

## PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE-REJECTION AND INTERPERSONAL ANXIETY IN YOUNG ADULTS

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**Abstract:** The present research intended to examine if parental acceptance and rejection was related to the interpersonal anxiety of 150 adults aged 18-35 years ( $M = 28.35$ ,  $SD = 9.77$ ). Half of the participants (75) were males. Half of the respondents (75) were in a close interpersonal relationship. The respondents completed the Greek versions of the following measures: (1) the Interpersonal Relationship Anxiety Questionnaire (IRAQ) and (2) the Short form of the Adult Parental Acceptance and Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ), Mother version and of the Adult Parental Acceptance and Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ), Father version. Results did not indicate statistically significant difference between the interpersonal anxiety of the respondents who are in a close interpersonal relationship from those who are not. However, the respondents' Interpersonal anxiety total score positively correlated to all the Parental Rejection factors (maternal and paternal Hostility/Aggression, Indifference/Neglect and Undifferentiated Rejection). The respondents' Interpersonal anxiety total score was negatively correlated to the Parental Acceptance factors (maternal and paternal Warmth/Affection).

**Key words:** Close relationships, Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection theory, Interpersonal anxiety, Parental acceptance and rejection

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection theory*

Ronald Rohner's Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory (PARTheory) is a theory of socialization attempting to describe the causes and consequences of interpersonal acceptance and rejection, (Rohner, 1975, 1986, 2004). PARTheory spread around the world, mostly due to its empirical base and its aim to study socialization and quality of life (Rohner & Khaleque, 2005). According to Sullivan (1953), a child develops the view of his or herself, as a personality trait, through the interaction with the important persons of his or her environment. Children's' experiences during childhood are able to influence the view of the self, forming positive or negative self-esteem, as they grow up. More recent data confirm this evidence, focusing on the emotional bond among family members. This tendency has been found to be strengthened by the expression of feelings and mostly the expression of love from parents to their children (Bengtson, 2001; Giotsa, 2007; Mylonas, Gari, Giotsa, Pavlopoulos, & Panagiotopoulou, 2006; Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2005).

More specifically, PARTheory (Rohner & Khaleque, 2005) supports that a child's psychological adjustment tends to be influenced by the way the child feels to be treated by the parents. Specifically, when a child feels accepted by the parents, she tends to be more easily psychologically adjusted in comparison to a child who feels rejected. Worldwide research evidence (Carrasco & Rohner, 2013; Giotsa & Touloumakos, 2014; Khaleque & Rohner, 2012; Rohner, 1975, 2014; Rohner & Khaleque, 2005) show that parental hostility, during a person's childhood, is related to specific personality characteristics, even within its adulthood. These characteristics may be hostility, negative self-esteem, emotional instability, negative worldview and dependency.

It is very interesting that cross-cultural data, resulting during the last 50 years, suggests that there are common parental behaviors, observed worldwide, according to which, it is possible for a researcher to define parental love (Rohner, 2004; Rohner et al., 2005). This is referred as the Warmth dimension of parenting, a continuum with parental acceptance marking the one end and parental rejection the other (Ali, Khaleque, & Rohner, 2015; Rohner, 1986; Rohner & Khaleque, 2005; Rohner et al., 2005). In fact, all people find themselves within this continuum, as everyone has experienced love, acceptance or rejection by their parents or caregivers during childhood (Rohner & Khaleque, 2005).

Nevertheless, the parent-child relationship seems to have been overlooked. The Warmth dimension, as a continuum, remains a characteristic of the theory, defining all interpersonal relationships. On one hand, not only in parent-child relationship but in other kinds of relationships as well, acceptance includes care, warmth, affection,

concern, comfort, support, nurturance, love. On the other hand, rejection refers to absence or withdrawal of feelings of acceptance and behaviors indicating physically or psychologically hurtful behaviors and affects (Rohner, 2016). The change of the theory's label, from Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory (PARTheory) to Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPARTheory), is obvious and occurred in 2014, in order to include all the relationships throughout a person's lifespan (Ali et al., 2015; Rohner, 1986, 2004; Rohner et al., 2005; Rohner & Rohner, 1980).

