an inclination to hit Adam in response to his lack of attention, or feeling excessively jealous of anyone who may take him away from her, were consistent with previous findings that suggest perceived rejection can prompt affective and behavioural reactions such as anger, hostility, despondency, jealousy, and inappropriate attempts to control one’s partner’s behaviour (Downey, et al., 1997; Romero-Canyas, et al., 2010). While Beth articulated that “[she] does not abuse him or anything,” and that her reactions are more of an “inclination...to either fight or flight” it is important to consider the dynamics at play in the relationship. Her automatic reaction of hitting him is consistent with research that identifies rejection sensitivity as a risk factor for

anger and reactive aggression that can be revealed verbally or physically (Ayduk et al., 1999; Downey, et al., 1998; Berenson, Downey, Rafaeli, Coifman, & Leventhal Paquin, 2011). Perhaps most intriguing about Beth's story was her partner's reaction to her aggression. Unsurprisingly, it has been found that aggressive behaviours triggered by sensitivity to rejection tend to destabilize relationships and increase the possibility of rejection by romantic partner (Downey, et al., 1998). In part, this was true of Beth's relationship as she recalled her partner admitting that her automatic, aggressive reactions tended to cause him to avoid her. Despite this, however, Beth's relationship remained intact and the couple chose to communicate their needs to one another and work together towards a more mutually beneficial dynamic. The couple's devotion to each other despite their experienced hardships suggests that there is more to learn about the dynamics of rejection sensitivity as a self-fulfilling prophecy. By examining specific types of behaviours within committed partnerships, we may be able to uncover what contributes to partners of individuals who are sensitive to rejection leaving versus staying in their relationships.

### **Wait...Is It Happening Anyway?**

It has been suggested that people learn to associate rejection with certain situations and cues (Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Kang, 2010). Consistent with previous research, it was clear that each participant had her own trigger that activated anxious expectations of rejection (Romero-Canyas, et al., 2010). Interestingly, each woman's trigger seemed to be similar to their original experience of significant rejection: for Anna, the possibility of her partner cheating, for Kiara, the possibility that her partner may leave her, and for Beth, the thought of her partner spending time with someone other than herself. While to a certain extent, one could consider this normal and even logical, it has been found that individuals who are sensitive to rejection are especially attentive to said cues, having a lower threshold for reaction;

thus, experiencing more intense emotions when they occur (Romero-Canyas, et al., 2010). Despite the intensity of their experienced emotions, the women often opted not to communicate their concerns to their partners which is consistent with the finding that women who are sensitive to rejection tend to engage in self-silencing behaviours; that is, they tend to suppress their personal voice or opinions to maintain their relationships (Harper, Dickson, & Welsh, 2006). Unfortunately, as shared by Kiara, self-silencing can lead to a build-up of anxiety which “[keeps] getting worse and worse” likely leading to more intense reactions to perceived threats.

Perhaps the most intense reaction that the women reported experiencing in response to a potential rejection was physiological. In fact, the women’s descriptions of panic attack-like symptoms in response to perceived potential rejection including changes in heart rate, difficulty breathing, and nausea are comparable to those experienced by individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-IV-TR*, 2001). This begs the question, should mental health professionals be viewing the women’s initial experiences of rejection as an experienced trauma? The original rejection sensitivity model does indeed consider the experience of being significantly rejected by one’s parents (via emotional abuse, physical abuse, etc.) an early interpersonal trauma (Downey et al., 1997); however, none of the participants original experiences of rejection in the present study fit this definition. While Beth identified feeling significantly rejected by her father, the rejection occurred in her late-teen years. In fact, prior to this incident, she identified that she had a “really close” relationship with her father. Further, Anna and Beth both shared that they had “good” and “supportive” relationships with their parents and instead, experienced rejection by romantic partners. Currently, the DSM-IV holds a very specific definition of trauma which limits the label to events that include “threatened death or serious injury, or threat to one’s physical integrity” (PTSD; American

Psychiatric Association, DSM-IV-TR, 2001, p. 463) clearly excluding the experiences of these women. Given the mental and physiological reactions the women shared, it is possible that the current definition limits our understanding of trauma and its legacy. It is important to consider the weight of a threat to one's psychological integrity (Brier & Scott, 2006). The termination of an intimate relationship has been regarded as one of the most stressful events one can experience (Leary, 2001). Further, it has been reported that the cessation of any personal relationship tends to be followed by considerable anxiety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Posttraumatic Relationship Syndrome (PTRS) (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2003) has been proposed as a syndrome which results from trauma experienced in the context of an emotionally intimate relationship. PTRS was developed to honour the notion that posttraumatic symptoms are expressed on a continuum; that is, not all individuals experiencing the effects of trauma will meet the full criteria for PTSD (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2003). Vandervoort and Rokach (2003) suggest that rejection in the context of a close interpersonal relationship is particularly likely to create a damaged paradigm of interpersonal intimacy because of the inherent trust one gives to those who they partake in intimate relationships with. Since one is more vulnerable in intimate relationships, violation of trust, honesty, non-maleficence, and fairness is likely to be more traumatic in intimate relationships than in non-intimate relationships (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2003). Consistent with the women's experiences, it is suggested that individuals with PTRS feel a lack of control resulting in a sense of vulnerability; thus, defense mechanisms are created to maintain psychological stability. Given that intimate relationships are so strongly intertwined with one's sense of identity and security, it logically follows that feelings of loss of a sense of belonging and compromised trust towards others can result from the loss or alteration of one's basic understanding of intimate relationships (Vandervoort & Rokach, 2003). While the women's

experiences seem to align with the description of PTRS, it is important to critique the usefulness of further categorizing individual's experiences. It seems that by putting a label on women who have had specific interpersonal experiences with trauma, we may be "depersonalizing" one's unique human experience and discounting the dynamic experience of post-trauma coping (Freeth, 2007) and growth. While it is worthwhile to consider the severity of the impact a significant experience of rejection can have on an individual, I do not believe it to be beneficial to expand the definition of trauma to include women who feel that their original experiences of rejection have lead them to feel sensitive to rejection in subsequent relationships. Feeling rejected is an experience that the majority of individuals will have throughout their life; therefore, most individual's reactions to rejection may be better understood as part of normal human experience. Given that the experience of rejection is largely universal, it is likely that most individuals, at some point in their life, would fit the criteria for PTRS. Given the universality of rejection and post-rejection coping, one could argue that rejection sensitivity should not be a diagnosable mental illness, but instead, regarded and embraced as an inevitable part of human experience that encourages personal growth.

Along with the physiological responses reported by the participants, the women also had the shared experience of feeling intense emotion, especially anger, following potential or real rejection experiences. It is widely accepted that feeling rejected normatively elicits anger (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006) but individuals who are especially sensitive to rejection have a higher tendency to respond to rejection cues with anger that is intense and uncontrolled (Berenson, et al., 2011). Anna and Kiara both shared feelings of wanting to get revenge on the men who hurt them and used profane names to refer to their ex-partners. Past research has explored the link between rage like reactions and certain mental health diagnoses, finding that

rage in response to rejection is more common in individuals diagnosed with borderline personality disorder than those with no diagnosis (Berenson, et al., 2011). While anger may have been the most prominent emotion experienced by the women in response to potential and real rejection, the experience of feeling hurt, pain, and sadness was also shared, which is consistent with previous research that suggests the experience of rejection results in increased risk for depressive symptomology (Ayduk, et al., 2001). While the present participant's reactions of anger likely would not be considered that of uncontrollable rage and reaction of sadness may not necessarily qualify them for a diagnosis of depression, this link does beg the more general question: what part does personality play in the women's reactions? Further, what connections may there be between rejection sensitivity and other mental health diagnoses such as anxiety disorders, personality disorders, or depression? While the answers to these queries are beyond the scope of the present study, opportunities for further research assessing connections between mental health and rejection sensitivity are vast.

