

Perceived Maternal Neglect and Adjustment Problems of High School Students

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Abstract: *The present study was designed to examine the influence of perception of maternal neglect on emotional, social, and educational adjustment employing a quasi experimental design. From among a total of 94 students studying in grades VIII, IX, and X, top and bottom 25 students were selected on the basis of their scores on the Parent- Child Relationship Scale (Nalini Rao, 1989). The former group of students constituted the high maternal neglect group, while the latter comprised the low maternal neglect group. Both the groups of students were administered the Adjustment Inventory for School Children developed by Sinha and Singh. Data were analyzed with the help of independent group t test. Results revealed significant differences in none of the three areas of adjustment implying that the students who perceive themselves to be neglected by their mothers are comparable to those who do not. The results have been discussed in terms of contextual effect and the compensatory nature of the care given by the father and other members of the family.*

Key Words: *Adjustment problems, Maternal neglect, Parent-child relationship, PARTheory, Warmth.*

I. Introduction

In the social and developmental science literature parent-child relationship has acquired a prominent place, primarily because of its influence on the child across cultures and social strata (Chao, 1994, 2001; Jackson-Newsom, Buchanan, & McDonald, 2008; Lim & Lim, 2003; Rudy and Grusec, 2001). Traditionally, a set of dimensions like “permissive versus restrictiveness” (Baumrind, 1971, 1991) and “control versus support” (Maccoby and Martin, 1983), and more recently, that of behavioural versus psychological control (Barber, 1996; Barber, Maughan, & Olsen, 2005) have been used to conceptualize four different parenting styles, such as authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and uninvolved. While both authoritative and permissive styles are characterized by warm parent-child relationships, the former is accompanied by high behavioural control, low psychological control, a reasoned, gentle, emotionally neutral approach to discipline, thereby parents simultaneously retaining authority and listening to input from the child, the latter is associated with low behavioural control, low psychological control, a reasoned approach to discipline (though discipline occurs infrequently), thereby de-emphasizing parental authority. In contrast, authoritarian parenting style is defined by low warmth, high behavioural control, high psychological control, use of harsh discipline, little input for adolescents in decision making, and heavy emphasis on parental authority. Lastly, uninvolved parenting is exactly as it sounds; there is a lack of involvement in the child's day to day life and overall development. It is characterized by a lack of warmth, low behavioural as well as psychological control. Uninvolved parents tend to be neglectful in meeting their children's basic needs. Cross cultural studies examining the associations between parenting practices/philosophies and parental warmth have found similarity (Jackson-Newsom, Buchanan, & McDonald, 2008) as well as differences (Chao, 1994, 2001; Lim & Lim, 2003; Rudy and Grusec, 2001) across groups.

So far as the differential effects of these parenting styles are concerned, there is no scarcity of literature documenting an associations between authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, or uninvolved parenting on the one hand and adolescent behaviour such as academic achievement, deviance, or depression on the other, consistently showing benefits of an authoritative style (Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Millstein, Holmbeck, Fischer, & Shapera, 2001; Steinberg 1989). Though children with authoritative parents may show healthy signs of social development and higher degree of emotional self-control, authoritarian parents, through their high expectations for obedience, may promote skills such as self-regulation but typically do not give their children the opportunity to develop self-expression. On the other hand, children of indulgent parents may have extensive chances for self-expression, but lack the rule-focused framework to build emotional regulation and control. These children are likely to suffer developmentally from a lack of parental warmth, interest or attention.

Parental warmth, as reflected through concern for the child and parent-child harmony, is a predominant factor in the development of the child. It has to do with the quality of the affectional bond between parents and their children. As Rohner, Khaleque, and Cournoyer (2005) suggest, parental warmth varies along a continuum on which all humans can be placed. One end of the continuum is marked by parental acceptance, which refers to

the warmth, affection, care, comfort, concern, nurturance, and support from the parents for their children. At the other end of the continuum, there is parental rejection, which is expressed in (i) cold and unaffectionate, (ii) hostile and aggressive; (iii) indifferent and neglecting; and (iv) undifferentiated rejecting behavior toward the child. Undifferentiated rejection refers to the child's belief that her parents do not really care for her or love her, even though there might not be overt behavioural indicators of parental neglect, aggression, or lack of affection. This is what the PARTheory (Rohner, 1986, 1999a, 2004; Rohner & Rohner, 1980, 2000) suggests.