### ***Parental acceptance-rejection and interpersonal relationships***

For the purposes of this research, a close interpersonal relationship was defined as an intimate relationship of any kind (romantic, marital, friendly etc.) affecting the emotional wellbeing of the individual.

Previous studies (Rohner, 2004; Rohner & Britner, 2002; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001) linked parental rejection (mother's and father's) with children's psychological maladjustment, observing developmental side effects until adulthood. However, it seems that social and emotional development is related to the way that acceptance and rejection from any attachment figure are perceived by the person within his/her lifespan. For example, Giotsa and Touloumakos (2014) suggested that the quality of a child's or adolescent's relationship with parents usually affects significantly the quality of the relationship with peers. Other researchers (Festa & Ginsburg, 2011; Giaouzi & Giovazolias, 2015; Hummel & Gross, 2001; Rohner, 2014; Rohner & Khaleque, 2002) also implied that parental rejection is associated with higher levels of interpersonal anxiety, during a person's life.

Interpersonal anxiety has not only been found to be related to parental rejection but also that it would be a plausible predictor of it (Brook & Schmidt, 2008). According to Giaouzi and Giovazolias (2015), children's interpersonal anxiety is linked to parents' anxiety, rejection and overcontrol, while adults who experience interpersonal anxiety tend to rate their parents as less warm, caring and dismissive than adults without interpersonal anxiety (Giaouzi & Giovazolias, 2015; Morris, 2001).

### ***The present study***

IPARTheory (former PARTheory) emerged by the need to study the relationship among children and parents, as well as its effect on the child's development and psychological adjustment. Despite the change in labeling and emphasis, significant portions of the theory continue to feature the effects, causes and other correlates of

children's perceptions of parental acceptance-rejection and of adults' parental acceptance-rejection during childhood, retrospectively perceived in adulthood.

The purpose of the present research was to study the interpersonal anxiety of young adults, in two different conditions: involved in a close interpersonal relationship or not in a close interpersonal relationship, in relation to participants' retrospectively perceived parental acceptance and rejection during their childhood. Specifically, the objectives of the study were the following: (1) To examine if the maternal and paternal acceptance and rejection are related to the respondents' interpersonal anxiety. Perceived parental acceptance and rejection during childhood, retrospectively was positively related to interpersonal anxiety (Festa & Ginsburg, 2011; Giaouzi & Giovazolias, 2015; Giotsa & Touloumakos, 2014; Hummel & Gross, 2001; Morris, 2001; Rohner, 2014; Rohner & Khaleque, 2005). (2) To examine if there are statistically significant differences in the interpersonal anxiety of men and women. Previous research on interpersonal anxiety suggested that women generally experience higher levels of interpersonal anxiety than the men (La Greca & Lopez, 1998). Taking into account the above findings, the present study the following hypotheses were stated:

- (a) Perceived maternal rejection will be positively correlated to interpersonal anxiety.
- (b) Perceived paternal rejection will be positively correlated to interpersonal anxiety.
- (c) Women of the sample will experience higher levels of interpersonal anxiety than men.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Participants were a convenience sample. Inclusion criteria were the following: (a) age (18-35 years old); (b) gender, and (c) ongoing relationship status (in a relationship or not). The above criteria were specified to have a balanced sample regarding gender and relationship status, two key-variables for this research. The resulting sample consisted of 150 young adults with a mean age of 28.35 years ( $SD = 9.77$ ). Seventy-five participants were males (50%). Seventy-five participants (50%) had a close interpersonal relationship (romantic or not). Among the 75 participants in a relationship, the 22.7% had a close, non-romantic relationship and 74.7% were in a close romantic relationship (34.7% dating, 29.3% married, 10.7% living together with their partner). The mean duration of

the relationship (romantic or not) was 76.42 months, ( $SD = 93.06$ ) or 6.37 years. Most of them (69%) had a university degree, 19% had finished high-school, 11 % had a post graduate degree and 1% had finished junior high-school. The 44% of the participants were employees, 24.4% were studying, 24% were unemployed, 2% were running their own business. Almost all participants (96.7%) had a Greek nationality, and 2.7% had an Albanian nationality, but they were fluent in Greek.

