

Self-regulation in romantic relationships: The moderating effect of agreeableness on self-esteem
and risk regulation

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of agreeableness and self-esteem on people's accommodation tendencies within the framework of risk regulation theory. Accommodation refers to one's tendency to inhibit destructive responses and respond constructively to one's romantic partner's transgressions. Informed by risk regulation research, I predicted that people with higher self-esteem (HSEs) will report higher constructive tendencies and lower destructive tendencies than those with lower self-esteem (LSEs). As agreeableness is associated with strong self-regulation abilities, I also predicted that people with higher agreeableness (HAs) will report being more constructive and less destructive than those with lower agreeableness (LAs). Furthermore, I hypothesized that high agreeableness will buffer the effect of low self-esteem, such that LSEs with higher agreeableness will report being more constructive and less destructive than LSEs with low agreeableness. Undergraduates ($N = 180$) completed measures of self-esteem and agreeableness. They underwent a relationship threat induction and completed the Accommodation Instrument as the outcome measure. Results showed that HAs or HSEs are more likely than LAs or LSEs to report constructive tendencies, and are less likely than LAs or LSEs to report destructive tendencies in response to their romantic partner's future transgressions. However, the results showed only a marginally significant interaction of agreeableness and self-esteem on one of the destructive tendencies, namely neglect. Only people with higher levels of both agreeableness and self-esteem reported lower neglect when compared to people with lower levels of both or one of the two personality traits. This study highlights the importance of self-esteem and agreeableness in accommodation and risk regulation processes.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships are part of people's everyday lives. Although people in romantic relationships share affection and liking, it is inevitable that they sometimes feel insecure in their romantic relationships. For example, people may have an argument with their romantic partner about a difference of opinion, or they may be upset by their partner's unresponsive behaviours when they need their partner's care. There are multiple ways in which people can react to such insecurities brought on by their partner's transgressions in their relationships. My Master's thesis investigates how people's personality traits influence their responses to a romantic partner's transgressions. Specifically, I research this question within the framework of risk regulation theory, and focus on two personality traits: self-esteem and agreeableness.

Self-Esteem and Risk Regulation Theory

Risk regulation theory suggests that everyone in romantic relationships has a regulatory system for responding to situations that afford both benefits and harm (Cavallo, Murray, & Holmes, 2013; Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Imagine that Rachel is not happy with the lack of time that her boyfriend Ross has spent with her and wishes Ross would change. On one hand, Rachel can bring up the issue and confront Ross about it, thus making an effort to improve the relationship. On the other hand, Rachel runs the risk of being ignored by Ross when she confronts him with the problem if Ross simply does not care. In a situation like this example, seeking connections to a romantic partner and approaching the relationship problem can be risky—meaning that one can either have one's goals and needs satisfied or be rejected by one's partner. Thus, seeking connections can expose oneself to the possibility of rejection. The risk regulation system is a system that regulates how people balance the motive to seek connections with the motive to self-protect.

The theory posits that the underlying determinant of whether a person will seek connections or self-protect is the person's level of trust in his or her romantic partner's responsiveness and care. The level of trust towards one's romantic partner is correlated with one's self-esteem (Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2009; Cavallo et al., 2013). Self-esteem is one's evaluation of the self (Anusik & Schimmack, 2016). When people have high self-esteem, they believe that others will be responsive to and caring for themselves; when they have low self-esteem, they are more doubtful about others' caring and responsiveness (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002). In fact, research on risk regulation theory has used self-esteem as a proxy for interpersonal trust (Cavallo et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2002, 2006, 2008). Outcome measures in risk regulation research often share similarities with the predictor of trust (e.g., perceptions of the partner's unresponsiveness). It is useful in such cases to substitute a self-esteem measure for a measure of chronic trust, because the content of self-esteem measures is different from the content of measures of trust.

Research on risk regulation theory has provided evidence that, in risky romantic situations, people with higher self-esteem (HSEs) tend to approach and seek connections, whereas people with lower self-esteem (LSEs) tend to self-protect. For example, when Murray and colleagues (2008) induced a relationship threat by asking participants to think of a time when they were disappointed by their partner, HSEs reported greater willingness to connect with their romantic partner, such as asking for support from their partner and relying on the partner to make decisions for themselves. Similarly, when Murray and colleagues (2002) induced relationship threat by having participants believe that their relationship was not going as well as they expected, HSEs reported relationship-enhancing behaviours, whereas LSEs reported self-protective behaviours, such as evaluating their partner negatively and reporting feeling distant

from their partner. These behaviours are self-protective because by derogating their partner and relationship, LSEs are denying the value and importance of the relationship to themselves. By perceiving the relationship as unimportant, LSEs can protect themselves from hurt or rejection. These findings suggest that self-esteem plays an important role in people's responses and behavioural intentions under relationship threat. They also support risk regulation theory's proposition that different levels of trust, as predicted by self-esteem, are differentially related to the motive to seek connection and to self-protect under various risky, threatening situations.

Risk regulation research has focused primarily on people's feelings toward and evaluations to their romantic partner and relationships under relationship threat. Risk regulation studies have not focused specifically on how people respond to transgressions by their romantic partner, which is the focus of this study. However, because experiencing a partner's transgressions is similar to the relationship threats typically used in risk regulation research, such as being reminded of a relationship disappointment by a partner, I speculate that when people face transgressions by their partner, they respond in a manner similar to how they respond to a relationship threat. Thus, when encountering transgressions by their partner, people should either connect or self-protect, depending on their levels of trust or self-esteem. Those with higher trust or self-esteem should be more likely than those with lower trust or self-esteem to establish closeness with their partner and resolve the situation through constructive means, such as by calmly discussing the transgressions. People with lower trust or self-esteem, on the other hand, should be more likely than those with higher trust or self-esteem to distance themselves from their partner and avoid talking about the situation.

