



ONLINE READINGS IN PSYCHOLOGY AND CULTURE
International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology

Unit 6 *Developmental Psychology and Culture*

Subunit 1 *Culture and Human Development: Infancy, Childhood, and Adolescence*

Article 4

8-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Rohner, R. P., & Khaleque, A. (2002). Parental Acceptance-Rejection and Life-Span Development: A Universalist Perspective. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 6(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1055>

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Parental Acceptance-Rejection and Life-Span Development: A Universalist Perspective

Abstract

Parental acceptance-rejection theory (PARTheory) is a theory of socialization that attempts to predict and explain worldwide causes, consequences, and other correlates of parental acceptance-rejection. Additionally, the theory attempts to predict and explain the consequences of acceptance-rejection in other primary interpersonal relationships, including intimate adult relationships. Empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports the major postulates of the theory, especially PARTheory's personality subtheory which predicts that perceived parental rejection is likely to be universally associated with a specific form of psychological maladjustment. Members of every society and ethnic group so far studied tend to respond to perceived acceptance-rejection precisely the way the theory predicts. With this information it should now be possible to formulate culture-fair policies, programs, interventions, and other applications for enhancing the welfare of humans elsewhere.

Introduction

Interpersonal relationships have unparalleled developmental implications for humans everywhere, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, and geographic boundaries (Duck, 1999). For children, parent-child relationships are particularly important. A vast research literature shows that the quality of parent-child relationships characterized by parental acceptance (love) and rejection (lack of love) is a major predictor of psychological functioning and development for both children and adults universally (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Rohner, 1975, 2002; Rohner & Rohner, 1980). A significant portion of this research dealing with the quality of parent-child interactions relates to parental acceptance-rejection theory.

Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory

Parental acceptance-rejection theory (PARTheory) 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, 1986, 1990, 2001). PARTheory predicts that parental rejection has consistent negative effects on the psychological adjustment and on behavioral functioning of both children and adults worldwide. In PARTheory, parental acceptance-rejection refers to a bipolar dimension of parental warmth, with parental acceptance at the positive end of the continuum and parental rejection at the negative end. Parental acceptance refers to the love, affection, care, comfort, support, or nurturance that parents can feel and express toward their children. Parental rejection refers to the absence or withdrawal of warmth, love, or affection by parents toward their children. Parents can express their love or lack of it in three principal ways. They can be cold and unaffectionate, hostile and aggressive, or indifferent and neglecting. Additionally, parental rejection can be subjectively experienced by individuals in the form of undifferentiated rejection. Undifferentiated rejection refers to the feeling that one's parent(s) do(es) not really love them or care about them, without necessarily having objective indicators that the parents are cold and unaffectionate, hostile and aggressive, or indifferent and neglecting.

PARTheory attempts to answer five classes of questions concerning parental acceptance and rejection. These questions are divided into the theory's three subtheories: personality subtheory, coping subtheory, and sociocultural systems subtheory.

1. What happens to children who perceive themselves to be loved (accepted) or unloved (rejected) by their parents (personality subtheory)?
2. To what extent do the effects of childhood rejection extend into adulthood and old age (personality subtheory)?
3. Why do some children and adults cope more effectively than others with the experiences of childhood rejection (coping subtheory)?
4. Why are some parents warm, loving, and accepting, and others cold, aggressive, neglecting, and rejecting (sociocultural systems subtheory)?

5. 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(sociocultural systems subtheory)?

PARTheory 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, 1986, 2002). Second, it draws from literary and historic materials going as far back as 2,000 years. Third, it draws from nearly 2000 empirical studies on parental acceptance and rejection since the 1930s to form a conceptual framework for explaining the lifespan and universalist perspectives incorporated into PARTheory's three subtheories (Rohner, 2002). These subtheories are described more fully below.