### *Measures*

#### *Adult Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire, Short Form (Adult PARQ), Greek version*

Adults' perceptions of maternal and paternal acceptance/rejection were quantified using the mother' and fathers' versions of the *Adult Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire, Short Form* (Rohner & Khaleuque, 2005). Rohner et al.'s (2005) 24-item Adult Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire retrospectively evaluates perceived parenting behaviors experienced by adults when they were aged from seven to twelve years. Adult Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire has two versions: one for adults rejected by their mothers and one for adults rejected by their fathers. Items in both versions are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 4 (*almost always true*) to 1 (*almost never true*). The 24 items are tapping into four dimensions: Warmth/Affection, Hostility/Aggression, Indifference/Neglect and, finally, the Undifferentiated Rejection (Rohner & Khaleuque, 2005). This Acceptance/Rejection model is based on the theoretical approach of "The Warmth dimension of parenting" by Rohner (see Rohner, Khaleuque, & Cournoyer, 2005). This 4-factor structure was confirmed by Gomez and Rohner (2011) applying a confirmatory factor analysis in a multicultural sample from US and Australia. The Greek adaptation of the Adult PARQ, Short form (both mother and father versions) was translated from English using the translation-back translation method (Brislin, 1970). The factor structure of the Greek Adult PARQ, Short form (both mother and father versions) has been evaluated by Giotsa and Kyriazos (2018) using confirmatory factor analysis. The four-factor structure was one of the alternative models proposed.

Scoring is calculated after reverse-scoring item 13 (*Paid a lot of attention to me*). The score of the questionnaire is keyed in the direction of perceived rejection. The higher the score, the more the parental rejection is, as perceived retrospectively by the adult taking the test. Thus, the total score is calculated by reversing the Warmth dimension and then subtracting its score from 40 (the maximum Warmth score). Scores at or above 60 (the midpoint) suggest perception of more parental rejection than acceptance (Kahn, Haynes, Armstrong, & Rohner, 2010). A sample items of

Adult PARQ, Mother version is “*My mother said nice things about me*”. A sample item of Adult PARQ, Father version is “*My father made me feel wanted and needed*”. Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) for Adult PARQ short reported by Lloyd, Ward and Blackwell-Young (2014) is .97, for both maternal and paternal versions. In this study, internal consistency of Adult Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire was estimated with Cronbach’s alpha was .94 for the Mother version and .93 for the Father version.

#### *Interpersonal Relationship Anxiety Questionnaire (IRAQ), Greek version*

Interpersonal anxiety was measured with the Interpersonal Relationship Anxiety Questionnaire (IRAQ) by Rohner (2012). More specifically, it measures Interpersonal acceptance/ rejection anxiety. It comprises nine items describing possible emotional states of interpersonal anxiety (e.g., feeling upset, nervous or afraid). Participants are asked to evaluate each statement on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*almost never true*) to 4 (*almost always true*). All nine items are tapping into a single factor. The higher the total score the more interpersonal anxiety the respondent has. Possible score ranges from 9 (lowest interpersonal anxiety) to 36 (highest interpersonal anxiety). Scores that fall in a range from 1 to 15 suggest normal anxiety, from 16 to 20 mild anxiety, from 21 to 27 moderate anxiety and from 28 to 36 severe anxiety (Naz & Kausar, 2015). Internal consistency reliability measured with Cronbach’s alpha ranges from .87 to .88 as reported by Brown et al. (2014) and Li & Rohner (2014) respectively (cited in Naz & Kausar, 2015).

