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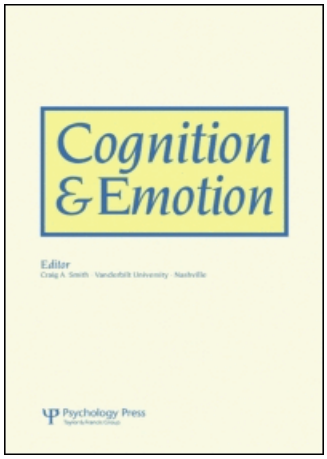

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Disappointment for others

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BRIEF REPORT

Disappointment for others

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Two studies examined when and why people experience disappointment for others. Study 1 demonstrated that participants reported disappointment for another's outcome only when the outcome had strong personal implications. Study 2 demonstrated that self-image concerns rather than empathy or resource concerns mediated the experience of disappointment for others. Collectively, these findings suggest that people experience disappointment for others when those outcomes implicate the self-image.

Most people can recall feeling disappointed following a setback. Smiles fade into heavy sighs as people momentarily re-experience the emotional discomfort of the disappointing outcome. However, research on counterfactual emotions suggests that how disappointed people feel depends as much on the outcome *expected* as it does on the outcome *obtained*. People experience disappointment when negative outcomes disconfirm positive

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expectations (van Dijk & van der Pligt, 1997; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, Manstead, & van der Pligt, 2000), and not simply in response to negative outcomes. Thus, bad news feels bad, but only unexpected bad news feels disappointing (Shepperd & McNulty, 2002). Disappointment can thus be distinguished from other negative emotions such as anger, which emerges in response to the presence of a negative outcome (van Dijk, Zeelenberg, & van der Pligt, 1999), and from alternative counterfactual emotions such as regret, which arises in response to the negative outcomes of personal actions or inactions (Zeelenberg et al., 2000).

Despite all that is known about disappointment, questions linger over the contexts and processes that determine it. Researchers have examined the disappointment people experience in response to *their own* outcomes. What researchers *have not* examined is when and why people experience disappointment for *the outcomes of other people*. Drawing from prior work on interpersonal emotions (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005), we define disappointment for others as the disappointment people feel when they are not the proximal agent involved in the unexpected negative outcome. The present investigation extends prior work by evaluating if and when people experience disappointment for others' outcomes and whether this experience originates from a genuine concern for the other person or from egoistic concerns over how the other's outcome affects the self.

Disappointment from implications of the outcomes of others

We propose that disappointment for others arises when the outcomes of others implicate the self. Past work suggests that outcomes must be personal to evoke emotions. For instance, the *componential emotion model* proposes that emotions signal that personal welfare has been implicated in the individual's ongoing relationship with his/her world (Frijda, 2001). Typically, people experience emotions when their personal welfare is affected, or implicated, by their own outcomes. For example, a wife experiences disappointment when her career expectations are directly implicated by her termination from her first teaching job.

In close relationships, however, strong social bonds foster considerable overlap between personal welfare and the welfare of significant others. This relational overlap introduces the possibility of experiencing emotions for others when personal status is implicated by the outcomes that happen to close others (Barquissau, Schmader, & Lickel, 2005). From this perspective, disappointment for others may arise when the associative implications of another's outcomes for oneself are strong enough to make them, in effect, personal.

The outcomes of others can have personal implications in several ways. First, they become personal when the partner is viewed as an extension of

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self, as when a husband empathically shares in his wife's emotional response to her job loss as if it were his own loss (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000). In this first way, personal and partner experiences become confounded in empathic experience. As such, disappointment for others stems from *empathy concerns*. Second, the outcomes of others become personal when they place additional demands on psychological and material resources, as when a husband experiences the additional stress that his wife's job loss places on shared resources as well as general relationship and living conditions (Karney & Bradbury, 2000). The self can be implicated in these cases by the husband's concerns over the additional stress on his social and emotional resources that his wife will require to cope with her loss as well as the additional stress on material resources (e.g., income) created by the wife's job loss. In this second way, disappointment for others stems from *resource concerns*.

Third, the outcomes of others become personal when they reflect negatively on the self via shared social identity, as when the husband feels that the threatening implications of his wife's job loss reflect poorly on his own self-image (Cialdini & de Nicholas, 1989; Lickel et al., 2005). In this third way, disappointment for others stems from *self-image* concerns.

Although we acknowledge that the personal implications carried by resource concerns or empathy can potentially evoke emotions for the outcomes of others, we propose that disappointment for others arises when the outcome of close others become personal by reflecting negatively on the self-image via the associative link of shared social identity.

