

## **Perceived Parental Acceptance-Rejection and Artistic Preference: Replication Thirty Years Later**

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### **Abstract**

In 1982, Rohner and Frampton investigated if there is a relationship in the U.S. between the degree to which adults recall themselves as having been accepted or rejected as children and their current preference for graphic art varying in complexity of design. The researchers found a relationship between these two constructs – the participants' perceived parental acceptance in childhood was associated with a preference for more complex art forms, which differed from their expectations based on the findings of previous studies. The purpose of our study was to replicate Rohner and Frampton's (1982) work, 30 years later, in order to determine if similar findings would emerge. Among our 133 participants, perceived maternal acceptance in childhood was associated with a preference for more complex art forms [similar to Rohner and Frampton's (1982) findings]. However, our participants' perceived paternal acceptance in childhood had no association with artistic preference. We suggest that in the future, researchers work to uncover the underlying reasons for the relationship between artistic preference and perceived parental acceptance and rejection.

*Keywords:* parental acceptance and rejection, artistic preferences, replication

## **Aceptación-Rechazo Parental Percibido y Preferencias Artísticas: Replicación Treinta Años Después**

### **Resumen**

En 1982, Rohner y Frampton investigaron si existe una relación en los Estados Unidos entre el grado con el que los adultos recuerdan qué tan aceptados o rechazados eran como niños y su preferencia actual sobre arte gráfico que varía en complejidad del diseño. Rohner y Frampton encontraron una relación entre estos dos constructos – la percepción de aceptación parental en la infancia se asocia con la preferencia de formas más complejas de arte, que difieren de sus expectativas, reportadas en hallazgos de investigaciones previas. El objetivo de este estudio fue replicar el trabajo de Rohner y Frampton (1982), 30 años después, para determinar si los resultados serían similares. Entre los 133 participantes, la percepción de aceptación maternal estuvo asociada con la preferencia de formas de arte más complejas [similar a lo que encontraron Rohner y Frampton (1982)]. Sin embargo, en los participantes de este estudio, la percepción de aceptación paternal durante la infancia no tuvo relación con la preferencia artística. Se sugiere que en el futuro, se trabaje en encontrar las razones subyacentes en la relación entre preferencia artística y percepción de rechazo-aceptación parental.

*Palabras Clave:* Aceptación y Rechazo Parental, Preferencias Artísticas, Replicación

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For many years, the psychological study of aesthetics has been an area of research (e.g., Boas, 1928; Fechner, 1876). There have been studies on aesthetic experience, often with a focus on the roles of emotion and empathy (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007). There have been studies on aesthetic pleasure, often with a focus on the roles of color and our bodies' resonance with the art we are viewing (Dutton, 2009; Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004; Lipps, 1903). There have also been studies on aesthetic preferences, often with a focus on the role of reward regions of the brain (Calvo-Merino, Urgesi, Orgs, Aglioti, & Haggard, 2010; Reber, Schwartz, & Winkielman, 2004; Topolinski, 2010).

The first true cross-cultural comparative work in aesthetics comes from Barry's (1957) research, in which he tested for a correlation between severity of socialization and style of art among a sample of non-literate societies. Barry drew from Whiting and Child's (1953) research, selecting 30 non-literate societies from their list of 76. Barry (1957) selected the societies from which he was able to find at least 10 works of graphic art (either exhibited in museums or as illustrations in ethnographic reports) and he coded the level of artistic complexity of each of the 30 society's works of art. Barry (1957) used many codes, including overall complexity of the design, presence of enclosed figures, presence of curved lines, crowdedness of space, and asymmetry of design. After coding each society's art for its level of complexity, he related these levels of artistic complexity to Whiting and Child's (1953) measures of "severity of socialization" in these same 30 societies. Barry (1957) revealed that the level of artistic complexity found in various societies around the world correlated strongly and significantly with the severity of socialization experienced by young children in those societies.

In a subsequent study, Rohner (1975) found that 15 societies in Barry's (1957) sample overlapped with his sample. Rohner took the data from these 15 societies to examine the cross-cultural relationship between parental acceptance-rejection (Rohner's [1975] variable) and complexity of art (Barry's [1957] variable). Rohner's (1975) results supported the earlier findings by Barry (1957), in that societies coded as being somewhat "rejecting" by Rohner's (1975) measure (i.e., harsher and more rejecting parenting practices) were characterized in Barry's (1957) study as having greater complexity of artistic design, whereas societies coded as being more "accepting" (i.e., warmer and more affectionate parenting practices) were represented with lower complexity of artistic design. Both Barry's (1957) and Rohner's (1975) research led to the tentative conclusion that across cultures, rejecting experiences in childhood (i.e., greater severity of socialization) are associated with more artistically complex design.