### **A Continuous Journey**

The word journey was used to describe the women's lived experiences because their experiences of rejection sensitivity seemed to be dynamic. Up to this point, the literature has seemingly regarded rejection sensitivity as a condition that, like a mental health diagnosis, can be named and understood, but the experiences of the participants of the present study suggest that they are not "rejection sensitive women" (e.g. Downey & Feldman, 1996) but instead, women who have experienced and are continuing to experience rejection sensitivity.

Despite having been rejected in the past, a hope for future romantic relationships was shared by the women who were not currently in committed partnerships. It has been suggested that this sense of hopefulness demonstrated by women who are sensitive to rejection may stem

from the acceptance that they feel in the early stages of romantic relationships which helps maintain the power of the belief that the right partner has the potentiality to meet their needs in the future (Downey & Feldman, 1996). While this notion may have some merit, the privilege of speaking with the women personally leads me to believe that the hope that they expressed comes at least partially, from an intrinsic belief that they deserve acceptance. Further, previous literature stresses the healing power of positive relationships (Romero-Canyas, et al., 2010). In a study by Kang (2006), anxious expectations of rejection were assessed at the beginning of student's first three years of university using the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey & Feldman, 1996). These participants then provided a history of their romantic relationships and reports of their satisfaction in their relationships multiple times over four years. Results suggested that women who reported experiencing relatively more satisfying relationships showed a decrease in rejection sensitivity over time (Kang, 2006 as cited by Romero-Canyas, et al., 2010). Consistent with this finding, Beth explained the evolution of her rejection sensitive tendencies, sharing that she is now in a place where her and her partner, Adam, are working together to override her automatic reactions in response to feeling rejected. Instead of immediately responding with aggression, Beth now attempts to recognize her emotion and alter her reaction. Beth and Adam's team approach is consistent with the suggestion that a highly motivated individual and a partner that can provide effective guidance and encouragement can elicit change (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, et al., 1999.) That being said, the notion that a devoted partner is necessary for change (Downey & Feldman, 1996) does not honour personal agency within women. Given the insight and hopefulness shared by the Anna and Kiara, despite not yet having the long-term experience of a devoted partner, I feel that it is within the woman to make attempts to understand her own thought processes and reactions. Resiliency following romantic rejection is dependent



on factors within an individual (e.g. self-esteem) (Waller & MacDonald, 2010); thus, the suggestion that a partner is necessary to evoke change discounts an individual's intrinsic strength.

### **Strengths of the Study**

There are several strengths of the present study. First, while extensive research on rejection sensitivity in the context of interpersonal relationships has been conducted using various research methods (i.e. established social cognition paradigms, experimental studies, physiological recordings, brain-imaging, and diary studies) up to this point, the use of a qualitative paradigm has been neglected. When used in conjunction with quantitative data, qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation (Mack, et al., 2005). Past research on the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity seems to present rejection sensitivity as a diagnosis, rather than an experience. By concentrating on three women's stories, the present research shed light on the grey areas that cannot be recognized or understood using solely quantitative methodologies; therefore, filling a gap in the literature.

In addition to adding to the primarily quantitative body of literature by using a qualitative method, the use of IPA demonstrates a second strength of the present study. IPA allowed an in-depth exploration of the perceptions of the experiences of women who identify with the current definition of rejection sensitivity. Consistent with IPA, analysis of each individual case was followed by a cross-case analysis which concentrated on identifying similarities among the three women's stories while also maintaining the individual experiences of each participant. By keeping the sample size small, as recommended by Smith and Osborn (1998), I was able to concentrate on all aspects of the women's experiences, without neglecting part of the data, which may have been a limitation of working with a larger sample size (Smith et al., 2009). In addition,

IPA embraces the researcher's subjectivity rather than attempting to remain objective as consistently seen in the quantitative paradigm; therefore, the findings described represent the "double hermeneutic" process which embraces both the participant's perceptions of their experiences as well as my own interpretations. Overall, using IPA allowed for a rich description and interpretation of the lived experience of rejection sensitivity in women's intimate partnerships.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with all research, there were also limitations to the present study. First, the rejection sensitivity model suggests that sensitivities to rejection develop as a response to the experience of significant rejection, especially early parental rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). While past research has utilized quantitative measures such as scales and questionnaires to measure the participants experiences of rejection, the present study assumed that identification with the current definition (a tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection) was enough evidence to assume the individual had something to share regarding her lived experience of rejection sensitivity. Interestingly, two of the three participants experienced romantic rejection, and one experienced parental rejection in her late-teen years. These types of experiences are inconsistent with past research which suggests that early parental rejection is the leading factor contributing to rejection sensitivity and regards rejection sensitivity resulting from romantic rejection as more easily undone and less likely to generalize beyond romantic relationships (Downey, et al., 1999); thus, it could be suggested that the women interviewed were not prime candidates to learn about the phenomenon from.

A second limitation of the study is the possibility of more than rejection sensitivity affecting the women's thoughts and actions within their intimate partnerships. For one, it is

important to contemplate that the women's sensitivities could be at least partially reflective of their cultural backgrounds which is especially relevant considering Anna, Kiara, and Beth were originally from Taiwan, Trinidad, and Canada, respectively. Age and stage of development is also important to consider. It is becoming widely accepted that between the ages of 18 and 25, many women are emerging adults who are going through a time of identity exploration (Arnett, 2004). Originally, adolescence was seen as a time for identity formation; however, in today's society, individuals go through a stage in which they are no longer beholden to their parents, but are neither yet committed to a full set of adult roles (Arnett, 2004). This stage of emerging adulthood allows individuals to explore possibilities in various areas of their lives, including romantic relationships. These explorations in love can be more complex in emerging adulthood than adolescence since they tend to involve a deeper level of intimacy (Arnett, 2004). While adolescent love tends to result in questions of "who do I enjoy being with?" experiences in love during emerging adulthood tend to bring forth more identity-focused questions such as "what kind of person am I and what kind of person would best suit me as a partner through life?" (Arnett, 2004). As two of the three women fit in the category of emerging adulthood by age, and all three women are university students, it is possible that some of the women's sensitivities and tendencies are reflective of this time of uncertainty in their lives. The women may simply be going through a time of identity formation and are navigating experiences with potential partners on a journey to understand what they would like for their romantic futures; thus, some of their thoughts and behaviours may naturally evolve or dissipate as they come to adulthood and attain stability in other aspects of their life.

A third and final limitation to the present study is inherent in the use of our language system to describe experiences as well as my own inexperience as an IPA researcher. When

using IPA, it is the job of the researcher to interpret the mental and emotional state of the participant based on what they say; however, people often struggle to effectively express what they are thinking and feeling, or simply choose not to disclose this information (Smith and Osborn, 1998). Throughout the interviews, I found myself noticing a juxtaposition between the tone of the story and the emotion conveyed by the participant while sharing it. Overall, I would describe my conversations with the participants as light-hearted as the conversations often included shared laughter. Despite the intense emotional undertones of many of the participant's experiences, all three women often laughed at their own recollections of their behaviour and said things like, "it sounds crazy" or "it sounds so psychotic." It is important to wonder about the meaning of these inconsistencies and how they may have affected the data. Perhaps the women were embarrassed of their experiences and sharing the stories without recalling the emotion that went along with the experience was more comfortable? It is also possible that there is a true disconnect between the women's emotions and cognitions, and this disconnect may be reflective of a way of coping aimed to numb the pain of their rejection experiences. As a new researcher, at the time of the interviews, I did not fully recognize the importance of such observations; thus, in future studies I would be more inquisitive, asking participants about the contradiction between their words and conveyed emotions, rather than having to rely on guesswork after the fact.