Evidence suggests that strong social bonds may enable people to experience emotional reactions to a partner's outcome even though they are not the proximal agent involved in the outcome and *even though* the partner's emotional reaction to the outcome is unknown (Lickel et al., 2005). For instance, a husband may experience disappointment over his wife's loss even if his wife does not express (verbally or nonverbally) disappointment to him. Although shame rather than disappointment was the emotion of interest, evidence suggests that people can experience emotions for the outcomes of others. Importantly, people experience shame in response to the outcomes of close others that implicate the self (Johns, Schmader, & Lickel, 2005). Shame results because the partner's transgression reflects negatively on the self *via the link* of shared social identity rather than empathy concerns or resource concerns (Lickel et al., 2005). We attempted to build on past work exploring shame for others to shed light on the determinants and processes that govern disappointment for others. Drawing from the work on shame, we propose that people experience disappointment for others when the others' outcome evokes self-image concerns rather than empathy or resource concerns.

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Overview of studies

Two studies explored when and why people experience disappointment for others. Specifically, we attempted to determine if people can experience disappointment for the outcomes of others that carry personal implications. We manipulated expectations and the character experiencing the outcome (the self, close other, or acquaintance) in samples of parents (Study 1) and romantic partners (Study 2). More importantly, however, we explored the processes that account for the experience of disappointment for others. Specifically, Study 2 tested which of the three ways that another's outcomes become personal—empathy concerns, resource concerns, self-image concerns—accounted for disappointment for others. Participants responded to measures of each mediator as well as the ultimate measure of disappointment in response to a manipulation of the importance that participants and their romantic partner attached to an unexpected negative outcome. We predicted that people would report disappointment for others only if the other's outcomes had high personal implications. More importantly, we predicted that self-image concerns rather than empathy or resource concerns would mediate the experience of disappointment for others.

STUDY 1

Method

Study 1 examined whether people might feel disappointment for another person when the other person's unexpected negative outcome has strong personal implications. Parents (30 males, 62 females) contacted in public settings were randomly assigned to complete one of six scenarios in a 2 (Outcome: expected vs. unexpected) $\times$ 3 (Scenario Character: self, own child, and acquaintance's child) between-subjects design. The scenario described a situation in which the parent, their child, or an acquaintance's child did not receive an award. In addition, parents were instructed to imagine that, before learning the outcome, they expected that the character in the scenario was likely (unexpected outcome) or unlikely (expected outcome) to receive the award. We reasoned that an outcome that occurred to one's own child would have strong personal implications, whereas an outcome that occurred to an acquaintance's child would not. Thus, we predicted that parents would experience more disappointment in response to the unexpected bad news occurring for their child than for an acquaintance's child. More importantly, we predicted that parents would experience *as much* disappointment when the unexpected negative outcome happened to their own child as when it happened directly to them.

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TABLE 1
Study 1: Disappointment ratings

	Self: M (SD)	*Own child: M (SD)*	*Acquaintance's child: M (SD)*
Expected	4.6 (1.8)[a]	4.2 (2.5)[a]	5.1 (1.4)[a]
Unexpected	6.8 (1.4)[b]	6.4 (1.6)[b]	4.9 (2.3)[a]

Note: Higher means reflect greater disappointment. Means within rows and columns with different superscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Results and discussion

The results are displayed in Table 1. Analyses revealed a significant main effect of Outcome, $F(1, 86) = 12.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.74$, qualified by a significant Outcome × Character interaction, $F(1, 86) = 3.71$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.50$. As predicted, parents reported greater disappointment for unexpected versus expected outcomes when the scenario described their child, $t(1, 86) = 3.21$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.09$, or them, $t(1, 86) = 3.35$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.15$, than when it described an acquaintance's child, $t(1, 86) = 0.20$, $p < .84$, $d = 0.07$. For expected outcomes, no differences emerged in disappointment as a function of character, all ts$(1, 86) < 1.20$, all ps$ > .23$, all ds$ < .40$. For unexpected outcomes, parents reported significantly more disappointment when they versus an acquaintance's child was the character, $t(1, 86) = 2.75$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.93$. In addition, parents reported more disappointment when their own child versus when an acquaintance's child was the character, $t(1, 86) = 2.11$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.74$. Importantly, parents reported as much disappointment when their child versus they were the character, $t(1, 86) = 0.60$, $p > .54$, $d = 0.21$.