Agreeableness and Self-Regulation in Interpersonal Context

Certainly, self-esteem is not the only meaningful factor that influences people's responses to relationship-threatening events. Other factors can moderate the relations between self-esteem and risk regulation. One such factor is people's executive resources, which are required for self-regulation (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Hofmann, Schmeichel, & Baddeley, 2012). In a study by Cavallo, Holmes, Fitzsimons, Murray, and Wood (2012), HSEs reported making more positive evaluations of their romantic relationship and other similar approach-motivated evaluations when compared to LSEs under relationship threat—but only when they could use their executive resources. When participants' executive resources were depleted, the effect of self-esteem on people's responses under relationship threat disappeared. One personality factor that is related to executive resources and self-regulation is agreeableness (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001; Tobin, Graziano, Vanman, & Tassinary, 2000). As executive resources are important in risk regulation (Cavallo et al., 2012), agreeableness might therefore play a role in people's responses under relationship threat.

Agreeableness is one of the Big-Five Personality traits (John & Srivastava, 1999). It describes individual differences in being likeable, pleasant, and harmonious in relations with others (Graziano & Tobin, 2009). Previous studies have shown that people with higher agreeableness (HAs) are more kind, cooperative, and generous than those with lower agreeableness (LAs) (Goldberg, 1992). HAs also expect romantic partners to be more caring and responsive than LAs (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997).

To show that agreeableness is associated with self-regulation, Jensen-Campbell and colleagues (2002) provided evidence that agreeableness stems from one's early effortful control processes that originate in infancy. Effortful control involves suppressing a dominant response to

allow for a subdominant one to be executed (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Konchanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000). It is associated with self-regulatory functions and socialization in childhood (Eisenberg, Smith, & Spinrad, 2011; Konchanska et al., 2000). Jensen-Campbell and colleagues (2002) tested participants' performance on self-regulatory tasks typically used to measure effortful control abilities, such as verbal fluency task and the Stroop task. These researchers found that participants' agreeableness scores were positively associated with the performance on these tasks, suggesting that agreeableness stems from effortful control.

Indeed, more direct evidence has shown that agreeableness is associated with emotional and behavioural self-control. In a study by Tobin, Graziano, Vanman, and Tassinari (2000), participants read positively or negatively charged descriptions of emotional events, and then interacted with another person. The results revealed that when HAs felt negative emotions after reading the negative event description, they reported more efforts to control their emotions than LAs. Furthermore, Meier, Robinson, and Wilkowski (2006) showed that agreeableness is associated with strong behavioural control. Half of the participants were primed with aggressive thoughts while the other half received a neutral prime. After the priming procedure, all participants were given an opportunity to administer noises to their ostensible opponent in a task. Results indicated that LAs with the aggressive prime administered significantly higher levels of noise to their opponent than did LAs with the neutral prime. However, HAs with the aggressive prime did not administer higher levels of noise to their opponent when compared to HAs with the neutral prime. Moreover, a subsequent study showed that HAs actually recruited prosocial thoughts if they received an aggressive prime, apparently in order to overcome the aggressive tendencies brought on by the aggressive prime (Meier et al., 2006). These findings suggest that HAs have good control over their emotions and behaviours.

In addition to being related to strong self-regulation abilities, agreeableness has been shown to affect people's responses to relationship-threatening, interpersonal transgressions. In a study by Kammrath and Scholer (2011), HAs evaluated the transgression behaviours of another person in a social interaction more negatively than did LAs, suggesting that HAs actually felt more upset than LAs. However, other research has shown that, despite feeling more upset than others, HAs are able to maintain social harmony because of their self-regulation skills. For example, in a daily-diary study by Jensen-Campbell and Graziano (2001), adolescents and their teachers recorded the adolescents' responses to interpersonal conflicts in school. Although adolescents with HAs rated themselves as angrier, their teacher did not rate them as angry in interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, HAs reported using more constructive conflict resolution tactics (e.g., compromising with the target of conflict) as opposed to destructive ones (e.g., reacting to conflicts with aggression) than LAs.

Agreeableness and Accommodation

The research presented above focused on the effects of agreeableness on general interpersonal relationships. Agreeableness is also related to self-regulatory processes specifically in romantic relationships. One domain of behavioural control in the romantic relationship context that shows differences in agreeableness is a person's accommodation tendencies.

Accommodation refers to a person's tendency to inhibit his/her destructive behavioural intentions and respond constructively following a romantic partner's transgression in a relationship (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). For example, when Ross ignores Rachel and makes her angry, Rachel would demonstrate accommodation if she refrains from acting on her anger and yelling at Ross, but instead talks to Ross calmly about how he is upsetting her. Rusbult and colleagues (1991) identified four types of accommodation that vary on

two orthogonal dimensions: activeness and constructiveness. The active and constructive accommodation tendency is voice, which is characterized by behavioural intentions to approach a partner's transgressions in constructive, relationship-maintaining manners, such as calmly discussing the problem with the partner. The active and destructive accommodation tendency is exit, which describes intentions to approach a partner's transgressions in destructive manners, including retaliating and breaking up. The passive and constructive accommodation tendency is loyalty, which refers to intentions to handle a partner's transgressions in constructive but non-confrontational manners, such as giving the partner the benefit of the doubt and silently hoping that the partner will not transgress again. The passive and destructive accommodation tendency is neglect, which is characterized by behavioural intentions to be silent and distant from the partner, such as ignoring and avoiding him or her.

In order to accommodate, one has to have cognitive resources for effortful control (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Rusbult et al., 1991). For example, in a study by Finkel and Campbell (2001), participants watched an emotionally evocative film and some were instructed to suppress their emotions, which depletes cognitive resources. The depleted participants reported fewer constructive accommodation tendencies than those who received no such instructions.

One study has demonstrated some preliminary evidence of the role of agreeableness in people's accommodation tendencies in romantic relationships. In a study by Perunovic and Holmes (2008), participants with different levels of agreeableness completed Rusbult and colleagues' (1991) Accommodation Instrument either under time pressure or with no time pressure. Since time pressure depletes people's cognitive resources, the researchers predicted that only participants in the condition with no time pressure should show different accommodation tendencies based on their levels of agreeableness. Indeed, HAs reported more

constructive accommodation tendencies than LAs in the no pressure condition. However, HAs reported even more constructive accommodation tendencies in the time pressure condition than LAs, and more than HAs in the no pressure condition. The researchers interpreted this unexpected result to suggest that HAs' constructive accommodation tendencies already became automatic in their daily lives, such that even with insufficient cognitive resources, their default tendency was to be harmonious and constructive. Although this study offered some insights into the role of agreeableness in people's responses to a partner's transgressions, it did not investigate the combined effects self-esteem and agreeableness in the context of partner's transgression.