In a succeeding paper, Rohner and Frampton (1982) highlight that more studies are needed to validate and generalize both Barry's (1957) initial and Rohner's (1975) subsequent findings. Therefore, Rohner and Frampton (1982) sought to find if they too could establish the relationship between severity of parenting practices and artistic complexity, via a different measurement process and a different context. Specifically, Rohner and Frampton (1982) posed the following research question: "Is there a relationship in America between the degree to which individuals recall themselves as having been rejected as children, and their current preference for graphic art varying in complexity of design?" (p. 253).

To address their research question, Rohner and Frampton (1982) conducted an intracultural study in the U.S. with 25 participants (15 females, 10 males) ranging in age from 17 to 77 years, with race(s) unspecified. Rohner and Frampton (1982) noted that there is no single, specific art tradition in the U.S., and therefore a departure had to be made from Barry's (1957) format of coding artistic productions characteristic of total cultures. Rohner and Frampton (1982) focused on the relationship between adults' current artistic preferences and their retrospective recollections of their childhood experiences in terms of perceived parental acceptance and rejection.

Rohner and Frampton (1982) measured perceived parental rejection via the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (Rohner, Saavedra, & Granum, 1980), a self-report questionnaire in which adults are asked to reflect on the warmth and rejection they experienced as children within their families. Responses were given to 60 statements on a 4-point scale, in terms of how well each statement described the way their major caretaker (usually their mother) treated them when they were between 7 to 12 years of age. Example items are: "Paid no attention to me when I asked for help" and "Made it easy for me to tell him/her things that were important to me." Each participant was asked to choose their primary caretaker and to answer about that person only. A higher cumulative score indicates a stronger perception of having been rejected, and a lower cumulative score indicates a stronger perception of having been accepted.

Artistic preference was measured by two sets of photographs of paintings (Set A and Set B), all within the same genre and chosen by Rohner and Frampton (1982). Both Set A and Set B contained five photographs ranked by two independent judges according to degree of complexity. Artistic complexity was determined by the 11 criteria provided in Barry's (1957) study. There was perfect agreement between the judges' rankings of pictures in both Set A and Set B. The least complex picture in each set got a complexity score of 1, and the most complex got a score of 5. Rohner and Frampton's (1982) participants were asked to focus on the style of the pictures more than on their content and to rank the pictures in order of preference. Rohner and Frampton (1982) determined each participant's artistic preference score by multiplying each picture's complexity code by the rank score the participant assigned to it. This was calculated for both Set A and Set B. Rohner and Frampton (1982) summed the Set A score and the Set B score and the mean of these two scores was used as the overall artistic preference score. A higher score indicated that the participant preferred more complex art.

Rohner and Frampton (1982) found that greater recollected parental acceptance was associated with a stronger preference for artistic complexity, which was an unexpected result because it did not replicate Barry's (1957) and Rohner's (1975) earlier findings. In an effort to interpret the results, Rohner and Frampton (1982) examined if the participants' scores for the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (Rohner et al., 1980) and scores for artistic preference were associated with any of the demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, level of education). No associations were found.

Rohner and Frampton (1982) highlighted that their research leaves an unexplained contradiction to Barry's (1957) and Rohner's (1975) findings, as Rohner

and Frampton's (1982) findings conclude that parental acceptance (not rejection) is associated with preferring more artistic complexity. Rohner and Frampton (1982) noted that they do not have a clear theoretical explanation for these contradictory results. Further, Rohner and Frampton (1982) noted three important differences between their study and Barry's (1957) and Rohner's (1975) earlier studies. First, Rohner and Frampton's (1982) study focused on artistic *preferences*, but Barry's (1957) and Rohner's (1975) earlier studies focused on artistic *productions* typical of whole cultures. Second, there was a restricted range of variation reported for perceived acceptance and rejection among Rohner and Frampton's (1982) sample. Only one person in the sample had a cutoff score for serious rejection. Third, the participants in Rohner and Frampton's (1982) study were reflecting on their childhood experiences, but in Barry's (1957) and Rohner's (1975) earlier studies, the focus was on parenting practices when they actually occurred.

### *The Present Study*

The purpose of our study was to replicate Rohner and Frampton's (1982) study, 30 years later, in order to determine if similar findings would emerge. Our study is a modified replication in that we sought to recruit a larger sample size; our participants completed measures of both perceived maternal and paternal acceptance-rejection separately (rather than having the participants choose only one parent); and our study was conducted online, rather than in person.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The participants were 144 adults (133 females, 11 males) ranging in age from 18 to 67 years. The majority (77%) identified as European American, followed by 12% African American, 2% Hispanic American, 2% Asian American, and 7% Other. Almost half (46%) of the participants reported "some college" as their highest level of education, followed by "college degree" (19%), "graduate degree" (18%), "some graduate school" (13%), and "high school diploma" (4%). One participant did not report their highest level of education. In our study, the majority of the participants were female (92%). Because of this imbalance in gender, we eliminated males from the analyses.