### **Implications for Counselling Practice**

In a world that is quick to put labels on lived experience, it is easy to regard rejection sensitivity as a possible diagnosis with a specific set of symptoms that have been identified repeatedly in the literature. While at first I considered the possibility of viewing rejection sensitivity as a diagnosis, my experience researching rejection sensitivity through a qualitative lens made me reconsider this view. While there are benefits for many individuals who receive

mental health diagnoses, one must not ignore the potential limitations of diagnosis such as the fact that diagnoses are imposed by outside experts rather than individuals themselves, diagnostic categories ignore the uniqueness of the individual, and diagnosis focuses on symptoms, largely ignoring the people's capacity for self-healing (Freeth, 2007). Damage to one's self-esteem, alteration of one's sense of identity, exposure to stigmatization associated with certain labels, and the creation of ambiguity about the sense of responsibility for one's own wellness are further negative effects receiving a diagnosis can have on an individual (Freeth, 2007; Corrigan, 2005). As such, perhaps my most profound learning from conducting this study was the finding that the experience of rejection sensitivity is not as black and white as has been reported in past literature. It can look one way on one day, and another the next. An individual can think or act a certain way with one partner, and a different way with another. One's experience of rejection sensitivity seems to be influenced by many other factors: What else is going on in the individual's life? Are they meeting goals unrelated to their love life, causing a boost in self-esteem? Are they feeling like they are underachieving in other aspects of their life leading them to feel incompetent or worthless? The circumstances contributing to one's experience with rejection sensitivity are likely endless. With this in mind, I no longer think that one can look at rejection sensitivity as an entity in itself and create a therapy based on the current definition.

People walk into counselling offices every day exhibiting various degrees of "rejection sensitive tendencies" reported in past literature such as avoiding relationships, having difficulty trusting a romantic partner, or interpreting rejection in ambiguous situations for a myriad of reasons. Given the variability of individual experience, it seems that the most logical and beneficial place to begin is to see each person as a living story and learn about the client by creating a strong therapeutic relationship and a safe space for the individual to feel vulnerable

(which is especially important given the present finding that those who are sensitive to rejection have a particular difficulty with allowing themselves to be vulnerable). As it has been demonstrated in the past, as well as in the present study that women's identities are largely influenced by their relationships (Surrey, 1991; Crocker & Park, 2004) the most beneficial therapy may be one that honours the importance of mutually empowering relationships for women (Jordan, 1986; Surrey, 1986) while simultaneously fostering insight into the women's sense of self. An approach that empowers the woman to take responsibility for her own well-being, fosters insight by exploring the past, and focuses on intrinsic strengths to nurture self-esteem could be highly beneficial for women who identify with rejection sensitivity. Counsellors should aim to help clients make sense of what is happening to them, aiding them to understand, recognize and appropriately address somatic responses. Perhaps most importantly, counsellors should help clients understand the universality and normalcy of rejection experiences, while respecting the complexity and variability of each individual's experience and encourage clients to view their unique experiences of rejection as an opportunity to learn about the self through the inevitable highs and lows that occur in intimate relationships.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There are an abundance of unanswered questions related to rejection sensitivity that await answers that require future research. To my knowledge, the present study is unique in its aim to understand rejection sensitivity through a qualitative lens; thus, the possibilities for further IPA studies are seemingly endless. To further understand the lived experience of rejection sensitivity, one could speak with many different populations: individuals who have had a specific rejection experience at a certain age (consistent with past research concentrating on early parental maltreatment) (Downey, et al.,1997), men who identify with rejection sensitivity; individuals

with various sexual orientations, individuals of differing ages, individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses, etc. Given the present finding that rejection sensitivity is dynamic and ever-evolving, longitudinal studies could also provide an invaluable look at how other variables may influence the look of rejection sensitivity throughout an individual's life.

While conducting the present study, I found myself consistently asking questions that do not yet have answers: Why do people who feel rejection sensitive continue to pursue relationships? What gives many women who live with rejection sensitivity the hope and motivation to continue to seek new partners? What variables contribute to individuals choosing to avoid relationships altogether at one point, and stay in unsatisfying relationships at others? How, if at all, does the initial experience of rejection affect the individual's experience of rejection sensitivity (e.g. rejection from one's father, mother, peer, romantic partner, etc.)? How do the women select potential romantic partners? Can an individual who is sensitive to rejection at one point in time, no longer experience this sensitivity later in life? If yes, can an individual work through rejection sensitive tendencies without having a partner or as past research suggests, is the company of a loving, committed partner necessary (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Romero-Canyas, 2010)? While some of these questions may be best suited for further quantitative research and others qualitative, it is my hope that research of rejection sensitivity continues to develop by seeking answers to the above questions, as I believe, we have only scratched the surface of this phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

The present study was the first of its kind that aimed to understand rejection sensitivity as a lived experience. This research contributed a new layer of understanding to the existing body of knowledge by examining how women experience rejection sensitivity within their intimate

partnerships and how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours have impacted their romantic lives. In chapter one, the current, widely accepted definition of rejection sensitivity was introduced as *a tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection* (Downey & Feldman, 1996). This definition stemmed from a relatively large body of quantitative literature that has aimed to understand the dynamics of the phenomenon from a largely developmental perspective.

As an individual who has closely followed rejection sensitivity research, when I first began the present study, I expected my findings to further substantiate the current understanding of the phenomenon. In part, this occurred. All three women shared experiences of anxiously expecting, readily perceiving, and overreacting to rejection within their romantic relationships. As the study progressed, however, I found my understanding of rejection sensitivity evolving. I began to see rejection sensitivity as fluid and ever-changing, rather than constant and measurable. Consistent with past research, the women seemed to operate with the goal of protecting themselves from experiencing further rejection by romantic partners (Downey, et al., 1999), but it also became clear that the sense of control they sought was additionally intended to protect themselves from the negative implications further rejection may have on their sense of selves. Instead of either avoiding relationships altogether, or overindulging in partners with the hopes of attaining unconditional love (Downey et al., 1997), the women phased back and forth between various levels of these extremes, often falling somewhere in the middle. The women seemed to be on continuous journeys of understanding how rejection sensitivity influences their thoughts and actions within intimate partnerships, each woman at a different stage of the journey. When asked if she believed rejection sensitivity could be completely overcome, Beth expertly responded, “yes and no,” an answer that I endorse. While indeed, it seems that rejection sensitivity may be a deeply ingrained response arising from past rejection experiences (Downey,



et al., 1997), the women's shared sense of hope suggests that a women's personal experience of rejection sensitivity is best viewed as an opportunity to learn and grow, whether it be with a romantic partner or on her own. Through the lived experiences of Anna, Kiara, and Beth, it is my hope that women, and those devoted to helping them, will be encouraged to understand their own unique relationships with rejection sensitivity and navigate their own journeys with a sense of hope for mutually satisfying and beneficial romantic relationships in their futures.

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## APPENDIX A: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

### Have you been rejected in the past?

### ...Are you now afraid of being rejected by your intimate partner?

**Are you a woman who has been in romantic relationships where you find yourself anxiously expecting, readily perceiving, or overreacting to rejection (or even the thought of rejection!) by your partner?**

If yes, you are invited to participate in a research study entitled:  
**Exploring the Influence of Past Rejection on Women's Experiences in Intimate Partnerships:  
An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.**

I am a University of Saskatchewan graduate student in the School and Counselling Psychology program looking for participants that meet the following criteria:

1. Female, between the ages of 18 and 30.
2. You believe that you anxiously expect, readily perceive or overreact to rejection, or the thought of rejection, in your romantic relationship.
3. You feel that you have experienced some type of rejection in the past (e.g. parental, peer, romantic, etc.)
4. You have been in, or are currently in, a heterosexual committed romantic relationship.
5. You are able to commit up to 4 hours of your time to partake in two interviews and to review the transcript after the initial interview.

If you are interested, please send the phone number you can be reached at by email to

**Amanda Merkosky:**

**[RejectionSensitivityStudy2012@gmail.com](mailto:RejectionSensitivityStudy2012@gmail.com)**

You will receive a \$50 honorarium to help cover any costs (e.g. childcare, transportation) you may have incurred as a result of your participation.