In sum, agreeableness is an interpersonal personality characteristic that is strongly associated with emotional and behavioural self-regulation, especially in interpersonal conflict situations. Recall Cavallo and colleagues' (2012) study that suggests that having ample executive resources, which are required for self-regulation processes, is crucial for self-esteem differences to emerge in people's risk regulation processes. Since agreeableness is associated with self-regulation, it is possible that agreeableness also moderates the effects of self-esteem on risk regulation in the context of a partner's transgressions. Risk regulation research suggests that under relationship threat, LSEs tend to derogate their partner and relationship. However, I predict that when LSEs have high levels of agreeableness, they might be able to control their relationship-derogating tendencies because their agreeableness confers strong self-regulation skills. Following this logic, LSEs with higher levels of agreeableness might behave similarly to HSEs and/or HAs, and act constructively in response to their partner's transgressions that are threatening to the relationship when compared to LSEs with lower levels of agreeableness.

Present Research

In this thesis, I set out to investigate the combined effects of agreeableness and self-esteem in people's risk regulation processes. Self-esteem has already been shown to be important to risk regulation, and I investigated a risky context for which agreeableness may also be important. Specifically, I investigated risk regulation in the context of accommodation, or responses to a partner's transgressions.

Accommodating constructively or destructively to a partner's transgressions can serve the risk regulating purposes of approach or self-protection, respectively. Constructively accommodating to a partner's transgressions through voice and/or loyalty should establish closeness in relationships. For example, when Rachel decides to calmly discuss the problem with Ross (voice) or give Ross the benefit of the doubt and forgive Ross (loyalty), Rachel is building a platform on which Rachel and Ross can reach an understanding or solution to the problem. Therefore, constructive accommodation allows Rachel to connect with Ross. Similarly, accommodating destructively to a partner's transgressions through exit and/or neglect should protect oneself from rejection. When Rachel decides to break up with Ross (exit) or ignore Ross (neglect), Rachel is denying the importance of the relationship and not allowing room for Ross to express anything, including rejection, in the relationship. Thus, destructive accommodation can be self-protective.

I predict main effects of self-esteem and agreeableness on accommodation tendencies, and that they interact as well. First, I hypothesize that agreeableness and self-esteem will be independently and positively associated with constructive accommodation tendencies (i.e., voice and loyalty), and negatively associated with destructive accommodation tendencies (i.e., exit and neglect). I further hypothesize that agreeableness will moderate the effects of self-esteem,

because agreeableness brings in high self-regulation abilities that could buffer the effects of low self-esteem. In particular, I expect that LSEs with higher agreeableness will report higher constructive tendencies and lower destructive tendencies when compared to LSEs with lower agreeableness.

CHAPTER 2: INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM AND AGREEABLENESS IN ACCOMMODATION

Method

Participants and Procedures

One hundred and eighty participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.53$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.22$ years; 147 females, 31 males, one genderqueer, one unreported gender; $M_{\text{Relationship Length}} = 22.82$ months, $SD_{\text{Relationship Length}} = 24.66$ months; 143 exclusively dating, 17 casually dating, 10 cohabitating, six married, four engaged; 105 Whites, 36 East Asians, 21 South Asians, six Mixed, five Middle-Eastern, three Hispanics, two Latino/Latina, two Africans/Blacks, one unreported ethnicity) who previously indicated in a prescreen mass testing session as currently being in a romantic relationship were recruited from an undergraduate psychology participant pool and participated in this online study in exchange for course credits. Analyses excluded an additional one participant because he/she reported not being in a relationship, and an additional 26 participants because they did not complete the threat induction procedure.

Participants were informed that this study was about “thoughts about romantic relationships.” They first provided demographic information, including gender, age, ethnicity, relationship length, and relationship status. Then, they completed measures of self-esteem and agreeableness. After that, participants completed the relationship threat induction procedure. Relationship threat was induced for all participants because previous studies showed that participants would only show differences in risk regulation processes when under relationship threat (Murray et al., 2006; 2008). As one focus of the present study is on how agreeableness moderates the already established relations between self-esteem and risk regulation, I decided to induce relationship threat in all participants. Then, they completed the Accommodation

Instrument (Rusbult et al., 1991) as the dependent measure. Finally, participants were properly debriefed and thanked.

Materials

Self-esteem. Participants completed the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (e.g., “I feel that I have a number of good qualities,” 1 = *very strongly disagree* to 9 = *very strongly agree*, $\alpha = .92$). This scale has demonstrated strong validity (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001). Please see Appendix A for the full scale.

Agreeableness. Participants completed the 9-item Agreeableness subscale of the Big Five Inventory (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991) (e.g., “I am someone who is helpful and unselfish with others,” 1 = *very strongly disagree* to 9 = *very strongly agree*, $\alpha = .79$). Strong validity evidence exists for this scale as well (Soto & John, 2009). Please see Appendix B for the full scale.

Threat induction. Participants responded to the instruction “Please take a few moments now to think about a time when you felt intensely disappointed, hurt, or let down by your romantic partner. In the space below, please describe what happened, and how you felt about the experience at the time.” This procedure has been shown to induce temporary relationship insecurity in previous studies (Murray et al., 2008).

