

Applications of Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory and Evidence to Forensic Psychology

By Charles H. Heller, Ph.D., USA

drheller@optonline.net

As a forensic psychologist I have recently become increasingly impressed with the potential value of parental acceptance-rejection theory (PARTheory) in the practice of forensic psychology. Both criminal and family courts require thorough psychological evaluations of clients to explore, understand, and document underlying variables that result in alleged behaviors, as well as to predict the possible effects of these behaviors on others. In my work as a consultant to the forensic unit of the Rockland County (New York) mental health unit that serves the family court, I have performed many custody and visitation evaluations in cases involving domestic violence, child abuse, and child neglect. I have had to evaluate both mothers and fathers in order to explore the way in which their own childhood affected their current mental health, their parental capacity, and their current psychological fitness.

In the process of evaluating children involved in custody or delinquency cases I have had to focus on the effects of parental care, explore youths' emotional attachment capabilities, and explore the possible effects of parental alienation caused by one parent alienating the child against the other. Furthermore, I have had to assess—in family court—how parental rejection in early childhood may have later affected criminal defendants or other clients. The process of conducting forensic evaluations is a tedious one. Clinicians must imagine themselves to be wearing a metaphorical “detective hat” as the exploration and discovery of clients' or defendants' early childhood and family of origin systems come into focus.

In the course of doing this work I have come to appreciate the relevance of the broad body of literature on issues of interpersonal acceptance-rejection. I have found PARTheory to be especially valuable in its capacity as an evidence-based theory of socialization and lifespan development that aims to understand and explain the causes, consequences, and other ramifications of interpersonal acceptance and rejection across diverse cultures and societies (Rohner, 1980, 1986; Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2009). PARTheory research has been conducted for over five decades. Hundreds of studies have confirmed the existence of the acceptance-rejection syndrome (Rohner, research is the fact that children everywhere need unconditional love and acceptance from parents and other attachment figures. Rohner and others have confirmed that when this condition is not met, children across all cultures and races are likely to develop low self-esteem, a sense of negative self-adequacy, aggressive behavior, and strong dependency needs—or become defensively independent. Additionally, rejected children are likely to become emotionally unresponsive, emotionally unstable, and develop a mistrustful, negative worldview.

This body of research also finds that perceived rejection by an attachment figure at any point in life is likely to be associated with the same cluster of personality dispositions found among children and adults rejected by parents in childhood (Rohner & Khaleque, in press). As researchers continue to explore the far reaching implications of PARTheory, the benefits to forensic psychology have become abundantly clear. Research is currently expanding PARTheory into other kinds of interpersonal relationships, including intimate partner acceptance-rejection, and adult offspring's acceptance-rejection of their aging parents (Khaleque, 2008). Relevant to the case I discuss below is new research related to in-law acceptance-rejection (Erkman & Öztürk, 2009). Furthermore, related research has addressed the effects of classroom peer acceptance and rejection (Ladd, 2006) and social ostracism (Williams, 2007) as well as a variety of other topics.

To illustrate the utility of PARTheory and associated evidence in forensic psychology I have selected a case from criminal court. (The demographics of this case have been changed.) In that case I was given the assignment of evaluating a defendant who allegedly committed a double homicide. Although she denied remembering what had happened during the crime, there were several witnesses who saw her kill the father and a female friend of her longtime boyfriend with whom she cohabited. As a result of my evaluation, I determined that no psychosis or insanity defense was plausible. The defendant had no history of violent behavior. However, she grew up in extreme poverty partly as a consequence of the fact that when she was seven years old her mother had been violently murdered in front of her. Her father was a severe alcoholic who was unable to keep a job. As a result both father and daughter lived together in homeless shelters for most of her childhood and adolescence. However, there were many times when the father would be too intoxicated to return to the shelter, and the young girl had to take care of herself. She often searched the neighborhood at night to find him and to bring him back to the shelter—if she could convince him to come. Eventually she was placed in foster and group homes because of his inability to care for her.

