



Research article

Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection: Disclosing Rohner's Subtheories in Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*

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Abstract

Acceptance and Rejection are the key concepts that influence an individual's psychological and emotional well-being. Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPAR Theory) postulated by Ronald P. Rohner and his colleagues offers a framework for understanding the intense influence of interpersonal acceptance and rejection on individuals' psychological and social outcomes. Understanding the dynamics of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection is crucial for fostering inclusive and supporting circumstances. This paper does the same by disclosing and contextualizing Rohner's Subtheories in Peter Philip Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. Through his writings, Carey delves into the complex workings of his character's psyche, thereby giving scope for the readers to explore the interior lives of his characters - their desires, fears, inner conflicts and motivations. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is a picaresque narrative that centres on Tristan, the titular character born with physical deformities. The complexities of his life in a society that is obsessed with physical perfection raise questions about the conventional notions of Acceptance and Rejection. This paper highlights the Acceptance-Rejection phenomena in Tristan's life and their implications.

Keywords: Peter Carey, Rohner, IPAR Theory, IPAR Subtheories, Acceptance-Rejection.



Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Peter Philip Carey, a remarkable Australian writer is known for creating complex and multi-dimensional characters that are often flawed, eccentric and deeply human with their unique perspectives and voices. Carey probes into their psyches, motivations and internal struggles through layered narratives thereby presenting them as fully realized individuals. His exploration of their psychological evolution adds depth and complexity. Further, he examines the tension between individual desires and social expectations, highlighting the psychological impact of navigating complex social structures. This psychological depth contributes to the richness and resonance of his narratives. Carey has won the Booker Prize twice. Winning the Booker Prize twice is the ultimate accolade that underscores the high regard and critical acclaim for Carey's writing and the enduring impact of his works in the literary realm. The key concern of this paper is to explore Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* by employing Rohner's IPAR Subtheories – Personality Subtheory, Coping Subtheory and Sociocultural

Article History: Received: 14 October 2023. Revised: 24 October 2023. Accepted: 24 October 2023. Published: 25 October 2023

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Citation: Parvathavardhini, B. 2023. Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection: Disclosing Rohner's Subtheories in Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. *Rupkatha Journal* 15:5. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v15n5.01>

System Subtheory. By disclosing and contextualizing these Subtheories, this paper gives a brief idea of the implications of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection in the protagonist's (Tristan's) life.

The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith excels in its richly imaginative and thought-provoking ideas. Or, as Carol Shields opines in her review (Shields web): "Irresistible...intimate and theatrical...supple and surprising...We're in the hands of a master storyteller." The story is situated within the context of two imaginary lands – Efica and Voorstand. The novel centres around the titular character Tristan Smith, who is born with physical deformities in a society that values physical perfection. Tristan, a crippled male baby of an unmarried actress grows up in the theatre premises. His mother, Felicity Smith, owns a radical theatre company in Efica named Feu Follet. Tristan's birth seems a baffling enigma since his paternal identity remains obscure throughout the novel. Three men claim paternal roles in his life. However, his presumptive father is Bill Millefleur, a handsome young actor. The other two significant paternal figures in the protagonist's life are Wally Paccione, production manager of Feu Follet and Vincent Theroux, the chief executive of Efica's largest pharmaceutical manufacturer. Tristan's life as a malformed child is despairing until he perceives various guises that theatre can bestow. Through the subtle realities, this picaresque tale promises to be a great arena for analyzing Tristan's psyche and gives readers an insight into how Parental Acceptance and Rejection act as determinants in shaping the human psyche.

Parental care is an indispensable aspect of nurturing and supporting a child's growth and well-being. The impact of parental figures in shaping characters and their development in literature is a fascinating research idea as parental attitude influences the development of fictional characters. Ronald P. Rohner's initial analysis exclusively focuses on Parental Acceptance-Rejection which has been reformulated and broadened to analyze all attributes of Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection. The reformulated supposition includes Acceptance-Rejection in other significant attachment figures and is not limited to parents, siblings, teachers and grandparents. The notion of interpersonal revolves around the dynamics and connections between individuals. It encompasses communication, relationships, empathy, conflict resolution and various social skills that enable individuals to interact and engage effectively with others. In Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, Tristan is encircled with several significant attachment figures. On analyzing his relationship with them, one can get a glimpse of the warmth dimensions of interpersonal acceptance and rejection. As Rohner insightfully remarks,

It is important to note that individuals are not either accepted or rejected in any categorical sense. Rather, everyone falls somewhere along the warmth dimension, experiencing varying degrees of acceptance and rejection in their relationships with significant others. (Rohner, 5).

