

PARENTAL LOVE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: IMPLICATIONS OF PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE- REJECTION THEORY[#]

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This article presents an overview of Parental Acceptance-Rejection (PAR) Theory, its consequences for life-span human development, and implications for research and clinical practice. Compelling empirical evidence across an array of measurement modalities supports PAR Theory's prediction that perceived parental rejection in childhood has consistent negative effects on psychological adjustment and behavioral functioning of children and adults worldwide. Overall, parental acceptance-rejection seems to be heavily implicated in offsprings' health, well-being, and in a number of psychological and behavioral problems including substance abuse, depression, conduct disorder, and delinquency.

The feeling that children's experience of parental acceptance (love) or rejection (lack of love) may have a greater influence on them than any other single experience inspired Rohner (1986) to develop Parental Acceptance-Rejection (PAR) Theory. Rohner began research on the worldwide antecedents, effects, and other correlates of parental acceptance-rejection in 1960 after reading a statement by Coleman (1956, p. 117) who wrote "In general, . . . rejected children tend to be fearful, insecure, attention seeking, jealous, hostile, and lonely (Wolberg, 1944). Many of these children have difficulty in later life expressing and responding to affection." After reading this, Rohner (1986, p. 68) said:

I wondered if these claims were true for humans everywhere, or whether they might be culture bound, so I conducted a small holocultural study using nineteen societies scattered widely around the world (Rohner, 1960). I was electrified to find that Coleman's claim about rejected children tending to be more hostile and aggressive and tending to have more negative worldviews than accepted children were apparently true, not simply in the United States but all over the world.

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These results inspired Rohner to undertake another cross-cultural study, this time a comparative study of parental acceptance-rejection in three Pacific societies. Later, in 1975, he published a detailed holocultural (cross-cultural comparative) study on 101 cultural groups (Rohner, 1975). Results of all these studies convinced him about the consistent effects of parental acceptance-rejection on the personality development of children and adults across races, ethnicities, and cultures of the world, at least as revealed in holocultural research. However, because holocultural research deals only with typical behaviors in random, stratified samples of the world's cultures, it can tell nothing about intracultural variability of behavior. As a result, Rohner felt the need to know if within-culture psychological research on the correlates of parental acceptance-rejection yields the same results as holocultural research. In order to explore this issue he developed and validated in 1976 the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire and the Personality Assessment Questionnaire, along with an interview format and behavior observation procedures Rohner, (1990/1999).

Several years of research using these instruments and procedures convinced Rohner that the correlations between perceived parental acceptance-rejection and its sequelae tend to be so robust that researchers are likely to get similar results regardless of which measurement modality they use. Much of the evidence leading to this conclusion is summarized in his book "The warmth dimension: Foundations of acceptance-rejection theory" (Rohner, 1986). Prior to this—based on twenty years of reflection and research—Rohner introduced for the first time the concept of parental acceptance-rejection theory (Rohner & Rohner, 1980). Since then, dozens of studies within the U.S. and internationally have tested and confirmed different aspects of the theory. Results of a recent meta-analysis of 43 studies worldwide, for example, provide strong empirical support for the basic postulates of PAR Theory's personality subtheory (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a).

Basic Tenets of PAR Theory

PAR Theory is a theory of socialization that aims to predict and explain major causes, consequences, and correlates of parental acceptance and rejection within the United States and worldwide (Rohner & Rohner, 1980; Rohner, 1986). PAR Theory predicts that parental rejection has consistent negative effects on the psychological adjustment and on behavioral functioning of both children and adults

worldwide (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a). The theory draws from the phylogenetic perspective (Rohner, 1975, 1986). In PAR Theory, this perspective refers to the fact that humans have phylogenetically acquired need for positive response from people most important to them. This needs in childhood refers to parental love, affection, care, comfort, support, and nurturance. The need for positive response becomes more differentiated and complex in adulthood to include the need, wishes, or yearning for positive regard of significant others (Rohner, 2001). PAR Theory also assumes that when this need for positive response is not met by significant others, humans have the phylogenetically acquired tendency to develop a specific constellation of socio-emotional and cognitive dispositions specified in the theory's personality subtheory (Rohner, 1999).