It became clear during my evaluation that although she did not feel her father actively rejected her, he did withdraw into a world of alcoholism that prevented him from nurturing and protecting her. I found that the defendant had a severe case of PTSD from watching her mother being violently killed in front of her. Throughout her life she blamed all her difficulties on this early loss. She often thought about the moment when she watched her mother being murdered. From this experience she developed a paranoid personality disorder. She saw the world in negative ways and often thought that others were going to cause her harm too. She lacked trust in others. She also developed a drug problem in that she smoked marijuana on a daily basis. Nonetheless, she survived childhood, and relocated as an adult to another small town where she supported herself for over a decade by working in low paying retail positions. She was never arrested, and she generally avoided the “street scene” of the violent crime, the drug trade, and underworld of illegal transactions with which she had become acquainted while in shelters and living as an unsupervised child. As an adult in her late twenties, she lived an existence that included promiscuity, drug abuse, and superficial interpersonal relationships. But she had no severe emotional or mental problems, no psychiatric hospitalizations, and she displayed no violence. She was able to maintain herself in a rented apartment and enjoyed dancing and being with various men who were, according to her, all unfaithful to her.

Several years ago the defendant started dating a young man who eventually invited her to live with him in his parents’ home. She became part of his family, and overcame much of her initial mistrust, which allowed her to emotionally attach herself to him and to his parents. She found herself in a relatively normal family situation where she experienced unconditional love and acceptance for an extended period of time. However, after a year of cohabitation her relationship with her boyfriend became strained when she confronted him about her suspicion that he was being unfaithful. His father was very supportive of her, and told her that even if his son and she ended their relationship, she could still live in their home—but in the basement apartment. Although she had no definite proof that her boyfriend was unfaithful, she decided to end the relationship because of her jealousy and mistrust. She also began to sense that her boyfriend’s father was trying to placate her, which caused her to become angry at both parents. At this time she was also abusing marijuana on a daily basis. While her boyfriend was at work on the day prior to the planned separation, it was alleged that she stabbed to death her boyfriend’s father and the young woman whom she suspected of having an affair with her boyfriend. Although she denied any memory of the crime it was clear that she felt betrayed by her symbolic father-in-law as well as by her boyfriend. She did not show any sadness over the death of either the father or the woman.

PARTheory Helps to Understand These Homicides

Aside from suffering from PTSD and paranoid personality disorder, it was also clear that the defendant was a victim of early parental rejection who experienced severe rejection sensitivity (Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001). Although she stayed in homeless shelters with her father she essentially felt abandoned by him because he became intoxicated every day. This psychological abandonment and rejection appeared to have been chronic throughout her childhood and adolescence, necessitating her placement in foster and group homes. Moreover, the tragic death of her mother was on some level perceived by her as abandonment. It was also perceived as early rejection. I believe that the defendant's suppressed feelings of pain and abandonment were reawakened by the feelings of rejection by her new (symbolic) nuclear family. This experience appears to have been too much for her to cope with, and these factors seem to have triggered a rejection crisis. She believed that she was about to be rejected by a parental figure in adulthood (her potential father-in-law) as well as by her boyfriend (intimate partner rejection). These fears of potential rejection probably triggered early childhood memories of abandonment, shame, and loss—memories she could not bear. These feelings and memories resulted in rage for which she did not have the internal resources to cope. In this way, I believe that the rejection crisis ultimately culminated in the double homicide.

Research has shown a worldwide tendency for people who were rejected in childhood to later become substance abusers (Rohner and Britner, 2002). So, it is not surprising that this woman became a substance abuser. This addiction probably contributed to her loss of control and exaggerated paranoia and suspiciousness. In this case, her boyfriend's father appears to have been a symbol of the paternal rejection she endured as a child. In fact, she even described the man as "a father figure," and said "I loved him but never told him." Furthermore, he said he cared about her too. But because of that statement she came to believe that he was using her in some way. Her feelings then changed from endearing love and attachment to mistrust and a feeling of being manipulated by him.

In summary, research has shown that perceived rejection by an attachment figure at any point in life is likely to be associated with the same cluster of personality dispositions found among children and adults rejected by parents in childhood (Rohner & Khaleque, in press). In the criminal case just described I have tried to show how growing research in interpersonal acceptance and rejection can contribute to forensic psychology. I believe that a convergence of early parental rejection coupled with adult interpersonal rejection may result in a rejection crisis that can lead to violent crime. In the years since I completed my doctoral research in criminal behavior (Heller, 1979) I have become aware that many incarcerated people have experienced severe rejection in their backgrounds, both as children and throughout their adult lives. I now utilize this new perspective in forensic work. Aside from criminal cases, PARTheory can also be used in the family court system. I could have easily described custody, neglect, and domestic violence cases where knowledge of PARTheory and associated research would have been helpful.

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