PARTheory's Personality Subtheory

PARTheory's personality subtheory postulates that parental acceptance-rejection has profound influence in shaping children's personality development over the life span. Specifically, the subtheory assumes that the emotional need for positive response from significant others (parents or other attachment figures) is a powerful motivator in children. When this need is not adequately met by attachment figures, children are predisposed emotionally and behaviorally to respond in specific ways. In particular, the subtheory postulates 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: hostility, aggression, passive aggression, or problems with the management of hostility and aggression; dependence or defensive independence, depending on the form, frequency, and intensity of rejection; impaired self-esteem; impaired self-adequacy; emotional unresponsiveness; emotional instability; and negative worldview.

According to PARTheory, rejected persons are likely to develop a negative worldview characterized by the belief that people and the world in general are hostile, treacherous, threatening, or negative in some other way. 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. In PARTheory, mental representation refers to individuals' more or less coherent but usually implicit beliefs and expectations about themselves and significant others that are constructed from emotionally important past and current experiences. The theory assumes that mental representations tend to influence individuals' memories, perceptions, interpersonal relations, and behaviors.

It is 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 serious adjustment problems. Some are able to cope with the pain of perceived rejection more effectively than others. This topic is discussed in PARTheory's coping subtheory below.

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 PARTheory's personality subtheory are called "troubled." These individuals suffer from impaired mental health even though they feel accepted by their parents. Until recently PARTheory researchers spent little time studying these individuals because it is generally recognized that people can be psychologically disturbed for a variety of reasons having nothing to do with parental acceptance and rejection. We now know that many of these troubled individuals are persons who feel rejected by their intimate partners and other non-parental attachment figures (Khaleque, 2001).

PARTheory's Coping Subtheory

Studies in the United States and across the world confirm PARTheory's assumption that nearly 80 percent of children and adults--irrespective of geographic location, race, and ethnicity--generally tend to be negatively affected by parental rejection (Rohner, 2001, 2002). A small fraction of the remaining 20 percent are termed "copers" in PARTheory. They are the people who experienced significant parental rejection in childhood but who nonetheless continue to be psychologically well adjusted as defined in PARTheory's personality subtheory. According to coping subtheory, copers are of two types: "affective copers" and "instrumental copers." Affective copers are those individuals who develop overall positive mental health despite experiencing 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. So far minimal empirical research has been conducted on the assumptions of PARTheory's coping subtheory, but available evidence suggests that the emotional support of non-rejecting significant others can help greatly to alleviate the distress of parental rejection.

PARTheory's Sociocultural Systems Subtheory

PARTheory's sociocultural systems 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 love and acceptance. Substantial cross-cultural evidence confirms these predictions (Rohner, 1975, 1986). PARTheory's sociocultural systems 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 household structure, artistic preferences, and occupational choices of individuals. Much more information on these topics is available in Rohner (1986, 2002).

Consequences of Parental Acceptance-Rejection

Since the 1930's 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. 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. In a review of available cross-cultural and intracultural studies, for example, Rohner and Britner (2002) provided evidence of worldwide correlations between parental acceptance-rejection and such other mental health issues as: depression and depressed affect; behavioral problems, including conduct disorders, externalizing behaviors, and delinquency; and, substance abuse.

Depression

Parental rejection has been linked with both clinical and non-clinical depression within almost all major ethnic groups in America, including among 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, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey. It is important to note that a number of longitudinal studies show that perceived parental rejection in childhood often precedes the development of depressive symptoms in adolescence and adulthood.

Behavior Problems

Parental rejection appears to be a major predictor in almost all forms of behavior problems, including conduct disorder, externalizing behavior, delinquency, and perhaps adult criminality. Cross-cultural findings supporting this suggestion come from many countries across the world, including Bahrain, China, Croatia, Egypt, England, Finland, India, Japan, Norway, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Many studies within the U.S. also support this conclusion, both among middle class and working class European Americans as well as among African Americans, Chinese Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other ethnic groups where it has been studied. As with depression, a number of longitudinal studies in the U.S. and internationally show that parental rejection often precedes the development of behavior problems.