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## APPENDIX B: TELEPHONE SCREENING GUIDE

R: Thank you for expressing interest in the research study. I would just like to confirm that you meet the participation criteria for the study. First, I need to confirm that you are willing to participate in the study and able to commit to two interviews that will last no longer than 1 to 2 hours each?

R: How old are you?

R: Have you been in or are currently involved in an intimate, heterosexual relationship?

R: Do you feel that you have experienced some type of rejection in the past? This can be anything from having felt rejected by a parent, a friend, a romantic partner, etc.

R: The poster advertisement asked “Are you a woman who has been in romantic relationships where you find yourself anxiously expecting, readily perceiving, or overreacting to rejection (or even the thought of rejection) by your partner?” What about this statement drew you to the study?

R: Great, now that we covered the participation criteria, I would like to set up a time to meet with you and hear about your experiences.

*If individual does not meet participation criteria...*

R: Again, I want to thank you so much for your interest in the study. Unfortunately, I am looking for participants that meet a very specific criterion. You have indicated that you (*insert reason that individual does not meet criteria* e.g. are below 18 years of age; have not been in a romantic relationship). Since the topic of my study is so specific and there are only going to be three to six participants, I need each woman to be (*insert example of passing criteria* e.g. above 18 years of age; have been in a romantic relationship). I could not be more appreciative that you contacted me and am so sorry to have to pass up your offer to participate.

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Interview Questions and Probes

#### Interview One:

1. Please tell me about your history of romantic relationships.

Possible Probes (*used only if the participants have difficulty articulating their experiences*):

- How many have you been in?
  - How long was the relationship?
  - Who ended the relationship?
  - Is/are there any relationship/s that you identify as most significant to you?
2. You have identified that you anxiously expect, readily perceive, or overreact to rejection in your relationships. Please tell me about your experiences of rejection.

Possible Probes (*used only if the participants have difficulty articulating their experiences*):

- Please tell me about some of your relationships with people who you feel you were rejected by.
  - Please tell me about your past relationship with this person.
  - Please tell me about your present relationship with this person.
  - Please tell me about the times when you think about these experiences of rejection.
3. What I'd like for you to do now is tell me about how you believe that those experiences of rejection have impacted your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in your romantic relationships. You can begin wherever you'd like and include or leave out whatever you'd like. You can talk about your past romantic relationships as well as your current one. There are no wrong answers; I am just interested in learning about how you feel your experiences of rejection have influenced your romantic relationships.

Possible Probes (*used only if the participants have difficulty articulating their experiences*):

- Please tell me about a time when you expected to be rejected by your partner.
- Please tell me about a time when you experienced anxiety because you were afraid that your partner was going to/rejected you.
- Please tell me about a time when you feel that you overreacted to a situation where you felt rejected by a romantic partner.
- Please tell me about your confidence level pertaining to your past/present relationship/s.
- How important is being in a relationship to you?
- Please talk about your partner's level of commitment to you.
- Please talk about how confident you are that your current relationship will last.

- Please talk about how you think that your prior experiences of rejection influences how you behave in your relationship.
4. For my last question today, I wonder if you could please tell me about any positives you have taken away from any of the experiences we have discussed today.

Possible Probes (*used only if the participants have difficulty articulating their experiences*):

- Please talk about any personal growth you feel you have experienced.
- Please talk about a lesson you learned because of your experiences that you consider valuable.

**Probes that may be needed throughout the interview:**

- Please tell me a story or give me an example to demonstrate what you just explained.
- Please tell me more about that...
- How did you feel about that?
- What was that like for you?
- What do you mean?

**Interview Two:**

1. During today's interview I would like to discuss with you themes that have surfaced throughout our last interview. The following is a list of themes that have surfaced; do you feel these themes are reflective of your experiences as a rejection sensitive woman? If yes, how so? Is there anything you feel I have missed?



## APPENDIX D: DATA RELEASE FORM

### *Exploring the Influence of Past Rejection on Women's Experiences in Intimate Partnerships:*

#### *An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*

#### Data Release Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have been given the opportunity to discuss the content of my interview transcripts with Amanda Merkosky as well as provided with the opportunity to request a copy of my initial interview transcript and add, alter, or delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the themes identified from the transcripts accurately reflect what I said in my personal interview. I hereby authorize the release of the content of both interview transcripts to Amanda Merkosky to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data Release Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher

## APPENDIX E: APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

|                                    |                |
|------------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>For administrative use only</i> |                |
| File Number:                       | Date received: |



### Application for Behavioural Research Ethics Review

#### *Evaluating Applications*

The matters of greatest concern to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) are the issues of informed consent of participants, voluntary participation, protection of individual privacy (confidentiality and anonymity), and safeguarding participants from any harmful results due to participation or non-participation in the proposed investigation or research project. Our evaluation of an application is based on the degree to which each of these concerns are satisfied; when filling out the application, researchers are urged to consider these points, and to explain to the Beh-REB the steps they will take to address the concerns. Researchers are also urged to consult the [Tri-Council Policy Statement 2](#) for more information and guidance.

The Beh-REB acknowledges the variety of paradigms and methodologies currently available to researchers, and that each of these paradigms entails its own particular ethical issues. Thus, there may be more than one way to address an ethical issue. Researchers should feel free to suggest alternative approaches or to explain why a particular requirement is not appropriate in the context of a given project.

\*\*All text boxes will expand once <Enter> is selected or the cursor moves to the next section.\*\*

| PART 1: IDENTIFICATION |   |  |             |
|------------------------|---|--|-------------|
| 1.1                    | <b>Project Title</b> <a href="#">GN 1.1</a>   | Exploring the Influence of Past Rejection on Women's Experiences in Intimate Partnerships: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis   |             |
| 1.2                    | <b>Principal Investigator</b> <a href="#">GN 1.2</a>  | Full Name: Stephanie Martin<br>Mailing Address: 28 Campus Dr., Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0X1<br>Email: stephanie.martin@usask.ca Phone: (306) 966-5259<br>NSID number (U of S faculty only): slm996   |             |
| 1.3                    | <b>University/Institutional Affiliation of Principal Investigator</b> <a href="#">GN 1.3</a>  | Position: Associate Professor<br>Department: Educational Psychology and Special Education (College of Education)<br>Division: School and Counselling Psychology                                |             |
| 1.4                    | If this is a student/graduate/resident project, please provide the following information: <a href="#">GN 1.4</a><br>a) Student Name(s) and Student ID or NSID (s): Amanda Merkosky (11039449) (am267)<br>b) Supervisor Name: Stephanie Martin |  |             |
| 1.5                    | <b>Project Personnel (Include graduates/post graduates/residents):</b> <a href="#">GN 1.6</a>   | Add Personnel  | Remove Last |
|                        | Full Name: Amanda Merkosky<br>Project Position/Role: Student Investigator<br>University/Institutional Affiliation: University of Saskatchewan<br>Email: am267@mail.usask.ca Phone: (306) 220-3813   | Full Name: Stephanie Martin<br>Project Position/Role: Supervisor<br>University/Institutional Affiliation: University of Saskatchewan<br>Email: stephanie.martin@usask.ca Phone: (306) 966-5259 |             |
| 1.6                    | <b>Primary Contact Person for Correspondence (if different than Section 1.2)</b> <a href="#">GN 1.8</a><br>Full Name: Amanda Merkosky<br>Mailing Address: G.S. 601 Box 16 R.R. 6 Saskatoon, SK, S7K 3J9                                       |  |             |

|      |  |                       |
|------|--|-----------------------|
|      | Email: <a href="mailto:am267@mail.usask.ca">am267@mail.usask.ca</a>  | Phone: (306) 220-3813 |
| 1.7  | Research Site(s) where project will be carried out: <a href="#">University of Saskatchewan</a>   |                       |
| 1.8  | 1.8.1 Proposed Project Period: <a href="#">GN 1.8</a> From (MM/DD/YY) July, 2012 To (MM/DD/YY) July, 2013  |                       |
| 1.9  | 1.8.1 Has this project applied for/received ethical approval from any other Research Ethics Board? <a href="#">GN 1.8</a><br><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No   |                       |
|      | 1.8.2 Please be advised that approvals may need to be sought if you are collecting data from schools, within health regions and may be required from other organizations, agencies, or community groups. Will you be contacting potential participants or collecting data from any such organizations? <a href="#">GN 1.8.2</a><br><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |                       |
| 1.10 | 1.10.1 Status of Funds: <a href="#">GN 1.10</a> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Awarded <input type="checkbox"/> Pending <input type="checkbox"/> Unfunded   |                       |
|      | 1.10.2 Provide name of funding source: <a href="#">Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada</a>   |                       |
|      | 1.10.3 Source of Funds: <input type="checkbox"/> Industry <input type="checkbox"/> National Institute of Health (NIH)<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tri-Council Grant <input type="checkbox"/> Cooperative Group (NCC, COG, RTOG)<br><input type="checkbox"/> Not-for-Profit Foundation <input type="checkbox"/> Internally funded  |                       |
| 11.1 | Name of Sponsor if different from above funding source:  |                       |