Parental acceptance-rejection theory (PARTheory) is an evidence based theory of socialization which suggests that children all over the world need to be loved by parents and other significant caregivers. Probably, this need is biologically based. PARTheory predicts that parental rejection has consistent negative effects on the psychological adjustment and on behavioural functioning of both children and adults worldwide. This has been confirmed by a vast research literature (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Rohner, 1975, 2002; Rohner & Rohner, 1980). According to Rohner, Khaleque, and Cournoyer (2011), the more acceptance (warmth, affection, care, comfort, concern, nurturance, support, or simply love) children receive from their parents or caregivers, the more positive influence will be on children's development and the more rejection (absence or significant withdrawal of warmth, affection, care and presence of physically and psychologically hurtful behaviors and affects), the more negative influence will be on children's development. Knafo and Schwartz (2003) found a correlation between parenting styles and adolescents' perception of parental values. Perception of parental values was more accurate among the adolescents of warm and responsive parents than those of autocratic parents.

Parents, according to the PARTheory, are thus uniquely important to children because their emotional as well as psychological adjustment are dependent on the quality of relationship with their parents. Because of the psychological hurt they receive, some rejected individuals become defensively independent. Defensive independence with its associated emotions and behaviors sometimes leads to a process of counter rejection, in which individuals who feel rejected, in turn reject others. They tend to develop feelings of impaired self-esteem and impaired self-adequacy. This happens because, as the symbolic interaction theory (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934) suggests, individuals tend to view themselves as they think their parents or significant others view them. Thus, insofar as children and adults feel their attachment figures do not love them, they are likely to feel they are unlovable, perhaps even unworthy of being loved. Individuals who feel rejected often tend to be emotionally less stable than those who feel accepted. The painful feelings associated with perceived rejection tend to induce a negative worldview within the children. That is, rejected persons are likely to perceive the world, interpersonal relationships, and the very nature of human existence as being untrustworthy, hostile, unfriendly, emotionally unsafe, threatening, and dangerous. Negative worldview, negative self-esteem, self-inadequacy, and the other personality dispositions are important elements in the social cognitions or mental representations of rejected persons. One's mental representations influence his conception of reality; it shapes the ways in which he perceives, construes, and reacts to new experiences, including interpersonal relationships. Individuals who feel rejected, not only are likely to seek, create, or interpret experiences, situations, and relationships in ways that are consistent with their distorted mental representations, but also tend to avoid or mentally reinterpret situations that are inconsistent with these representations. Such types of selective attention, negatively biased perception, faulty styles of causal attribution and distorted cognitive information processing propel the rejected individuals along developmental pathways that are qualitatively different from that of those who feel accepted or loved. Khaleque and Rohner (2002) conducted a meta analysis of 43 studies conducted worldwide to claim that perceived parental acceptance-rejection is associated with psychological (mal) adjustment universally among children and adults, regardless of differences in gender, race, language, or culture. Their results showed that roughly 26% of the variance in children's self-reported psychological adjustment and with roughly 21% of the variance in adults' self-reported psychological adjustment are explained by perceived parental (maternal and paternal) acceptance-rejection.

However, while quality of parent-child interaction has been found to be associated with cognitive as well as adaptive functioning (Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton, 1987; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rohner, 1986), social context clarifies how different aspects of the parent-child relationship are associated with later problems. For example, Lewis, M., Feiring, C, McGuffog, C, & Jaskir, J. (1984) have found a link between attachment security and later problem behaviour at home, not at school. Fagot and Kavanagh, (1990) and Sroufe, Egeland, and Kreutzer (1990) also found very weak and/or non significant associations between attachment security and later problem behaviour in school. On the other hand, accepting parent behaviour has been found to be related at least as strongly to problem behavior at school as at home, particularly for externalizing behaviour (Loeber & Dishion, 1984; Rothbaum, 1986, 1988).

While talking on the effects of parental acceptance-rejection or parenting styles, it must be kept in mind that the determining factor is not the parental love or care itself; rather it is important to consider the extent to which the child satisfies her needs to be loved or cared. Kagan (1978) put it, "parental rejection is not a specific set of actions by parents but a belief held by the child." In effect, much of parental acceptance-rejection behavior is symbolic. Therefore, to understand why rejection has consistent effects on children and adults, one must

understand its symbolic nature. Certainly parents everywhere may express, to some degree, acceptance (warmth, affection, care, concern) and rejection (coldness, lack of affection, hostility, aggression, indifference, neglect), but the way they do it is highly variable and often saturated with idiosyncratic meaning. Because the determining factor in an individual's reaction to his environment is his attitude, the effects of parenting, in fact, depends on how he perceives it. That means the key concepts of perceived acceptance and rejection are defined in terms of the interpretations that individuals make of parents' or major caregivers' behaviour.

