

# Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory and Attachment Theory

This chapter presents an overview of interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory (IPARTheory) and attachment theory along with a brief comparison of the two theories. Discussion of conceptual frameworks of these two theories seems to be useful for a better understanding of the theoretical relationships among interpersonal acceptance-rejection, psychological adjustment, and intimate relationships of children and adults.

## Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory

Interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory (IPARTheory) was formerly known as parental acceptance-rejection theory (PARTheory). This is an evidence-based theory of socialization and lifespan development. The theory was formulated by Ronald Rohner (1935–). It aims to explain major concepts, and predict causes, correlates, and consequences of interpersonal acceptance and rejection in a variety of attachment relationships across the lifespan (Khaleque & Ali, 2017; Rohner, 1975, 1986/2000; Rohner & Khaleque, 2015b). The theory predicts that interpersonal rejection has consistent negative effects on psychological adjustment and behavioral functioning of both children and adults worldwide. Serious and chronic parental rejection in childhood, however, typically appears to have more severe and longer-lasting emotional, social, cognitive, behavioral, and neurobiological

effects on children and adult offspring than do perceived rejection in other attachment relationships throughout life (Khaleque, 2017a).

## Major Concepts

*Parental acceptance-rejection* in IPARTheory 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 warmth, affection, love, care, comfort, support, or nurturance that parents can feel or express toward their children. *Parental rejection*, on the other hand, refers to the absence or withdrawal of warmth, affection, or love. Parental rejections also include a variety of physically and psychologically hurtful behaviors of parents toward their children. Parents can express their acceptance or love through physical, verbal, and symbolic behaviors indicating their feelings of warmth and affection toward their children. On the other hand, parents can express their rejection or lack of love by being cold and unaffectionate, hostile and aggressive, or indifferent and neglecting toward their children. In addition, parental rejection can be subjectively experienced by children in the form of undifferentiated rejection. In IPARTheory, *undifferentiated rejection* refers to children's feeling that their parents do not really love them, which may or may not be objectively true.

In IPARTheory, *parental control* refers to the permissiveness-strictness continuum of parental behavior, which fits with the concept of behavioral control rather than psychological control (Rohner, 1986/2000). Conceptually, behavioral control is characterized by two separable elements. The first element has to do with the extent to which parents place limits or restrictions on their children's behavior (i.e., the extent to which parents use directives, make demands, and establish family or household rules). The second element has to do with the extent to which parents insist on compliance with these proscriptions and prescriptions. Behavioral control refers to styles of parental *discipline* (e.g., corporal punishment). Behavioral control does not, however, refer to the methods or techniques parents use to enforce compliance with their rules.

*Psychological adjustment* in IPARTheory refers to an individual's position on the constellation of seven personality dispositions central to IPARTheory's personality subtheory. These dispositions include hostility, aggression, passive aggression, and problems with the management of hostility and aggression; emotional unresponsiveness; dependence or defensive independence depending on the form, frequency, durations, and severity of perceived rejection; impaired self-esteem; impaired self-adequacy;

emotional instability; and negative worldview. Additionally, the theory predicts that the experience of rejection by an attachment figure is likely to induce feelings of anxiety and insecurity in children and adults. These feelings are likely to be associated with their cognitive distortions. Perceived parental warmth and acceptance, on the other hand, has been found to be associated worldwide with psychological adjustment, with positive personality and behavioral development of children and adult offspring (Khaleque, 2013a, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a, 2011, 2012).

### **Origin of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory**

IPARTheory is a continually evolving theory. Formulation of the theory began in the last quarter of the 1900s (Rohner, 1975, 1986/2000). Rohner began research on the worldwide antecedents, consequences, 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. Many of these children have difficulty in later life expressing and responding to affection.” After reading this, Rohner (1986/2000) conducted a small holocultural study (i.e., cross-cultural comparative research) on 19 societies scattered widely around the world (Rohner, 1960). The results of these holocultural studies inspired him to undertake another cross-cultural study on parental acceptance-rejection in three Pacific societies. Later, in 1975, he published a detailed holocultural study on 101 cultural groups (Rohner, 1975). Results of all these studies convinced Rohner about the consistent effects of parental acceptance-rejection on the personality development of children and adults across races, ethnicities, and cultures of the world. However, because holocultural research deals only with typical behaviors in 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 research on the correlates of parental acceptance-rejection would yield the same results as holocultural research. In order to explore this issue he developed and validated the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire and the Personality Assessment Questionnaire, along with an interview format and behavior observation procedures (Rohner, 1984/1991).

Several years of research using these instruments and procedures convinced him 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

(Rohner, 1986/2000). Based on 20 years of reflection and research, Rohner formulated parental acceptance-rejection theory (Rohner & Rohner, 1980). Since then, hundreds of studies within the United States and internationally have tested and confirmed different aspects of the theory. To test IPARTheory's central postulates, 12 meta-analyses have been conducted on a total of 551 studies based on an aggregate sample of 149,440 respondents from 31 countries on five continents (Ali, Khaleque, & Rohner, 2013, 2015; Ali et al. 2017; Khatun, Ali, Khaleque, & Rohner, 2017; Khaleque, 2013a, 2013b, 2015c; Khaleque & Ali, 2017; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a, 2002b, 2011, 2012; Rohner & Khaleque, 2010). Results of these meta-analyses confirm that the IPARTheory's central postulates are true for children and adults cross-culturally.

