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PREVIEW

The Association between Adolescent
Ego Development and Self-Reported
Psychopathological Symptoms and Behaviors

by

Susan H. Ryf

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology in the
Department of Psychology at Pace University

NEW YORK

1996

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank those who helped and supported me through the process of conducting this project. Without their backing the journey would have been ever so more difficult.

First, I am indebted to all those individuals who spent valuable time administering and scoring measures that led to the database for this endeavor. A special thanks to Pam for her support through the scoring of WU-SCT protocols.

I very much appreciate the incredible response I received from my family and friends during this lengthy process. I particularly want to thank my mother and Priscilla for listening, my aunt Jane for pushing me along, and Justine for giving me hope. The patience, love, and support of my husband, Charlie, were a godsend during this time of newfound emotions. I thank him dearly.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to my consultant Beth Hart for her helpful comments and support during the course of this research. To John Stokes, my advisor, I give my heartfelt thanks for the countless hours of guidance, encouragement, and statistical expertise devoted to helping me through this project. And, finally, I wish to thank both of these people for providing me access to databases without which this investigation could not have been pursued.

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Abstract

The relationship between ego developmental level and psychopathological symptoms was investigated in a group of 320 male and female adolescents, ages 14-18, taken from a public suburban high school and a private psychiatric hospital. Level of ego development was measured by Loevinger's Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WU-SCT); Achenbach's Youth Self-Report (YSR) was used for identifying psychopathological symptoms.

Mean profiles of symptoms were obtained for six ego level groups. Profile analysis revealed no significant differences among these groups for either shape or dispersion. However, a MANOVA revealed that ego development does have an overall effect on levels of self-reported symptoms. Further analysis by ANOVA revealed ego level effects for both the Internalizing and Externalizing broad-band categories and the Total Problems scale as well as all the narrow-band categories except Withdrawn. Multiple comparison tests uncovered two patterns that accounted for most of the significant differences: 1) the Self-Protective I-Δ group reported more symptoms than did the Conformist I-

3 group on both broad-band scales as well as the Somatic Complaints, Attention Problems, Aggressive Behavior, and Total Problems scales; 2) the Impulsive I-2 group reported more symptoms than did the Conformist group on both the Externalizing and Delinquent Behavior scales. This same group also reported more Delinquent Behavior symptoms than either the I-3/4 Self-Aware group or the I-4 Conscientious group. This finding supports the results of earlier investigations addressing ego development and delinquency (Frank & Quinlan, 1976; Noam et al., 1984). Lastly, the Conscientious group was found to report more Thought Problems than the Impulsive group, the I-Δ/3 Self-Protective/Conformist group, and the Conformists.

It was emphasized that these results are likely to have more to do with the manner in which those at different ego levels report their own symptoms than with the reality of those symptoms. Suggestions for further research in this area include assessing psychopathology beyond self-report procedures and investigating the relationship between ego development and the various manifestations of specific types of psychopathology.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Adolescence is a time marked by physical and psychological changes that interact to create a backdrop for the transition to adulthood or maturity. G. Stanley Hall (1904) addressed this stage by using the phrase "storm and stress" to describe the day-to-day vacillations of mood experienced by the adolescent. Some of this chaos can be explained by the youngster's preoccupation with physical characteristics and emerging sexuality within the context of an increasing capacity for cognitive awareness amidst social and moral restrictions. Since the early 1900s, various theorists have offered their ideas to both uphold and explain the upheaval of this adolescent period (A. Freud, 1958; Blos, 1962).

Others, however, in seeking to clarify the nature of adolescence, have conducted extensive research that appears to refute the popular storm and stress notion of this period (Masterson, 1968; Offer, 1969; Offer & Offer, 1975). These overall findings suggest that the majority of young people maintain healthy relationships with peers and parents and experience a sense of social and moral responsibility.

Furthermore, they seem to lack the extensive rebelliousness that is often associated with the popular conception of adolescence (Weiner, 1970).

In order to explain such conflicting views of adolescence, some have suggested that the turmoil may be more internalized and, therefore, not as well-noticed. For example, while Offer and his colleagues rallied against the idea that adolescence is filled with psychological chaos to the point of appearing psychotic they did not deny that their subjects were often besieged by anxiety and depression. They were able to temper these findings, however, by saying that these adolescents were not experiencing or showing turmoil since they were quite able to recognize their feelings and deal with them effectively (Offer, 1969).