The factorial structure of the IRAQ questionnaire was examined by Brown et al. (2014) in a Western cultural context and by Li and Rohner (2014) in an Asian cultural context (as quoted in Naz and Kausar, 2015). Both studies confirmed that IRAQ is a valid and reliable measure (cited in Naz and Kausar, 2015). The Greek adaptation of the IRAQ was translated from English using the translation-back translation method (Brislin, 1970). The unidimensional factor structure of the instrument has been confirmed by (Giotsa, Stalikas, Kyriazos, & Zergiotis, 2018) using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). In this study internal consistency reliability measured by Cronbach’s alpha was .87.

#### **Procedure**

The present study took place during 2016 in Athens. Participants were briefed about the nature and purpose of the study by the research team and a written informed consent was obtained. They were also assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses during the data collection, analysis and storage. Then they completed

a paper and pencil test-battery. The required completion time was approximately 20 minutes. Participants did not receive any reward. The present study followed the Ethical Code of the University of Ioannina, Greece.

## RESULTS

In Hypotheses (a) and (b) perceived maternal and paternal rejection was hypothesized to positively correlate with interpersonal anxiety. The assumption of normality was first evaluated. Specifically, Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests on the scores of all four scales of Adult PARQ, Mother Version were statistically significant with no exception ( $p = .000$ ), confirming visual inspection. Respectively, for the Father Version of Adult PARQ, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test on the scores for all four scales was also statistically significant ( $p = .000$ ). So, all Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests on Adult PARQ, for both versions confirmed that the distributions deviated significantly from normal distribution (with  $p < .05$ ) for all scales.

On the contrary, in the case of IRAQ the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was not statistically significant ( $p = .200$ ) suggesting that the assumption of normality was not violated for IPARQ ( $p > .05$ ). Thus, a non-parametric correlation coefficient (Spearman's rho) was used since normality assumption was violated for the scores of PARQ scales (for both mother and father versions) but not for the other (IRAQ total score).

A correlation analysis was carried out to examine the relation of maternal rejection with interpersonal anxiety (Hypothesis a). The correlations of PARQ sub-scales, Mother Version with IRAQ total scale were examined. Results suggested that perceived maternal Warmth/Affection was significantly negatively correlated with interpersonal anxiety,  $r_s(144) = -.36, p < .001$ . Moreover, perceived maternal Hostility/Aggression was significantly positively correlated with interpersonal anxiety,  $r_s(144) = .44, p < .001$ . In turn, perceived maternal Indifference/Neglect was found to be significantly positively correlated with interpersonal anxiety,  $r_s(145) = .47, p < .001$ . Also, perceived maternal Undifferentiated Rejection was significantly positively correlated with interpersonal anxiety,  $r_s(144) = .45, p < .001$ . Finally, the Total Mother PARQ score was found to be significantly positive correlated with the total anxiety score,  $r_s(142) = .51, p < .001$ .

To test if paternal rejection was related with interpersonal anxiety (Hypothesis b), the correlations of PARQ sub-scales, Father Version with IRAQ total scale were examined. Results suggested that perceived paternal Warmth/Affection was significantly and negatively correlated with interpersonal anxiety,  $r_s(144) = -.27, p < .001$ . In addition, perceived paternal Hostility/aggression was positively correlated with interpersonal anxiety,  $r_s(142) = .55, p < .001$ . Perceived paternal

Indifference/Neglect was also found to be significantly positively correlated with interpersonal anxiety,  $r_s(145) = .43, p < .001$ . Perceived paternal Undifferentiated Rejection was significantly and positively correlated with interpersonal anxiety,  $r_s(145) = .39, p < .001$ . Finally, the Total Father PARQ score was significantly positively correlated with total anxiety score,  $r_s(140) = .49, p < .001$ .

