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PREVIEW

A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF ADOLESCENT EGO DEVELOPMENT
AND PARENTAL REPRESENTATION

by

Lisa Bitondo-Federico

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

1995

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(Please type all information)

NAME: Lisa Bitondo-Federico

TITLE OF PROJECT: A Longitudinal Study of Adolescent
Ego Development and Parental Representation.

DOCTORAL PROJECT COMMITTEE:

PROJECT ADVISOR: Beth Hart, Ph.D
(Name)
Professor
(Title) (Affiliation)

PROJECT CONSULTANT: Alfred Ward, Ph.D
(Name)
Associate Professor
(Title) (Affiliation)

FINAL APPROVAL OF COMPLETED PROJECT:

I have read the final version of the doctoral project and certify that it meets the relevant requirements for the Psy.D. degree in School-Community Psychology.

Beth Hart
(Project Advisor's Signature)

1/20/95
(Date)

Alfred W. Ward
(Project Consultant's Signature)

1/20/95
(Date)

Acknowledgements

This process of completing my Doctorate and this project has been both a personal and professional exploration for me. I feel lucky to have had very dedicated and competent people see me through the process and completion of my training.

I want to especially thank my analyst, James H. Stoeri, Ph.D and my advisor, Beth R. Hart, Ph.D for their contributions to my personal and professional growth over the past five and a half years. Brief words alone cannot fully express the gratitude and appreciation I feel towards both of them.

I would like to thank my consultant Alfred Ward, Ph.D for having the patience to consistently meet with me over many hours of data analysis and for continually expressing optimism and a sense of humor. I would like to thank Steven Salbod, for helping me analyze the data as well.

I feel lucky to have really wonderful friends who have shared this process so closely with me. I especially thank my dear friends Joanne Calderone-Galley, Psy.D and Joseph Cohen, M.A who really saved the day when I felt most stuck finishing the discussion. Thank you for your helpful comments on the writing. And lastly, I want to thank my parents, Attilio and Ann Bitondo, and my husband, Paul Federico. Thanks for your support and belief in me.

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PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a time during which progressive and regressive shifts result in revisions and transformations of many aspects of psychic structure. The present study examined the relationship between two psychoanalytic developmental concepts, ego development and parental representation and shifts in these mental structures over time. The Washington University Sentence Completion test, also known as the Loevinger (SCT) (Loevinger, 1970), was used to assess level of ego development and the Inventory of Parental Representation (IPR) (Hart, 1993) was used to assess seven aspects of maternal and paternal representation.

While most studies have investigated adolescent adjustment in relation to family life, this investigator hoped to capture more internal phenomena-the growth of the ego and its relationship to internal working models of ones parents. Much literature points to the relationship between positive bonds to parents and adjustment in adolescence while a wide body of literature points to shifts away from such positive or idealized relationships to those which are harsh and critical. This study looked more in depth at parental representations. Longitudinal changes, that is regression, progression, and maintenance of ego level were examined in the context of the effects on maternal and paternal representation. This study examined parental representational

patterns particular to different levels of ego development as well as differences in representations between mothers and fathers. Parental differences were also explored and elaborated.

Classical and developmental literature were illustrated that provided a theoretical framework of object relations and ego functioning. Freud's (1923,1924,1925) emphasis on the importance of removing parental authority in adolescent psychosexual development has been underlined by Loewald (1980) who elaborated the primal importance of the relinquishment and "destruction" of the investment in early incestuous objects for new non-incestuous love objects in adolescence. Patterns of object removal may be expected to differ by sex-whereby females are required to give up the oedipal father; males the oedipal mother. However, prolonged preoedipal attachment to the mother is also problematic to both sexes. These are the kinds of complexities that were explored and related to development in adolescence.

Subjects were 147 adolescents who completed the SCT and IPA over a period of two years. Analyses of variance were used to investigate their developmental and representational changes as well as the interaction between them.

Results comparing subjects who, over two measurement times, one year apart, regressed, progressed or remained stable in ego stage yielded significant findings for four out

of five categories of comparison. Progression out of Preconformity seemed to enable adolescents to make better use of their parental objects, to be less negative and to be more attuned to parental needs for protection in comparison to those who were stable Preconformists. In examining Conformists who regressed versus stable Conformists, it was shown that regression is associated with less a perception of both maternal and paternal strength. Conformists who were able to progress became increasingly focused on maternal intrusiveness as compared to stable Conformists. In addition, Postconformists who regressed became increasingly concerned with maternal reparation needs compared to those who maintained the Postconformist position. Hypotheses examining parental differences also yielded significance. Mothers were generally seen as being better able to function as self objects, being in need of greater protection and more facilitating of individuation than were fathers. However, mothers were also perceived to have more negative qualities than fathers.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Statement of the problem

The longitudinal investigation of adolescent development conducted by Pace University (Hart 1988-1993) examines the impact of numerous variables on development over the years of adolescence. The purpose of the present study was to investigate shifts in object representation in relation to ego development over time and to clarify those representations that enabled advanced stages of ego development and those that impaired developmental progress. The perception of parental differences were also to be explored.