It is in this context that several researchers (Bhatt & Mehta, 1975; Rao, 1978; Seginer, 1985) emphasize that it is inappropriate to elicit information about one's perception of his family or his parent as a unit. Because an individual may very well have quite different feelings and attitudes regarding each member of the family, an adolescents perceptions of his interaction with his mother and father should be sampled separately (Manley, 1977; Rex, Long, Brody, & Fauber, 1986; Ruth, 1985), especially in India where fathers and mothers assume distinct roles in the socialization of their children (Singh 2005). The present study also aims at examining the adjustment problems of adolescents as a function of perceived maternal neglect. The important conceptual feature of the research reported here is its emphasis on individuals' subjective perceptions of his mother's behaviour.

II. Method

1.1. Sample

A total of 94 students (55 boys and 39 girls) studying in grade VIII, IX and X were administered the parent-child Relationship Scale (Nalini Rao, 1989). On the basis of their scores on the Neglect subscale of this scale, the top 25 and the bottom 25 students were selected. The top and bottom 25 scorers constituted the high and low maternal neglect groups respectively. The age of the sample was ranging from 12 years to 16 years. All the students were taken from a Bhubaneswar-based high school. The description of the sample characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table1. Description of sample characteristics

Group	N	No. of Boys and Girls	Mean Age	Mean perceived maternal neglect score
1. High maternal neglect group	25	Boys(15) Girls(10)	14.16	31.16
2. Low maternal neglect group	25	Boys(14) Girls(11)	13.96	17.25

2.2 Instruments

The following instruments were used in the present study.

Parent Child Relationship scale (PCRS). The scale, developed by Nalini Rao (1989), measures characteristic behavior of parents as experienced by their children. This questionnaire contains 100 items categorized into ten dimensions namely, protecting, symbolic punishment, rejecting, object punishment, demanding, indifferent, symbolic reward, loving, object reward and neglecting. Items of the scale are arranged in the same order as the dimensions and they rotate in a cycle through the scale. The respondent is required to respond the items separately for both father as well as mother. Items are common for both the parents except for three items which are different, in the Father and Mother forms due to the nature of variation in paternal and maternal relationship with children. Respondents were to rate statements as to their own perceptions of their relationship with either Father or Mother on a five point scale ranging from 'Always' to 'Very rarely' weighted 5,4,3,2 and 1, on the scale points. The scale is scored separately for each parent. Thus every respondent obtains ten scores for 'father form' and ten for 'mother form' on the ten dimensions of the scale. However, for the present purpose, the students' responses to the neglect items were considered. According to the objectives of the study, only the Mother Form of the scale was used.

Adjustment Inventory for School Children. This scale, developed by A. K. P. Sinha and R. P. Singh, has been designed for school students of India. This inventory contains 60 items, 20 each measuring levels of adjustment in three areas, i.e., Emotional, Social and Educational. The respondents were required to give their responses in either 'Yes' or 'No' depending on whether the item is true for the individual or not. The response indicative of adjustment is given a score of zero, otherwise a score of one is awarded. That means a higher score is indicative of poor adjustment.

2.3 Procedure

After obtaining permission from the Head master and the Vice Principal of the concerned school, Parent Child Relationship scale (PCRS) was administered. Before administering the tests adequate amount of rapport was established with the students. The perceived maternal neglect score for each individual was found

out. Scoring was done with the help of the manual. Then all the 94 students were ranked from highest to lowest. High scores on the scale represented high maternal neglect. The top 25 and bottom 25 students were selected. These two groups of students constituted the high and low maternal neglect groups respectively. Both these two groups were administered the Adjustment Inventory for School Children developed by A. K. P. Sinha and R. P. Singh. The responses of to the items of the scale were scored according to the manual. Then the scores were subjected to statistical analysis.

Both the tests were administered in group in a free period within the school hour.

III. Results

Keeping the objective of the study in mind, the scores of both the high and low maternal neglect groups on the Adjustment Inventory were compared by means of independent sample t test. Table 2 presents the group wise means, Standard Deviations of the high and low maternal neglect groups and t values for Emotional, Social and Educational Adjustment scores.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of High and Low Maternal Neglect groups (N=25 in each group) and t values for Emotional, Social, and Educational Adjustment.