Accommodation. Participants responded to Rusbult and colleagues’ (1991) 16-item Accommodation Instrument, which I modified to measure participants’ plans for accommodation in the future by changing the items from present tense into future tense. Each item begins with one of the four stems that describes a partner’s transgression (i.e., “Next time my partner says something really mean,” “Next time my partner is rude to me,” “Next time my partner behaves in an unpleasant manner,” and “Next time my partner does something thoughtless,”). Each stem is

followed by one of the four behavioural intention clauses that correspond to each of the four subscales of accommodation, which are exit (e.g., “I will threaten to leave him/her,” $\alpha = .77$), voice (e.g., “I will try to resolve the situation and improve conditions,” $\alpha = .85$), loyalty (e.g., “I will forgive my partner and forget about it,” $\alpha = .77$), and neglect (e.g., “I will avoid dealing with the situation,” $\alpha = .71$). Each item is followed by a scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 9 (*very strongly agree*). Please see Appendix C for the full scale.

Results

Data Analyses

Outliers were defined as any data that were three standard deviations above or below the mean. There was one outlier in participants’ scores of agreeableness, two outliers for exit, and four outliers for voice. The dataset for these three variables were trimmed with the 5% trimmed mean, such that outliers were replaced by the value at three standard deviations above or below the mean accordingly.

I then regressed participants’ scores on each of the Accommodation Instrument subscales onto self-esteem (mean-centered) and agreeableness (mean-centered), and the two-way interaction. (Self-esteem and agreeableness were moderately correlated, $r = .29, p < .001$.)

I hypothesized that agreeableness and self-esteem will be independently and positively associated with constructive tendencies – namely voice and loyalty. I also expected that agreeableness and self-esteem will be independently and negatively associated with destructive tendencies – namely exit and neglect. I further hypothesized that that LSEs with higher agreeableness will report higher constructive tendencies and lower destructive tendencies than LSEs with lower agreeableness.

Next, I will present the findings in two ways: First I present the main results by each subscale of the Accommodation Instrument, by describing the significant or marginally-significant effects that emerged for each subscale. I will also present additional analyses including different control variables. Then I summarize these effects in terms of self-esteem, agreeableness, and interaction effects across the four subscales. For descriptive statistics of the predictors and outcome variables, please refer to Table 1. For correlations among study variables, please refer to Table 2. For a table of the statistics for the main regression analyses, please refer to Table 3.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	<i>M(SD)</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
Age (years)	20.53(4.22)	4.33	25.51
Relationship Length (months)	22.82(24.66)	2.93	18.84
Self-Esteem Scale	6.30(1.55)	-0.30	2.62
BFIA	6.37(1.23)	-0.27	2.99
Accommodation – Exit	2.71(1.51)	0.93	3.21
Accommodation – Voice	7.15(1.37)	-1.08	4.12
Accommodation – Loyalty	4.81(1.62)	0.03	2.18
Accommodation – Neglect	3.15(1.46)	0.67	2.87

Note. BFIA = Big Five Inventory – Agreeableness

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Among Study Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	--						
2. Relationship Length	.56***	--					
3. Self-Esteem Scale	.03	.06	--				
4. BFIA	-.02	.04	.27***	--			
5. Accommodation – Exit	.00	-.03	-.21***	-.36***	--		
6. Accommodation – Voice	-.05	-.11	.35***	.39***	-.59***	--	
7. Accommodation – Loyalty	.01	-.10	-.07	.14*	-.16*	.19**	--
8. Accommodation – Neglect	.04	.03	-.37***	-.30***	.52***	-.57***	.21***

Note. BFIA = Big Five Inventory – Agreeableness

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Accommodation Tendencies From Self-Esteem and Agreeableness

Predictor	Exit	Voice	Loyalty	Neglect
	<i>b</i> 95% CI			
Self-esteem	-.12 [†] [-0.26, 0.02]	.23 ^{***} [0.11, 0.35]	-.12 [-0.28, 0.03]	-.29 ^{***} [-0.42, -0.16]
Agreeableness	-.39 ^{***} [-0.57, -0.21]	.35 ^{***} [0.19, 0.51]	.26 [*] [0.05, 0.46]	-.23 ^{**} [-0.40, -0.06]
Self-esteem x agreeableness	-.04 [-0.16, 0.07]	.01 [-0.09, 0.11]	-.08 [-0.21, 0.05]	-.09 [†] [-0.20, 0.02]

Note. CI = confidence interval.

[†] $p < .10$. ^{*} $p < .05$. ^{**} $p < .01$. ^{***} $p < .001$.

Exit

There was a marginal main effect of self-esteem, $b = -.12$, $t(174) = 24.95$, $p = .096$, indicating a negative association between self-esteem and participants' exit accommodation tendencies. There was also a significant main effect of agreeableness, $b = -.39$, $t(174) = 4.31$, $p < .001$, such that HAs were less likely than LAs to report that they would use exit in response to their partner's transgressions. The two-way interaction between self-esteem and agreeableness was not significant, $b = -.04$, $t(174) = -0.75$, $p = .453$.

Voice

There was a significant main effect of self-esteem, $b = .23$, $t(174) = 3.74$, $p < .001$, indicating that HSEs were more likely than LSEs to report using voice in response to their partner's transgressions. There was also a significant main effect of agreeableness, $b = .35$, $t(174) = 4.42$, $p < .001$, such that the higher one's agreeableness, the more one endorses voice. The two-way interaction between self-esteem and agreeableness was not significant, $b = .01$, $t(174) = 0.22$, $p = .826$.

Loyalty

There was a significant main effect of agreeableness, $b = .26$, $t(174) = 2.48$, $p = .014$, indicating a positive association between agreeableness and participants' loyalty accommodation tendencies. There was no significant main effect of self-esteem, $b = -.12$, $t(174) = -1.54$, $p = .125$, and no significant interaction between self-esteem and agreeableness, $b = -.08$, $t(174) = 1.18$, $p = .236$.

Neglect

There was a significant main effect of self-esteem, $b = -.29$, $t(174) = -4.33$, $p < .001$, indicating that the higher one's self-esteem, the less one endorses neglect. There was also a significant main effect of agreeableness, $b = -.23$, $t(174) = -2.66$, $p = .009$, indicating that HAs are less likely than LAs to report neglect.