While the literature has indicated a need for further investigation of the effects of the actual behavior of parents on adolescent development (Powers et al. 1983), this author was interested in investigating internal representational changes as a way of deepening our present understanding of adolescent development. There has been contrasting literature about the effects that bonding to parents has on ego development. Anna Freud (1958) believes that while a strong fixation to the mother impairs developmental progress, a poor attachment results in a lack of inner coherence of the personality. It is essential for the adolescent to have a positive mental representation from which to detach and to provide an inner "emotional refueling"

experience (Mahler et. al, 1975). The literature suggests that parents who facilitate individuation as well as recognize needs for connectedness give to their children a distinct advantage in terms of progressive development (Blos, 1972, 1974).

Anthony (1969) illustrates how parents who feel emptiness and a psychic death as a result of the individuation process may enslave their children, preventing them from entering adolescence. In addition, children who are exposed to envious and hostile parents also suffer a loss in ego development. It is hoped that the adolescent does not feel she or he is leaving an empty, dying parent, but rather parents who can allow themselves to be displaced with the anticipation of a different relationship in the future, one characterized by a respectful awareness of two independent people.

Hypotheses examined changes in ego development over time with respect for varied and changing aspects of parental representation. Representational dimensions include parents who are perceived as I. Positively Attached/Self-Objects, II. Protected/Repaired, III. Intrusive/Possessive, IV. Narcissistic/Hostile, V. Facilitating Individuation, VI. Weak/Dependent, VII. Demanding/Disappointed. It was also hoped that using seven dimensions of parental representation would provide a fuller understanding of mothers' and fathers' separate and distinct influences on their adolescents.

In this study, ego development was the measure of psychological adjustment, although ego development is more than and not the same as adjustment. Prior research has shown that positive sex role identification, personality development, positive self concept (Lavoie, 1976), dating identity (Cooper & Grotevant, 1987), capacity for intimacy formation (Bray et al., 1988), realistic goal setting (Marcia, 1966) and adjustment to boarding at college for boys and girls (Sullivan, 1980); (Lasser & Snarey, 1989), are all significantly related to increased development. In addition is research indicating that greater degrees of maladjustment and depression occur at the lowest developmental stages (Gold, 1980). It is posited that greater understanding of perceived parental qualities corresponding to higher ego development will deepen understanding of how adolescents use their parents to grow, progress and reconsolidate at higher levels of development. Parental qualities that are most conducive to psychological development and maturity will be identified along with those qualities that correspond to developmental failure.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

The earliest phases of object representation

The concept of psychic representation is an important one as it is an essential element of what constitutes an object relationship. Furthermore, representational capacities are very much related to ego development. Sandler and Rosenblatt (1962) have provided a seminal paper describing the inner world of an individual that integrates drive and object relations theories. They state that "A self representation is an organization which represents the person as she/he has consciously and unconsciously perceived herself and which forms an integral part of the representational world." "The construction of the representational world is a product of ego functions and the self and object representations are part of the representational world." This world can be compared to a stage set within a theater, with the various objects represented by different characters and the child as hero at the center. The characters correspond to representations, while the form and expression at any one point by a character correspond to images, that make up representations.

These representations take different "shape" depending upon id, ego and superego demands. Distortion via defensive operations serve to enable the expression of wishes similar to the process of dreamwork described by Freud (1900). The ego and representational world are intricately related as the

ego constructs a representational world in relation to its own level of development. The ego is the active agent while the representational world is a set of indications which guides the ego to appropriate and adaptive defensive activity. The identifications that form are a result of modifications of self-representations resulting in changes in the ego, based on the child's use of imitation. Introjection is viewed differently from the process of imitation, because it assumes that the child behaves not like the actual parent, as in imitation, but according to an inner object representation that has likely been subject to extensive fantasy and distortion. Identification with the ideal representations and introjections are important for superego development and will play a large part in the shape of development of an ego-ideal and transformations within the superego in adolescence. It is evident that one's representational world is interrelated with ego development and yet only a component of what constitutes object relationships. It becomes important to then further explore varied object relational perspectives.