Ronald P. Rohner's Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory, commonly addressed as IPARTheory, concentrates on the causes and consequences of interpersonal acceptance and rejection through three Subtheories. Firstly, the Personality Subtheory attempts to analyze the predispositions of personality - the effects of perceived interpersonal acceptance and rejection. The central aspect of this Subtheory is the emotional need that every individual possesses to get a favourable response from their significant others. A person with whom one has a deep-rooted emotional tie or relationship is considered as the significant other. It is predominantly parents for children and intimate partners for adults.

In Tristan's case, one can find several attachment figures including Wally and Bill. But chiefly he interacts with his mother Felicity and his nurse Jacques Lorraine, a young woman disguised as a charming man. As a child, Tristan gets support, care and comfort from Felicity. Despite his physical deformities, he is able to survive because of his mother's acceptance. Rohner remarks that "children's and adults' emotional need for positive response from significant other and attachment figures is a powerful and culturally invariant motivator" (Rohner, 9). Tristan's emotional need or yearning for maternal love has been fulfilled by Felicity. It is her positive response that motivates Tristan's psyche. Since Tristan's birth, Felicity has not let him down in any circumstances. She never makes him feel that he is crippled. Tristan's assertiveness is evident when he says, "I was, indeed, a curious-looking child – strong in the shoulders, withered and tangled in the legs. My hair was dense and blond, and the irises of my eyes – although no longer white as they had been when I was born – were now milky, marbled, striated with hair-line spokes of gold. They were my best feature, and were sometimes thought to be quite beautiful" (67). Hence, Tristan's actions are motivated through her positive responses which led him further to explore theatrical delights and incites him to become a performer.

While analyzing another aspect, for instance when the children's or adults' emotional need is not fulfilled, their response reflects anxiety and insecurity through their behaviour and emotion. In Rohner's words, "Individuals who feel rejected by significant others are likely to be anxious and insecure" (Rohner, 10). Tristan's idea of taking up acting as a career begins with Bill to which Felicity expresses her strong opposition. Here, Felicity's consent acts as Tristan's emotional need, therefore her disagreement in this matter discomforts Tristan. She does not disclose her dissent for long. Her initial hesitation is because "Naturally my maman worried continually about her deformed little boy's self-esteem" (67). Typically, rejected individuals feel emotionally unsafe and develop negative self-esteem. Felicity does not want Tristan to have such negative self-feelings as she remarks:

I want him to be strong and brave" (76). Tristan's worry turns down when his mom favours him. She gives her consent by helping him to put on the make-up and says, "Look in your mirror". (174)

Tristan's anxiety vanishes and he remarks, "I looked so wonderful, so unimaginable, so beautiful that it seemed presumptuous to say anything" (174). These specific emotional and behavioural manifestations reveal the effects of interpersonal acceptance and rejection.

Tristan's attachment figure during his adulthood is Jacques Lorraine, a young woman disguised as a man. Tristan considers her to be his intimate partner and eventually, her positive responses such as "He was amazing" (330) give him instant pleasure. As William James persuasively states, "the deepest principle of Human Nature is the CRAVING TO BE APPRECIATED" (James). Tristan yearns for love and this emotional need, whenever it gets fulfilled, feeds into his sense of joy and behaviour. Jacques cheers Tristan very often for instance when Tristan struggles to express his words clearly because of the Bruder Mouse Suit he is wearing, and she gets him Two-pin Vocal Patch that has been used by actors in the water circus. Wearing such a patch in his Adam's apple gives him a better and clear voice that everyone understands. Jacques persuades him to practice, "'Do some Shakespeare,' she said. 'Quick. Do that bit from *The Tempest* that you like.'" (375). He plays Caliban and recites a few words, "'I'll show thee the best springs; I'll pluck thee berries.'" (378). After such confession, he feels delighted and expresses his contentment through these words, "I felt her hands fondle my ears. I could smell the flower, the musty dust on its stamen. I saw her wet cheeks and was filled with joy" (378). By expressing