The theory attempts to answer five classes of questions concerning parental acceptance and rejection. These questions are divided into three subtheories: personality subtheory (1,2), sociocultural systems subtheory (3, 4), and coping subtheory (5).

1. What happens to children who perceive themselves to be loved (accepted) or unloved (rejected) by their parents?
2. To what extent do the effects of childhood rejection extend into adulthood and old age?
3. Why are some parents warm, loving, and accepting, and others cold, aggressive, neglecting, and rejecting?
4. How is the total fabric of a society, as well as the behavior and beliefs of people within the society, affected by the fact that most parents in that society tend to either accept or reject their children?
5. Why do some children and adults cope more effectively than others with the experiences of childhood rejection?

PAR Theory has several unique features guiding its attempt to answer these questions. First, it draws extensively from major ethnic groups in the United States as well as from worldwide cross-cultural evidence (Rohner, 1999). Second, it draws from literary and historic materials going as far back as 2,000 years. Third, it draws from more than 1500 published empirical studies on parental acceptance and rejection since the 1930s to form a conceptual framework for explaining the lifespan perspective incorporated into PAR Theory's personality subtheory.

PAR Theory's personality subtheory

This subtheory postulates that parental acceptance-rejection has profound influence in shaping children's personality development over the life span. The theory begins with an apriori assumption (Rohner, 1999, p.8):

Humans have developed the enduring, biologically-based emotional need for positive response from the people who are most important to them. The need for positive response includes an emotional wish, desire, or yearning (whether consciously recognized or not) for comfort, support, care, concern, nurturance, and the like. In adulthood the need becomes more complex and differentiated to include the wish (recognized or unrecognized) for positive regard from people whose opinions are considered to be of value. People who can best satisfy this need for infants and children are typically their parents, but the source for adolescents and adults expands to include significant others.

PAR Theory's personality subtheory assumes that the emotional need for positive response from significant others (parents or attachment figures) is a powerful motivator in children. And when this need is not adequately met by attachment figures, children are predisposed emotionally and behaviorally to respond in specific ways (Rohner, 1986). In particular, the theory assumes that rejected children are likely to feel anxious and insecure. Additionally, parental rejection is expected to lead to other personality outcomes in children and adults including: (1) aggression or hostility, passive aggression, or problems with the management of hostility; (2) dependence or defensive independence, depending on the form, frequency, and intensity of rejection; (3) impaired self-esteem; (4) impaired self-adequacy; (5) emotional unresponsiveness; (6) emotional instability; and (7) negative worldview.

According to PAR Theory, rejected people are likely to develop a negative worldview characterized by beliefs that people and the world in general are unfriendly, hostile, or dangerous (Rohner, 1986, 1999). Negative worldview, negative self-esteem, negative self-adequacy, and some of the other personality dispositions described above form the basis of mental representations or social cognitions of rejected people (Rohner, 1986, 1999). In PAR Theory, mental representation refers to an individual's more or less coherent but usually implicit beliefs and expectations about oneself and significant others that are constructed from emotionally important past and current experiences. The theory assumes that mental representation

tends to influence individuals' memories, perceptions, interpersonal relations, and behaviors.

It seems important to note here that not all accepted children and adults necessarily develop in a favorable manner. Some accepted individuals develop adjustment problems similar to those of rejected individuals for reasons other than parental acceptance-rejection. Moreover, not all rejected individuals develop adjustment problems. In PAR Theory, individuals in the later group are called copers.

Important elements of rejection are apt to linger into adulthood, placing people who were rejected as children at somewhat greater risk of social and emotional problems throughout life than people who were loved continuously. Some of the individuals who do not respond as predicted by PAR Theory's personality subtheory are called "troubled" people. These individuals form the majority of the 20% who do not confirm the assumptions of PAR Theory. They suffer from impaired mental health even though they felt that they had been accepted by their parents. PAR Theory researchers have so far spent little time and effort studying these troubled individuals, because it is generally believed that people can be psychologically disturbed for variety of reasons having nothing to do with parental acceptance and rejection.