### **Basic Tenets of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory**

IPARTheory postulates that acceptance by attachment figures has consistent positive effects and rejection by them has consistent negative effects on the psychological adjustment and behavioral functioning of both children and adults worldwide (Rohner & Khaleque, 2015b). The theory attempts to answer five classes of questions concerning interpersonal acceptance and rejection. These questions are divided into the theory's three subtheories: personality subtheory, coping subtheory, and sociocultural systems subtheory.

Personality subtheory attempts to answer two general questions: (1) What happens to people who perceive themselves to be accepted (loved), or rejected (unloved) by their attachment figures? (2) To what extent do the effects of childhood rejection extend into adulthood and old age?

Coping subtheory tries to answer one general question: Why do some children and adults cope more effectively than others with the experience of childhood rejection?

Sociocultural systems subtheory attempts to answer two classes of questions: (1) Why are some parents warm, loving, and accepting, and others are cold, aggressive, neglecting, and rejecting? And (2) how is the total fabric of a society including the behavior and beliefs of people within the society can influence most parents in that society to be either accepting or rejecting of their children?

IPARTheory 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, 1975, 1986/2000, 1999, 2014). Second, it draws from literary and historic materials going as far back as 2,000 years. Third, it draws from

more than 5,000 empirical studies on interpersonal acceptance and rejection since the 1930s to form a conceptual framework for explaining the lifespan perspective incorporated in IPARTheory's three subtheories as described in the following.

### **Personality Subtheory of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory**

This subtheory postulates that acceptance-rejection by attachment figures have profound influence in shaping children's and adult's personality development over the lifespan. 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.

The theory draws from the phylogenetic perspective (Rohner, 1975, 1986/2000). In IPARTheory, this perspective refers to the fact that humans have acquired—through the process of evolutionary development—the need for positive response or love from people most important to them. According to the theory, this need in childhood is for parental warmth, affection, care, comfort, support, nurturance, or simply love. IPARTheory's personality subtheory assumes that the emotional need for positive response from attachment figures is a powerful motivator in children and adults (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The personality subtheory postulates that when this need is adequately met by attachment figures, children have the phylogenetically acquired tendency to develop the following positive personality dispositions: (1) low hostility and aggression, (2) independence, (3) positive self-esteem, (4) positive self-adequacy, (5) emotional stability, (6) emotional responsiveness, and (7) positive worldview. Contrarily, the subtheory assumes that when this need for positive response is not met by parents or other attachment figures, children tend to develop a specific constellation of negative personality dispositions specified in the theory's personality subtheory (Rohner, 1986/2000). In

particular, the theory assumes that rejected children are likely to feel anxious and insecure. Moreover, as children grow into adulthood, these negative personality dispositions tend to form a stable negative personality pattern called rejection syndrome (Rohner, 2004). This rejection syndrome tends to have significant negative effects on the individual's psychological adjustment and behavioral functioning throughout the lifespan (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a, 2011). 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; (3) impaired self-esteem; (4) impaired self-adequacy; (5) emotional unresponsiveness; (6) emotional instability; and (7) negative worldview.

According to IPARTheory, rejected people are likely to develop a negative worldview characterized by beliefs that people in general are unfriendly, hostile, or dangerous (Rohner, 1986/2000, 1999). Negative worldview, negative self-esteem, negative self-adequacy, and some of the other personality dispositions just described form the basis of mental representations or social cognitions of rejected people (Rohner, 1986/2000, 1999). In IPARTheory, mental representation refers to an individual's more or less coherent but usually implicit beliefs and expectations about the self 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. Rohner (1999, p.11) wrote:

Indeed some develop emotional and behavioral problems similar to those of rejected people but for reasons having nothing to do with parental acceptance and rejection per se. And some rejected people are able to remain fairly healthy—emotionally and behaviorally—despite having to live with parental rejection. [In IPARTheory, individuals in the latter 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 IPARTheory's personality subtheory are called "troubled" individuals.

These troubled individuals—forming the majority of 20 percent who do not confirm IPARTheory’s assumption—suffer from impaired mental health even though they felt that they had been accepted by their parents. IPARTheory 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 a variety of reasons having nothing to do with parental acceptance and rejection. More discussion about “troubled” individuals can be found under “Coping Subtheory.”

### **Sociocultural Systems Subtheory**

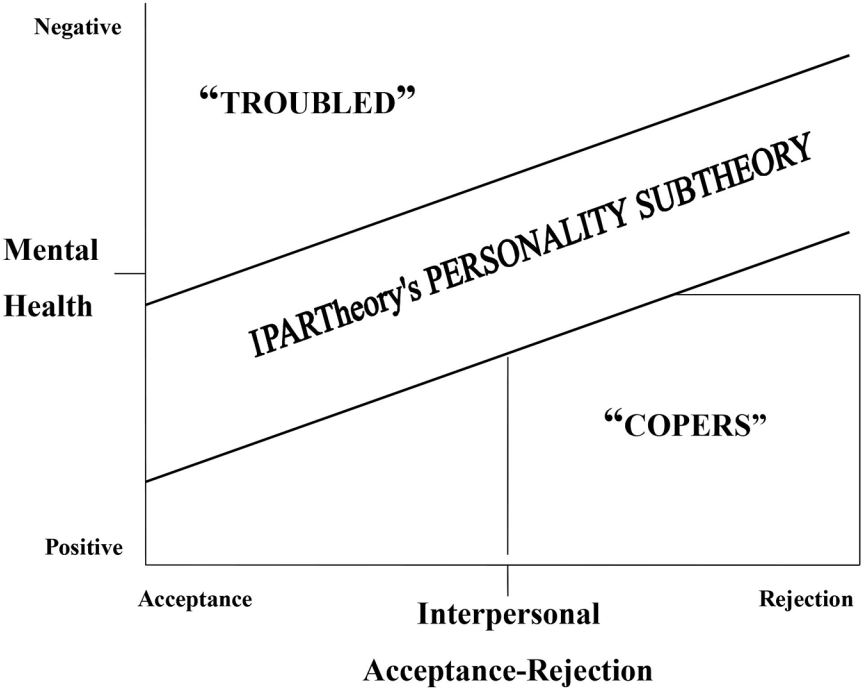
Sociocultural systems subtheory attempts to predict and explain major causes and sociocultural correlates of parental acceptance and rejection worldwide. The subtheory predicts, for example, that children are likely to develop cultural beliefs about the supernatural world (God and spiritual beings) as being malevolent (i.e., hostile, treacherous, destructive, or negative in some way) in societies where they tend to be rejected. Contrarily, 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 (Batool & Najam, 2009; Rohner, 1999). IPARTheory’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 (Rohner, 1986/2000, 1999; Rohner & Khaleque, 2005).