These effects were qualified by a marginal interaction between self-esteem and agreeableness on neglect, $b = -.09$, $t(174) = -1.67$, $p = .097$. Please see Figure 1 for a graph of the interaction. To interpret the interaction, I first examined the effect of self-esteem at high and low levels of agreeableness. HSEs reported marginally lower levels of neglect than LSEs when they were lower in agreeableness (1 *SD* below the mean), $b = -.18$, $t(174) = -1.83$, $p = .069$. HSEs reported significantly lower levels of neglect than LSEs when they were higher in agreeableness

(1 SD above the mean), $b = -.40$, $t(174) = -4.31$, $p < .001$. Then, I examined the effect of agreeableness at high and low levels of self-esteem. HAs reported significantly lower levels of Neglect than LAs when they were higher in self-esteem (+1 SD), $b = -.37$, $t(174) = -3.37$, $p < .001$, but not when they were lower in self-esteem (-1 SD), $b = -.09$, $t(174) = -0.65$, $p = .514$. These results suggest that people's tendencies to neglect after experiencing a partner's transgressions depends on the combined effects of self-esteem and agreeableness. Specifically, only people with higher levels of both self-esteem and agreeableness reported lower levels of Neglect when compared to people with lower levels of both or one of the two personality traits.

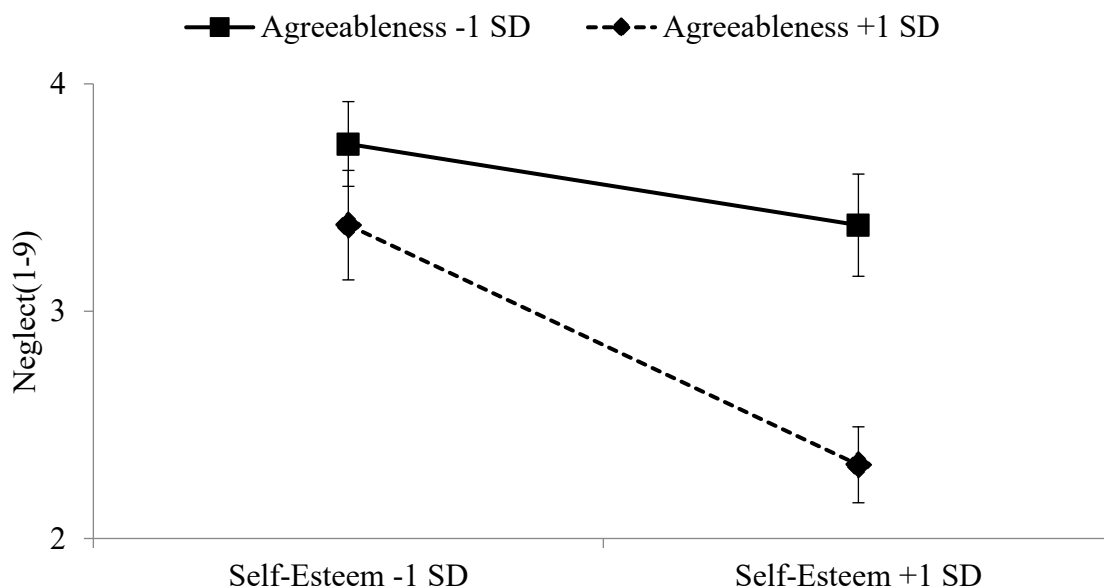


Figure 1. Participants' neglect accommodation tendencies as a function of self-esteem and agreeableness, with ± 1 standard error bars. High self-esteem (+1 SD) and high agreeableness (+1 SD) are associated with lower neglect tendencies than other combinations of levels of self-esteem and agreeableness.

Control Variables

To rule out alternative explanations, I conducted separate regression analyses for the dependent measures including each of the control variables (i.e., gender, age, relationship length,

and ethnicity) in the model as a predictor. Similarities and differences in these results compared to the main analyses are presented below.

Gender. Self-identified gender was coded as 1 for male, 2 for female, and 3 for gender queer. Analyses that controlled for gender yielded the same effects of self-esteem and agreeableness that were present in the main analyses. Gender was not a significant predictor of any of the dependent measures, $bs > -.05$, $ts > -0.17$, $ps > .114$.

Age. Participants' age was entered in years. Analyses that controlled for participants' age yielded the same effects that were present in the main analyses. Age was not a significant predictor of any of the dependent measures, $bs > .00$, $ts > .02$, $ps > .402$.

Relationship length. Relationship length was entered in months. Analyses that controlled for relationship length yielded the same effects that were present in the main analyses.

Relationship length was not a significant predictor of exit, loyalty, or neglect, $bs > .00$, $ts > -0.09$, $ps > .169$. However, there was a significant main effect of relationship length on voice, $b = -.01$, $t(173) = -2.13$, $p = .034$, indicating that people reported lower voice tendencies the longer they were in their relationship.

To further investigate the effect of relationship length on people's voice tendencies, I ran a separate regression analysis to include two additional interaction terms: relationship length and agreeableness, and relationship length and self-esteem, in addition to the self-esteem and agreeableness interaction term and main effects of agreeableness, self-esteem, and relationship length.

Results of this analysis indicated a significant main effect of agreeableness, $b = .29$, $t(171) = 3.50$, $p < .001$, indicating that the higher one's agreeableness, the more likely one will report using voice in response to partner's transgressions. There was also a significant interaction

between self-esteem and relationship length, $b = .01$, $t(173) = 2.46$, $p = .015$. To interpret this interaction, I examined the effect of relationship length at high and low levels of self-esteem, controlling for agreeableness. Longer relationship length was associated with lower voice tendencies at lower level of self-esteem (1 *SD* below the mean), $b = -.02$, $t(173) = -3.27$, $p = .001$, but not at higher level of self-esteem (1 *SD* above the mean), $b = .01$, $t(173) = 0.791$, $p = .430$. Next, I examined the effect of self-esteem at longer and shorter relationship length, controlling for agreeableness. HSEs reported significantly higher voice tendencies when relationship length was longer (1 *SD* above the mean), $b = .43$, $t(173) = 4.34$, $p < .001$, but self-esteem did not predict voice when relationship length was shorter (1 *SD* below the mean), $b = .08$, $t(173) = 0.93$, $p = .355$. Please refer to Figure 2 for a graph of this interaction. There was no significant main effect of self-esteem on voice, $b = .09$, $t(171) = 1.04$, $p = .30$. The main effect of relationship length is also not significant, $b = -.01$, $t(171) = -1.53$, $p = .13$. Interactions between self-esteem and agreeableness, and relationship length and agreeableness were not significant, $bs > -.00$, $ts > -0.47$, $ps > .640$.