Summary. Study 1 showed that parents felt as much disappointment for another person's outcomes as they did for their own outcome when the other's outcome had strong personal implications. Parents felt as much disappointment when an unexpected negative outcome happened to their child as when it happened to them, and the disappointment in both instances was greater than when the unexpected negative outcome happened to an acquaintance's child.

STUDY 2

Although Study 1 demonstrated that people can experience disappointment when another's outcomes have strong personal implications, it is unknown whether these findings extend beyond the parent–child relationship to other

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close relationships. Study 2 attempted to address this limitation by examining disappointment for others in romantic relationships. More importantly, the findings do not speak to the underlying processes that account for disappointment for others. Earlier, we reviewed three ways in which another's outcome can become personal and each offers a different explanation for the results of Study 1. First, the disappointment for the child's outcome may have stemmed from empathic concern for the child. Second, the disappointment may have stemmed from resource concerns; the parents may have recognised that their child's unexpected bad news would require them to devote additional energies toward attending to the child. Third, disappointment may have stemmed from self-image concerns; parents may have felt that the child's "failure" reflected poorly on them.

Study 2 examined these three explanations among romantic partners by manipulating whether the outcome was described as important or unimportant to the participants and to the partner. The empathy explanation predicts that participants should report disappointment for their partner's outcomes if the outcome is important to the partner, regardless of whether the outcome is important to them. According to explanations based on egoistic concerns, personal importance attached to the partner's outcome also affects the disappointment that participant's feel. The resource explanation predicts that participants should report disappointment for their partner's outcomes when the outcome is important to them and the partner. The self-image explanation predicts that participants should feel disappointment for the partner's outcomes if the outcome is personally important, regardless of whether it is important to the partner.

We also included items that assessed the effect of personal importance, other importance, and closeness as well as the mediating role of self-image, resource, and empathy concerns in disappointment for others. Prior work on shame shows that people feel shame over a partner's transgression when the partner's outcome reflects poorly on them via shared social identity (Barquissau et al., 2005). The findings on shame led us to predict that participants would feel disappointment for their partner's outcome when the outcome was personally important, regardless of whether it was important to the partner. We also predicted that self-image concerns but not empathy or resource concerns would mediate the effect of personal importance on disappointment for others.

Methods

Students involved in romantic relationships (29 males, 61 females) were randomly assigned to complete one of eight scenarios in a 2 (Scenario Character: self vs. partner) $\times$ 2 (Personal Importance: low vs. high) $\times$ 2 (Other Importance: low vs. high) between-subjects design. We adapted the

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Study 1 scenarios to romantic couples and simplified the Study 2 design by dropping the "expected outcome" condition as well as the "acquaintance character" condition so that we could focus specifically on the question of why people experience disappointment for the outcomes of others that have high personal implications. Participants read a modified version of the Study 1 award scenario that described a situation in which they or their partner did not receive an expected award. Moreover, participants read that the award was or was not important to them and was or was not important to their partner. Participants then rated how disappointed they would feel over the outcome.

We also included items that asked participants to rate the extent to which (a) they felt that the failure to receive the award would reflect poorly on them, and (b) they would feel as their partner felt after learning the award outcome (1 = *not at all*; 9 = *very much so*). To assess resource concerns, we added an item asking participants to rate how much time and attention would be demanded of them after the failure to receive the award (1 = *very little*; 9 = *a great deal*). Finally, we added manipulation check items asking how important the outcome was to them and their partner (1 = *not at all important*; 9 = *very important*) and an item asking how close they felt to their partner (1 = *not at all close*, 9 = *very close*).

Results and discussion

Preliminary analyses. As sex effects have emerged for empathy in the past, we conducted preliminary analyses to test for sex effects in empathy and disappointment. Results showed no sex effect on disappointment, any mediating variables (e.g., empathy), or predictors, all Fs$(1, 82) < 0.45$, all ps $> .50$, all ds < 0.27. We thus omitted sex from further analyses.

We conducted a set of 2 (Scenario Character: self vs. partner) $\times$ 2 (Personal Importance: high vs. low) $\times$ 2 (Other Importance: high vs. low) ANOVAs to check our importance manipulations. Analyses revealed a single effect of personal importance on the manipulation check item for importance of the award to the participant, $F(1, 82) = 131.01$, $p < .01$, $d = 2.39$. Participants rated the outcome as more personally important when the award was described as personally important ($M = 6.66$, $SD = 0.78$) versus not personally important ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.88$). Analyses also revealed a single effect of other importance on the manipulation check item for importance of the award to the partner, $F(1, 82) = 123.74$, $p < .01$, $d = 2.33$. Participants rated the outcome as more important to the partner when the award was described as important to the partner ($M = 6.07$, $SD = 1.62$) versus unimportant to the partner ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.23$).