### **Coping Subtheory**

Not all rejected individuals develop serious adjustment problems. Some are able to cope with the impact of rejection more effectively than others. This issue is addressed in IPARTheory’s coping subtheory. Studies in the United States and across the world confirm IPARTheory’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, 2001; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a, 2011, 2012; Khaleque, 2013a, 2015c). A small fraction of the remaining 20 percent is termed “copers” in IPARTheory. They are the people who experienced significant parental rejection in childhood but who, nonetheless, continue to be psychologically well adjusted as defined in IPARTheory’s personality subtheory. According to IPARTheory’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 or occupational lives despite psychological impairment due to parental rejection in early life (Rohner, 1999). Approximately 80 percent of all respondents in most studies respond as the theory predicts. A small fraction of the remaining 20 percent of respondents do not respond as the theory predicts. They are termed “copers” in IPARTheory (see Figure 5.1).

As noted earlier, the majority of the *apparent* exceptions to IPARTheory’s personality subtheory, however, are termed “troubled” individuals. These are individuals who, despite coming from loving (accepting) families, self-report the same constellation of hurtful psychological dispositions and maladjustment as do individuals who come from rejecting families.



**Figure 5.1** Troubled Individuals in the Context of IPARTheory’s Personality Subtheory (Adapted from Rohner & Khaleque, 2005)

Copyright © 2018, ABC-CLIO, LLC. All rights reserved.



## Paradigm Shift in Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory

Interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory emerged under the acronym IPARTheory in 2014 (Khaleque, 2017b; Rohner, 2014) after being known for well over three decades as parental acceptance-rejection theory (PARTheory). As noted earlier, PARTheory researchers, until 2000, spent little time and effort studying troubled individuals because it was generally believed that people could be psychologically disturbed for a variety of reasons having nothing to do with parental acceptance and rejection (Rohner, 1999). But research only on parental acceptance-rejection could not provide a comprehensive answer to the question: Why do some accepted people show the same constellation of personality dispositions as do rejected individuals?

Gradually, PARTheory researchers started realizing that much of what the theory postulates about the effects of perceived parental acceptance-rejection is also true about the effects of perceived acceptance-rejection in virtually all attachment relationships throughout the lifespan, although the magnitude of the effects may differ. This shift in research focus led to a major paradigm shift in IPARTheory's personality subtheory (Rohner, 2006; Khaleque, 2007).

**Original PARTheory postulate.** Parental rejection is associated with the specific cluster of personality dispositions noted in the personality subtheory.

**Reformulated IPARTheory postulate.** Perceived rejection by an *attachment figure at any point in life* is associated with the same cluster of personality dispositions found among children and adults rejected by parents in childhood.

The first empirical study to test the just noted reformulated postulate of IPARTheory was conducted by Khaleque in 2001 (Khaleque, 2001). This study examined the impact of perceived acceptance-rejection by intimate male partners on the psychological adjustment of adult females in the United States. Results showed that partner acceptance had significant impact on women's psychological adjustment. Additionally, results showed that both partners' acceptance and paternal acceptance had a significantly greater impact on women's psychological adjustment than did maternal acceptance (Rohner & Khaleque, 2008). Thus IPARTheory has gradually expanded beyond its initial concerns with *parental* acceptance-rejection, and started focusing on all aspects of *interpersonal* acceptance-rejection (Khaleque, 2007). Results of 12 meta-analyses provide compelling evidence about the worldwide generalizability of this postulate (Khaleque & Ali, 2017).

## **Cross-Cultural Implications of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory**

Global research evidence provided in this book and elsewhere lends credibility to IPARTheory's contention that perceived parental rejection is one of the major causes of social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral problems of children, adolescents, and adults everywhere—regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, and geographical boundary, or other such defining conditions. Having said this, it should also be noted that perceived acceptance-rejection appears to account universally for an average of about 26 percent of the variance in the psychological adjustment, personality development, and behavioral functioning of children and adults, leaving approximately 74 percent of the variance to be accounted for by other factors (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a, 2011). Nonetheless, results of 12 meta-analytic reviews based on 551 studies involving an aggregate sample of 149,440 children and adults from 31 countries on five continents show that the central tenets of IPARTheory—especially IPARTheory's personality subtheory—are so robust and stable cross-culturally that professionals and practitioners should feel confident in using them for developing policies, practices, and intervention strategies to deal with the problems of intimate relations, psychological adjustment, personality dispositions, and behavioral functioning of children and adults globally (Khaleque, 2015a).

