

THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG PARENTAL REPRESENTATIONS,
SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION AND DEPRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

The literature indicates that a strong, positive parental bond facilitates individuation (Bowlby, 1973), and that the success of the adolescent separation-individuation process impacts the health of the adult personality, particularly in relation to depression. Depression during adolescence has been associated with a failure of individuation (Blos, 1968), insecure attachments (Armsden et al., 1990), and negative parental representations (Blatt et al., 1979). This study investigated the relationship among psychological separation, depression, and parental representations.

More specifically, this study assessed the relationship between adolescents' responses to developmental challenges linked to the process of individuation and psychological separation, using the Pace Profile of Adolescent Depression and Individuation (PADI) and the Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI – Maternal). This study also evaluated the associations between parental representations and psychological separation, utilizing the Inventory of Parental Representations (IPR – Maternal & Paternal Subscales) and the Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI – Maternal). Since the literature generally supports attachment to the mother as playing a more important role, the relationship between maternal representations and separation was specifically addressed. In addition, since research suggests that separation-individuation assumes different developmental pathways for males and females (Chodorow, 1989; Gilligan, 1982), gender differences were explored.

A correlational analysis between the subscales of the PSI and PADI found that 14 out of 32 correlations hypothesized were significant, indicating that an empirical relationship exists between psychological separation and depression. A correlational analysis between the subscales of the PSI and the IPR found that 29 out of 56 correlations (21 out of 28 maternal subscales) were statistically significant, indicating an empirical relationship between psychological separation and parental representation. Upon further evaluations, it was determined that the set of PSI subscales was able to significantly predict 7 out of 8 of the PADI subscales, all 7 of the IPR-Maternal subscales, and 3 of the 7 IPR-Paternal subscales, indicating that how one scores on a test of psychological separation from one's mother can be used to predict how one will score on a scale assessing adolescents' reactions (i.e., depressive) to developmental challenges, on a scale assessing their maternal representations, and on a scale assessing paternal representations.

Gender effects showed that boys tended to score higher than girls on functional independence, emotional independence, and attitudinal independence; on positive identity and inflated self-worth; in their perception of mother as passive and avoidant, disappointed in them while at the same time demanding perfection; and as jealous, angry, competitive, and self-centered. Girls scored higher than boys in the extent to which they felt the need to care for and protect mother.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to Kaplan (1984), many social historians have regarded Jean-Jacques Rousseau and G. Stanley Hall as the first discoverers or “inventors” of adolescence. Rousseau and Hall saw a relationship between sexual puberty and morality. They and others suggested that adolescence is a second battle in which the highest moral attainments come to fruition. The very existence of adolescence, however, has been debated along with different notions of what it is. Some characterize it as an awkward stage, a rebellious time, or a passive and painful transition from childhood to adulthood, while still others view adolescence as an arbitrary social invention not worthy of mention.

The psychoanalytic study of adolescence began with Sigmund Freud's (1905) publication of *Three Essays on Sexuality*. Before this publication, the importance of adolescence was considered to be the beginning of sex life in the individual. With the discovery of an infantile sexuality, the status of adolescence was lessened to that of a period of the final transformations of diffuse infantile sexuality to genitally centered adult sexuality. Anna Freud (1958), depicting adolescence as a neglected stepchild in psychoanalytic thought, said that analysts have failed to recover:

the atmosphere in which the adolescent lives, his anxieties, the height of elation or depth of despair, the quickly rising enthusiasms, the utter hopelessness, the burning – or at other times sterile - intellectual and philosophical preoccupations, the yearning for freedom, the sense of loneliness, the feeling of oppression by the parents, the

impotent rages or active hates directed against the adult world, the erotic crushes – either homosexually or heterosexually directed – the suicidal fantasies, etc.; these are elusive mood swings, difficult to revive which, unlike the affective states of infancy and early childhood, seem disinclined to re-emerge and be relived in connection with the person of the analyst (p. 260).