joy, he displays a surge of energy and enthusiasm which makes him feel more lively, motivated and engaged with his surroundings. Both positive and negative emotional dispositions become manifest as a result of interpersonal acceptance and rejection respectively. As Emma-Marie Smith comments in her article, "People with positive personalities focus on the good in life. They acknowledge negativity, but they know it is impermanent" (Smith, web). Tristan's experiences of acceptance from his significant others appease the rejection and ease him. Thus, he grows up reflecting his positive personality and remains motivated.

IPAR Theory's Coping Subtheory deals with the factors that influence individuals to withstand and emotionally cope with the experience of childhood rejection. A better understanding of the coping process is possible through a multivariate, person-in-context perspective. "Specifically, the multivariate model of behavior employed in IPAR Theory states that the behavior of the individual (e.g., coping with perceived rejection) is a function of the interaction between self, other and context" (Rohner, 18). Self characteristics include the mental representations and personality of the individual. Other characteristics include the significant other's severity, form and frequency of rejection. Context characteristics include the other significant people in the individual's life with social conditions. Being a crippled child, Tristan experiences rejection on all hands but perceived rejection is rarely obvious in his behaviour. The intensity and frequency of rejection in his life are destabilized by the love and care bestowed on him by his attachment figures which give him the mental strength to withstand and cope with the rejection. As Stephen Covey comments, "When it comes to developing character strength, inner security and unique personal and interpersonal talents and skills in a child, no institution can or ever will compare with, or effectively substitute for, the home's potential for positive influence" (Covey, web).

An observation based on this coping mechanism states that "the likelihood of children and adults being able to cope with perceived interpersonal rejection is enhanced by the presence of at least one warm, supportive, attachment figure in their life" (Rohner, 18). On scrutinizing Tristan's life, one can find several supportive figures. Few among them include Bill Millefleur, Wally Paccione, Jacques Lorraine and Roxanna Wonder Wilkinson. Their care and support instil in him a sense of security. One of the crucial aspects that help people cope efficiently is their determination. "Self-determined individuals believe they can exert at least a modicum of control over what happens to them through their own effort or personal attributes" (Rohner, 19). Tristan tries to get through the rejection he faces by trying hard with determination. He always intends to be a performer which by any chance is considered impossible by people around him. Being very inquisitive, he can never stop himself from dreaming about his career as a performer. He proves his stand by playing the role of The Hairy Man, a Voorstandish character that has its roots in the animistic culture of the native people of Voorstand. Playing the role of The Hairy Man is quite risky but Tristan does it to show his potential as an actor:

I breathed through my nose and managed to make my arms go backwards. I knew I wasn't going to die my famous death just yet. I began to experience the feeling of what I would later know when I did my first show in Saarlum – a feeling of intense well-being which was not contradicted, but rather amplified by the pulsing pain in my arms. I came down the tree, my arms feeling warm and sticky with blood, and shrugged myself free of my mother's eager embrace. (75-76)

While trying to cope with rejection he also finds his identity as a performer. An argument in IPAR Theory postulates, "Individuals with a sense of self-determination are believed in IPAR Theory to have an internal psychological resource for minimizing some of the most damaging

consequences of perceived rejection" (Rohner, 19). Tristan's belief in his ability to accomplish something he craves for and the persistence he possesses are his intrinsic motivations. His determination to become an actor despite his flaws shows his resilient nature.

IPAR Theory's Sociocultural Systems Subtheory provides scope for analyzing the causes and consequences of interpersonal acceptance and rejection within individuals and societies. Sociocultural Systems play an indispensable role by influencing interactions, development and human behaviour. Sociocultural Subtheory suggests, "personal characteristics of children such as their temperament and behavioral dispositions shape to a significant extent the form and quality of parents' behavior toward them" (Rohner, 21). This is true in the case of Tristan. Tristan's determination has its roots in Felicity and her words:

you are more intelligent than other actors, and you must learn to have an open mind, so any director can understand that you will not be difficult to work with, that you are interested in new approaches to the work. You must keep on learning about being brave. This is something you can't learn once. You have to learn it over and over. You must never be frightened to look how you look, and if you can do this, you will always look powerful. You will have to make yourself into something beyond anyone's capacity to imagine you. (174)