## **Criticisms of the Theory**

One of the major criticisms against the interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory is that the theory is negatively designed because it focuses more on the effects of interpersonal rejection than on acceptance. But this criticism is not supported by empirical evidence. An overview of IPARTheory research literature based on 12 meta-analyses shows that during the last 40 years more studies have been conducted focusing on interpersonal acceptance than rejection globally (Khaleque, 2015a). Another criticism against the IPARTheory is about its directionality. Like most of the parent-child relational theories, IPARTheory is unidirectional as it focuses mainly on children's perceptions of parental acceptance-rejection, and little or not at all on parents' perceptions of acceptance-rejection by children.

## **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory is an important theoretical approach to study and understand intimate relationships over an individual's lifespan (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Colin,

1996). The theory provides important concepts and constructs for explaining intimate relationships in childhood, adolescents, and adulthood. Bowlby laid the foundation of the theory, and Ainsworth expanded it with empirical support (Bretherton, 1995). Although infant research was the original basis of attachment theory, it was later formulated as a lifespan theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1979). In recent years, it has been applied to the study of adult intimate relationships (Feeney, 1999; Shaver & Clark, 1994).

Attachment theory has attracted enormous interest of intimate relationship researchers globally. According to Cassidy and Shaver (1999), for example, more than 2,000 studies have been conducted on the lifespan perspectives of attachment relationships.

### **Origin of the Attachment Theory**

John Bowlby (1907–1990) developed the central ideas of attachment theory in the 1950s while he was working as a psychiatrist at the Tavistock Child Guidance Clinic in London. He was struck by the fact that the early histories of juvenile thieves were very often associated with severe disruptions in their relationships with the mother figures. Thus he started conducting research on the effects of temporary separation of children from their primary caregivers during the first five years of life.

In 1950 Ainsworth joined Bowlby's research team as a research associate at the Tavistock clinic and started studying the effect on personality development of separation from the mother in early childhood. In 1953 she left the Tavistock clinic and went to Uganda. There, she kept contact with Bowlby and continued working on the empirical validation of Bowlby's theoretical notions. Ainsworth observed infant development and maternal care in two different cultural settings in Uganda and the United States. In 1955, she came back to the United States and renewed her close intellectual collaboration with Bowlby. Together they defined, developed, and refined the propositions of attachment theory.

The association between John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth was very important and fruitful for the development of attachment theory (Marrone, 1998). Some of the important elements of contemporary attachment theory were formulated by Ainsworth rather than Bowlby himself.

### **Basic Concepts**

Bowlby constructed the basic tenets of attachment theory, drawing from the concepts of Darwinian theory, ethology, developmental psychology,

and psychoanalysis. According to Bowlby (1969/1982) and Ainsworth (1973), attachment is as an enduring affective bond characterized by a tendency to seek and maintain proximity to an attachment figure, particularly under stress. As an emotional bond, Ainsworth (1989) defined attachment as a relatively long-lasting tie with the partner as a unique individual who is interchangeable with none other. According to Ainsworth (1989), attachment like all other affectional bonds includes the following elements: (1) an emotional bond, (2) an enduring relationship, (3) the need to maintain proximity, (4) the feeling of distress upon separation, (5) the pleasure in reunion, and (6) the grief at loss. Ainsworth (1989) also thought that attachment includes elements that are not necessarily present in other affectional bonds. These elements are the experience of security, comfort, and safety obtained from the relationship with the partner. However, an individual can move off from the secure base provided by the partner with confidence to engage in other activities. But because not all attachments are secure, Ainsworth (1989) proposed a modification of the secure-base criterion of attachment to imply a seeking of the closeness that would lead to a feeling of security and comfort in the relationship with the partner.

### Assumptions of Attachment Theory

A brief description of attachment theory's major assumptions is given as follows:

**Biological evolutionary basis.** One of the fundamental assumptions of attachment theory is its evolutionary perspective focusing on the psychological base of attachment behavior (Bowlby, 1958, 1969/1982). Bowlby (1969/1982) formulated this theory, drawing ideas from Darwinian theory, fields of ethology, and cognitive psychology. Accordingly, attachment theory assumes that humans have a biologically based propensity to develop enduring emotional bonds with attachment figures. Human attachment bonds are subject to adaptive changes over the lifespan.

**Behavioral system.** In attachment theory, a behavioral system refers to a set of discrete behaviors that function in an organized way to help the individual achieve attachment. People's attachment behavior system regulates the depth (i.e., the degree of closeness or distance) of their relationships with attachment figures. Attachment theory proposes that attachment behavior is a goal-corrected behavioral system. The goal is to attain attachment, and the person goes on trying whatever will work to achieve the goal. For example, if crying does not help bring the attachment figure to the child, the child may try some alternative ways (crawl, walk, or run) to

draw the attention of the attachment figure. Attachment theory assumes that the behavioral system controlling attachment tends to become active “from the cradle to the grave” (Bowlby, 1969/1982, p. 129). Attachment behavior tends to be activated in an individual either by external threatening conditions (frightening stimuli or events) or internal threatening conditions (illness and pain). The intensity of activation of attachment behavior tends to vary with the intensity of the threat (Colin, 1996).

**Secure-base concept.** The secure-base concept is one of the most important assumptions of attachment theory. A secure base is provided through a relationship with one or more responsive attachment figures who meet the child’s needs and to whom the child can turn for security, when upset or anxious. Ainsworth provided empirical evidence to support the concept of attachment figure as a secure base from which an infant can explore the world (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Ainsworth (1989) indicated that being near the attachment figure tends to support exploration, and being away from the attachment figure tends to activate attachment behavior. In other studies in a laboratory playroom in the United States, Rheingold and Eckerman (1970) and many others showed that infants explore comfortably if mothers are present but become distressed when separated from their mothers.