## PART 2: CONFLICT OF INTEREST

|     |   |
|-----|---|
|     | 2.1.1 Is there any real, potential or perceived conflict of interest (any personal or financial interest in the conduct or outcome of this project)? <a href="#">GN 2.1</a><br>No.  |
| 2.1 | 2.1.2 Will any of the researcher(s), members of the research team and/or their immediate family members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Receive personal benefits in connection with this project over and above the direct costs of conducting the project, such as remuneration or employment?</li> <li>- Receive significant payments of other sorts from the sponsor such as grants, compensation in the form of equipment or supplies or retainers for ongoing consultation and honoraria?</li> <li>- Have a non-financial relationship with a sponsor (such as unpaid consultant, board membership, advisor or other non-financial interest)?</li> <li>- Have any direct involvement with the sponsor such as stock ownership, stock options or board membership.</li> <li>- Hold patents, trademarks, copyrights, licensing agreements or intellectual property rights linked in any way to this project or the sponsor?</li> <li>- Have any other relationship, financial or non-financial, that if not disclosed, could be construed as a conflict of interest?</li> </ul> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |

## PART 3: BRIEF OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| 3.1 | Briefly describe the project, its objectives and potential significance (250-500 words): <a href="#">GN 3.1</a><br>Central to the human character is a desire for acceptance and a desire to avoid rejection by others (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Unfortunately for many, the evasion of rejection is unavoidable. Attachment theory suggests that people bring expectations from one relationship and apply them to subsequent relationships (Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980). The influence of the attachment model is apparent in the theory of 'rejection sensitivity', which suggests that early experiences of rejection (e.g. parental rejection, peer rejection) can result in the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection by significant others in future relationships (Feldman & Downey, 1994; Harper, Dickson & Welsh, 2006; Asher & Cole, 1990; Downey, Bonica & Rincon, 1999). An abundance of quantitative research has suggested that rejection sensitivity has significant implications regarding how people think, feel, and behave in their intimate relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000; Ayduk, Downey & Kim, 2001; Downey et al., 1999). Despite this knowledge, we know little about the lived experience of the rejection sensitive woman. How do women experience 'rejection sensitivity' within their intimate partnerships? To explore this phenomenon, a qualitative research approach is applicable. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, the present study aims to gain an understanding of how women experience 'rejection sensitivity' within their intimate partnerships and how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours have impacted their romantic lives. |
|-----|---|



|     |  |
|-----|--|
|     | <p>Understanding the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity from a first-hand perspective has promising implications for the expansion of knowledge in the fields of personality and counselling psychology. Knowledge gained from the proposed research may provide insight into the developmental trajectories of women; specifically, the development of the self within intimate relationships. Further, understanding the unique perceptions of rejection sensitive women will allow us to uncover what influences their feelings and behaviours in regards to distress surrounding their romantic lives and will also allow us to consider the role that perceived rejection potentially plays in triggering damaging behaviors that have previously been associated with rejection sensitivity (e.g. hostility, diminished support, jealous controlling behavior, avoidant or overinvestment strategies) (Downey &amp; Feldman, 1996). Gaining an understanding of this phenomenon is important, as the knowledge gained from the proposed research could provide insight on how to break the cycle of rejection sensitivity. It has been suggested that healthy relationships can provide individuals with the opportunity to change (Downey, et al., 1999). Insight into the thoughts and perceptions linked to positive change could be invaluable for those whose romantic lives are suffering from prior rejection experiences as well as valuable to the clinicians devoted to helping them.</p>   |
| 3.2 | <p><b>Provide a description of research design and methods to be used: <a href="#">QN 3.2</a></b></p> <p><b>Research Design:</b><br/>Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is performed with the goal of exploring, in detail, how participants make sense of their personal and social world (Smith &amp; Osborn, 1998). The approach is phenomenological as it includes a comprehensive examination of each participant's lived experience in an attempt to understand the individual's personal perception or account of an event (Smith &amp; Osborn, 1998). As the majority of previous research on rejection sensitivity suggests, mainstream psychology is strongly committed to quantitative and experimental methodology (Smith &amp; Osborn, 1998). IPA deviates from this norm by employing in-depth phenomenological analysis, an effective tactic to study how people think about what is happening to them (Smith &amp; Osborn, 1998). In the proposed study, the phenomenon of interest is how women experience 'rejection sensitivity' within their intimate partnerships. More specifically, how have their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours impacted their romantic relationships? As the goal of IPA is to gain an understanding of the participant's personal perception or account of an event, this methodology is highly appropriate for the present study.</p> <p><b>Method:</b><br/>As the purpose of the present study is to gain an understanding of the participant's personal perception or account of their experience as a rejection sensitive woman navigating an intimate relationship, data will be generated in semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Smith, Flowers, &amp; Larkin, 2009). The interviews will be designed to get as close to the lived experience of the phenomenon as possible by encouraging participants to provide rich, detailed, retrospective accounts of their experiences in their own words (Smith, Flowers, &amp; Larkin, 2009). In IPA studies, interviews are set up as events that facilitate the discussion of relevant topics which in turn, allows the research question to be answered via analysis (Smith, Flowers, &amp; Larkin, 2009); thus, an interview guide with a series of open-ended questions and potential probes (Van Den Hoonaard, 2012) was created for the interviews with each participant and will be used to loosely guide the interaction and ensure that relevant topics are covered (See Appendix A). Questions are worded openly to ensure assumptions of the researcher are not being transmitted to the participant that may lead them towards particular answers (Smith, Flowers, &amp; Larkin, 2009). Of utmost importance is the intention to view the interviews as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Smith, et al., 2009) and to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of the rejection sensitive individual.</p> <p>Two semi-structured interviews will be conducted with each participant and will be audio-recorded for later analyses. The first interview will be conducted with the purpose of gaining initial insight into the experiences of participants. Three general questions will be posed regarding their experiences in romantic relationships, experiences of rejection, and their experiences as a rejection sensitive woman in an intimate relationship. A fourth and final question, which focuses on any positives that the participant may have taken away from their experiences, will be posed at the end of the interview with the intent of bringing the participant back to "neutral" after discussing potentially difficult topics. A second interview will then be conducted with the purpose of presenting the participant with the themes generated from the first interview and engaging in a discussion regarding the accuracy of the analyses (Van Manen, 1990). Any additional data obtained from the second interview will also be transcribed and analyzed for further themes. During the second interview, participants will be asked to sign a data release form for the use of their data collected in the interviews (See Appendix B).</p> <p><b>Data Analysis:</b><br/>There is no prescriptive method of data analysis within IPA research; however, an idiographic approach is suggested, beginning with one case at a time and slowly working up to more general categorizations or claims. The process of data analysis will be completed in several stages:<br/>Stage 1: I will review the transcripts with the intent to make note of anything that initially seems interesting or significant (e.g. similarities and differences; contradictions in what the participant said)<br/>Stage 2: I will start over and this time, look for emerging themes which will not only reflect the participant's original words but my interpretation of their stories<br/>Stage 3: I will attempt to make sense of any connections between the emergent themes. This process will provide me with clusters of themes which represent key aspects of the participant's experience. The second interview, which involves sharing the transcript and established themes with the participant, will act as a confirmation that the themes identified accurately represent the experience of the participant.<br/>Stage 4: As recommended by Smith and Osborn, I will complete this process for each transcript separately. Upon completion of all transcripts, a master table of themes (which represent all participants data) will be created.<br/>Stage 5: In the final stage, I will translate the themes into a narrative account of the data. The thematic analysis will be</p> |