Substance Abuse

Support for the worldwide association between parental acceptance-rejection and substance abuse comes from evidence in Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden, and other countries. 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, European Americans, and Hispanic Americans.

Measuring Parental Acceptance and Rejection Cross-Culturally

Most of the research discussed in this chapter draws from the logic of "anthroponomy" and the "universalist approach" described in Rohner (1975, 1977, 1986). That is, if one is serious about establishing worldwide principles or universals of human behavior, then one must employ a multimethod research strategy across a wide range of the world's known sociocultural settings. Doing so allows one to capture the full range of human variability in races, languages, ethnicities, genders, ages, and the like. The objective here, of course, is to demonstrate that claimed universals truly generalize across these population boundaries as well as across different measurement modalities. The single strongest body of evidence about the worldwide mental health correlates of parental acceptance-rejection comes from cross-cultural and intracultural studies of PARTheory's personality subtheory (Rohner, 1986, 2001, 2002). This evidence is based on the convergence of several broad paradigms of research as well as several discrete measurement procedures within these paradigms. These include: 1) a major holocultural study of 101 well described nonindustrial societies distributed widely throughout the major geographic regions and culture areas of the world (Rohner, 1975); 2) a controlled comparison of three sociocultural groups in the Pacific (i.e., a Maori community of New Zealand, a traditional highland community of Bali, and the Alorese of Indonesia) where-as described by anthropologists-children tended to be rejected by their parents (Rohner, 1960); 3) an 18-month ethnographic and psychological community study in West Bengal, India (Rohner & Chaki-Sircar, 1988); and, 4) at least 50 intracultural psychological studies by more than two dozen researchers in the United States and internationally. Collectively, these studies have tested several thousands of children and adults within at least 28 nations and language groups internationally (Rohner, 1986, 2002; Rohner & Rohner, 1980). These studies also include every major ethnic minority in the U.S. (i.e., Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans) as well as middle class and working class European Americans.

The psychological studies draw from one or another version of two self-report questionnaires in the preferred language of respondents (i.e., the adult, child, or parent version of the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire, and the adult or child version of the Personality Assessment Questionnaire). Additionally, some of the studies draw from interviews with adults, parents, and children, and a few draw from behavior observations of the interaction between parents and children. Specific information about these instruments and individual studies may be found online at vm.uconn.edu/~rohner.

Conclusion

Members of every society and ethnic group so far studied throughout the world tend to respond to perceived acceptance-rejection precisely as PARTheory's personality subtheory predicts. All this evidence lends credibility to PARTheory's contention that the experience of parental rejection is one irreducible, root-cause of social, emotional, behavioral, and social-cognitive problems in the development of children, adolescents, and adults everywhere-regardless of differences in gender, ethnicity, race, language, sociocultural background, or other such defining conditions. Because perceived acceptance-rejection appears to have a consistent effect on all humans the possibility is opened for creating culture-fair policies and programs, interventions, treatment, and other practical applications for enhancing human welfare everywhere.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What practical (e.g., prevention, intervention, or treatment) implications do you see of the fact that perceived parental acceptance-rejection appears to have consistent effects on humans in all societies and ethnic groups?
2. What is the "universalist approach" in studying behavior across cultures? Why is this approach-or something like it-needed to confirm the existence of universals in human behavior?
3. Why do you suppose that perceived rejection by one's intimate adult partner (or by other attachment figures) generally appears to have the same psychological effects as perceived parental rejection in childhood? In other words, what psychological mechanisms or processes seem to be at work here?

4. What are the seven personality dispositions that PARTheory's personality subtheory postulates to be worldwide consequences of perceived parental acceptance-rejection? Why do you think they have emerged as more or less stable dimensions resulting from parental rejection?
5. Select any widely used theory of personality (e.g., psychodynamic, behavioral, social learning, humanistic, existential) and explain how it would deal with the phenomenon of parental rejection.
6. As described in PARTheory, who are "copers" and "troubled individuals"? How are they alike or different with respect to their mental health status and their experience of parental acceptance-rejection?