Freud favored the resolution of the triangular object relationships culminating in the oedipal complex in psychic development. He progressively credited the mother with a unique and special role in the child's psychic growth. Freud (1905) specified that the child's first love object is the mother's breast and that her task was to teach the infant how to love. In 1914, Freud characterized the first object

relationship as "anaclitic"; a love that depends upon being fed. This kind of holding is one of the most important functions of a mother in infancy, enabling the capacity for "signal anxiety." Later, Freud (1931/1938) fully recognized the significance of the mother/infant attachment, stating that it is "unique" and "without parallel" in the establishment of an unalterable pattern and prototype for all later love relations for a life time."

There is considerable debate today about the degree to which relationships are drive or object determined. There is agreement, however, that there is a progression from an undifferentiated/objectless stage, to progressive degrees of definition and individuation to a stage of true object relations (Ainsworth, 1969). In the first stage, the gratification of oral needs and the affective experience around that is most central, encompassing Mahler's et. al., (1975) symbiotic stage. Within the transitional phase, ego functions begin to develop and one can speak of a developing "body ego" with a rudimentary distinction between self and other. In this stage the infant is attempting to rely upon developing inner structures in an attempt to turn away from an exclusive preoccupation with inner tensions. In the stage of true object relations, the child can perceive mother as separate from the self and can preserve an inner image of her regardless of inner tensions from imposed frustrations. This state encompasses Anna Freud's conception of "object" constancy. She states: "When it's power of perception

permits the child to form a conception of the person through which agency it is fed, its love is transferred to the provider of food." Along these lines, Spitz (1959, 1965) says that "before this point we can hardly speak of love for there is no love until the loved one can be distinguished from all others." "There is no libidinal object as long as it remains interchangeable."

Hartmann (1946) emphasizes the link between ego functions and object relations and the gradual shift from the child's concern about loss of the object to loss of the love of the object. This progression allows the child to "neutralize instinctual energies" and relate to a separate individual/mother. It seems that ego psychologists see the development of object relations as intertwined with ego development, emphasizing the existence of an initial state of "primary narcissism", where the infant is solely concerned with need gratification (Ainsworth, 1969, Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Ego psychology is an outgrowth of Freud's (1923, 1961, 1927/1961) structural theory, emphasizing the development of the functioning and the functions of the ego. One part of the ego, according to Hartmann (1958) and Rappaport (1960), stresses the ego's autonomous functions as well as its integrative or organizational functions, what Freud (1923/1961) terms the "synthetic function."

Loevinger's (1979) model also emphasizes the ego's synthetic function, as she conceives of ego development as a process where there is a "striving to master and to integrate

a sense of experience." Stressing the ego's synthetic function of assimilation and integration into a stable, coherent organization, she views ego development as progressing within an invariant sequence of stages, each with its own internal coherence and equilibrium with increasing degrees of complexity.

With increasing emphases on relational issues in development, relatedness has come to be viewed as being primary rather than secondary to the development of ego functions and search for drive gratification. Object relations theory emphasizes that the primary motivation for relatedness is not drive determined or even drive related, but based exclusively on object need. There is an emphasis on the processes through which these experiences are incorporated and internalized through the process of self-object differentiation (Blatt, 1979), striving for the breast and not the milk (Klein, 1952), the infant's active need to cling (Balant, 1937, 1949) and the mother's function of "holding" as a "basic form of loving" and environmental provision" (Winnicott, 1948, 1953, 1960).

Winnicott (1962) addresses various aspects of the development of the infant as a person. The mother who is well attuned enables the infant to develop a healthy sense of "going on being." As the mother receives and interprets the infant's instincts and actions by providing words to gestures, she enables a transformation to occur; the presence of mere gurgles can be turned into a shared symbolic

communication. Through a sense of connectedness and a feeling of existence, a body ego, the first ego organization can emerge. Frustrations are inevitable, as the infant needs to cue and signal mother, that is to begin communicating. The "good enough mother", however, is relatively responsive and shields the infant from excessive impingements. In this way, the infant can recover from intense anxieties and make use of signal anxiety to cope with frustrations. If mother is grossly missatuned, then fragmentation and "unthinkable anxiety" necessitate the child's development of a "false self" defense. As a result, the use of "transitional experience" is limited and relationships will ultimately feel unsatisfying, with a sense of individual realness and connection deeply lacking.

The capacity to make use of transitional objects are the outcome enabled by a "good enough mother", where the child can take the chance to attempt to relate to objects outside of the self (Winnicott, 1951), partially relinquishing omnipotent control. The object, a blanket or teddy functions as a transition between purely internal and external reality, and serves as a bridge for the infant away from a state of primary narcissism. The "good enough mother" is one who actively adapts to the child's needs, providing an illusion for the child that wishes for the breast can lead to it's actual creation. The child thus gains a sense of omnipotence that will be an aid throughout development in life in an ability to feel connected to others, to play, imagine, be