PAR Theory's sociocultural systems subtheory

This subtheory attempts to predict and explain major causes and sociocultural correlates of parental acceptance and rejection worldwide. The subtheory predicts, for example, that children are likely to develop cultural beliefs about the supernatural world (God and spiritual beings) as being malevolent (i.e., hostile, treacherous, destructive, or negative in some way) in societies where they tend to be rejected. On the other hand, the supernatural world is expected to be perceived as benevolent (i.e., warm, generous, protective, or positive in some other way) in societies where most children are raised with warmth and acceptance. Substantial cross-cultural evidence confirms these predictions (Rohner, 1999). PAR Theory's sociocultural subtheory also predicts, and cross-cultural evidence confirms, that parental acceptance and rejection tend to be associated worldwide with many other sociocultural correlates such as artistic preferences and job choices of individuals as well as adults (Rohner, 1986, 1999).

PAR Theory's coping subtheory

Studies in the United States and across the world confirm PAR Theory's assumption that nearly 80 percent of children and adults,

irrespective of geographic location, race, and ethnicity, tend to be negatively affected by parental rejection (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a). A small fraction of the remaining 20 percent is termed “copers” in PAR Theory. They are the people who experienced significant parental rejection in childhood but who, nonetheless, continue to be psychologically well-adjusted as defined in PAR Theory’s personality subtheory. According to PAR Theory’s coping subtheory, copers are of two types: “affective copers” and “instrumental copers” (Rohner, 1999). Affective copers are those individuals who develop overall positive mental health despite parental rejection. Instrumental copers are those individuals who do well in their professional, occupational, or task oriented lives despite psychological impairment due to parental rejection in early life (Rohner, 1999). So far, minimal empirical research has been conducted on the assumptions of PAR Theory’s coping subtheory.

Consequences of Parental Acceptance-Rejection

Since the 1930s, a large number of studies have been conducted on the antecedents and especially the consequences of perceived parental acceptance-rejection for cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development of children, and for personality functioning of adults within United States and worldwide (Rohner, 1986, 1990/1999, 2001; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a). Research on parent-child relations consistently indicates that perceived parental rejection typically has serious consequences for the psychological development and personality functioning of children and adults (Rohner, 1990/1999). In a review of available cross-cultural and intra-cultural studies, for example, Rohner and Britner (2002) provided evidence of worldwide correlations between parental acceptance-rejection and other mental health issues including: (1) depression and depressed affect; (2) behavior problems—conduct disorders, externalizing behaviors, and delinquency; (3) substance abuse; and (4) psychological maladjustment.

Depression

As reported by Rohner and Britner (2002), parental rejection has been found to be linked consistently with both clinical and non-clinical depression within almost all major ethnic groups in America, including African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, and Mexican Americans. Moreover, parental rejection tends to be associated with depression in many countries internationally, including Australia, China, Egypt, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, and Turkey.

It is also interesting to note that Rohner and Britner (2002) reviewed a number of longitudinal studies showing that perceived parental rejection in childhood tends to precede with the development of depressive symptoms in adolescence and adulthood.

Behavior problems

According to Rohner and Britner (2002), parental rejection appears to be a major predictor of almost all forms of behavior problems, including conduct disorder, externalizing behavior, and delinquency. Cross-cultural findings supporting this suggestion come from many countries across the world, including Bahrain, China, Croatia, Egypt, England, India, and Norway. As with depression, a number of longitudinal studies in the U.S., and internationally show that parental rejection also tends to precede the development of behavior problems.

Substance abuse

Rohner and Britner (2002) showed that support for the worldwide correlation between parental acceptance-rejection and substance abuse comes from substantial research evidence in Australia, Canada, England, the Netherlands, and Sweden. These studies clearly indicate that parental rejection is etiologically connected with both drug abuse and alcohol abuse. Besides these cross-national studies, parental rejection has also been found to be linked with substance abuse in most ethnic groups in the U.S., including African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics. In addition, Rohner and Britner (2002) cited a large number studies thoroughly documenting the relation between parental rejection and substance abuse among European American middle class and working class Americans.

