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It's not personal: the use of deflections in social rejections

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ABSTRACT

What do people say to socially reject someone, and is it what they would want to hear? We test whether rejectors use deflections – words to deflect the interpretation of the rejection as a negative judgment of the rejectee (e.g., “nothing personal”) – and whether that has the desired effect. In two exploratory studies, participants spontaneously used deflections in video-recorded and written social rejections ($N_1 = 497$, 19.1% deflections; $N_2 = 94$, 35.1% deflections). In two preregistered studies ($N_3 = 1213$; $N_4 = 933$), participants imagined themselves as rejectors and as rejectees across multiple contexts (Study 3) and as rejectees in situations with acquaintances or close friends (Study 4). Participants preferred rejections with deflections compared to rejections without, and particularly preferred “nothing personal.” The present research addresses the struggle to find the right words for social rejection and opens an avenue for investigation of when and how language may soften the blow.

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Deflections; emotions; interpersonal relationships; language; social rejection

What do people say when they socially exclude someone, and is it what they would want to hear if they were being excluded? Both the people engaging in social exclusion and the people on the receiving end struggle with the process (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baumeister et al., 1993; Bohns & DeVincent, 2019; Feeney, 2004; Freedman et al., 2016; Kansky & Allen, 2018; Leary, 1990; Legate et al., 2013; Sommer et al., 2001; Williams, 2007), and rejectors fear the rejection will be difficult and have negative consequences (Givi & Kirk, 2024; Lu et al., 2023). One of the major challenges inherent to direct social rejections (i.e., ones that involve someone being explicitly told that they have been rejected) is the struggle to know what to say (Baumeister et al., 1993). Yet previous research on social exclusion has focused less on the language of social rejection and more on the antecedents and consequences of social exclusion experiences (e.g., Büttner et al., 2024; Hales et al., 2016; Leary et al., 1998; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009; Williams & Nida, 2011). Furthermore, one of the main foci of the recent social psychological work on social exclusion is ostracism (i.e., the silent treatment; Williams, 2007) rather than explicit social rejection (Wesselmann & Williams, 2017), and ostracism, by default, does not involve language choices. However, social exclusion happens in many different forms, both through ostracism and through more direct strategies that do involve language choices (e.g., Blackhart et al., 2009; Lutz & Schneider, 2020; Molden et al., 2009; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009; Wesselmann & Williams, 2017; Wesselmann et al., 2022). It is therefore critical to understand language choices within social rejections and how they are perceived by both rejectors and rejectees.

In the present research, we characterize and examine the role of deflections: phrases designed to deflect the rejectee's sense that the rejection is about more than a non-acceptance of a social request and could be construed as a broader negative evaluation of the rejectee. That is, in using a deflection, a rejector disentangles their rejection of the rejectee's social request from any perception of their rejection of the rejectee as a person. For example, the phrase “nothing

personal” is a deflection in which the rejector is indicating that although a rejection is occurring, the rejectee should not interpret the rejection as a negative judgment of them as a person. Similarly, the phrase “no hard feelings” can indicate that even though the person is engaging in rejection, they are not left with negative feelings toward the rejectee. Like other forms of rejection language (e.g., apologies, positive regard; Freedman et al., 2016), deflections may have positive or negative effects on the rejectee. Thus, across four studies, we test whether people spontaneously use these phrases in social rejections and how they are perceived from the standpoints of rejectors and rejectees in different contexts.

It is hard to find the right words: a lack of a social script in rejections

It is not surprising that people complain they do not know what to say when socially rejecting someone. It is hard to find the right words for social rejection because there are no clear social scripts (Baumeister et al., 1993). Unlike other social situations that have clear scripts (Schank & Abelson, 1977), there is not a socially sanctioned way to reject someone. For instance, if someone wants to get to know a new acquaintance better, they may ask, “do you want to grab a cup of coffee?” Yet, if the person on the receiving end wants to say no in a kind way, there are no empirical guidelines for the best words to use.

There are different strategies that people use to communicate social rejections (e.g., Baxter, 1982; Cody, 1982; Metts, 1992; Wilmot et al., 1985), which vary on how compassionate they seem (Sprecher et al., 2010), yet these strategies do not necessarily provide specific language to use. For example, one strategy for a direct rejection is to “openly express to the person [the] desire to disengage” (Baxter, 1982, p. 227), but how does one do that? Finding the right words to use is such a challenge that rejectors will look for alternatives to avoid having to make those language decisions. For example, people sometimes choose to ghost (i.e., cut off contact to reject) because it feels easier than a direct rejection (e.g., Dean Marshall et al., 2024; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Timmermans et al., 2021) even though ghosting is perceived in a negative light (e.g., Freedman & Powell, 2024).

Additionally, much of the research on rejection communication strategies has been within the context of close relationships such as friendships or romantic relationships (e.g., Baxter, 1982; Cody, 1982; Ren & Woodfield, 2016; Wilmot et al., 1985). It is therefore less clear how to craft rejections in other relational contexts such as between new acquaintances. That is, relationships which vary in closeness need to be explored to see if language is received differently based on closeness.

Finally, social scripts of what to say in other difficult social situations or general niceties may not necessarily work the same for social rejections (Freedman et al., 2016, 2017). For instance, apologies generally make forgiveness more likely after a social transgression (see Fehr et al., 2010 for a meta-analysis) and are a common occurrence within rejections (Freedman et al., 2017; Ren & Woodfield, 2016). However, apologies do not seem to be effective at making social rejections hurt less (Freedman et al., 2017).

Deflections may address two concerns for rejectors

Aside from apologies, what might we expect rejectors to say, and how is that perceived by rejectees? Rejectors face two motivational obstacles when they are trying to craft a social rejection (Folkes, 1982; Freedman et al., 2016; Goffman, 1967). First, rejectors are motivated to protect their own reputations: they do not want to appear unkind or callous. For example, after experiencing a breakup, the individuals who initiate the breakup indicate that one of the potential consequences of the rejection is being perceived as cruel (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). Second, rejectors are motivated to avoid hurting the rejectee’s feelings. Although they may not want to engage in the requested social interaction, they also do not necessarily want the person on the receiving end to experience negative emotions (Folkes, 1982; Freedman et al., 2016). In other words, rejectors want to preserve self-image for both rejectors and rejectees (Goffman, 1967).