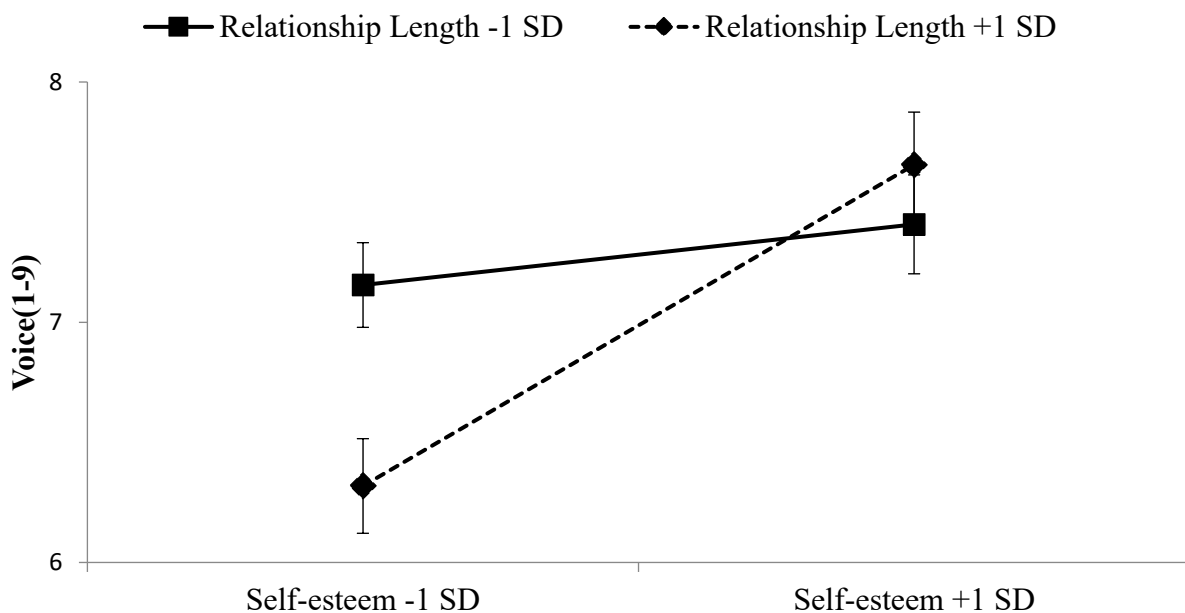


Figure 2. Participants' voice tendencies as a function of self-esteem and relationship length, with ± 1 standard error bars. LSEs are less likely to use voice when relationship length is longer (+1 SD) than when relationship length is shorter (-1 SD).

Ethnicity. Because a univariate ANOVA revealed a marginally significant difference of self-esteem between East Asians and Non-East Asians, $F(178) = 3.78$, $MSE = 8.96$, $p = .053$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, such that East Asians reported somewhat lower self-esteem ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 1.56$) than Non-East Asians ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.45$), I conducted analyses to control for East Asians vs. Non-East Asian ethnicity. Non-East Asians and East Asians were dummy coded as 0 and 1, respectively.

Analyses that controlled for ethnicity yielded the same effects of self-esteem and agreeableness on voice and loyalty that were present in the main analyses. However, the results differed from the main analysis for exit when controlling for ethnicity, such that the main effect of self-esteem became nonsignificant, $b = -.11$, $t(173) = -1.58$, $p = .12$. The patterns of the main effect of agreeableness and the interaction between agreeableness and self-esteem on exit remained identical to the main analyses.

Moreover, the results differed from the main analysis for neglect when controlling for ethnicity, such that the marginally significant interaction between self-esteem and agreeableness became nonsignificant, $b = -.09$, $t(173) = -1.65$, $p = .10$. The patterns of the main effects of self-esteem and agreeableness on neglect remained identical to the main analyses.

However, such differential effects have to be interpreted with cautions, because there are only 36 East Asians in this sample with 180 participants. Ethnicity also did not significantly predict any of the dependent measures, $bs > .01$, $ts > 0.03$, $ps > .640$.

Overall Findings

Self-esteem emerged as a significant or marginally-significant predictor of three subscales: exit, voice, and neglect. As one would expect, HSEs were more likely than LSEs to report that they would use the active, constructive strategy of voice to respond to their partner's transgressions. Moreover, HSEs were less likely than LSEs to report that they would use the active, destructive strategy of exit and the passive, destructive strategy of neglect.

Agreeableness also emerged as a significant predictor of all subscales: exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect. As one would expect, HAs were more likely than LAs to report that they would use both active and passive constructive strategies of voice and loyalty to respond to their partner's transgressions. Moreover, HAs were less likely than LAs to report that they would use both active or passive destructive strategies of exit and neglect.

Furthermore, there was a marginally-significant interaction of self-esteem and agreeableness on one subscale: neglect. Contrary to the prediction that LSEs with higher agreeableness would report lower tendency to use Neglect than LSEs with lower agreeableness, results suggested that only people with higher levels of both agreeableness and self-esteem reported lower tendencies to use neglect when compared to people with lower levels of either agreeableness, self-esteem, or both.

Analyses including the control variables mostly supported the main analyses described above. Unexpectedly, there was a significant interaction between self-esteem and relationship length, such that LSEs in longer relationships reported being less likely to use voice than LSEs in shorter relationships. Implications of this finding will be discussed later. Ethnicity also seemed to influence the results slightly when it is controlled for, such that the marginal interaction between self-esteem and agreeableness on neglect became non-significant. However, this difference has to be interpreted with cautions as the sample size for East Asians was small.