|   |   |  |  |   |                                       |  |   |   |   |                                      |                                      |                                       |  |
|---|---|--|--|---|---------------------------------------|--|---|---|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
|   | presented in a results section, followed by a discussion that aims to link the themes to current literature, and report a final description outlining the meanings inherent in the participant's lived experiences to provide an understanding of how women experience rejection sensitivity within their intimate partnerships.  |  |  |   |                                       |  |   |   |   |                                      |                                      |                                       |  |
| 3.3   | <p>Provide details regarding the duration and location of data collection event(s): <a href="#">GN 3.3</a><br/>         It is anticipated the each interview will be approximately 60 to 120 minutes in length. Interviews will take place in an available classroom at the University of Saskatchewan.</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaire</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Participant Observation</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Individual Interviews</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Focus Groups</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Group Interview</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Non-invasive physical measurements</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Video/audio recording</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Secondary use of data or analysis of existing data</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Home Visits</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Ethnography</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</td> <td></td> </tr> </table> | <input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaire | <input type="checkbox"/> Participant Observation | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Individual Interviews | <input type="checkbox"/> Focus Groups | <input type="checkbox"/> Group Interview | <input type="checkbox"/> Non-invasive physical measurements | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Video/audio recording | <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary use of data or analysis of existing data | <input type="checkbox"/> Home Visits | <input type="checkbox"/> Ethnography | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Questionnaire                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Participant Observation  |  |  |   |                                       |  |   |   |   |                                      |                                      |                                       |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Individual Interviews | <input type="checkbox"/> Focus Groups   |  |  |   |                                       |  |   |   |   |                                      |                                      |                                       |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Group Interview                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Non-invasive physical measurements   |  |  |   |                                       |  |   |   |   |                                      |                                      |                                       |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Video/audio recording | <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary use of data or analysis of existing data   |  |  |   |                                       |  |   |   |   |                                      |                                      |                                       |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Home Visits                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Ethnography  |  |  |   |                                       |  |   |   |   |                                      |                                      |                                       |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                     |   |  |  |   |                                       |  |   |   |   |                                      |                                      |                                       |  |

| PART 4: PROJECT DETAILS |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 4.1                     | <p>4.1.1 Will you have any internet-based interaction with participants? <a href="#">GN 4.1</a></p> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No   |
| 4.2                     | <p>4.2.1 Will your research involve Aboriginal Peoples including First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples? <a href="#">GN 4.2</a></p> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No   |
| 4.3                     | <p>4.3.1 Will the project involve community-based participatory research? <a href="#">GN 4.3</a></p> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  |
| 4.4                     | <p>Will deception of any kind be necessary in this project? <a href="#">GN 4.4</a></p> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No  |
| 4.5                     | <p>Indicate how the participants will be debriefed following their participation (if applicable), and describe how the information on the results of the research will be made available to participants once the study has ended. Debriefing is particularly important if deception has been used. <a href="#">GN 4.5</a><br/>         At the close of the study, participants will be thanked for their involvement and given the opportunity to ask any questions they might have. So that they may access a copy of the results of the study, they will be provided with the researchers contact information.</p>   |
| 4.6                     | <p>Will participants be compensated? <a href="#">GN 4.6</a></p> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No<br>Please include details:<br>Participants will receive a \$50.00 honorarium to compensate for their time and potential travel costs.   |
| 4.7                     | <p>4.7.1 Will participants be anonymous in the data gathering phase of the study? (Anonymous means that no link can be established between the participant and the research - no one including the researcher knows who has participated in the research):</p> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No<br><p>4.7.2 Will the confidentiality of participants and their data be protected? (Confidentiality means that no link can be established between the collected information and the participant's identity)</p> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No<br><p>4.7.3 If yes, are there any limits to confidentiality:</p> <input type="checkbox"/> Limits due to the nature of group activities (e.g. focus groups): the researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality<br><input type="checkbox"/> Limits due to context: individual participants could be identified because of the nature or size of the sample or because of their relationship with the researcher.<br><input type="checkbox"/> Limits due to selection: procedures for recruiting or selecting participants may compromise the confidentiality of participants (e.g. participants are referred to the study by a person outside the research team)<br><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

| PART 5: ESTIMATION OF RISKS AND BENEFITS |   |
|--|---|
|  | <p>6.1.1 Do you consider this project to be: <a href="#">GN 5.1</a></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Minimal Risk      <input type="checkbox"/> Above Minimal Risk</p> <p>6.1.2 Indicate if the participants might experience any of the following:</p> <p><b>Risk of psychological or emotional harm or discomfort (e.g. trauma, anxiety, stress)</b><br/>The topic being explored is sensitive in nature; thus, recalling past experiences has the potentiality to cause discomfort or emotional fatigue in participants.</p> <p><b>Legal repercussions for participating in the study (e.g. possibility of being sued, charged with criminal activity, disclosure of past or future criminal activities, etc.)</b><br/>Due to the nature of the topic discussed, it is possible that a participant may reveal that they have been/are in abusive spousal or familial situations. If a participant reveals that there is a minor involved in a dangerous situation, it is my duty to report this knowledge for the protection of the child. Participants will be informed of this during the consent process.</p> <p><b>Social repercussions (e.g. ostracized, being negatively judged by peers or employer, fired from your job)</b><br/>No.</p> <p><b>Risk of physical harm or discomfort (e.g. falling, muscle pain, tiredness, weakness, nausea)</b><br/>No.</p> <p>6.1.3 Describe how the risk will be managed (including an explanation as to why an alternative approach could not be used). If appropriate, identify any resources, e.g. physician or counselor, to which participants can be referred.<br/><a href="#">GN 5.1.3</a></p> <p>5.1 Risks associated with this study are minimal; however, it is possible that participants may experience some discomfort or emotional fatigue discussing their experiences of rejection, past relationships, and their experience of rejection sensitivity within their romantic relationship. In addition, it may cause negative memories to surface. Participants will be informed that they have the right to determine what is discussed in the interviews and may refuse to answer any question. They will be informed that they have the right to request to turn off the audio recorder at any time. They will also be notified that they have the right to take a break and resume the session when they are ready or end the session at any time. Participants will be given a list of counselors that they may contact to further discuss any emotional discomfort they experienced if they choose (See Appendix C). I will also ensure that the participants know that if they have questions regarding these agencies, I would be happy to provide with any information they may need. In addition, as outlined in the consent form, participants will be informed prior to the beginning of the first interview, that if they discuss a situation in which a child is in an abusive situation that it must be reported, and confidentiality will be broken. As I recognize that the topic of the proposed study is sensitive in nature, my final question in the first interview to the participants is designed to tap into any positive lessons they may have gained from their experiences of rejection. By ending the interview on a more positive note, I hope to bring the participant back to "neutral" and attempt to reduce any discomfort or negative feelings that may have arose during the interview.</p> <p>6.1.4 If above minimal risk, what are the likely benefits of the research to the researcher, participant, the research community and society that would justify asking participants to participate? <a href="#">GN 5.1.4</a><br/>Talking about one's experience of rejection sensitivity in romantic relationship may be beneficial, as it provides an opportunity to gain a more in-depth understanding of one's experience. In addition, participating in this study will help provide understanding of the extent of the impact of rejection sensitivity on intimate relationships and help inform those in the helping profession who work with women in similar situations.</p> |

