Exploring psychological growth in adult offspring following perceived parental rejection in childhood

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Origin of study

• The study grew out of my interest in the effects of parental acceptance and rejection as perceived in childhood, from the adult perspective.

• The study draws on the literature base of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPAR Theory) – a cross-cultural, universal body of research documenting the effects of feeling accepted or rejected by either one parent, or both.
Outcomes of IPAR studies

• Cross-culturally, children who perceive parental warmth, love and acceptance, tend to demonstrate healthy psychological adjustment in adulthood (Rohner, Khaleque & Cournoyer, 2005), compared to those children who experience parents as hostile or abusive (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Rohner, 1975, 1986, 2004).
Outcomes

• Perceived parental rejection in childhood is acknowledged as a causal factor in adolescent and adult aggression, hostility, feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, anxiety, depression, deviant behaviour - all resulting in internalised and externalised harmful behaviour (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002, 2013; Rohner & Rohner, 1980; Rohner, 1975, 1986, 2004), often resulting in diagnosis of mental health disorders.
Translating research into the real world

• My interest is from an interventionist standpoint – both as a counsellor and psychotherapist, but also from a psycho-social viewpoint, where psychological maladjustment is seen as a social disease (Layard & Clark, 2014) - in how adults, rejected as children, can improve their psychological health, without necessarily accessing a talking therapy or a pharmacological intervention.
The study

• My present day research is a follow-up of 2 previous studies that I conducted:

1 The effect of perceived parental acceptance in childhood on self-compassion, self-acceptance and unconditional positive self-regard in adult offspring

2 The impact of personal development in processing perceived parental rejection in childhood
Results from previous studies

• My earlier research, using MHR, indicates that self-compassion, positive self-regard and self-acceptance have a significant correlation with perceived maternal acceptance, and found it was a predictor of self-compassion and self-acceptance – this ties in with Rogers (1951) theory that we introject our attitudes towards self from our parental environment.
Previous research

• My second piece of research, using IPA, considered the role of Personal Development, as experienced on a counsellor-training course, as a vehicle for processing the experience of perceived parental rejection in childhood (Clare, 2016).
Findings from study 2

The Child’s Experience

• The pain of maternal abandonment
• Striving for parental acceptance
• Problematic transition into adulthood
Self in Relation to Others

• Unworthy of acceptance
• Issues with trust
• Isolation and loneliness
• Connecting with others

Processing of experience

• Acknowledging and feeling the pain
• Finding self-acceptance
• Developing an internal locus of control
Current research

• Continuing the theme, and building on my previous research, I am now hoping to capture causes and commonalities of psychological growth, as reported by adult participants who have experienced perceived parental rejection in childhood.
Methodology

• I am using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis:
  - As a humanistic counsellor I work from within a client’s phenomenology / frame of reference
  - I believe understanding phenomenology/idiography is key to making sense of experience, and ultimately finding meaning and purpose
  - I believe phenomenology is a key to the design and implementation of interventions in the field of self-determination/personal agency/self-help
Literature Review

• In addition to IPAR theory I am sourcing research from the fields of:
  - Post-traumatic growth – re-building of the assumative world (Janoff-Bulman, 1989)
  - Positive psychology – self-understanding i.e. flourishing and authenticity (Seligman, 2010; Joseph & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014)
  - Self-determination theory / human need fulfilment (Mancini, 2008)
  - Hope (Allen, 2008)
  - Thriving/constructivist self-development theory / adaptation & meaning making (Saakvitne, Tennen & Affleck, 1998)
Inclusion Criteria

• Adults who have experienced perceived parental rejection in childhood, and have worked with this issue, to the extent where they now feel they have experienced psychological growth and be sufficiently grounded in their experiencing (self-defined).

• In addition, participants are willing and able to seek additional therapeutic intervention, if participation in the research project elicits any emotional distress.

• Participants aged 18 or over, and fluent in written and spoken English.
Semi-structured questions:

• Please can you tell me about some of your experiences of parental rejection in childhood, and how you felt as a result of those experiences?

• Do you think those experiences had a lasting impact on you as you grew up? How specifically?

• How do you think those experiences effected the relationship which you had with yourself? How did you feel about yourself?

• Can you remember what your expectations of life were in general?

• In which ways do you consider yourself to have experienced psychological growth following the experience of perceived parental rejection?

• How do you account for the emergence of psychological growth?
Stage of research...

- 9 participants interviewed and verbatim transcriptions completed
- Preliminary analysis of transcripts
Data

Themes of rejection identified so far:

• Shame
• Childhood abuse (neglect, sexual, emotional, psychological, physical)
• Difficulties with transitioning to adulthood
• Compounding abuses in adulthood
Data

Themes of psychological growth identified so far:

• Perceived acceptance from another
• Development of a more loving relationship with self
• Finding meaning/purpose – something ‘bigger’ than self
• Self-agency/hope
• Compounding negative experience as a ‘tipping point’
Potential relevance of findings

• Increase in awareness of the effects of perceived parental rejection

• Contribution to the literature on idiographic factors of psychological growth following developmental trauma, childhood adversity and complex trauma

• Potential transmutation of findings into psycho-educational programmes

• Identification of therapeutic interventions outside of psychological provision