Anna Freud (1958) went on to say that adolescence is an unsteady balance in normal growth, and that it would be abnormal for there not to be interruption or disharmony at this developmental juncture. It is a time of upsetting battles between id and ego, making it quite normal for adolescents to behave inconsistently and unpredictably, in ways that would be deemed abnormal at any other time of life. This is so because, during adolescence, the individual's ego is experimenting and does not abruptly close itself off to possibilities. During adolescence an adult personality structure is beginning to emerge and it takes a long time for this to occur.

Blos (1967) views adolescence as the second-individuation process. The first individuation process, accomplished by the end of the third year of life, refers to the attainment of emotional object constancy, the child's capacity to internalize a constant stable object even when she is being disappointing. Then, as in adolescent individuation, personality structure is said to be vulnerable. Whereas in infancy the struggle is a "hatching from the symbiotic membrane to become an individuated toddler" (Mahler, 1963), in adolescence it becomes "the shedding of family dependencies, the loosening of infantile object ties in order to become a member of society at large or, simply, of the adult world" (Blos, 1967, p. 163). In the first separation-individuation process, primary

whole objects are internalized and thereby constant; in adolescence, the parents are removed as sources of authority.

Kaplan (1984) proposes that adolescence is an emotional battleground between the past and the future. It is an active revision of infancy and childhood. One does not obliterate the past but immortalizes what was valuable and says farewell to what stands in the way of adult potential. The task at hand is object removal. Thus, one shifts incestuous desires away from parents. This irreversible process is a mourning process, a farewell to childhood, which entails considerable grief and longing. Adolescents begin to learn to let go of infantile ties to parents and to assume responsibility for themselves. However, adolescents dimly realize what is being lost during this mourning process - the passionate attachment to their parents that they enjoyed in childhood - as they begin the process of sublimating their infantile love into social ideals and cultural products. Successful individuation of adolescence enhances adult development; failure leads to depression and an array of untoward problems (Blos, 1968; Blatt et al. 1977; Armsden et al., 1990).

Even though the removal of parental authority is a major task of individuation, the quality of the adolescent's attachment to the parents is important to the outcome (Bowlby, 1973). This study investigates the inter-relationship among aspects of the adolescent's separation-individuation, the nature and quality of their parental representations, and depression. Since the literature generally supports attachment to the mother as playing a more important role, psychological separation from the mother was specifically addressed. In addition, since research suggests that separation-individuation assumes different developmental pathways for both males and females (Chodorow, 1989; Gilligan, 1982), gender differences were explored.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Attachment and Parental Representations

Bowlby's (1969) ethological-evolutionary attachment theory implies that an essential part of the ground plan of both human and nonhuman species is for an infant to become attached to a mother figure. To measure early attachment patterns, the Strange Situation has been used in one year olds (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall, 1978). Ainsworth (1979) describes infants as secure or anxious according to the pattern of behavior shown in the strange situation, especially in episodes of reunion after separation. Securely attached infants had mothers who were more responsive to their infant's signals (e.g., the feeding situation, close bodily contact, face-to-face interaction, infant's crying) than mothers of the two anxiously attached groups. This responsiveness enables infants to form expectations and moderate responses to events, internally and environmentally. These infants come to form an inner representation or "working model" of the mothers as responsive and generally accessible. In contrast, anxious infants do not know what to expect of the mother. They are insecure because their mothers have disregarded their signals or have responded to them much too late or inappropriately, giving them no reason to believe she is accessible or responsive (Ainsworth, 1979).

Attachment and exploration seem to support each other. The presence of an accessible and responsive attachment figure opens the infant up to stimulation that in turn activates exploration (Ainsworth, 1979). Whether or not attachment interferes with the

development of independence has been debated. According to Bowlby (1973), secure attachment facilitates rather than hampers healthy self-reliance. In free play situations infants display longer periods of interest in exploration and are more persistent and enthusiastic in problem-solving situations as well as more likely to elicit and accept help from mother (Ainsworth, 1973). "The implication is that the way in which the infant organizes his or her behavior toward the mother affects the way in which he or she organizes behavior toward other aspects of the environment, both animate and inanimate" (Ainsworth, 1979, p. 936).