As for the inter-correlations of the four Adult PARQ sub-scales, Warmth scale was also strongly and negatively correlated with all the rest PARQ subscales (all  $ps < .001$ ). It should be noted that Warmth scale was not reversed for the calculation of the above correlation coefficient since the hypothesis tested here focused on the relationship of the Warmth/ Affection score per se with the interpersonal anxiety score and not on calculating the total PARQ score. For the calculation of the total PARQ score we followed the scoring instructions suggested by Rohner et al. (2005; see details described in the Measures section).

**Table 1: Correlations between IRAQ and PARQ dimensions for Mother and Father version**

	IRAQ Spearman's rho	
	PARQ Mother Version	PARQ Father Version
Warmth/Affection	-.36	-.27
Hostility/aggression	.44	.55
Indifference/Neglect	.47	.43
Undifferentiated Rejection	.45	.39
Total PARQ	.51	.49

*Note:* All  $p$  values were  $< .001$

Women of the sample were hypothesized to experience higher levels of interpersonal anxiety than men according to hypothesis c. To test it we used an independent sample  $t$  test because the assumption of normality was not violated for IRAQ total score since the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was not statistically significant ( $p = .200$ ). The independent sample  $t$  test suggested that the difference in IRAQ scores between males ( $N = 75, M = 19.76, SD = .65$ ) and females ( $N = 75, M = 19.85, SD = .61$ ) were not statistically significant,  $t(148) = -.11, p = .917, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.86, 1.67]$ . IRAQ scores per gender and relationship status are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: IRAQ scores per gender and relationship status**

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Men	75	19.76	5.65
Women	75	19.85	5.26
Not in relationship	75	19.81	4.96
In relationship	75	19.80	5.92



## DISCUSSION

The present research aimed at studying the interpersonal anxiety that young adults experience within their intimate relationships, focusing on: (a) the effect of the perceived parental acceptance and rejection experienced during childhood on the interpersonal anxiety in adulthood and (b) whether gender differences exist on the levels of experienced interpersonal anxiety. We decided to use a cut-off point of 35 years for the age our sample. This decision was based on personality literature findings suggesting personality is quite stable by the age of 30 years (McCrae & Costa, 1990). Additionally, we needed to focus on stable interpersonal relationships across time. Participants in this age is more likely to have more stable and lengthy relationships.

In general, in the present study participants on average experienced mild levels of interpersonal anxiety, adopting the cutoff levels proposed by Rohner (2012). In empirical literature young adults in a similar age range (20-30 years) of a Croatian Sample experienced normal interpersonal anxiety levels (males,  $M = 14.16$  and females,  $M = 14.35$ ) as reported by Vulic-Prtoric and Tkalic (2016). However, mean interpersonal anxiety in special populations were higher, 26.77 and 15.32 for adolescents with Somatoform Disorders and Minor Medical Problems, respectively (Naz & Kausar, 2015).

The internal consistency of the Adult Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire was adequate since Cronbach's alpha was higher than the generally suggested .70 (Nunnally, 1978), and comparable to other studies (Naz & Kausar, 2015; Brown et al., 2014). However, the distribution of PARQ scores violated the assumption of normality, although that was not the case for the IRAQ score. Specifically, PARQ scores were positively skewed, suggesting an overuse of the lower points of the Likert scale. Similar findings were reported in other PARQ studies in Greece (Giotsa & Touloumakos, 2014; Giotsa, Stalikas, Kyriazos, & Zergiotis, 2018). This could be attributed to consistently low scores in perceived rejection by the Greek samples.