Individuals manage their reputations and the emotions of other people through language choices in interpersonal situations (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975), including within social rejections (Metts, 1992). For example, when people imagine how someone might refuse a date request, they include language such as expressions of appreciation and concern for the rejectee's feelings (Besson et al., 1998). Rejectors can also try to manage their own reputations by using disclaimers such as hedging ("I might be wrong") or asking the person to hold their judgment ("hear me out"; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). Rejectors use these disclaimers to try to prevent rejectees from thinking poorly about them based on what they are about to say (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Metts, 1992). It is possible that a deflection serves a disclaimer-like function in social rejection. Previous research has found that, when given a choice, people prefer to avoid personal explanations for social rejection (Besson et al., 1998; Folkes, 1982). Furthermore, when people imagine what they would say to a long-term romantic partner to end the relationship, a small percentage indicate that they would try to keep the rejectee from feeling that they are to blame for the rejection, which can include statements such as "it's not you" (Wilson et al., 2009, p. 41). When left to choose what to say during a social rejection, people may choose to say things like "nothing personal," "no hard feelings" and "no offense," but do those phrases make social rejections a less negative experience? One possibility is that while rejectors may use deflections, rejectees may not appreciate deflections.

One potential concern with a deflection is that it implies that the rejectee should feel or think in a particular way. For example, the phrase "no hard feelings" could imply not only that the rejector does not view the rejectee negatively but also that the rejectee should reciprocate and not bear ill will toward the rejector. Similarly, telling a rejectee that the rejection is "nothing personal" may force the rejectee to feel that they must accept the idea that the rejector is not evaluating them negatively regardless of how they perceive the situation. In this way, deflections may be like apologies in social rejection: they may often be included by rejectors, but from the standpoint of the rejectee, they may not have the intended positive effect (Freedman et al., 2017). Taken together, research is needed to test whether deflections may be part of how people construct a rejection across different relational contexts (e.g., in the hopes of maintaining their reputation and possibly alleviating hurt feelings), and whether those desires may backfire and lead rejectees to feel worse.

The present research

In the present set of studies, we examine whether rejectors spontaneously use deflections within their social rejections across multiple communication contexts (Studies 1 and 2), as well as how people perceive deflections when they imagine being in the role of rejector and rejectee (Study 3) and in close friend and acquaintance contexts (Study 4). In Study 1, participants reject a new online acquaintance (with whom they believe they have been playing a game) while being videotaped. In Study 2, participants write a rejection for a person they conversed with in an in-person laboratory study. In Study 3, participants are randomly assigned to be the rejector or rejectee and imagine different rejection related scenarios. For each scenario, they choose the rejection they would prefer: one with or without a deflection. We predicted that rejectors would be more likely to want to give a rejection with a deflection than rejectees would be to want to receive one. In Study 4, participants are randomly assigned to a close friend or acquaintance condition and rate how they would feel receiving rejections with and without "nothing personal" deflections in those scenarios. We predicted that participants in the acquaintance condition, compared to the close friends condition, would feel more positively about "nothing personal" rejections compared to rejections without deflections. For all studies, the data, code, and materials can be found on OSF: <https://osf.io/tue8j/files/osfstorage>.

Study 1

Study 1 was initially conducted to test the roles of social power and belongingness on post-rejection social and emotional sensitivity (see Supplement for full methods, results, and links to preregistrations;

in this study, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, but neither had any effects on the dependent variables), but included videotaped rejections, which are the focus of the present study. Below we report the relevant methods for the present manuscript. The study was approved by the St. Mary's College of Maryland Institutional Review Board (Study ID: FA21_62A).

Method

In this study, participants played a game in which they had the opportunity to accept and reject other players. For the rejection, participants recorded a video of themselves rejecting one of the players that they believed the player would watch.

Participants

Participants were recruited via word of mouth, campus-wide e-mails, and posters from a college in the mid-Atlantic United States. The target sample size was 506 participants based on a power analysis for the original intended analyses. A total of 512 college students completed the study for \$15. Of the 512 participants who were recruited, four were excluded for computer malfunction, two were excluded for participating more than once, four were excluded for not recording a video, and five were excluded for not rejecting during the video. Thus, the final analytic sample consisted of 497 participants ($M_{age} = 19.93$, $SD = 1.80$; 31.8% men, 58.4% women, 6.2% non-binary, 2.6% reported another gender, and 1.0% did not provide gender; 13.1% African/African American/Black, 3.6% Asian/Asian American, 68.4% European American/White, 6.2% Hispanic/Latino, 0.2% Middle Eastern or North African, 0.4% Pacific Islander/Pacific Islander American, 7.8% Multiracial, and 0.2% did not provide race/ethnicity).

Procedure

After providing consent, participants completed a set of questionnaires (see Supplement) and were introduced to the game task. They were told they would be playing with several other players (i.e., their opponents; all of whom were women).¹ Each of their opponents had preset names, photos, and descriptions (e.g., “Hey everyone! My name is Kayla and I enjoy hiking and painting. My favorite board games are Parks and Wingspan.”). All the opponent players were preprogrammed: the participant was the only true player. The photographs of the participants were taken from the Radboud Face Database (Langner et al., 2010) and photoshopped to appear as though they were in the same building as the participants and in generic clothing. Photos were paired with the same player names across participants, but descriptions were randomly assigned to the name/photo combination for each participant.

To begin the game, participants took a photo of themselves and wrote their name and a brief description of themselves. The game that the participants played (“Wordsmith”) was developed for the purposes of this study and had the same basic premise as Balderdash. In this game, players are given a target word and write a definition for that word. Then all the definitions are displayed, and the goal is to select the true definition, which has been added as one of the options for a total of four options (participant’s definition, two other players’ definitions, the true definition). Participants could not see their scores, but they saw the correct answers after guessing.

There were three rounds of play, and at the beginning of each round, they saw the pictures and read the descriptions of the players in that round. After Round 1, participants learned that there were group rotations. After Round 2, participants were told it was their turn to choose one current player to move forward with them for Round 3. Participants picked a player to join them and then recorded a rejection video to be sent to the player they did not choose. Finally, all participants completed the remaining tasks and questionnaires (see Supplement), were debriefed, and compensated \$15.

Measures

One of the researchers transcribed all the rejection videos. To assess the language that the participants used in the rejection videos, we trained two coders to look for the presence of

multiple types of language, but the focus of the present manuscript is on deflections (e.g., “nothing personal,” “no hard feelings,” “no offense”). The research team decided to code for deflections when one of the coders noticed their existence as they were reading through the responses. One of the lead researchers trained the coders to identify deflections as phrases like the ones listed above or variations of them (e.g., “nothing personal” could be “it’s not personal” or “it’s not you”). The coders were trained on ten randomly selected videos, and then each coder coded the same fifty videos. As inter-rater reliability on the subset of fifty videos was substantial ($\kappa = .83$), coders then separately coded the rest of the videos. Two coders also coded each rejection containing a deflection for whether they fit into one of the three main categories of deflection (nothing personal $\kappa = .90$, no hard feelings $\kappa = .97$, no offense $\kappa = .79$). Discrepancies were resolved via discussion.