**Internal working model.** Another important concept developed by Bowlby (1969/1982) in attachment theory is the notion of an internal working model or representational model. According to Bowlby (1994) each individual perceives events, forecasts the future, and constructs her/his plans with the help of working models of the world which she/he builds for herself/himself. A key feature of an individual’s working model is her/his notion of who her/his attachment figures are, where they may be found, and how they may be expected to respond. Attachment theory assumes that internal working models of oneself and others are formed during the course of attachment-eliciting events. According to attachment theorists, internal working models begin to form during the early months of life and continue to develop and reshape in later life. Children develop certain expectations regarding their interactions with attachment figures on the basis of repeated experience. These expectations are integrated and embodied in the mental representation models or internal working models that may influence the formation and development of later models. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), internal working models can be of three different types: (1) secure—in which children perceive their attachment figures as reliable—and they expect them to be responsive to their needs; (2) avoidant—in which children perceive their attachment figures as unavailable—and they defensively avoid close contact with their

attachment figures; and (3) anxious/ambivalent—in which attachment figures are not consistently available or responsive to children.

***Continuity and change.*** Attachment theory assumes continuity and change in attachment bonds and behaviors across the lifespan. The theory has proposed a set of well-integrated assumptions regarding the development of attachment bonds and intimate relationships throughout the lifespan. Many of the theory's assumptions about infancy and childhood have been well supported by research (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). However, propositions about adult attachment and intimate relationships need more research for empirical support (Colin, 1996).

## **Adult Attachment**

Although the initial focus of attachment theory, as noted earlier, has been infants and children, extension of the theory from childhood through adulthood mainly began with the seminal study on adult romantic relationships by Hazan and Shaver (1987). This path-breaking study has sparked increasing interests in exploring the nature and characteristics of attachment relationships in adolescence and adulthood (Berlin, Cassidy, & Appleyard, 2008; Feeney, 2008).

Based on the concepts of attachment theory, Hazan and Shaver (1987) tried to conceptualize adult intimate relationships as an attachment process. They proposed that adult romantic relationships are governed by the attachment behavioral systems, and eventually romantic partners become attachment figures. Following this initial conceptualization, adult intimate relationships research in recent years, especially research based on attachment theory, has tended to focus on three important aspects of adult attachment. First, the process of formation and maintenance of adult attachment relationships follow the same patterns of individual differences observed in child-parent attachment relationships (i.e., secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant). Second, individual differences in adult attachment behaviors are likely to reflect differences in expectations, beliefs, and values (i.e., internal working models) based on differences in individuals' historical contexts of attachment development. Third, romantic love consists of three behavioral components: attachment, caregiving, and sex (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Generally, researches on adult attachment following attachment theoretical perspective have been based on the these three assumptions (Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo, 2016).

## Comparison between Attachment Theory and IPARTheory

Both interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory and attachment theory emphasize the importance of attachment, acceptance, and intimate relationships in individuals' healthy social, emotional, and personality development over the lifespan. The two theories attempt to explain the formation and maintenance of intimate relationships with attachment figures throughout life. The theories also focused on effects of the quality of such relationships on individuals' psychological well-being and behavioral functioning. Although both the theories initially focused on the development of childhood close relationships with attachment figures, especially with parents, they have more recently been applied to the study attachment relationships in adulthood (Khaleque, 2015b; Rohner, 2008; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008; Thompson, 2008). Because of their contributions to adult intimate relationships research, it seems relevant to analyze and compare these two theories to understand their major points of convergence and divergence.

### *Agreements between the Two Theories*

IPARTheory and the attachment theory agree on at least five basic assumptions, which are briefly described as follows:

**Evolutionary perspective.** A common feature of both theories is an evolutionary perspective. Attachment theory assumes that human beings have a biologically based and phylogenetically acquired propensity to develop enduring emotional bonds of attachment with noninterchangeable attachment figures. Attachment theory emphasizes the evolutionary adaptiveness of these attachment bonds. IPARTheory, on the other hand, assumes that human beings have a phylogenetically acquired biological need for positive response (i.e., need for care, comfort, support, nurturance, love, affection, etc.) from parents, significant others, or attachment figures. In addition, IPARTheory assumes that humans have acquired over the course of hominid evolution the propensity to respond in specific negative ways when this need is not fulfilled.

Attachment theory implicitly recognizes IPARTheory's postulates that human beings have a phylogenetically acquired need for positive response. According to Bowlby (1969/1982), this need is acquired through a system of evolutionary adaptation. In this connection, Ainsworth (1990) viewed that a child who is attached to a parent has the biologically based propensity to seek proximity, security, and protection to that parent (Simpson & Belsky, 2008).



According to Rohner (1999, p. 3), “When children don’t get this positive response, specific emotions and behaviors of the kind postulated in both attachment theory and IPARTheory (i.e., insecurity, anxiety, may be anger, dependency, etc.) begin to emerge.” Worldwide cross-cultural research supports these assumptions. For example, in a number of recent studies, significant associations have been found between perceived parental acceptance, children’s and adults’ psychological adjustment, and positive personality dispositions; and on the other hand, significant associations have been found between perceived parental rejections, children’s and adults’ psychological maladjustment, and negative personality dispositions (Ali, Khaleque, & Rohner, 2013, 2015; Khaleque, 2013a, 2013b, 2015c, 2017a; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002a, 2011, 2012; Rohner & Khaleque, 2010).