Psychological maladjustment

Rohner and Britner (2002) showed that the strongest body of evidence about the worldwide relation between psychological (mal)adjustment and parental acceptance-rejection comes from cross-cultural and intracultural studies of PAR Theory's personality subtheory. PAR Theory postulates a worldwide relation between perceived parental acceptance-rejection in childhood and individuals' psychological adjustment in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Rohner, 1986, 1999). Especially, as noted earlier, PAR Theory's personality subtheory assumes that children and adults universally—irrespective of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status—are phylogenetically predisposed to develop a specific constellation of personality dispositions as a consequence of varying

degrees of perceived parental acceptance or rejection (Rohner, 1986, 1990, 1999).

Perceived parental rejection is likely to be associated with at least seven measurable personality dispositions (Rohner, 1986): (1) hostility, aggression, passive aggression, or psychological problems with the management of hostility and aggression; (2) emotional unresponsiveness; (3) dependence or defensive independence; (4) impaired self-esteem; (5) impaired self-adequacy; (6) emotional instability; and (7) negative worldview. In PAR Theory, these seven personality dispositions collectively represent an index of psychological (mal)adjustment (Rohner, 1999). Numerous studies conducted across the world support the postulate of a significant transcultural association between perceived parental acceptance-rejection and psychological adjustment. For example, Rohner (1975) found supportive evidence for this postulate in a holocultural study of 101 societies worldwide. Moreover, Cournoyer (2000) reported a partial list of the sociocultural groups in different countries where this finding has been replicated and reconfirmed. This list includes: the United States with African-Americans, European-Americans, and Hispanic-Americans (Rohner, 1986); Bahrain (Al-Falaj, 1991); Egypt (Salama, 1987); India (Rohner & Chaki-Sircar, 1988; Saxena, 1992); Japan (Morishita, 1988); Korea (Rohner, & Pettingill, 1985); Czechoslovakia (Matejcek & Kadubcova, 1984); Pakistan (Haque, 1987); Peru (Gavilano, 1988); Mexico (Rohner, Roll, & Rohner, 1980) Nigeria (Haque, 1985); St. Kitts, West Indies (Rohner, Kean, & Cournoyer, 1991); and Turkey (Erkman, 1992). In addition, a meta-analysis of forty-three studies drawing from 7,563 respondents worldwide showed that the predicted relations between perceived parental acceptance-rejection and psychological adjustment emerged almost invariably in all studies (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a).

Rohner and Britner (2002) showed that the majority of studies that assess the relation between parental rejection and psychological maladjustment tend to focus predominantly on the influence of mothers' behaviors even though fathers' behaviors are often as strongly implicated as mothers' in many developmental outcomes. Evidence for this conclusion is provided by other sources (Rohner, 1998; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001) in addition to Rohner and Britner (2002).

Concluding Comments

PAR Theory attempts to explain and predict life-span human development at both the individual level (personality subtheory) and

sociocultural system level (socio-cultural systems subtheory). The strength of PAR Theory lies in its multimethod universalist approach. The theory has been empirically tested with different methodologies including holocultural studies (Rohner, 1975; Rohner & Rohner, 1981, 1982), ethnographic studies (Rohner & Chaki-Sircar, 1988; Rohner, Kean, & Cournoyer, 1991), interview and behavior observation (Rohner, 1999), and hundreds of self-reported questionnaire studies worldwide (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002b). Self-reported questionnaire studies have made extensive use of the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ) (Rohner, 1990/1999). The PARQ is available in more than 27 languages, and has been used in over 230 studies in approximately 60 nations and ethnic groups worldwide (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002b). A met-analysis of the internal consistency of the PARQ based on 7,152 respondents worldwide shows the instrument to be robust in cross-cultural research (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002b). Compelling evidence across an array of measurement modalities supports the postulate of a significant association between perceived parental acceptance-rejection and psychological adjustment-maladjustment, regardless of cultural, geographic, gender, and social class differences.

Finally, the implications of PAR Theory for predicting and explaining human development is vividly stated by Cournoyer in the following excerpt (2000, p. 228):

PAR Theory gives us clues concerning why a particular child is adjusting poorly, and how that adjustment may be related not merely to the behavior of a particular set of parents, but also to the fabric of the socio-cultural system, and to human nature, enhancing our understanding of what we are as a species.

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