| PART 6: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
|                                 | <p>Describe the participants and the criteria for their inclusion or exclusion. Indicate the number of participants and a brief rationale for the intended number of participants: <a href="#">GN 5.1</a></p> <p>Smith and Osborn (1998) suggest that an appropriate sample size for a study of this nature is three to six due to the fact that this range allows for sufficient in-depth engagement with each individual case but also allows a detailed examination of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence; thus, using purposive sampling, three to six women will be recruited for participation. Purposive sampling allows for the purposeful selection of participants (Morrow, 2007) on the basis of their ability to provide the researcher with an understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2002; Folkington, 2005). Participants will be selected according to the following criteria:</p> |
| 6.1                             | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Female, between the ages of 18 and 30.</li> <li>2. The participant perceives themselves to fit the definition of 'rejection sensitive' (one who anxiously expects, readily perceives and overreacts to rejection).</li> <li>3. The participant feels that they have experienced some type of rejection in the past (e.g. parental, peer, romantic)</li> <li>4. Has been in a heterosexual committed romantic relationship at some point in her life.</li> <li>5. Is able to commit up to 4 hours of their time to partake in a screening questionnaire (RSQ), two interviews and a review of the transcript.</li> </ol>  |

|     |  |
|-----|--|
|     | A female sample is well suited for the present study because according to previous research, the prospect of disagreement and conflict in relationships tends to elicit stronger rejection concerns in women than men; thus, the strategies discussed are more typically portrayed in rejection sensitive women.   |
| 6.2 | <p>6.2.1 Provide a detailed description of the method of recruitment. <a href="#">GN 8.2</a><br/>Participants will be recruited through poster advertising throughout the University of Saskatchewan campus (See Appendix D). An e-mail address, set up for the purpose of the present study, will be listed so that those interested can make contact with the researchers. Upon receiving the potential participant's e-mail response to the poster, contact will be made via telephone to ensure participants fit the eligibility criteria (See Appendix E).</p> <p>6.2.2 How will prospective participants be identified?<br/>To ensure that potential participants fit the eligibility criteria, an initial telephone conversation will take place.</p> <p>6.2.3 Who will contact prospective participants? Describe the source of the contact information, how they will be contacted and as applicable, who originally collected the contact information. Ensure any letters of initial contact or other recruitment materials are attached, e.g. advertisements, flyers, telephone script, etc.<br/>Student researcher, Amanda Merkosky, will contact prospective participants. The poster advertisement will tell those interested to send an email to the project email address with a telephone number that they can be reached at.</p> |
| 6.3 | In cases where the research involves special or vulnerable populations, distinct cultural groups, or in cases where the research is above minimal risk, the researcher should describe their experience or training in working with the population. If none of these criteria apply, this section may be omitted. <a href="#">GN 8.3</a><br>N/A  |
| 6.4 | Where relevant, please explain any relationship (pre-existing, current or expected to have) between the researcher(s) and the researched (e.g. instructor-student, manager-employee, co-workers, family members/intimate relationships, etc). Please pay special attention to relationships in which there may be a power differential. Describe any safeguards and procedures to prevent possible undue influence, coercion or inducement. <a href="#">GN 8.4</a><br>N/A  |

## PART 7: CONSENT PROCESS

|     |  |
|-----|--|
|     | Describe the process that will be used to obtain informed consent. Please note that it is the content of the consent, not the format that is important. If the research involves collection of personally identifiable information from a research participant or extraction of personally identifiable information from an existing database, please describe how consent from the individuals or authorization from the data custodian will be obtained. If there will be no written consent, please provide a rationale for oral or implied consent (e.g., cultural appropriateness, online questionnaire, etc.) and explain how consent will be recorded.  |
| 7.1 | <p>7.1.1 Describe the consent process. <a href="#">GN 7.1</a><br/>Informed consent will be obtained with a written consent form introduced at the beginning of the first interview (See Appendix F). The form clearly outlines the details of the research project, and participant rights and obligations. Signing the form will signify the participants' understanding of these rights and obligations, and will be accepted as consent to participate. Participants will receive a copy of the consent form for their records.</p> <p>7.1.2 Who will ask for consent?<br/>I, the student researcher will ask the participants for their consent.</p> <p>7.1.3 Where, and under what circumstances will consent be obtained?<br/>Consent will be obtained at the beginning of the first interview by all participants.</p> <p>7.1.4 Describe any situation in which the renewal of consent for this research might be appropriate and how this would take place (e.g. longitudinal studies, multiple data collection events, etc.).<br/>N/A</p> |
| 7.2 | If any or all of the participants are children and/or are not competent to consent, describe the process by which capacity/competency will be assessed, the proposed alternate source of consent - including any permission/information letter to be provided to the person(s) providing the alternate consent - as well as the consent process for participants. <a href="#">GN 7.2</a><br>N/A  |
| 7.3 | Describe your plans for providing project results to the participant? <a href="#">GN 7.3</a><br>If participant's wish to obtain a copy of the completed study, they will be notified in the consent form to contact me at RejectionSensitivityStudy2012@gmail.com or call my thesis supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin at 966-5259.  |
| 7.4 | How and when are participants informed of the right to withdraw? What procedures will be followed for participants who wish to withdraw at any point during the study? <a href="#">GN 7.4</a><br>Participants will be informed in the consent form that their participation is voluntary and they may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time during their participation in the study, without explanation or penalty of any sort. If they choose to withdraw, data collected will be deleted from the study and destroyed, if desired. Participants will also be informed of the limits to their right to withdraw: Once the data is aggregated and presented, it will no longer be possible to withdraw.  |

| PART 8: DATA SECURITY AND STORAGE  |  |
|--|--|
| Indicate the procedures you plan to implement to safeguard and store the data. Identify the person who will be assuming responsibility for data storage (University regulations require the researcher or the supervisor, in the case of student research, to securely store the data at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of five years upon the completion of the study - ( <a href="#">Procedures for Stewardship of Research Records at the University of Saskatchewan 2010.</a> )) |  |
| 8.1  | Who will conduct the data collection? <a href="#">GN 8.1</a><br>I, Amanda Merkosky, will collect the data.   |
| 8.2  | Who will have access to the original data of the study? <a href="#">GN 8.2</a><br>Only myself, and my supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin will have access to the original data of the study.   |
| 8.3  | How will confidentiality of original data be maintained as well as preserving or destroying data after the research is completed. For all data (e.g. paper records, audio or visual recordings, electronic recordings), indicate the: <a href="#">GN 8.3</a>   |
|  | 8.3.1 Person responsible for data storage:<br>At the end of the research project, the results and associated material such as audio recordings and transcripts will be safeguarded and securely stored on campus at the University of Saskatchewan by my supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin, for a minimum of five years. To protect participant's anonymity, signed consent forms will be stored in a separate location from the data records. When the data is no longer required, it will be appropriately destroyed. |
|  | 8.3.2 Data security during transportation from collection site:  |
|  | 8.3.3 Means and location of storage (e.g. a locked filing cabinet, password protected computer files, encryption):<br>Electronic data will be stored on a password protected, encrypted computer. Hard copies of the data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.   |
|  | 8.3.4 Time duration of storage (Must be > 6 Years):<br>Data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years upon completion of the study.  |
|  | 8.3.5 Final disposition (archive, shredding, electronic file deletion):<br>After a minimum of 5 years upon completion of the study, electronic data will be permanently deleted. Hard copies of the data will be shredded.   |
| 8.4  | Indicate how the data collected is intended to be used (thesis, journal articles, conference presentation, media, etc). <a href="#">GN 8.4</a><br>The data from this research project will be used for the purposes of my thesis. The findings may be published and may be presented at conferences.   |

**PART 9: Declaration by Principal Investigator  
(or Supervisor for student projects)**

**Project Title**

Exploring the Lived Experience of Rejection Sensitivity in Intimate Partnerships: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