From this ongoing debate, one can extrapolate the notion that adolescents are experiencing the world in quite different ways; and their appearance to others is just as varied. Some have conjectured that the types and extent of difficulty experienced by anyone proceeding through the adolescent period may well depend on the individual's ego development—or one's perspective of himself and the world around him (Frank & Quinlan, 1976; Gold, 1980; Loevinger, 1976; Noam et al., 1984; Noam & Houlihan, 1990). Loevinger

characterizes this frame of reference, or world view, as an intangible master trait which is thought to reflect the nature of one's impulse control, interpersonal relations, moral perceptions, and cognition at a given time.

For maturing teens who are able to differentiate between self and others and are beginning to think in more abstract terms there is the possibility of a major shift in ego development. When this happens, these individuals are able to reframe their cognitive perspectives about the world to accommodate the new and increasing demands placed upon them. It is expected that over the course of their high school years young people will experience an increase in their level of ego development with the necessary regressions and progressions (Redmore & Loevinger, 1979; Josselson, 1980). When this does not occur, the individual may sense a lack of internal resources to cope with the world. As a result, psychopathological symptoms may arise or intensify thereby impairing the adolescent's ability to function in school and in social relationships.

Determining whether certain patterns and severity of self-reported symptoms among adolescents can be linked to particular levels of ego development is the primary focus of this study. At the conclusion of an earlier investigation of this topic, Noam et al. (1984) stated the need for further

research to help uncover the relationship between ego development and the more complex patterns of symptoms. They felt their work could be expanded by obtaining a larger sample that would provide a wider range of ego levels. They also believed that utilizing self-report measures could help unveil more information about those symptoms that tend to be internalized (e.g., anxiety) and not so obvious to others. The contents of this latter recommendation has been challenged over the years by those who believe that self-report measures actually confound what is really going on in the particular individual doing the recording (Gold, 1980; Loevinger, 1966; Shelder, Mayman, & Manis, 1993). However, some of this problem may be alleviated by understanding and addressing how teens at different ego levels are likely to experience and report themselves.

Overall, there is reason to believe that valuable information for the design of future empirical research will be gained if different adolescent psychopathology profiles can be established on the basis of a developmental component. For example, if certain adolescent groupings can be identified then such groupings can be compared in terms of the most efficacious treatments, mental health settings, and school placements. Knowledge gained from this study may benefit treatment planning programs as well. The popular

diagnostic systems, so often used in clinical settings, have not always been adequate in explaining the role of development in child and adolescent disorders (Achenbach, 1982; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978; Noam & Houlihan, 1990). Further information about this connection may aid mental health workers in making decisions about therapies, placements, and follow-up care. Too often such assignments are made according to age, behavior, and/or symptoms without any regard for development. This practice is especially problematic for adolescents who appear to vary greatly in both physical and psychological development even though they are of similar age. By considering all of these factors and discovering that certain groupings do, in fact, emerge will likely provide a new basis from which the developmental psychopathology literature can expand—especially as it pertains to the period of adolescence.

Review of the Literature

To investigate the association between ego development and adolescent psychopathology, one needs to understand how each of these terms will be utilized in the present study. A rather large body of literature is available for exploring the meaning of each of these concepts in terms of historical roots and evolution. Other information about each can be

gathered from the research that addresses the means of measuring and/or organizing each of these concepts within the context of formal investigations. Since few studies have actually concerned the specific association between ego development and adolescent psychopathology, the literature addressing each of these concepts on an individual basis becomes essential for extracting information that might link these two areas.

Ego Development

Various meanings of ego development will be presented in order to best understand how the term will be used here. Part of this explanation will entail a discussion of stage theories and how they have contributed to both the evolution of the ego development concept and the means by which it is measured. Finally, the literature pertaining to ego development as it occurs in the adolescent is particularly important to this study and will be discussed.

History of the Concept

The term ego development has presented some confusion given its various meanings over time. The evolution of ego development as a concept has been a complex dynamism involving the contributions of many, sometimes opposing,

theorists (Loevinger, 1976). With Darwin's discoveries in the 19th century, interest in the general area of development increased rapidly; and as early as 1908, John Dewey and James Tufts wrote about the development of the ego in Ethics—a widely used text in the undergraduate curriculum of that time. Freud probably never used the word ego and, instead, spoke of the I or the self—and its defenses—as arising for the purpose of containing the drives and meeting the demands of the superego (Loevinger, 1976). Anna Freud gave more importance to the ego by positing a hierarchy of defenses that can be both adaptive and pathological. Such ego defense mechanisms that could be explained in terms of psychoanalytical theory helped to create a link between psychoanalysis and developmental psychology (Noam, Kohlberg, & Snarey, 1983). Hauser (1976) emphasizes a distinction between the psychodynamic and cognitive-structural concepts of ego development. The former refers both to when the ego processes first appear in infancy as well as the development of numerous processes including cognition, defense mechanisms, and interpersonal skills. Of most importance here is the cognitive-structural viewpoint which addresses these processes but also takes into account both the ability of a person to integrate these processes and the individual's frame of reference. Under the guise of such

labels as character, cognitive development, and moral development several stage models evolved which became incorporated into the models of those theorists who most directly influenced Loevinger's formulation.