Results and discussion

The average word count across the videos was 35.83 words ($SD = 23.94$). Although deflections were not used a majority of the time, they were used in 19.1% of the 497 rejection videos. The most used deflection was nothing personal (72.6% of the deflections), followed by no hard feelings (20.0%), and no offense (6.3%). Six rejections contained multiple deflections, and seven of the deflections could not be clearly categorized into one of the three main categories (e.g., “no bad blood”). Study 1 raised the possibility that deflections may be an important feature of social rejections among new acquaintances, and that nothing personal is a particularly common form of deflection.

Study 2

In Study 2, we examined whether deflections would be found in a different social rejection dataset in which participants had to write rejections for a confederate they had recently met. This study, like Study 1, is part of a larger study, and we only report the measure and condition relevant to the current manuscript (participants in the other condition received training on how to reject and therefore are not relevant to the present study). The study was approved by the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board (Study IDs: 2009080018, 2019040041).

Methods

Participants

Ninety-four people ($M_{age} = 19.13$, $SD = 1.40$; 21.3% men, 78.7% women; 29.8% Asian, 5.3% Black or African American, 26.6% Hispanic/Latinx, 30.9% White, 7.4% multiple races/ethnicities) participated in this study. Participants were recruited from a large university in the south-central United States for course credit. An additional three participants were excluded for being suspicious that they were interacting with confederates, and two participants were excluded after asking that their data not be used in the study.

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants watched a video (see Video Task), had a short, in-person conversation with two ostensible participants, and were asked to deliver a social rejection message to one of the other “participants” (see Social Rejection Task). After being told that they would need to socially reject one of the people they interacted with, but before writing the message, participants completed personality and stress measures as part of the larger study (see Supplement). Finally, participants were probed for suspicion and debriefed.

Video task. All participants began their session by watching the same video, which was used as the control condition for the larger study. The video was a 12-minute tour of European cities.

Social rejection. When participants arrived at the lab, they were told they were assigned to be “Participant A,” and they were led to a common area that included a desk and a computer to watch their video. Once the video ended, the experimenter brought two confederates into the common area and then left to ostensibly set up the next task. While the experimenter was gone, the confederates facilitated a pleasant small talk conversation with the participant. The experimenter reentered the room after four minutes and asked the confederates to join them back in the lab to start their next task. The two confederates left the room with the experimenter, and the experimenter told the participant that they would return shortly to get them started.

The experimenter then rejoined the participant and informed them that they would have some time to hang out with one of the other “participants” before their next task, and because they were assigned to be Participant A, they got to choose who they would like to hang out with. Additionally, participants were told that because their social time would not be extending the time of their session, they would likely finish at the same time as the other “participants” and see the participant they did not choose on their way out of the lab.

After ensuring the participant did not have any questions about their task, the experimenter took the participant back to the lab and set them up at a computer in Room A. The participant was told that they would be writing a message on the computer to the “participant” they did not choose letting them know that they did not want to hang out with them. The participant was also informed the experimenter would be printing and delivering the message. After receiving these instructions, participants completed a personality measure for the larger study and wrote their social rejection message.

Measures

As in Study 1, two research assistants coded the rejections for the presence of deflections and for the specific three deflections (nothing personal, no hard feelings, no offense). Coders were reliable across all categories, all $\kappa > .92$. Discrepancies were resolved via discussion.

Results and discussion

The average word count was 53.06 words ($SD = 41.83$). As in Study 1, deflections were not used a majority of the time, but in Study 2 they were used in 35.10% of the rejections. Replicating Study 1, the most used deflection was nothing personal (81.80% of the deflections), followed by no hard feelings (12.1%), and no offense (3.0%). One rejection contained multiple deflections, and two of the deflections could not be clearly categorized into one of the three main categories. As in Study 1, participants in Study 2 spontaneously used deflections within their rejections, and deflections were present 35% of the time. Also consistent with Study 1, the nothing personal category was the most frequent deflection. Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 provide support for people’s spontaneous use of deflections when communicating social rejections to new acquaintances. The studies further suggest that deflections are included across multiple modes of rejection: videotaped oral rejections in an online game (Study 1) and written rejections to people they had met in person (Study 2).

Study 3

Study 3 builds on Study 1 and Study 2 by investigating whether rejectors and rejectees differ in how much they would want to give or receive a social rejection which includes a deflection. If deflections are similar to apologies within rejections (Freedman et al., 2017), it is possible that although rejectors may want to use them, rejectees may not like them. Therefore, we hypothesized that rejectors would be more likely to want to use rejections with deflections than rejectees would want to receive them. We also conducted pre-registered exploratory analyses to examine how likely participants are to think that rejections would contain deflections and how they would imagine feeling upon receiving and giving

them. Finally, we pre-registered our interest in separately exploring the three main deflections found in Studies 1 and 2: nothing personal, no hard feelings, and no offense.

Method

All methods, hypotheses, and exclusion criteria for this study were pre-registered on OSF: <https://osf.io/8ayq9/overview>. The study was approved by the St. Mary's College of Maryland Institutional Review Board (Study ID: SU24_09).

Participants

Participants who were at least 18 years old, fluent in English, and living in the United States were recruited via Prolific. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete, and participants were compensated with \$2.50. A G*Power analysis for an independent samples *t*-test with 90% confidence to detect a small effect size ($d = 0.20$) with an alpha of .05 determined a target sample size of 1054 participants. To account for potential exclusions, we set our recruitment target at 1213 (15% higher than our target sample size). A total of 1221 participants consented to participate with seven excluded for indicating that their data should not be used and one for failing to complete at least 75% of the main trials (as pre-registered), resulting in a final sample of 1213 participants ($M_{age} = 37.63$, $SD_{age} = 12.02$; 54.2% cisgender women, 39.7% cisgender men, 2.0% non-binary, 0.6% transgender man, 0.2% transgender women, 0.2% agender, 2.3% self-identified, 0.4% selected multiple genders, and 0.6% did not provide a gender; 61.2% White/European American, 14.6% African/African American/Black, 8.4% Asian/Asian American, 5.4% Hispanic/Latino/a/x/e, 9.1% Multiple Races/Ethnicities, 0.6% American Indian/Native American, 0.20% Middle Eastern or North African, 0.20% Pacific Islander/Pacific Islander American, 0.30% self-identified as another race or ethnicity, and 0.10% did not report).