CHAPTER THREE: DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effects of agreeableness and self-esteem on people's accommodation tendencies through the framework of risk regulation. All participants completed self-report measures of agreeableness and self-esteem and went through a relationship threat induction. Participants then completed Rusbult and colleagues' (1991) Accommodation Instrument. I expected that HAs and HSEs will independently be associated with higher constructive accommodation tendencies and lower destructive tendencies than LAs and LSEs. I further hypothesized that self-esteem and agreeableness would interact, such that LSEs with higher levels of agreeableness would report higher constructive tendencies and lower destructive tendencies when compared to LSEs with lower levels of agreeableness.

Consistent with my predictions, the results of this study showed that HAs are more likely to endorse both constructive accommodation tendencies (i.e., voice and loyalty), and are less likely to endorse both destructive accommodation tendencies (i.e., exit and neglect) when compared to LAs. Recall that accommodating constructively to a partner's transgressions requires self-regulation skills (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Since agreeableness is related to self-regulatory skills, the findings that it positively predicted constructive behaviours and negatively predicted destructive behaviours align with my expectations.

However, the effects involving self-esteem only partially supported my hypotheses, such that HSEs reported only being more likely to endorse voice and less likely to endorse exit when compared to LSEs. Self-esteem did not predict people's loyalty or neglect tendencies. This inconsistency may be explained by the relation between self-esteem and trait agency. Self-esteem is positively correlated with personal feelings of agency, such as self-efficacy and being in control of oneself (Judge & Bono, 2001). HSEs tend to feel that they have control and power over different domains in life. In accommodation, voice and exit are both active (as opposed to passive) tendencies in which one is adopting an agentic orientation. In contrast, loyalty and neglect are both passive tendencies that do not afford the opportunity for one to exert power or control. In fact, both loyalty and neglect include behavioural intentions to stay silent and forgive, and to avoid handling the problems.

In addition, this study showed limited support for the moderating effect of agreeableness on the association between self-esteem and people's accommodation tendencies. Across the four subscales of accommodation, there was only one marginally-significant interaction between agreeableness and self-esteem, namely involving neglect. HSEs with higher agreeableness were the most likely to say that they would not use neglect—that is, they would not fail to talk with their partners about the transgression when compared to people with other levels of agreeableness and self-esteem. This pattern of interaction converges with findings from McCarthy, Wood, and Holmes' (2017) study, which showed that when compared to people with other levels of agreeableness and self-esteem, only those with higher levels of both agreeableness and self-esteem were more likely to take the risk of disclosing negative events that had occurred outside the relationship to their romantic partner. Perhaps being high in only one trait—agreeableness or self-esteem—is not sufficient to avoid responding with neglect.

With regards to the lack of support for the moderating effects of agreeableness on the associations between self-esteem and voice, exit, and loyalty, one possible explanation is that accommodation might not parallel risk regulation contexts as much as I originally expected. Risk regulation research typically focuses on peoples' responses after they experience global insecurities. In contrast, accommodation focuses on people's responses regarding a specific partner's transgression. Although such transgressions can also induce relationship insecurities, the transgressions described in the Accommodation Instrument are very specific scenarios when compared to the relationship threat typically used in risk regulation research. For example, the Accommodation Instrument (Rusbult et al., 1991) asks what people would do when their partner says something thoughtless, whereas risk regulation research asks people to think of a time that they were disappointed by their partner (Murray et al., 2008). Because of these differences in the context between risk regulation and accommodation, the effects of agreeableness and self-esteem on accommodation might not be parallel to the effects of these two variables on risk regulation.

The present research also differs from risk regulation research in a second way. Specifically, dependent measures of risk regulation typically inquire about participants' feelings about or evaluations of their relationship or romantic partner, whereas the Accommodation Instrument asks about specific behavioural intentions. For example, studies of risk regulation have asked participants to report their subjective closeness to their partner, how long they think their relationship will last, and whether they think their partner will be responsive to them (Cavallo et al., 2012, 2013; McCarthy et al., 2017; Murray et al., 2002, 2006). In contrast, the Accommodation Instrument, as I used it here, measures specific behavioural intentions, such as whether or not one would discuss the problem with one's romantic partner, and whether or not one would terminate the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1991). Research suggests that people's

attitudes or feelings do not necessarily predict their subsequent behaviours (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977, 2005; Wicker, 1969). Relating this finding to the present research, typical measures of risk regulation theory might be more reflective of people's attitudes about their relationships and their romantic partner, whereas the Accommodation Instrument is more reflective of people's behaviours. As such, participants might then have different responses to these two measures, and thus, produce these unpredicted results in this study despite the similarities between risk regulation and accommodation.

In addition to the main findings, this study showed an unexpected, yet interesting, interaction between self-esteem and relationship length on people's voice tendencies. In particular, LSEs reported that they would be less likely to use voice to respond to their partner's transgressions the longer their relationship. In contrast, HSEs reported that they would be more likely to use voice when they are in a longer relationship than when they are in a shorter relationship. The pattern for LSEs does not seem to make intuitive sense, since one would expect people to communicate openly as they become more comfortable with their romantic partner over the course of their relationship. For example, Stafford and Canary (1991) found that compared to casually dating couples, married and engaged couples reported using more open and direct strategies when talking about their relationship. I speculate that my unexpected finding on the interaction of low self-esteem and relationship length on voice is due to the lower relationship quality that LSEs have when compared to HSEs. Relationship satisfaction generally tends to decline over time (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014), and this appears to be especially pronounced for LSEs' relationships (Wood et al., 2017). It seems likely that as relationship satisfaction declines for LSEs, they become especially insecure. Hence, LSEs may

become even less likely to open up and discuss problems in their relationship with their romantic partner over time.

Another possible explanation for this finding is the lack of trust that LSEs have towards their romantic partner. When LSEs do not trust that their romantic partner will be responsive to their disclosures, they might not use voice to handle their partner's transgressions when the relationship just begins in order to avoid rejection from their partner. As such, LSEs' romantic partners might not actually realize that they have even transgressed, and continue behaving similarly. Over time, LSEs might eventually accept the fact that partner transgressions are part of their relationship, and therefore, become even less likely to use voice.