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TABLE 2
Study 2: Disappointment ratings

	Scenario character			
	Self		*Other*	
	Other importance		*Other importance*	
Importance of outcome to the participant	*Low: M (SD)*	*High: M (SD)*	*Low: M (SD)*	*High: M (SD)*
Low	3.2 (1.8)[a]	3.0 (1.1)[a]	1.7 (1.3)[b]	2.3 (1.8)[b]
High	7.8 (1.3)[c]	8.2 (1.0)[c]	7.8 (1.2)[c]	8.1 (1.1)[c]

Note: Higher means reflect greater disappointment. Means with different superscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Disappointment. The means for all conditions appear in Table 2. Analyses revealed a significant main effect of personal importance on disappointment ratings, $F(1, 82) = 150.90$, $p < .01$, $d = 2.57$. Participants reported greater disappointment when personal importance was high ($M = 8.00$, $SD = 1.03$) versus low ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.42$). If we look at just at the right side of Table 2, it becomes apparent that the results offer no support for the empathy explanation for disappointment. Instead, the results support the egoistic explanation. Participants reported greater disappointment when the other's outcome was personally important than when it was not personally important, irrespective of other importance.

Analysis also revealed a significant Personal Importance × Scenario Character interaction, $F(1, 82) = 4.22$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.43$. Simple effects tests revealed that when the outcome was personally important, participants reported similar levels of disappointment regardless of whether the outcome occurred to them ($M = 8.00$, $SD = 0.98$) or to their partner ($M = 8.01$, $SD = 1.13$), $t(1, 82) = 0.1$, $p > .99$, $d = 0.04$. By contrast, when the outcome was personally unimportant, participants reported greater disappointment when the outcome happened to them ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.50$) than when it happened to their partner ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(1, 82) = 2.94$, $p < .01$, $d = 1.16$. This interaction, while interesting, does not qualify the main effect of personal importance by other importance and the finding that our effects are entirely driven by egoistic concerns rather than empathy concerns.

Test of mediation model. We conducted a path analysis to test whether empathy concerns, resource concerns, or self-image concerns mediated the effects of personal importance on disappointment. The path model included Personal Importance, Other Importance, Closeness, and Scenario Character as exogenous predictors, and self-image, empathy, and resource concerns as our endogenous mediators. The path analysis using maximum likelihood

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estimation revealed adequate fit for the target model, $\chi^2(3) = 3.41$, $p = .34$, $RMSEA = 0.02$, $RMR = 0.02$, $CFI = 1.00$.

Figure 1 presents the standardised direct path coefficients that were significant as solid lines and those that were non-significant as dashed lines. Self-image concerns had significant direct and indirect effects on disappointment. The significant total effect of personal importance on disappointment ($\beta = .90$) decomposes into a significant indirect effect ($\beta = .91$) and a non-significant direct effect ($\beta = -.01$). Importantly, the indirect effect of personal importance on disappointment was mediated by self-image concerns, $(.92) \times (.97) = .89$. Unlike self-image concerns, neither resource nor empathy concerns had significant direct or indirect effects on disappointment. Moreover, there were no significant direct or indirect effects of scenario character, closeness, or other importance on the mediator of self-image concerns or the ultimate outcome of disappointment. Finally, model comparison chi-square tests revealed a significant decrement in fit only when the model was modified to exclude the critical mediator of self-image concerns, $\triangle \chi^2(1) = 5.96$, $p < .05$, and not when the model was modified to exclude the possible mediators of resource or empathy concerns, both $\triangle \chi^2 s > 0.02$, both $ps > .98$. In sum, path analysis revealed that disappointment for others arose from participants concerns over how the unexpected bad news would reflect on their self-image rather than resource or empathy concerns. These findings showed that the inclusion of self-image concerns not only contributed to the fit of the model but that the exclusion of this mediator significantly diminished the fit of the model.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

These findings advance prior work by showing (a) that people can experience disappointment for others and, more importantly, (b) that self-image concerns rather than empathy or resource concerns mediate disappointment for others. Study 1 confirmed that people experience disappointment for others only when the outcomes of others have personal implications. Specifically, parents felt as much disappointment for their child's unexpected bad news as they did over their own unexpected bad news. Study 2 extended Study 1 beyond the parent–child relationship to romantic relationships. Study 2 showed that participants felt disappointment about their partner's unexpected bad news only when the outcome was personally important, irrespective of whether the outcome was important to the partner. More importantly, the path analyses revealed that self-image concerns rather than resource or empathy concerns mediated other disappointment.