### *Measures*

*Perceived maternal acceptance-rejection.* The participants completed the Adult Parental Acceptance and Rejection Questionnaire: Short Form (Rohner & Khaleque, 2005). This is a 24-item, 4-point Likert-type, self-report questionnaire designed to measure a person's perceptions of their mother's treatment of them during childhood. Sample items include: "My mother ridiculed me and made fun of me;" "My mother tried to make me feel better when I was hurt or sick." A higher cumulative score reflects a stronger perception of maternal rejection, and a lower

cumulative score reflects a stronger perception of maternal acceptance. We observed a Cronbach's alpha of .97 for this measure.

*Perceived paternal acceptance-rejection.* The participants completed the Adult Parental Acceptance and Rejection Questionnaire: Father (Short Form; Rohner & Khaleque, 2005). This measure is identical to the Adult Parental Acceptance and Rejection Questionnaire: Mother (Short Form; Rohner & Khaleque, 2005) but it is answered with a person's father in mind. A higher cumulative score reflects a stronger perception of paternal rejection, and a lower cumulative score reflects a stronger perception of paternal acceptance. We observed a Cronbach's alpha of .96 for this measure.

*Artistic preference.* Our method for measuring artistic preference was identical to Rohner and Frampton (1982), via the same two sets of photographs of paintings (Set A and Set B). Each set of pictures contained the five photographs ranging from least complex to most complex. The least complex picture in each set got a complexity score of 1, and the most complex got a score of 5. Respondents were asked to focus on the style of the pictures more than on their content and to rank them in order of preference. Each participant got a total artistic preference score, which was calculated by multiplying each picture's complexity code by the score the participant assigned to it. This was calculated for both sets of pictures. Similar to Rohner and Frampton's (1982) study, Set A correlated strongly and positively with Set B ( $r = .87, p = .001$ ). The two scores were summed and the mean of these two scores was used as the overall artistic preference score. A higher score indicated that a participant preferred more complex art.

*Demographics.* The participants responded to a series of demographic questions including gender, age, race, and level of education.

### *Procedure*

Once obtaining approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board, we recruited participants via snowball sampling. The study was completed online via an anonymous survey. Once the participant read and agreed to the informed consent, they completed the measure of perceived maternal acceptance-rejection, then the measure of perceived paternal acceptance-rejection, followed by the measure of artistic preference, and finally, the demographic questions. Upon completion of the study, the participants could choose to enter a raffle to win one of a series of gift cards.

## **Results**

To test for a relationship between perceived maternal acceptance-rejection and artistic preference, a Pearson correlation was conducted. The results revealed that the two variables were associated ( $r = -.27, p = .002$ ), indicating that higher perceived maternal acceptance was associated with a preference for more complex artistic design.

To test for a relationship between perceived paternal acceptance-rejection and artistic preference, a Pearson correlation was conducted. The results revealed

that the two variables were not associated ( $r = -.06$ ,  $p = .51$ ), indicating that perceived paternal acceptance had no association with preference for complexity in artistic design.

Similar to Rohner and Frampton's (1982) study, we examined if the participants' scores for perceived maternal acceptance-rejection, perceived paternal acceptance-rejection, and artistic preference were associated with any of the demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, level of education). No associations were found.

## Discussion

The purpose of our study was to attempt to replicate Rohner and Frampton's (1982) study, 30 years later, in order to determine if similar findings would emerge. Our study is a modified replication in that we sought to recruit a larger sample size than that of Rohner and Frampton (1982; their sample size was  $N = 25$ ); our participants completed measures of both perceived maternal and paternal acceptance-rejection separately (rather than having the participants choose only one parent); and our study was conducted online, rather than in person.

Despite these differences, our results are similar to Rohner and Frampton's (1982). Rohner and Frampton (1982) found that greater perceived parental acceptance was correlated with a preference for more complex artwork. In our study, we found the same correlation but only for perceived maternal acceptance, not perceived paternal acceptance. This is similar to Rohner and Frampton's (1982) study, as most of their participants chose to complete the measure of parental acceptance-rejection about their mother.

Like Rohner and Frampton (1982), we do not have a clear theoretical explanation for our results. The reason for the negative relationship between complexity of artistic design and severity of parenting practices remains uncertain. As Barry (1957) highlighted, socialization is a strong influence on personality, which may in turn influence the artwork that we create. Perhaps this extends to artistic preference. We suggest that researchers examine personality factors as potential mediating variables between perceived parental acceptance-rejection and artistic preference. We also suggest that researchers consider the potential roles of cognitive processes, creativity, and psychological health as potential mediating variables.

The two major limitations of our study are that our analyses focused only on female participants (as they constituted 92% of the sample), and that the majority (77%) of the sample identified as European American. We encourage researchers to continue in this line of research with a more even balance of females and males and with more diversity of racial backgrounds.

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