**Universal propensities.** Both IPARTheory and attachment theory argue that the propensities cited previously are universal because they are thought to be rooted in human biology.

IPARTheory draws from the logic of *anthroponomy* and the *universalist approach* described in a number of studies by Rohner (1975, 1986/2000). IPARTheory researchers have been employing a multimethod research strategy across a wide range of sociocultural settings. Doing so allowed IPARTheory researchers to explore the full range of human variability in races, languages, ethnicities, genders, ages, and the like. The objective of IPARTheory research is to demonstrate that the basic postulates of the theory are universally true and generalizable across all populations, regardless of geographical boundaries, as well as across different measurement modalities (Rohner & Khaleque, 2015b). The single strongest body of evidence about the worldwide mental health correlates of interpersonal acceptance-rejection comes from cross-cultural and intracultural studies of IPARTheory’s personality subtheory discussed earlier.

This evidence is based on the convergence of four broad paradigms of research as well as on several discrete measurement procedures within these paradigms. The major paradigms of research include (1) a major *holocultural* study on 101 nonindustrial societies distributed widely throughout the major geographic regions and cultures 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, 1988/2000); and (4) more than 600 intracultural *psychological studies* in the United States



and internationally (Khaleque, 2013b; Rohner, 2014). Collectively, these studies have tested about 150,000 children and adults in more than 30 countries in five continents. These studies also included major ethnic groups in the United States, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans.

The universalist approach has been a part of attachment theory since its origins. Attachment researchers have collected empirical evidence over the past five decades from numerous cultures around the world (Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo, 2016). On the basis of a huge amount of accumulated evidence, the attachment theorists have drawn the following universalist conclusions about the nature of attachment: (1) children everywhere tend to develop attachment relationships with their primary caregivers; (2) the quality of attachment relationships varies depending on the sensitivity and responsiveness of the caregivers to children's needs; and (3) childhood experience of attachment relationships have a significant influence on social, emotional, and personality development during adulthood (Grossman & Grossman, 2005; Van Ijzendoorn & Sagi-Schwartz, 2008).

**Representational model.** Both theories draw heavily from the common concept of representational model, called “mental representations” in IPARTheory, and “internal working models” in attachment theory. In attachment theory, *internal working models* are thought to be formed on the basis of individuals' early life (i.e., infancy and childhood) experiences based on daily interactions with their attachment figures (Cassidy, 2000). Similarly, in IPARTheory the formation of *mental representations* depends on individuals' experiences of interpersonal relationships with their attachment figures during childhood and adulthood (Rohner, 1986/2000; Rohner & Khaleque, 2015b).

According to Bowlby (1988), childhood mental representations are relationship specific because internal working models are constructed in interpersonal relationships. In attachment theory representations of the self and attachment figures are considered complementary (e.g., the self is lovable if the attachment figures are loving) (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). Bowlby (1988) thought that initially relationship-specific internal representations of children become more general strategies that guide their relationships and behavior throughout lives. Because people may form different mental representations about different attachment figures, an important question arises regarding the accessibility of a working model in any given situation (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008). According to attachment literature, the accessibility of an attachment working model depends on a number of factors such as the length of experience on which a

particular working model is based, the number of times it has been applied in the past, and how relevant the working model is in a particular situation (Baldwin, 1992; Collins & Read, 1994).

The question about the specificity of mental representations has also been addressed in IPARTheory. IPARTheory coincides with attachment theory in this regard. For example, IPARTheory proposes that children's emotional security is dependent on the quality of their relationship with their parents and other attachment figures. The theory also postulates that the experience of parental acceptance and rejection during childhood has an "unparalleled influence in shaping children's personality over time" (Rohner & Khaleque, 2015b). Thus IPARTheory and attachment theory have consistent views regarding the specificity of mental representations that children construct in their relationships with caregivers.

Attachment theorists suggested that although mental representations formed in early relationships are changeable, they are fairly stable and enduring over the individual's lifespan (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008). In this connection, Bowlby (1969/1982) argued that attachment working models formed during infancy undergo developmental changes as individuals' social and cognitive competencies develop from childhood through adulthood (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). Bowlby also suggested that changes in the nature of attachment relationship could lead to changes of the working models. In attachment theory, this kind of discontinuity in internal working models is called *affective discontinuity* (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008).

IPARTheory also focused on the issue of stability and change of mental representations. The theory postulates that perceived parental acceptance-rejection is associated with the development of more or less stable social, emotional, and cognitive dispositions of an individual throughout the lifespan. These stable dispositions are likely to be related to the individual's ideas about self and others (Rohner & Khaleque, 2015b). IPARTheory assumes that individuals' mental representations of themselves may change as a result of rejection by an attachment figure at different times during the lifespan. Thus it may be argued that both IPARTheory and attachment theory recognize a lifelong process of stability and change in individuals' representational models.

**Resistance to loss of significant relationships.** According to both IPARTheory and attachment theory, children and adults tend to resist the disruption or loss of affectional bonds of attachment with parents or other attachment figures. According to IPARTheory, emotionally attached individuals usually seek emotional closeness with their attachment figures, experience distress upon separation from them, and experience grief at

their loss (Rohner, 2005). Similarly, attachment theory views that children's and adults' reactions to separation and loss of an attachment figure are characterized by anxiety, anger, and denial, followed by a phase of despair in which the predominant feelings are sadness and hopelessness (Bowlby, 1980; Shaver & Fraley, 2008).