Measures	Group	Mean	SD	t	SIG
Emotional Adjustment	High maternal neglect children	3.80	3.0	.099	.921
	Low maternal neglect children	3.88	2.69		
Social Adjustment	High maternal neglect children	5.20	1.98	.281	.780
	Low maternal neglect children	5.40	2.96		
Educational Adjustment	High maternal neglect children	4.52	2.60	.155	.877
	Low maternal neglect children	4.64	2.86		

From Table 2 it can be noticed that the mean emotional adjustment score of the high maternal neglected adolescents is 3.80 and that for the low maternal neglect subject's children is 3.88. Similarly standard deviations (SD) of both the groups are 3.0 and 2.69 respectively. Group comparison shows a t value of .099 which is not statistically significant. This implies that both the groups are comparable in terms of emotional adjustment. Perception of maternal neglect was not found to be correlated with emotional adjustment of adolescents. So far as emotional adjustment is concerned, high scores indicate unstable emotion while those with low scores tend to be emotionally stable. In the present study, perception of maternal neglect did not seem to affect the emotional stability of the subjects.

Moreover, according to the authors of the test used, so far as emotional stability is concerned, scores ranging from 2 to 4 can be described as having good adjustment (Sinha & Singh, 1971). In the present study the mean scores of both the groups correspond to good emotional adjustment.

It is evident from Table 2 that the group mean and standard deviation of high maternal neglect subjects are 5.20 and 1.98 respectively and those for the low maternal neglect subjects are 5.40 and 2.96 respectively. A t value of .281 was obtained which was found to be not significant. The high maternal neglect group was found to be comparable to their low maternal neglect counterparts in terms of social adjustment.

The mean social adjustment scores of both the groups correspond to average level of adjustment implying that both the groups were average in social adjustment. Individuals scoring high on the social adjustment dimension are submissive and retiring while low scores indicate aggressive behavior. Average level of adjustment implies that adolescents in both the groups were neither very submissive nor very aggressive.

Similarly, so far as educational adjustment is concerned, Table 2 reveals mean scores of 4.52 and 4.64 as well as standard deviations (SD) 2.60 and 2.86 for the high low maternal neglect adolescents respectively. Group comparison shows a t value of .155 which is not statistically significant. This implies that both the groups are not significantly different from each other in terms of educational adjustment. Furthermore, on average, both the groups can be said to be average to good in educational adjustment.

High scores in educational adjustment means poor adjustment with curricular and co-curricular programmes. Persons with low scores tend to be interested in school programmes.

IV. Discussion And Conclusion

Comparison of the adolescents who perceive themselves to be highly neglected by their mothers with those who do not revealed no significant differences between them so far as their emotional, social, and educational adjustments are concerned.

The results are not consistent with previous researchers (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Rohner, 1975, 2002; Rohner et al, 2011; Rohner & Rohner, 1980). These advocates of the Parental acceptance theory (PARTheory) hold that children everywhere need acceptance (love) from parents and other attachment figures.

When this need is not met, children worldwide regardless of variation in culture, gender, age, ethnicity tends to self report a specific of psychological maladjustment. Perception of parental rejection tends to be associated with behavior problems, depression or depressed affect, substance abuse, and other mental health-related issues.

Developmental psychologists emphasize the importance of quality of parent-child interaction in determining the cognitive as well as adaptive functioning of children as well as adolescents (Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton, 1987; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rohner, 1986). However, social context has been found to moderate the relationship between different aspects of the parent-child relationship and later problems. For example, link between attachment security and later problem behavior is evident at home not at school (Lewis, M., Feiring, C, McGuffog, C, & Jaskir, J. (1984). Fagot and Kavanagh, (1990); Sroufe, Egeland, and Kreutzer, (1990) also found very weak and/or non significant associations between attachment security and later problem behavior in school. The items of the instrument used to measure adjustment problems in the present study are in the form of questions asked in the context of school, thus requiring the students to indicate their problems in the context of school. This might be a reason for not finding a significant relationship between perceived maternal neglect and adjustment problem in the present study.

Furthermore, it must be kept in mind, that in the present study, only maternal neglect dimension of parent-child relation was considered. According to Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1979), if a child in a two parent family has a good relationship with one parent, a poor relationship with the other parent does not appear to have much effect on the child. However, if a child's relationship with both parents is poor, or if it is poor with one parent and only neutral with the other, behavior problems are more likely to develop. In the present study, the absence of significant influence of perception of maternal neglect on adjustment could be attributed to absence of paternal neglect.

Moreover, in Indian society, joint family system is still prevailing. Even though the children are neglected by their mothers in a joint family, they might have been getting extra care and attention by their grandparents, maternal aunt, paternal aunt, father's etc which might be compensating the influence of their perception of maternal neglect on emotional, social and educational adjustment levels.

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