Procedure

After providing consent, participants were randomly assigned to the Rejector or Rejectee condition. In each condition, participants were shown nine different prompts in which the participant is either invited to do something social (Rejector) or is inviting another person to do something social (Rejectee) and were asked to choose between social rejections which included deflections and ones that did not.

Next, each participant imagined they were both a rejector and a rejectee (in a random order). First participants indicated how likely they think it would be that they would use (or receive) a social rejection that included a deflection. They were then given a list of emotions and rated how much they would feel each one when giving/receiving one of the three deflections. To reduce redundancy, each participant was randomly given one of the three deflections (nothing personal, no hard feelings, no offense) to evaluate in each of these two feelings questions. They then completed demographics and a data quality check before being debriefed and compensated.

Measures

Preference for rejections with deflections. In the first task, participants chose between social rejections which included deflections or ones that did not across nine prompts (see Table 1). Following each prompt, participants made a binary forced choice decision on whether they would rather a social rejection which included a deflection or one that did not. Social rejections that did not include a deflection were phrases such as “No, I’m not up for doing that,” whereas social rejections that included a deflection were formed by randomly pairing a social rejection phrase (e.g., “I’m not up for it”) with a deflection (i.e., nothing personal, no hard feelings, or no offense). Rejections with and without deflections were matched on word count. Rejections were randomly presented with each scenario, but each participant saw each deflection phrase a total of three times. Preference for rejections with deflections was calculated as a percentage of trials in which the participants chose a rejection with a deflection over one without.

Table 1. Rejection scenarios in Study 3.

Rejector	Rejectee
You are hanging out at a party, and someone there asks if you want to get a drink on a different night.	You are hanging out at a party, and you ask someone there if they want to get a drink on a different night.
You are playing at your weekly soccer game and a teammate asks if you want to come with them to a party that night.	You are playing at your weekly soccer game and ask a teammate if they want to come with you to a party that night.
Your friend just bought a new pair of hiking shoes and wants to try them out at a nearby park. Your friend asks you to go on a hike with them.	You just bought a new pair of hiking shoes and want to try them out at a nearby park. You ask your friend to go on a hike with you.
You recently got a new housemate, and they ask you if you want to keep them company while they run errands.	You recently got a new housemate, and you ask them if they want to keep you company while you run errands.
You see your friend when you are out running errands and they ask if you want to go out to eat for dinner.	You see your friend when you are out running errands and ask if they want to go out to eat for dinner.
You are out with your friends and one of them asks if you want to go to lunch with them.	You are out with your friends and ask one of them if they want to go to lunch with you.
You see an old friend and they ask if you want to go get ice cream with them.	You see an old friend and ask if they want to go get ice cream with you.
You meet a new person at work and they ask if you want to get coffee.	You meet a new person at work and ask if they want to get coffee.
You have been talking with a coworker about their typical gym routine. After work they ask you to go to the gym with them.	You have been talking with a coworker about their typical gym routine. After work you ask them to go to the gym with you.

Likelihood of using or receiving rejections with deflections. When imagining themselves as the rejector and rejectee, participants were asked how likely they would be to use or receive each of the three deflections (nothing personal, no hard feelings, and no offense) in a rejection. Participants responded to both the rejector and rejectee questions, presented in a random order. All questions were answered on a scale from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 5 (*extremely likely*).

Emotional responses to rejections with deflections. For emotional responses, they were again asked to imagine themselves in both roles and asked how much they would feel each emotion (hurt, angry, sad, relieved, happy, uncomfortable, guilty, ashamed) if they were to give or receive (depending on prompt) one of the three deflections. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three deflections. All questions were answered on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).²

Results

Rejections which include deflections are preferred and “nothing personal” was the most attractive of the deflection phrases

Rejections which included deflections were chosen at significantly higher than chance levels in both the Rejector ($t(606) = 7.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.31$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.12]) and Rejectee ($t(605) = 9.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.38$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.13]) conditions (see Figure 1). Whereas participants significantly preferred the inclusion of deflections, we did not find support for our preregistered hypothesis that preference would significantly differ by role. That is, there was no significant difference between the percentage of trials in which rejectors ($M = 60.78\%$, $SD = 28.75\%$) compared to rejectees ($M = 59.81\%$, $SD = 31.47\%$) chose a rejection with a deflection: $t(1211) = -0.56$, $p = .579$, $d = -0.03$, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.02].

As pre-registered, we explored whether rejectors and rejectees significantly differed in their preference for the three specific deflections. A 3 (Deflections: nothing personal, no hard feelings, no offense) $\times$ 2 (Role: rejector, rejectee) mixed ANOVA found a significant main effect of Deflection ($F(2, 2422) = 42.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$). When choosing a rejection with a deflection, participants chose rejections containing “no offense” ($M = 0.55$, $SD = 0.37$) less frequently than rejections containing “nothing personal” ($M = 0.62$, $SD = 0.35$, mean difference = 0.07, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.10]) and “no hard feelings” ($M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.35$, mean difference = 0.08, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$, 95% CI

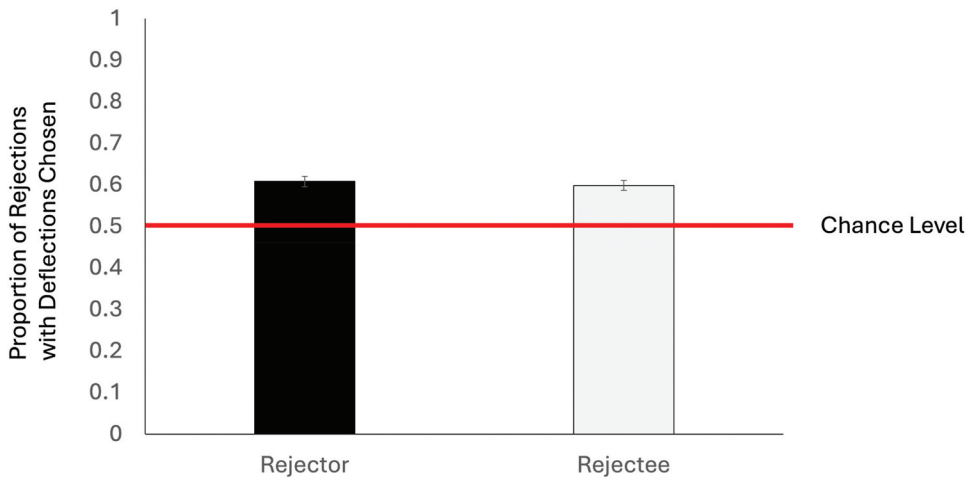


Figure 1. Proportion of rejections with Deflections Chosen. *Note.* Error bars denote standard error.