**Importance of affectional bonds.** Both IPARTheory and attachment theory make a distinction between general affectional bonds and specific attachment bonds. As noted earlier, persons with whom the individual has an affectional bond are in IPARTheory called "significant others." A significant other is any person with whom an individual has a relatively long-lasting emotional bond, who is uniquely important to the individual, and who is interchangeable with no one else. An attachment figure has all these characteristics but has one additional *essential* characteristic. Specifically, to be an attachment figure, as defined in IPARTheory, one's sense of emotional security, happiness, and well-being must be dependent to some degree on the quality of the relationship with the significant other person (Rohner & Khaleque, 2005). IPARTheory argues: "Parents are generally the most significant others for children because they are typically children's attachment figures—the persons with whom children have established bonds of attachment. Parents are thus uniquely important to children because children's sense of security and other psychological dispositions are dependent on the quality of relationship with the parents" (Rohner, 1999, p. 2).

### *Differences between the Two Theories*

Despite strong similarities between the two theories, they also differ in important respects. These differences, however, do not necessarily mean disagreements. According to Rohner (1999), major differences include:

**Major focus.** IPARTheory traditionally focuses on the quality of parenting, especially characterized by parental acceptance-rejection (i.e., warmth/affection, hostility/aggression, indifference/neglect, and undifferentiated rejection). Attachment theory traditionally focuses on the attachment behavior of children, especially infants and toddlers, toward the parent, especially the mother, although recent focus on "caregiving" patterns in attachment relationships is also evident (e.g., George & Solomon, 1996).

**Age differences.** Originally, IPARTheory concentrated on school-aged children, adolescents, and adults, whereas attachment theory concentrated primarily on infants and toddlers. Now, however, both theories are trying to take a lifespan perspective, focusing on infancy through old age.

**Long-term effects of infancy experiences.** Historically, IPARTheory and attachment theory have different views about the role of infancy

experiences on long-term socioemotional development of individuals. Although current attachment theorists do not hold deterministic views about the influence of early experiences on individuals' development, IPARTheory has always disagreed with attachment theory's original assumptions about the deterministic role of early childhood experiences.

More specifically, attachment theory originally emphasized the importance of the quality of early attachment relationships and proposed an essential stability and continuity of attachment styles from infancy to adulthood (Bowlby, 1980). Although Bowlby conceived that infants' attachment styles are changeable in response to new attachment relationship experiences, he also postulated that attachment representations tend to be more assimilating rather than accommodating to later experiences (Zhang & Labouvie-Vief, 2004). However, despite the importance attributed to early attachment experiences, many current attachment theorists suggest that the development of attachment should not be thought as a unique and linear trajectory. Instead, they propose that various paths of childhood attachment trajectory may emerge in adulthood based on the individuals' developmental characteristics, quality of their relations with attachment figures, and environmental circumstances in which those relationships evolved (Sroufe, 1995). Specific experiences with intimate partners in adulthood may either consolidate or result in variations in an initial pattern of attachment relationships (Thompson, 2008).

Similarly, IPARTheory has postulated from its beginnings that individuals' psychological adjustment in childhood and later can improve, if the forms of parenting change from rejection to acceptance (Rohner, 1999). Moreover, many adults who experience rejection by their intimate partners also tend to report the same cluster of psychological dispositions found among children who perceive themselves to be rejected by their parents (Rohner, 2008). Recognizing this fact, IPARTheory researchers have been focusing on the specific and independent contributions of intimate adult relationships on individuals' psychological adjustment (Rohner, 2008).

**Differences in measurement approaches.** IPARTheory tends to rely heavily (but not exclusively) on individuals' self-reports of parental treatment as revealed by questionnaires and interviews. Attachment theory, on the other hand, tends to rely heavily on behavior observations by researchers, focusing on infancy and early childhood.

**Differences in approach of personality outcomes of parenting.** In IPARTheory personality outcomes of parenting behaviors are viewed as dimensions or continua, which range from positive to negative. On the other hand, in attachment theory, personality outcomes are viewed as types or categories, such as secure attachment or insecure attachment.

**Focus on a single primary personality outcome versus a constellation of personality outcomes of different parenting styles.** IPARTheory focuses on personality as a constellation of interrelated characteristics influenced by different parenting styles. Attachment theory emphasizes different types or categories of attachment behaviors as the primary personality outcomes of different parenting styles. Despite these differences, both IPARTheory and attachment theory have made significant contributions to the understanding of the nature, characteristics, and dynamics of attachment relationships and their developmental consequences for children and adults cross-culturally (Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo, 2016). So far numerous empirical studies have been conducted to verify the assumptions of IPARTheory and attachment theory. Research literature regarding these two theories that seems potentially relevant to intimate relationships is briefly reviewed in the next chapter.

**Attachment styles.** Another fundamental difference between attachment theory and IPARTheory is about the notion of attachment styles. According to attachment theorists, the specific nature of early social exchanges between the caregiver and the child results in differences in the quality of attachment relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Thompson, 2008). According to attachment theory, the quality of attachment relationships with caregivers in early childhood could give rise to the following types of attachment styles: (1) secure attachment—mothers/primary caregivers who foster secure attachment are more responsive; (2) insecure attachment—mothers/primary caregivers who foster insecure attachment are less responsive. There are three different kinds of insecure attachment. They are (1) avoidant attachment—in which children show little separation anxiety; (2) ambivalent attachment—in which children show both likes and dislikes for parents; and (3) disorganized attachment—in which children show unpredictable behavior because they are uncertain and confused about the responses of parents or caregivers. Prompt and consistent attention and response from parents or caregivers to the children's needs and comforts during the first three months help the development of secure attachment between caregivers, especially parents, and children (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972). According to attachment theory, attachment styles that develop in early childhood significantly influence adult attachment styles. Attachment theory views differences in adult attachment relationships similar to secure or insecure attachment styles in childhood (Belsky, 2006).