The correlations between parental acceptance and rejection and the respondents' interpersonal anxiety were all statistically significant. More specifically, the results suggested that both maternal and paternal acceptance during childhood were negatively and significantly correlated to the interpersonal anxiety that they experience during adulthood. On the contrary, it seems that maternal and paternal rejection were positively and significantly correlated to experienced anxiety during an interpersonal relationship during adulthood. It could be argued that, according to the present sample, the more a child feels accepted by his or her parents, the less interpersonal anxiety he or she will experience during adulthood. Respectively, the more rejected a child feels, the more interpersonal anxiety he or she will experience.

The first and second hypotheses that the perceived maternal and paternal rejection is positively related to interpersonal anxiety relates the effect of the perceived acceptance or rejection, during childhood, on the quality of the relationships with the peers throughout lifespan. (Festa & Ginsburg, 2011; Giaouzi & Giovazolias, 2015; Giotsa & Touloumakos, 2014; Hummel & Gross, 2001; Morris, 2001; Rohner, 2014; Rohner & Khaleque, 2005) were confirmed. These findings were supported by similar findings in empirical literature (Festa & Ginsburg, 2011; Giaouzi & Giovazolias, 2015; Hummel & Gross, 2001; Rohner, 2014; Rohner & Khaleque, 2002) reporting that perceived parental rejection is strongly related to the interpersonal anxiety, even in relationships in the person's adult life.

The third hypothesis, stated that women experience higher levels of interpersonal anxiety than the men (La Greca & Lopez, 1998). Nevertheless, average levels of experienced interpersonal anxiety within an intimate relationship of men and women were similar, as no statistically significant difference emerged. This finding differs from previous reported empirical findings (Altemus, Sarvaiya, & Epperson, 2014; Giaouzi & Giovazolias, 2015; La Greca & Lopez, 1998) suggesting that women are more sensitive and tend more often to experience interpersonal anxiety within an interpersonal relationship.

Rohner and Britner (2002) noted that a person's interpersonal relationships include the most significant happy or sad events in a lifetime. For most people adults or children interpersonal relationships contribute to subjective happiness and well-being. As a result, when a person's important emotional bonds are disappointing, threatened or broken, it is possible that emotions such as anxiety, insecurity or anger will appear (Rohner & Britner, 2002).

To sum up, it is obvious that the emotional closeness among the parents and the children is very important (Bengtson, 2001; Giotsa, 2007; Mylonas et al., 2006; Rohner et al., 2005; Sullivan, 1953). There is evidence supporting that parental behavior is able to affect the children's psychological adjustment and development from childhood until adulthood (Carrasco & Rohner, 2013; Giotsa & Touloumakos, 2014; Khaleque & Rohner, 2012; Rohner, 1975, 2014; Rohner & Khaleque, 2005). The present research's data also supports this evidence, focusing mostly on the interpersonal anxiety and the way perceived parental acceptance and rejection during childhood can affect it.

Even if this study shed some light on important aspects of interpersonal relationships and the way parental acceptance and rejection can affect them, it also has some limitations. At first, the sample was quite small, it was adequate for the statistical analyses performed. Any generalization of the findings must be in the same age population. In addition, during the process of data analysis the researchers

focused on specific demographics (i.e. gender) which -according to the existing literature- seem to be related to experienced interpersonal anxiety. Future research may expand the analysis to include other demographic variables too, such as living conditions and other personal information (e.g. education level, work status). Finally, the lack of normal distribution of the PARQ scores is confirmable by similar findings in Greece (Giotsa & Touloumakos, 2014; Giotsa, Stalikas, Kyriazos, & Zergiotis, 2018), thus presumably it cannot be attributed to sampling procedure. Besides, this was the case only with PARQ but not with IRAQ. Future research on PARQ Greek adaption could probably address this issue (see also Giotsa & Touloumakos, 2014).

The need for further research in Greece cannot be stressed enough. The study of interpersonal relationships, through the lens of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory, is a relatively new research field. Future research, could examine the perceived partner's acceptance and rejection, in association with the respondent's interpersonal anxiety levels, as well as the interpersonal anxiety in association with the psychological adjustment of adult or adolescent participants.

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