[0.06, 0.11]). There was no main effect of Role ($F(1,1211) = 0.31, p = .578, \eta_p^2 < .001$) or interaction between the Role and Deflection ($F(2, 2422) = 0.31, p = .737, \eta_p^2 < .001$).

Rejectees perceived deflections as significantly more likely than rejectors and especially for “no offense”

As pre-registered, we explored whether role in the social rejection affected the perceived likelihood that the rejector would use a deflection when communicating their social rejection. A 2 (Role: rejector, rejectee) $\times$ 3 (Deflection: no hard feelings, no offense, nothing personal) within-subjects ANOVA was conducted. A significant interaction between Role and Deflection on the likelihood of use ($F(2, 2402) = 12.62, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .01$) qualified main effects of Role ($F(1, 1201) = 86.95, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$) and Deflection ($F(2, 2402) = 32.45, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$). Rejectees thought that rejections would be more likely to contain each of the deflections than rejectors, but the difference was greater for no offense (mean difference = 0.33, $SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.26, 0.40]$) and no hard feelings (mean difference = 0.25, $SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.18, 0.31]$) than for nothing personal (mean difference = 0.14, $SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.07, 0.20]$); see Figure 2).

“Nothing personal” may be more protective against negative emotions for rejectors

To examine whether the deflections elicit different emotions from rejectors, we conducted an 8 (Emotion: hurt, angry, sad, relieved, happy, uncomfortable, guilty, ashamed) $\times$ 3 (Deflection: no hard feelings, no offense, nothing personal) mixed ANOVA which found a significant interaction between Emotion and Deflection ($F(14, 8344) = 1.79, p = .034, \eta_p^2 = .003$; see Figure 3) that qualified significant main effects of Emotion ($F(7, 8344) = 213.19, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .15$) and Deflection ($F(2, 1192) = 3.71, p = .025, \eta_p^2 = .01$).

Participants reported they would feel less hurt giving a rejection containing nothing personal ($M = 1.56, SD = 0.91$) than no offense ($M = 1.74, SD = 1.00$, mean difference = $-0.19, SE = 0.07, p = .022, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.35, -0.02]$). Participants also reported that they would feel less anger giving a rejection containing nothing personal ($M = 1.25, SD = 0.61$) and no hard feelings ($M = 1.33, SD = 0.75$) compared to no offense ($M = 1.47, SD = 0.91$, mean difference $\text{no offense vs. no hard feelings} = -0.14, SE = 0.05, p = .032, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.27, -0.01]$; mean difference $\text{no offense vs. nothing personal} = -0.22, SE = 0.06, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.35, -0.09]$). Lastly, participants reported they would feel less sad giving a rejection containing nothing personal ($M = 1.69, SD = 0.94$) than no hard feelings ($M = 1.90, SD = 1.00$, mean

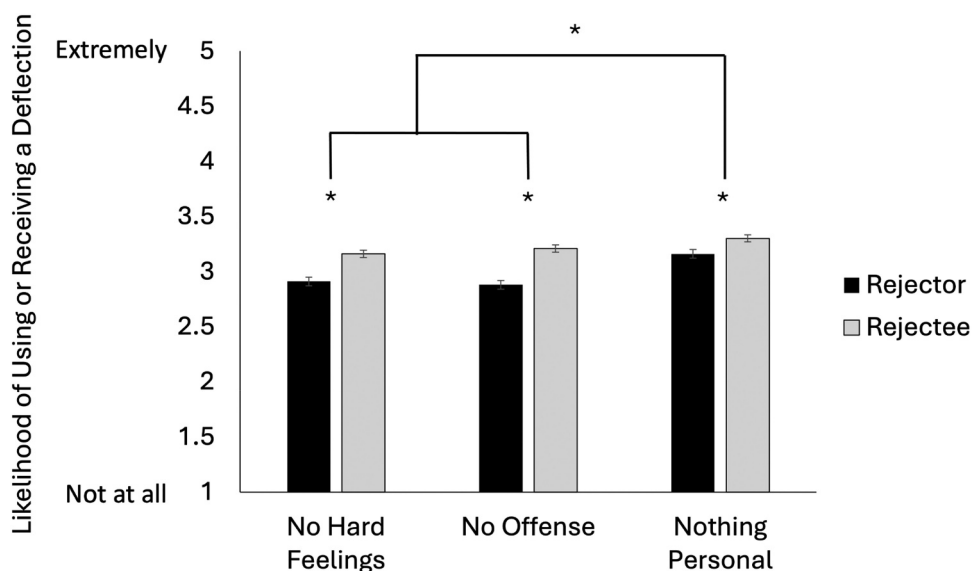


Figure 2. Likelihood of using each deflection for rejector and rejectee roles in Study 3. *Note.* Error bars denote standard error.

difference = -0.21 , $SE = 0.07$, $p = .009$, 95% CI $[-0.38, -0.04]$) or no offense ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.02$, mean difference = -0.18 , $SE = 0.07$, $p = .034$, 95% CI $[-0.35, -0.01]$).

Rejectees would feel more relief when rejections contain “nothing personal”

Similarly, an 8 (Emotion: hurt, angry, sad, relieved, happy, uncomfortable, guilty, ashamed) $\times$ 3 (Deflection: no hard feelings, no offense, nothing personal) mixed ANOVA was conducted to examine whether deflections elicit different emotions from rejectees. There was a significant interaction between Deflection and Emotion ($F(14, 8351) = 3.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$) that qualified a main effect of Emotion ($F(7, 8351) = 195.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$). Participants reported they would feel more relieved if they received a rejection containing nothing personal ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.14$) than no hard feelings ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.02$, mean difference = 0.20 , $SE = 0.08$, $p = .026$, 95% CI $[0.02, 0.38]$) or no offense ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.97$, mean difference = 0.25 , $SE = 0.08$, $p = .003$, 95% CI $[0.07, 0.43]$; see [Figure 3](#)). There was no main effect of Deflection ($F(2, 1193) = 0.21$, $p = .813$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$).