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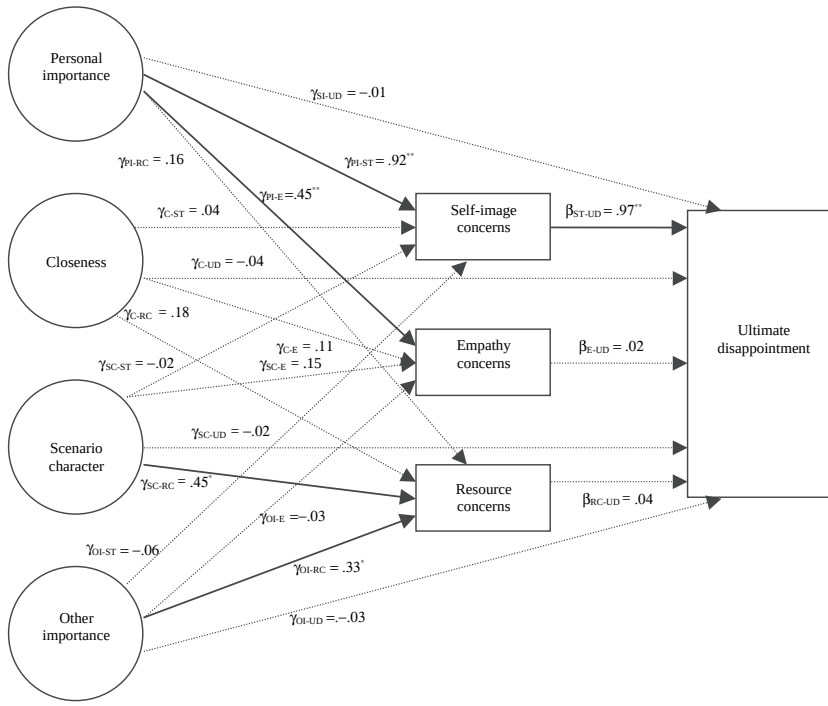

Figure 1. Results of the path analysis. Significant paths appear as solid lines, non-significant paths appear as dashed lines. Numbers represent beta weights. $*p < .05$. $**p < .01$.

Limitations and future directions. Although informative, the use of scenarios is vulnerable to biases stemming from self-presentational concerns and introspection limitations when responding to hypothetical outcomes. Future studies should replicate these findings in real settings. Given the mediating role of identity threat, future research should also explore the extent to which the identity link created by social roles (e.g., graduate advisors) can evoke disappointment for others (e.g., students) outside the context of close personal relationships.

Future research should also assess the consequences of disappointment for relationship outcomes. For example, do people disclose their disappointment for a partner's outcomes to the partners and, if so, do such disclosures strain or facilitate the relationship? Research could examine whether anticipated other-disappointment might motivate proactive efforts to prepare for disappointment. Evidence suggests that people forsake optimism as feedback becomes imminent to avoid anticipated disappointment arising when expectations exceed outcomes (Carroll, Sweeny, & Shepperd, 2006; Shepperd, Oulette, & Fernandez, 1996; Sweeny, Carroll, & Shepperd, 2006).

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Future work could explore whether anticipated other-disappointment leads people to forsake optimism for others.

Finally, future work could adopt paradigms used by helping researchers (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002) to better examine the role of empathy in other-disappointment. Although Study 2's *findings* supported self-image concerns as the mediator, Study 2's *design* could have handicapped the empathy explanation as participants may have found it hard to feel empathy in the condition where they imagined an outcome that the partner felt was important but that they felt was unimportant. Of course, the claim that empathy is the critical mediator is inconsistent with the finding that the condition where low other importance did not match high personal importance also produced high levels of other-disappointment. Nonetheless, the possibility that empathy mediates other-disappointment in some cases should be further explored.

Summary. Although an indiscriminate capacity to experience emotions for the outcomes of *all* others would not be adaptive, a selective capacity to experience emotions for the outcomes of *significant others* would incur enough adaptive benefits to offset the costs. Thus, although the capacity to experience disappointment for the outcomes of all others would overwhelm a husband, his ability to feel disappointment for his own wife's outcomes would be critical to the ongoing fulfilment of his role as a relationship partner. These findings show that disappointment extends beyond personal outcomes to the outcomes of others that implicate the self-image.

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