Stage Theory and Typologies: Their Contribution to Ego Development

Since the early 1900s the idea of stages and characterologies have often been a part of the various theories explaining the development of the human psyche—some of which are pertinent to our understanding of ego development. For explaining their respective concepts of moral development and psychosocial development, Piaget (1932) and Erikson (1950) utilized primarily developmental sequences that entail age-related phenomena. Their contribution to ego development, as presented here, will be discussed. Others such as Fromm (1941) and Graves (1966) have postulated certain typologies for explaining different personalities among a given age group—usually adults. However, such investigators have given little regard to the nature of the sequence that is important for understanding these differences. Instead, those that have proposed the identification of typologies with stages have been most important to the idea of ego development as it is presented

here (Sullivan, Grant, & Grant, 1957; Peck & Havighurst, 1960; Isaacs & Haggard, 1965; Loevinger, 1966, 1976). Such postulations of developmental characterologies imply that individual characters can be understood in terms of their relative developmental levels.

Erikson (1950) utilized the Freudian view of the ego emerging from libidinal drives and mediating between the id, the superego, and the environment to develop his psychosocial theory. To a large degree his stages are explained in terms of oral, anal, and phallic preoccupations and drives and their relationship to an interpersonal dimension. In essence, Erikson's scheme represents a functional model that implies a strong association between psychological stages and social milestones (e.g., adolescence, marriage). The crisis for each stage is connected to an age-related functional requirement that necessitates a new way of adapting. While each crisis has existed from the beginning it only becomes paramount, along with the potential for resolution, at a critical time in the life cycle. In contrast is Piaget's hierarchy for cognitive development that is representative of a structural model. Central to this model of development is the transformation of underlying cognitive organizations such that movement is toward equilibrium between the external environment of the

organism and the internal processes of assimilation and accommodation. Periods of stability are what constitute the "stages" (Noam, Kohlberg, & Snarey, 1983). Like Erikson, Piaget's model utilizes an invariant progression of stages; however, no age-specific requirement is implied. Furthermore, each subsequent stage of the Piagetian model represents a new and more complex structure based upon an integration of foregoing characteristics.

The concept that the resolution of each of Erikson's psychosocial stages makes way for a new form of ego synthesis has offered some contribution to the structural-developmental literature. Erikson's stages with their subsequent expansion of ego strength brings to light the cognitive, ego, and moral aspects that may account for or describe these levels. In this instance the infantile sexual drives and their interpersonal meanings become secondary to a model that depicts an abstract succession of what many may call self-esteem or ego identity. While these elements of Erikson's psychosocial theory may have contributed to some of the developmental stage theories to be discussed, a Piagetian-type hierarchical structural model involving a transformation at each stage has been just as readily used for explaining these and other similar concepts such as ego development (Loevinger, 1976), moral development (Piaget,

1932; Kohlberg, 1964), and relatability (Isaacs, 1956).

Loevinger made it clear that her concept of ego development was not the same as that posited by Freud or other psychoanalysts. Instead she described an abstract master trait around which the personality is organized. Integral to her description of this concept are a series of stages that depict the manner in which the individual experiences self and others. In devising her model with its hierarchical stages of ego development, Loevinger was most directly influenced by the work of Sullivan, Grant, and Grant (1957), Peck and Havighurst (1960), and Isaacs and Haggard (1965). All of these researchers have been devoted to formulating developmental sequences in relation to character typologies.

In their study of delinquent individuals, for example, Sullivan, Grant, and Grant (1957) described a "core personality" that represents an integration of the experienced and cognitive worlds of the individual. The development of this personality core was seen to be gradual and the result of growth spurts, new insights, and reorganization—especially in the areas of communication and social interaction. Thus, for each level of their seven-stage scheme for maturity development, Sullivan, Grant, and Grant defined a critical interpersonal problem. Only upon