Discussion

Study 3 built on Studies 1 and 2 by exploring how the inclusion of deflections in social rejections was perceived from the standpoint of the rejector and rejectee. Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, deflections were perceived as somewhat likely to be included in social rejections, and Study 3 suggests that people perceive them as significantly more likely to be included from the standpoint of the rejectee than the rejector. Both rejectors and rejectees were significantly more likely to choose a rejection with a deflection (than without) and preferred rejections which included “no hard feelings” or “nothing personal” to those which included “no offense.” That is, contrary to the preregistered hypothesis, rejectees were not significantly less likely to choose a rejection which included a deflection. Furthermore, the findings suggest that participants felt that one of their preferred deflections (i.e., “nothing personal”) was significantly more likely to be included in a social rejection than the other two. In addition, rejectors reported they would feel fewer negative emotions (hurt, anger, and sadness) when using “nothing personal” compared to “no offense,” and rejectees reported they would feel more relief being told “nothing personal” compared to “no offense” or “no hard feelings.” However,

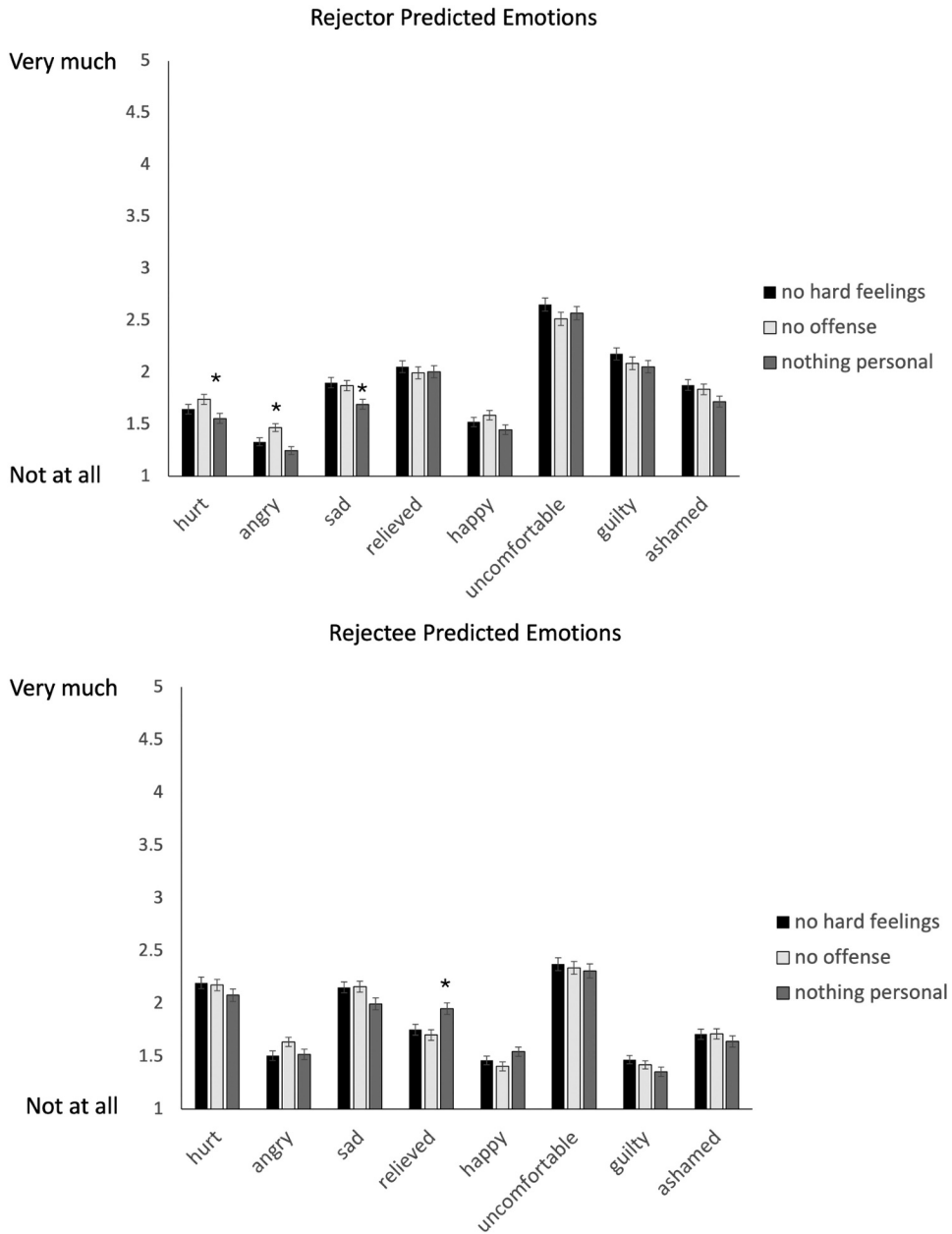


Figure 3. Predicted emotions for each deflection for rejectors and rejectees. *Note.* Error bars denote standard error.

rejectees thought that rejections would be more likely to contain all three deflections compared to rejectors, but this difference was the greatest for no offense. In other words, rejectees anticipate rejectors using the least preferred form of deflection.

Study 4

In Study 3, we found that both rejectors and rejectees preferred rejections with deflections compared to rejections without deflections, and the “nothing personal” deflections were the most preferred type.

However, it is possible that rejections with deflections are more strongly preferred with acquaintances than with very close others (e.g., close friends). For example, when people imagine ending a romantic relationship (i.e., a close relationship), they very infrequently choose to use language such as “it’s not you” (Wilson et al., 2009). Thus, it is possible that rejections with deflections may be more preferred when the relation between the rejector and rejectees is less close. We therefore hypothesized that there would be a greater preference for rejections with deflections compared to rejections without deflections in acquaintance interactions than close friend interactions.

Furthermore, the rejections without deflections in Study 3 were written in a bald on-the-record style: there was no ambiguity or softening of the rejection (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, it is possible that rejections with deflections were only preferred because the rejections without deflections were particularly direct. Therefore, in Study 4, we test both the effects of closeness on preference for rejections with deflections, and we use rejections without deflections that are stated somewhat less baldly (e.g., with the use of phrases like “I’m not really up for doing that” as opposed to “I’m not up for doing that”; Brown & Levinson, 1987). The study was approved by the St. Mary’s College of Maryland Institutional Review Board (Study ID: SP25_27) and preregistered on OSF: <https://osf.io/qv6rj/overview>.

Method

In this study, participants wrote about their close friends or acquaintances and then imagined themselves on the receiving end of four rejection scenarios from the category of people they had just written about. For each scenario, participants rated two rejections: one without a deflection and one with a “nothing personal” style of deflection.