Implications for the Literature

This study has implications for the literature on accommodation and on risk regulation. First, this study demonstrates the role of agreeableness and self-regulation in accommodation. The positive associations between agreeableness and constructive tendencies and the negative correlations between agreeableness and destructive tendencies replicated the preliminary findings of Perunovic and Holmes (2008). These results are consistent with the notion that accommodation requires self-regulatory skills, because agreeableness offers strong self-regulatory skills.

This study also informs the literature on the effect of self-esteem in accommodation, which has been overlooked. The findings of this study are novel in suggesting that self-esteem plays an important role in active accommodation tendencies (i.e., voice and exit).

Moreover, this study points to another personality variable, namely agreeableness, that may influence people's risk regulation processes, in addition to self-esteem. Although the context of accommodation is not entirely parallel to the context of risk regulation, the two

contexts do share the theoretical foundation in describing people's responses to relationship-threatening situations. This study suggests that for potential risk regulating behaviours that require self-regulation abilities, such as constructively accommodating to partner's transgressions, agreeableness plays an even more important role than self-esteem.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it relied on self-report measures for people's accommodation tendencies. Participants reported only their behavioural intentions in response to their partner's hypothetical transgressions in the future. As people's attitudes and thoughts do not necessarily translate into behaviours (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977, 2005; Wicker, 1969), this study has limited strength in predicting people's actual behaviours when they face a partner's transgressions. In addition, the self-report nature of this study's measures makes this study vulnerable to participants' biases in their responses. When participants respond to measures of self-esteem, agreeableness, and accommodation, it is possible that they might not be answering with complete honesty and accuracy. For example, people might report higher constructive accommodation tendencies because they are more socially desirable than destructive tendencies. More behavioural evidence is needed to strengthen the validity and reliability of this study's findings.

Future Directions

In the future, I would like to follow up this study with studies that include a manipulation of cognitive load. Because self-regulation requires executive resources (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Perunovic & Holmes, 2008), having another condition with a cognitive load, such as time

pressure, should more directly allow me to examine the role of self-regulation in accommodation. Specifically, if the effects of agreeableness and self-esteem on accommodation diminish in the cognitive load condition but not in the no cognitive load condition, that will provide stronger evidence that cognitive resources are required for accommodation.

Another future direction is to include a control condition in which there is no relationship threat. Since relationship threat was induced in all participants in this study, I cannot be certain that the effects of agreeableness and self-esteem on accommodation tendencies are in response to relationship threat. If the effects of agreeableness and self-esteem only emerge in a threat condition but not in a no-threat condition, that would suggest that the effects of agreeableness and self-esteem are not ubiquitous, general tendencies, but rather influences on people's accommodation tendencies in response to relationship threat.

Conclusion

This thesis investigated the effects of agreeableness and self-esteem on people's accommodation tendencies within the framework of risk regulation. Consistent with the notion that agreeableness is associated with strong self-regulation abilities, HAs reported being more likely to use constructive accommodation tendencies and less likely to use destructive accommodation tendencies when compared to LAs. Similarly, consistent with previous evidence that self-esteem is associated with interpersonal trust and personal agency, HSEs reported being more likely to use active, constructive tendencies and less likely to use active, destructive tendencies when compared to LSEs. Although the predicted moderating effects of agreeableness on the associations between self-esteem and accommodation did not emerge on all accommodation tendencies, the present findings nonetheless highlight the importance of self-esteem and agreeableness in accommodation and risk regulation processes.

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Appendix A

Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1986)

10 Items of Self-Esteem Scale

1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.
 2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
 3. All in all I am inclined to feel that I am a failure. *
 4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
 5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of. *
 6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
 7. On the whole I am satisfied with myself.
 8. I wish I could have more respect for myself. *
 9. I certainly feel useless at times. *
 10. At times, I think I am no good at all. *
-

Note: Items are scored on a 9-point scale (1 = *very strongly disagree*, 9 = *very strongly agree*)

*Items are reverse-scored.

Appendix B

Big Five Inventory – Agreeableness Subscale (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991)

9 Items of Agreeableness Subscale

I am someone who:

1. tends to find faults in others. *
 2. is helpful and unselfish with others.
 3. starts quarrels with others. *
 4. has a forgiving nature.
 5. is generally trusting.
 6. can be cold and aloof.
 7. is considerate and kind to almost everyone
 8. is sometimes rude to others. *
 9. likes to cooperate with others.
-

Note: Items are scored on a 9-point scale (1 = *very strongly disagree*, 9 = *very strongly agree*)

*Items are reverse-scored.

Appendix C

Accommodation Instrument (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991)

4 Subscales and 16 Items of Accommodation Instrument

Exit

1. Next time when my partner says something really mean, I will threaten to leave him/her.
2. Next time when my partner is rude to me, I will feel so angry I want to walk right out the door.
3. Next time when my partner behaves in an unpleasant manner, I will do something equally unpleasant in return.
4. Next time when my partner does something thoughtless, I will do things to drive my partner away.

Voice

1. Next time when my partner says something really mean, I will talk to my partner about what's going on, trying to work out a solution.
2. Next time when my partner is rude to me, I will try to resolve the situation and improve conditions.
3. Next time when my partner behaves in an unpleasant manner, I will calmly discuss things with him/her.
4. Next time when my partner does something thoughtless, I will try to patch things up and solve the problem.

Loyalty

1. Next time when my partner says something really mean, I will hang in there and wait for his/her mood to change – these times pass.
2. Next time when my partner is rude to me, I will give him/her the benefit of the doubt and forget about it.
3. Next time when my partner behaves in an unpleasant manner, I will forgive my partner and forget about it.
4. Next time when my partner does something thoughtless, I will patiently wait for things to improve.

Neglect

1. Next time when my partner says something really mean, I will sulk and will not confront the issue.
 2. Next time when my partner is rude to me, I will ignore the whole thing.
 3. Next time when my partner behaves in an unpleasant manner, I will spend less time with him/her.
 4. Next time when my partner does something thoughtless, I will avoid dealing with the situation.
-

Note: Items are scored on a 9-point scale (1 = *very strongly disagree*, 9 = *very strongly agree*)