- I confirm that the information provided in this application is complete and correct.
- I accept responsibility for the ethical conduct of this project and for the protection of the rights and welfare of the human participants who are directly or indirectly involved in this project.
- I will comply with all policies and guidelines of the University and Health Region/affiliated institutions where this project will be conducted, as well as with all applicable federal and provincial laws regarding the protection of human participants in research.
- I will ensure that project personnel are qualified, appropriately trained and will adhere to the provisions of the REB-approved application.
- I certify that any significant changes to the project, including the proposed method, consent process or recruitment procedures, will be reported to the Research Ethics Board for consideration in advance of its implementation.
- I certify that a status report will be submitted to the Research Ethics Board for consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the project remains open, and upon project completion.
- If personal health information is requested, I assure that it is the minimum necessary to meet the research objective and will not be reused or disclosed to any parties other than those described in the REB-approved application, except as required by law.
- I confirm that adequate resources to protect participants (i.e., personnel, funding, time, equipment and space) are in place.
- I understand that if the contract or grant related to this research project is being reviewed by the University or Health Region, a copy of the ethics application inclusive of the consent document(s), may be forwarded to the person responsible for the review of the contract or grant.
- I understand that if the project involves Health Region resources or facilities, a copy of the ethics application may be forwarded to the Health Region research coordinator to facilitate operational approval.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator and/or Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Principal Investigator and/or Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date (MM/DD/YY)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Student Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Student Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date (MM/DD/YY)

**Department Head:** The signature/approval of the Department/Administrative Unit acknowledges that he/she is aware of and supports the research activity described in the proposal (UofB and RGH only)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Department Head

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Department Head

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date (MM/DD/YY)

**SECTION 10: APPENDICES** [\\_GN 10](#)

| Document  | Included?  | Description |
|---|--|-------------|
| Recruit Material(s)   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |             |
| Letter (s) of Initial Contact   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |             |
| Consent Form(s)   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |             |
| Assent Form(s)  | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A |             |
| Research Tool(s) (e.g. Questionnaires, focus group guides, interview scripts, etc.) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |             |
| Transcript Release Form(s)  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |             |
| Other (please specify):<br><input type="text"/>                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A |             |



## APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled Exploring the Influence of Past Rejection on Women's Experiences in Intimate Partnerships: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask any questions you might have about the study.

**Project Title:** Exploring the Lived Experience of Rejection Sensitivity in Intimate Partnerships: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

**Researcher:** Amanda Merkosky, M.Ed. Candidate, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Saskatchewan (Phone: 306.220.3813; Email: RejectionSensitivityStudy2012@gmail.com)

**Supervisor:** Dr. Stephanie Martin, R. D. Psychologist, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education (Phone: 306. 966.5259; Email: Stephanie.Martin@usask.ca)

### **Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:**

The theory of *rejection sensitivity*, suggests that early experiences of rejection (e.g. parental rejection, peer rejection) can result in the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection by significant others in future relationships. The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of romantic relationships in which the women identifies with the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity. Emphasis will be placed on gaining an understanding of how you feel you have experienced rejection sensitivity in your thoughts, feelings and behaviours surrounding your intimate partnerships.

### **Procedures:**

I am asking you to be one of three to six participants who take part in two audio recorded interviews that will be approximately 60 to 120 minutes each. The interviews will take place over a one to two month time period.

The first interview will be semi-structured; meaning, I will ask you four open ended questions on the topics of your history of rejection, your history of romantic relationships, and finally, your experience of rejection sensitivity within your romantic relationship. The questions will not be detailed; rather, I would like you to speak openly about your experiences. Prior to the second interview, you are able to request a copy of the transcript of your first interview, and invited to add, alter, or delete any part of the transcript you feel does not accurately represent your answer to the question posed.

During the second interview I will present you with the themes that have surfaced throughout the study. The purpose of this second interview is to confirm with you the accuracy of my interpretation and its relevance to your experience as a rejection sensitive woman in a romantic relationship. Upon completion of the second interview, I will ask that you sign a *Data Release Form* obtaining your permission to use the content of the interviews in the research project.



The interviews will take place at the University of Saskatchewan. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded and will then be transcribed.

Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

**Funded by:**

This study has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

**Potential Risks:**

Risks associated with this study are minimal. However, you may experience some discomfort discussing your experiences of rejection, past relationships, and your experience of rejection sensitivity within your romantic relationship. In addition, it may cause negative memories to surface. You have the right to determine what we discuss and may refuse to answer any question. Further, should you wish, you have the right to request we turn off the audio recorder at any time. If your discomfort increases during the interview, you have the right to end the session or request that we take a break. Should you experience discomfort as a result of the interview, attached to this form is a list of counselors that you may contact to further discuss the emotional discomfort that has arisen.

**Potential Benefits:**

Talking about your experience of rejection sensitivity in your romantic relationship may be beneficial for you as it provides an opportunity to gain a more in-depth understanding of your experience. In addition, participating in this study may help provide understanding of the extent of the impact of rejection sensitivity on intimate relationships and help inform those in the helping profession who work with women in similar situations.

**Compensation:**

You will receive a \$25 honorarium at the end of each interview. This \$50 total honorarium is to help cover any childcare and/or transportation costs you may have incurred as a result of your participation.

**Confidentiality:**

The data from this research project will be used for the purposes of my thesis. The findings may be published and may be presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. To ensure your privacy, the audio recordings will be kept completely confidential and personally identifying information will be removed when reporting your data. Although I may report direct quotations from the interview, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information will be removed from my report. Confidentiality will be breached only in case of the disclosure of a situation of current child abuse; in which case, it is my duty to report the matter for the protection of the child.

**Storage of Data:**

During the study, data will be stored on a password protected laptop belonging to the student researcher and backed up on the University of Saskatchewan secure Cabinet system for reliable access and maximum security. Upon completion of the study, the results and associated material such as audio recordings and transcripts will be safeguarded and securely stored on campus at

the University of Saskatchewan by my supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin, for a minimum of five years. To protect your anonymity your signed consent forms will be stored in a separate location from the data records. When the data is no longer required, it will be appropriately destroyed.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. If you choose to withdraw, data collected will be deleted from the study and destroyed, if desired. It is important to note the following limit to your right to withdraw: Once the data is aggregated and presented, it will no longer be possible to withdraw your contributions to the study.

**Follow up:**

If you wish to obtain a copy of the completed study, please feel free to contact me at RejectionSensitivityStudy2012@gmail.com or call my thesis supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Martin at 966-5259. The study is anticipated to be completed fall, 2013.

**Questions or Concerns:**

If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point. You are also free to contact the researcher at the email provided above if you have questions at a later time. The proposed research was reviewed and approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Committee on July 26, 2012. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Ethics Office (966-2084). Out of town participants may call toll free (866) 966-2975.

**Consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

|                               |                  |             |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------|
| _____                         | _____            | _____       |
| <i>Name of Participant</i>    | <i>Signature</i> | <i>Date</i> |
| _____                         | _____            |             |
| <i>Researcher's Signature</i> | <i>Date</i>      |             |

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***



## APPENDIX G: COUNSELLING SERVICES

### *Exploring the Influence of Past Rejection on Women's Experiences in Intimate Partnerships:*

#### *An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*

#### **Counselling Services**

Should you experience any emotional anxiety or distress as a result of our interviews, below is a list of counsellors in Saskatoon.

#### **University of Saskatchewan Student Health and Counselling Services**

3<sup>rd</sup> floor of Place Riel

Phone: 306-966-4920

Website: <http://students.usask.ca/current/life/health/>

Fee: No charge

#### **Saskatoon Family Service**

506 25th Street East

Saskatoon SK S7K 4A7

Phone: (306) 244-0127

Website: [www.familyservice.sk.ca](http://www.familyservice.sk.ca)

Fee: sliding scale (dependent upon income)

#### **Saskatoon Christian Counselling**

617 3rd Ave. N.

Saskatoon SK S7K 2J8

Phone: (306) 244-9890

Website: <http://www.saskatoonchristiancounsellingservices.com>

Fee: \$90/hour; however subsidy may be available