Participants

Participants who were at least 18 years old, fluent in English, and living in the United States were recruited via Prolific. The survey took approximately four minutes to complete, and participants were compensated \$1.00. A G*Power analysis for a 2×2 mixed ANOVA with 95% confidence to detect a small effect size ($f = 0.1$) and an alpha of .05 determined a target sample size of 978 participants. To account for potential exclusions, we set our recruitment target at 1076 (10% higher than our target sample size). Participants were excluded based on the following preregistered exclusion criteria: if they did not answer “yes” on the data quality question or if they failed the manipulation check. Of the 1078 people who participated in the study, 26 did not answer “yes” on the data quality question, and 119 failed the manipulation check, leaving a final sample of 933 participants ($M_{age} = 41.10$, $SD = 13.27$; 60.3% cisgender women, 34.9% cisgender men, 0.8% non-binary, 0.4% transgender man, 0.1% transgender women, 0.4% agender, 3.2% self-identified with another term; 11.0% African/African American/Black, 2.1% American Indian/Native American, 7.3% Asian/Asian American, 6.8% Hispanic/Latino/a/x/e, 2.1% Multiple Races/Ethnicities, 0.8% Middle Eastern or North African, 0.3% Pacific Islander/Pacific Islander American, 74.8% White/European American, and 0.3% self-identified as another race or ethnicity).

Procedure

After providing consent, participants were randomly assigned to the Close Friend or Acquaintance condition. In both conditions, they completed a writing task in which they were asked to either think about their close friends or their acquaintances and write in response to the following prompt: *Take the next minute to write about them. What are they like? Where did you meet them? In what contexts do you interact?* After one minute, participants were able to click to the next page where they were presented with a manipulation check (see Measures).

Next, participants read four brief scenarios in which they ask either a close friend or acquaintance (based on the condition to which they were assigned) to engage in a social activity (e.g., “grab a cup of coffee”). The scenarios were presented in a randomized order. After each scenario, they were asked

how they would feel about two different rejections to the social request. For each scenario, one of the rejections contained a “nothing personal” style deflection and one rejection did not contain a deflection. The rejections were paired such that they were very similar except for the deflection (e.g., “I’m not up for that, nothing personal” and “I’m not really up for doing that”) and were matched on word count. Each rejection pair was randomly assigned to the scenarios for each participant, and the order of the rejections presented for the scenarios was also randomized.

Finally, participants completed demographics, a data quality question, and were debriefed before being redirected to Prolific for payment.

Measures

For the manipulation check, participants were asked how close they were to the people they had just written about. The answer choices were “not close,” “close,” and “I was not asked to write anything.” To be included in the study, participants in the Acquaintance condition had to respond with “not close,” and participants in the Close Friends condition had to respond with “close.”

For the rejection ratings, participants were presented with the following four pairs of rejections: 1) “I’m not up for that, nothing personal” and “I’m not really up for doing that,” 2) “I’d rather not, nothing against you” and “I’d rather not do that,” 3) “I’m not up for that, but it’s nothing personal,” and “I don’t think I’m really up for doing that,” and 4) “I don’t feel like it, but it’s not you” and “I don’t think I really feel like doing that.” They then rated how they would feel after each rejection response on a scale from 1 (*very negatively*) to 5 (*very positively*).

Results

To test the hypothesis that participants in the Acquaintance condition, compared to those in the Close Friend condition, would feel more positively about rejections with nothing personal deflections compared to rejections without deflections, a 2 (Closeness: Close Friend vs. Acquaintance) $\times$ 2 (Rejection Type: No Deflection vs. Nothing Personal) mixed ANOVA on how positively they view the rejections with and without deflections was conducted. In contrast to the hypothesis, there was no interaction between rejection type and closeness: $F(1, 931) = 2.44, p = .119, \eta_p^2 = .003$. However, replicating Study 3, there was a significant main effect of Rejection Type ($F(1, 931) = 36.78, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$), such that participants felt more positively about rejections with nothing personal ($M = 2.75, SD = 0.82$) than rejections without deflections ($M = 2.63, SD = 0.76$; mean difference = 0.13, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.17]). In addition, there was a significant effect of Closeness ($F(1, 931) = 5.52, p = .019, \eta_p^2 = .01$), such that participants felt more positively about rejections from close friends ($M = 2.74, SD = 0.57$) than rejections from acquaintances ($M = 2.63, SD = 0.55$; mean difference = 0.11, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.21]).

Discussion

Taken together, Study 4 replicated the overall finding from Study 3 that rejectees prefer rejections with deflections, even when the alternative communication was expressed less baldly, and extended our knowledge of how relationship closeness affects overall perceptions of rejection. That is, people feel more positively about rejections from close friends than from acquaintances. However, contrary to the hypothesis, participants did not feel significantly more positively about deflections when they came from acquaintances compared to friends. In other words, deflections were preferred regardless of the relationship with the rejector.

General discussion

Despite the large body of research on the negative effects of social rejection on the rejectee (Bernstein et al., 2021; Kendler et al., 2003; Nolan et al., 2003; Slavich et al., 2009, 2010;

Williams & Nida, 2022), not as much is known about what people can do to soften the blow in casual social rejection scenarios. For example, people report that they feel at a loss for what to say to soften the blow for the rejectee (Baumeister et al., 1993) even though rejectees often underestimate how much rejectors care about their feelings (e.g., Park & Klein, 2024). Furthermore, rejectors also want to protect their own reputations and their own feelings from the consequences of delivering bad news (Bond & Anderson, 1987; Folkes, 1982; Freedman et al., 2016). Therefore, researchers need to learn more about what people do say and how it affects both the rejectors and rejectees.

Four studies provided support for the idea that deflections are something that people may include in a social rejection. First, rejectors include deflections when crafting spoken (Study 1) and written rejections (Study 2) to a new acquaintance they met online or in person. Second, people endorse deflections as somewhat likely for the social rejection of people beyond new acquaintances (e.g., friend, coworker, teammate, housemate; Study 3), and people prefer to have a deflection included in the social rejection (Studies 3 and 4). Furthermore, “nothing personal” is not just the most used but also the most preferred of the three deflections which were considered (Studies 1–3). Finally, deflections such as “nothing personal” have significant but different emotional benefits for the rejector and rejectee. From a rejector standpoint, participants estimate they could relatively spare themselves feelings of hurt, anger, and sadness if they include “nothing personal” in their social rejection (i.e., compared to including “no offense”). When they imagined themselves as rejectees, participants felt that the inclusion of “nothing personal” could facilitate feelings of relief. Taken together, the present research sheds new light onto what people might say during a social rejection and sets the stage for a fruitful direction to move in as researchers strive to discover what people can say to soften the blow of social rejection.