Her optimistic outlook towards Tristan certainly has an impact on his behaviour. There are other influences "in the context of the natural environment in which they live, the maintenance systems of their society, peers, and adults in the society" (Rohner, 21). The ambience around Tristan is entirely theatrical with towers, foyers, lights, ladders and prostheses. His peers are the fellow actors of Feu Follet. The idea of becoming an actor develops in him sooner than expected. Some days of his boyhood have been spent between the pages of *Life of Stanislavsky* and *Theatre Through the Ages*. He remarks, "I stayed on my mattress ostentatiously reading *Theatre Through the Ages*" (101). People around him like Bill, Roxanna, Wally and Jaques uphold Tristan in all his endeavours after his mother's death. It is through the interactions with people like them that he develops an attitude of feeling himself capable of becoming an actor.

Parental acceptance or, in a broader sense, Interpersonal acceptance acts as the driving force behind Tristan's determination. The love that is bestowed on Tristan by the attachment figures (Felicity and Wally) is acknowledged by Carey. As Carey opines in an interview,

Tristan's mother Felicity. She's this beautiful, driven, slightly neurotic woman who gives birth to this hideously monstrous child. And what she gives that child is incredible. She loves him. She's by no means perfect—she shouts and shrieks at him—but those muddy passionate outbursts don't feel bleak to me. Or there's Wally, the exprisoner and not very perfect con man. He also loves Tristan. (Polito & Carey, web)

Wally's acceptance of him fosters emotional intimacy, trust and satisfaction. It is apparent when Tristan mentions, "He understood my language without its being repeated" (82). Tristan senses the experience of being valued, respected, included and supported by others which involves feeling accepted, loved and acknowledged for who he is. Contributing to better mental health, Interpersonal acceptance plays a crucial role in fostering Tristan's positive self-esteem. The impact of Interpersonal Acceptance in his life exhibits positive social interactions and healthy relationships thereby supporting his well-being.

The chances of rejection vary depending on the specific context and situation. In the case of Tristan, being a crippled child imparts umpteen chances of getting rejected by his significant others. It is important to note that rejection is one of the aspects of life and everyone experiences it at some point. Tristan is not an exception but the intensity of rejection in his life gets conciliated by the immeasurable love bestowed by his mom and his significant others. The significance of parental care in shaping a child's personality is expressed in IPARTheory as,

Parents are thus uniquely important to children because children's security and other emotional and psychological states are dependent on the quality of relationship with their parent(s). It is for this reason that parental acceptance and rejection is postulated in IPARTheory to have unparalleled influence in shaping children's personality development and psychological adjustment over time. (Rohner, 9)

It implies the mirroring aspects of parental acceptance and rejection in a child's personality. Tristan's emotional well-being is a reflection of his mother's care towards him. An article posted by the Families for Life Movement, entitled "The Importance of Family Acceptance" presses home the idea that: "A sense of belonging is important in healthy human development as it helps us to combat behavioural and anxiety issues. A large part of a child's self-esteem comes from feeling that they have a place in the world where they belong to and matter to others" ("The Importance...", web). On examining Tristan's dispositions based on Rohner's IPAR Subtheories, it is evident that Parental care or Interpersonal Acceptance intensely influences his personality, behaviour and ultimately his life. His resilient disposition towards rejection establishes him as a better copier. His accomplishment as a performer shows him as an accepted individual in a society that is obsessing with the notion of physical perfection.

By contextualizing and analyzing Carey's Tristan on par with Rohner's Subtheories, the study provides valuable insights into the implications of Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection. In a deeper sense, recurrently pondering over rejection negatively influences an individual and undermines his ability to cope effectively. It also creates conflict, stress and strain in interpersonal connections. Acceptance provides a supportive foundation for confronting life's challenges and setbacks. Interpersonal Acceptance in Tristan's life works well as a shield to overcome rejection. In order to cope with and keep oneself away from such negative conceptions of society, one has to build an environment of acceptance and empathy that contribute to healthier and more fulfilling interpersonal connections.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding Disclosure

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency.

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