IPARTheory, on the other hand, does not explain individual differences in adult attachment on the basis of attachment styles. Instead of classifying individuals on the basis of their attachment styles, the theory focuses on the extent to which individuals' feelings and mood are affected

by—or are dependent on—the quality of the relationship between themselves and their intimate partners (Rohner, 2005). In addition, IPARTheory characterizes adult attachment on the basis of two major points: (1) perceived quality of an individual's attachment relationships and (2) an individual's need to maintain proximity with an attachment figure (e.g., the experience of distress upon inexplicable separation from the attachment figure, and joy upon reunion with the attachment figure). However, IPARTheory considers such features as correlates of the *quality* of intimate relationships and not as essential parts of intimate relationships (Rohner, 2005).

### ***Multiple internal working models versus a single working model.***

Bowlby (1980) contended that defensive exclusion can have an effect on attachment working models. For example, parent's persistent rejection, neglect, or punishment of a child's intense attachment behavior can have an effect on attachment working models of the child. In such cases, the child experiences a representational conflict that may be resolved by developing two conflicting sets of working models. One set, which represents the child's negative experiences with the attachment figure, is defensively excluded from consciousness, whereas the other remains consciously accessible. Based on observations of emotionally troubled adults in therapy, Bowlby (1980) suggested that (1) defensively excluded working models formed in early life may still influence individuals' behaviors in adulthood, (2) such models are usually in conflict with consciously accessible working models, and (3) defensively excluded models may influence individuals' behavior at different stages in their lives (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008).

Contrarily, IPARTheory argues that it is unlikely for individuals to develop two radically different and incompatible internal working models of an attachment figure. Rohner (1999), for example, contended that it is not unusual for individuals to have inconsistent or conflicting sets of cognitions and feelings about their parents and other attachment figures. This does not necessarily mean that individuals have concurrently two radically different and inconsistent internal working models of an attachment figure. However, it is possible that an individual may sometime create a single internal working model with inconsistent or conflicting elements, when he/she feels ambivalent about an attachment figure.

## **Concluding Comments**

Discussion and comparison of IPARTheory and attachment theory reveal that both the theories have made significant contributions to the

understanding of the nature, characteristics, and dynamics of intimate relationships and their developmental consequences for children and adults cross-culturally (Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo, 2016). So far numerous empirical studies have been conducted to verify the assumptions of IPARTheory and attachment theory. Research studies on these two theories that are potentially relevant to intimate relationships are reviewed in the next chapter. The review mainly focuses on contributions of these two theories, specifically on three areas of intimate relationships: (1) development of empirical knowledge, (2) assessment, and (3) nonclinical and clinical applications.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 5 focuses on the major concepts of interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory (IPARTheory) including parental acceptance and rejection, parental control, psychological adjustment; origin of the theory, basic tenets of the theory, paradigm shift in IPARTheory, cross-cultural implications of IPARTheory, and criticisms of the theory. The chapter also discusses attachment theory, origin of the attachment theory, basic concepts of the theory, assumptions of attachment theory, adult attachment, comparison between attachment theory and IPARTheory, agreements between the two theories, and differences between the two theories.

**Interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory.** IPARTheory is an evidence-based theory of socialization and lifespan development.

**Parental acceptance.** In IPARTheory, parental acceptance refers to warmth, affection, love, care, comfort, support, or nurturance of parents toward children.

**Parental rejection.** Parental rejection refers to the absence or withdrawal of warmth, affection, or love, and hurtful behaviors of parents toward children.

**Parental control.** Parental control refers to the permissiveness-strictness continuum of parental behavior.

**Origin of IPARTheory.** This is a continually evolving theory. Formulation of the theory began in the last quarter of the 1900s.

**Basic tenets of IPARTheory.** The theory postulates that acceptance by attachment figures has consistent positive effects and rejection by them has consistent negative effects on the psychological adjustment and behavioral functioning of both children and adults worldwide.

**Subtheories of IPARTheory.** The theory has three subtheories: personality subtheory, coping subtheory, and sociocultural systems subtheory.

**Attachment theory.** This theory focuses on attachment or intimate relationships over an individual's lifespan.



**Basic concepts of attachment theory.** Attachment is as an enduring affective bond characterized by a tendency to seek and maintain proximity to an attachment figure.

**Secure base.** A secure base refers to a relationship with one or more responsive attachment figures who meet the child’s needs and to whom the child can turn for security, when upset or anxious.

**Internal working model.** In attachment theory, internal working models are thought to be formed on the basis of individuals’ early life experiences based on daily interactions with their attachment figures.

**Agreements and differences between the two theories.** IPARTheory and the attachment theory agree on at least five basic assumptions including evolutionary perspective, universal propensities, representational model, resistance to loss of significant relationships, and importance of affectional bonds. But they differ on major focuses including attachment styles, personality outcomes, internal representational models, and measurement approaches.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- 1. Discuss the origin of interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory and the paradigm shift in the theory.
- 2. Discuss the basic postulates and cross-cultural implications of interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory.
- 3. Discuss the origin and the assumptions of attachment theory.
- 4. Compare agreement and differences between the two theories.
- 5. Discuss the contributions of these two theories, specifically on intimate relationships, psychological adjustment, and lifespan development.