The present research raises the possibility that even though rejectors want to spare the rejectees’ feelings, they may not accomplish that goal by using language which comes across as trying to impact the rejectees’ emotions. If social rejectors want to flag what they are not saying or doing (i.e., a deflection), then people prefer to receive the “nothing personal” deflection rather than the deflections which direct the feelings of the rejectee (e.g., no offense). Although approximately 20% (Study 1) and 35% (Study 2) of participants did spontaneously use deflections in their rejections, most participants did not. The current research, therefore, raises a potential pathway for helping individuals craft less hurtful rejections. If would-be-rejectors know that including a deflection (especially a “nothing personal” deflection) might help soften the blow for the rejectee, they may begin to use deflections more and help themselves and the person they are rejecting feel better about the situation.

Deflections may protect the emotions of rejectors and rejectees but in different ways

While social rejection is well known to be emotionally tricky for the rejectees, it is also the case that people experience many negative emotions when faced with rejecting others (e.g., Kansky & Allen, 2018; Poulsen & Kashy, 2012). The inclusion of deflections may help manage emotions but in different ways for rejector and rejectee. From the standpoint of rejectees, “nothing personal” significantly bolstered feelings of relief.

When participants imagined being rejectors, deflections showed significant impact on hurt, sadness, and anger with no significant differences found for relief. Of the three deflections considered, “nothing personal” was the most successful and “no offense” was the least successful in buffering the rejector from negative feelings. Previous research has found that when people must give an explanation for socially rejecting someone, they prefer to make the explanation relatively impersonal (Folkes, 1982). We build on this by showing that simply flagging the rejection as not personal without further explanation can have emotional benefits, and we also find that rejectees prefer to hear that it is not personal. As researchers conduct more studies on the language of rejection, it will be important to consider how linguistic choices jointly affect emotions for rejectors and rejectees.

Future research: culture and context impacts on the use and consequences of deflections

The current research has described a potentially useful language option in social rejections and sets the stage to build our understanding of what people should say to soften the blow of social rejection. For example, in the present research we examined written and spoken social rejections of new acquaintances met online or in person as well as hypothetical social rejections across relational contexts (e.g., friend, coworker, teammate, housemate; close friends vs. acquaintances). All the studies provided support for the endorsement of deflection as a preferred and successful strategy.

Yet more research is needed to understand how the communication medium and social context shape the use of deflections and their emotional benefit. Do people tend to use these deflections more often when writing versus speaking just as they tend to choose different words in written versus oral communication in other domains (e.g., Hayes, 1988)? Furthermore, the scenarios in the present study were casual (e.g., asking a friend to grab coffee), but deflections may be less preferred in a weightier scenario (e.g., asking a friend to go on a trip together).

Furthermore, deflections are only one category of rejection language that can affect the outcomes of a rejection, and future work is needed to examine whether they are a helpful or even the best choice depending on the context. That is, future work should examine how deflections compare to other forms of language in preventing hurt feelings and protecting rejectors' reputations. For example, there are multiple ways to let a rejectee know that their value has not been impacted. As described in existing frameworks of what to say during a social rejection, rejectors can include positive regard in their rejections (e.g., "you're great"), and this positive regard may help reduce hurt feelings (Freedman et al., 2016). However, positive regard differs from deflections in that deflections do not involve compliments or positivity, rather, they are designed to neutralize potentially negative evaluations. Similarly, a rejector can offer alternatives to the denied social request (Freedman et al., 2016) or excuses about why the rejection occurred (Folkes, 1982). These different forms of language may have different effects on rejectees depending on the relationship. For example, positive regard may work better than deflections in close relationships where the expression of positive regard would be more believable than in an interaction between strangers or acquaintances. Relatedly, excuses may be a better strategy than deflections when there is an external and uncontrollable excuse that the rejectee would believe (Folkes, 1982). If there is instead a personal reason for the rejection that the rejectee would be hurt by (e.g., rejecting someone due to the way they look), a deflection may be a kinder choice. The current research introduces deflections as a new language element to consider for social rejection and provides a springboard for future work to investigate when they are best used in relation to other recommended language elements for social rejection.

Another aspect of deflections within rejections that should be considered is what effect they have on the reputation of the rejector. Rejectors are motivated to be seen in a positive light and protect their reputations (Bond & Anderson, 1987; Folkes, 1982; Freedman et al., 2016), but do deflections accomplish that goal? It is likely that rejectors' reputations may be spared more when they use deflections if rejectees are feeling more relieved about the situation. Yet it is also possible that the effect of deflections on rejectors' reputations may vary based on the interpersonal context or existing perceptions about the rejector. For example, deflections may affect the reputation of someone in a position of power differently than someone who shares the same status as the rejectee.

The current findings should be understood in the context of the collected samples. All three of the samples were from the United States, and although the samples were recruited from different regions (mid-Atlantic, south central, unconstrained within the U.S.), we did not examine deflections within other cultures outside the United States. From both practical and theoretical perspectives, it will be important for future research to consider the ways in which culture may shape the use of and reactions to deflections. For example, reactions to apologies and willingness to give apologies varies considerably across cultures (e.g., Lin et al., 2022; Shafa et al., 2017). It is therefore possible that other attempts to smooth difficult social interactions, like using deflections in a rejection, may look different across cultures.

Conclusion

Taken together, the present research provides support for a new language element that people sometimes elect to include in their social rejections: deflections which direct rejectees to not make certain attributions or feel certain emotions. People spontaneously include deflections in their social rejections (Studies 1 and 2), endorse them as somewhat likely to be included in social rejections (Study 3), prefer rejections with deflections to rejections without (Studies 3 and 4), and especially prefer hearing “nothing personal” compared to “no hard feelings” or “no offense” (Study 3). The use of “nothing personal” may help protect rejectors against feelings of hurt, anger, and sadness whereas it may help facilitate relief in rejectees. The identification of deflections as something people may draw on when communicating social rejection sets the stage for how to move forward. For example, more research is needed to understand how much people elect to include deflections in their social rejection as a function of communication medium and their broader culture. These studies provide evidence of a form of language that may provide positive benefits to both rejectors and rejectees and represent an important step in deriving empirically based advice for people who find themselves in the unenviable position of having to construct a social rejection.

Notes

1. Per a reviewer request, we conducted a post-hoc exploratory analysis on gender differences in use of deflections in Studies 1 and 2. There were no significant differences in the use of deflections between men and women in Study 1 ($\chi^2(1) = 0.83$, $p = .363$, $V = .043$). In Study 2, women were more likely to use deflections (40.54%) than men (15%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.51$, $p = .034$, $V = .22$).
2. These were presented in a randomized order, but due to a programming error, the order of emotions presented in the “no offense” block was not randomized.

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