According to Bowlby's (1973) concept of "internal working models," one derives core expectations about the environment, and especially concerning the availability and responsiveness of others and the potency and worthiness of the self, from early interactive experience. Thus, an infant who has experienced reliable, sensitive care (i.e., responsiveness to its signal, overtures, moods, and states) will come to expect not only that the caregiver is available but that he or she (the infant) is effective in eliciting care. Thus, the infant will be secure in the attachment relationship. Very different models of self, other, and relationships would derive from experiences of chronic rebuff or inconsistent, haphazard care. These internal working models provide guiding frameworks for further transactions with the environment, including the selection and interpretation of experience and the way one approaches others. A child that expects to be rebuffed by others may not seek them out when needy, may interpret benign behavior as hostile, and may strike out aggressively. Thus continuity in individual adaptation is not due so much to the presence of static traits in the child as to a transactional process guided by experience.

Investigators have also attempted to elucidate the role of children's representations (working models) of relationships and more research is needed in this area. Evidence supports the premise that children's representations of the parent-child relationship generalize to peers (Cassidy, Kirsh, Scolton & Parke, 1996; Rudolph, Hammen, & Burge, 1995). Cassidy and colleagues found that children who tended to see their parents as rejecting were more likely to ascribe hostile intentions to familiar and unfamiliar peers. Evidence gathered by Rudolph and colleagues (1995) also supports the contention that such representations mediate the quality of children's interactional and relationship competencies in the peer context.

Attachment, Representations, and Separation-Individuation

Separation-individuation is closely related to attachment at any developmental stage. Moving to a more autonomous state of being, whether in infancy, adolescence, or beyond, occurs in the context of the attachment to a primary caregiver. During adolescence, the individual turns to others to fulfill attachment needs, thereby reducing reliance on the family. If the primary attachment is too intense, however, separation will be impeded (Quadrio and Levy, 1988). Type of attachment has implications for psychological well-being. Kobak and Sceery (1988) found that securely attached individuals represented their parents as more loving and available during distressful events. They reported low levels of distress and high levels of support and were rated as more ego-resilient, less anxious, and less hostile by peers.

Research indicates that a strong parental bond seems to stimulate the process through which adolescents strive to become independent (Grovetant and Cooper, 1985, 1986). Parents provide necessary guidance and support to adolescents learning to stand

on their own (Greenberg, Seigel, and Leitch, 1983; Kenny, 1987; Ryan and Lynch, 1989). The parent-child relationship develops from unilateral authority to one of cooperative negotiation in adolescence. Ideally parents facilitate the well-being and performance of adolescents in terms of identity development, positive self-image, life satisfaction and social competence.

Separation-Individuation

Blos (1979) has suggested that the first separation-individuation experience posited by Mahler (1975) and the second separation-individuation experience of adolescence are both times in which personality structure is vulnerable. Successful progression through both seems to impact the health of the adult personality and social relationships (Blos, 1979), including self-esteem, quality of family relationships, success in peer relationships, and level of depression and anxiety (McClanahan and Holmbeck, 1992).

Mahler (1975) spoke of tension created by the universal lifelong yearning for oneness with the mother and the equally powerful desire for the longing for separateness. According to Mahler, the mother's unconscious attitude toward the child is a central force in the child's normal or pathological development because the child adapts to both the mother's conscious and unconscious. In the first phase of Mahler's stage theory, normal autism (0-2 months), the infant has no awareness of himself or others; he is aware only of bodily tension and in the gratification of those basic needs. In the next phase, symbiosis (2-5 months), there is a merger between the infant and caretaker – they feel as one. During this phase, mirroring occurs between the mother and the child. Healthy mothering occurs when the mother can detach from the child, but when she is inseparable