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PREVIEW

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**A longitudinal investigation into progressive and regressive shifts
in ego development in male and female adolescents**

Klein, Eileen T. Rappaport, Psy.D.

Pace University, 1994

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Ann Arbor, MI 48106**

PREVIEW

**A Longitudinal Investigation into
Progressive and Regressive Shifts in Ego Development
in Male and Female Adolescents**

by

Eileen T. Klein

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology in the
Department of Psychology at Pace University
New York
1994**

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E.K.

PREVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored adolescent ego development by looking at changes in ego level longitudinally. Regressive and progressive ego shifts were examined by comparing differences in variability of item scores in order to determine if regressive shifts would be related to future ego growth. The sample consisted of 217 adolescents in the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades who attended a public high school in Westchester County, New York. The students were part of a larger longitudinal investigation of adolescent development conducted by Pace University. Level of ego development was measured by the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT) (Loevinger, Redmore & Wessler, 1970). Students in the sample included those who had taken the WUSCT for at least 3 years from 1990 through 1993.

To test whether ego regression was adaptive, 2 hypotheses were formulated. The first hypothesis predicted greater variability of item scores at the second time of testing for those students who had regressed to below the Conformist level of ego development than for those who had scored at a constant level. Results of analyses confirmed this hypothesis.

The second hypothesis predicted that for those students who had scored below the Conformist level at the second testing time, greater variability of item scores would predict future progressive ego growth at testing time 3. The second hypothesis was supported for those students who had progressed to the Self-Aware stage (at least to the Transitional level between Conformist and Conscientious) in terms of one of the three measures of dispersal used -- the standard deviation. However, there was no support

found when comparing the group of students who at testing time 3 had progressed beyond the Transitional level to the Conscientious stages of ego development. This can be attributed to the fact that the majority of individuals who will reach this level of ego development will not do so until the ages of at least 20 to 22. The findings were discussed in terms of contemporary psychoanalytic theory concerning the nature and meaning of ego regression in adolescence. Practical implications for being able to differentiate adolescents who are regressing adaptively from those whose ego regression is pathogenic were discussed.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

Jacobson (1961) states that it is a paradox that while adolescence is viewed as a time of most concern to parents it is a period least well comprehended by psychoanalysts. She describes adolescence as a "life between a saddening farewell to childhood and an anxious hopeful passing over to the still unknown country of adulthood" (p. 36). Adolescence is a period of rapid and elaborate change. There is a pull to be free of parental attachments and a fear of having to become independent as the only road to freedom to achieve a sense of identity. It is a period of life characterized by a second separation/individuation process, a time when there is a new self struggling to reconcile past and present to deal with the as yet unknown future.

Many authors propose that the turmoil of adolescence is a prerequisite to the necessary psychic restructuring which should accompany this age if stage appropriate tasks are to be mastered (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1959). Other authors question whether or not this is the case, and if so, for whom (Offer, 1969; Ostrov & Offer, 1981). Until Offer (1969) disproved the notion, it was felt the psychopathology expressing itself in adolescence could be attributed to developmental turmoil which "allegedly" naturally occurred (Masterson, 1968). Cantwell and Carlson (1979) state that while adolescence does in fact present with age-appropriate miseries, it is the course for severely disturbed teenagers to become psychiatrically ill adults. It is often difficult to differentiate this developmentally determined depression from adult depressive illness. It is equally difficult to differentiate adolescents displaying "disturbed" behavior which is a reflection of age-appropriate conflict from those who display the same behavior but who are psychiatrically ill.

The premise held by many theoreticians is that adolescence is a time when temporary ego regression may in fact reflect the age-appropriate process of and capacity for loosening of ties to previously held feelings and representations (Blos, 1968; A. Freud, 1958; Jacobson, 1961; Kaplan, 1984). Regression opens the way for new attachments as well as flexibility, breadth and depth of psychic structures (Blos, 1973). A primary task of adolescence is that of identity formation (Blos, 1973; Erikson, 1959). According to Blos (1973), identity formation is an outcome of psychic restructuring, the transformation of the self. Such a task is necessarily accomplished via regression, or regression in the service of the ego (Kris, 1952).

Research concerning the turmoil and regression that occurs at this stage becomes increasingly important in view of the escalating incidence of depression in this age group and which represents a crisis in today's society. Bemporad (1978) states that at least one third of the adolescent psychiatric population has depression as a primary or secondary diagnosis. Depression has serious implications as to suicide, which has increased 300% over the past 30 years. Suicide was noted as the fifth leading cause of death in the world in the age range of 15 to 19 year olds. It is important to research "masked depression" as well. Masked depression is a term used to describe behaviors believed to be an expression of, or defense against, underlying depression which are seen particularly during adolescence (Glasser, 1968).

Psychoanalytic understanding of depression has been accurately described in classical papers (Abraham, 1911; Freud, 1917). However, we need to look at depressive affect developmentally to help differentiate between this and depression as an illness. Spiegel (1961) states that depression should be evaluated in relation to what is normal for that particular stage of development.

Despite the description of adolescence as a time of turmoil, psychic restructuring and ego development, there is a dearth of empirical research, specifically longitudinal, which investigates this, as well as the possible meaning of ego shifts and their relation to future ego development in adulthood. Until the Pace study, there had been no longitudinal empirically based research to investigate theoretical assumptions about nature and meaning of ego regression at this time.

There is a need for systematic integration of developmental theory in research in general and in adolescence in particular. There is also a need for research which ties developmental theory to regression, stage and ego theory in order to better differentiate between developmentally and psychiatrically based depression in adolescence. It is unclear how far current existing longitudinal or cross-sectional research on adolescent developmental issues such as ego, affect, cognitive development can be generalized since previous studies are based on research with usually no more than two data points, usually with male samples and with confounding cohort effects (Gfeller, 1986a). While authors have noted that depression as well as ego regression are marks of potential growth, these have not been empirically addressed on a longitudinal basis (Loevinger & Redmore; Redmore & Loevinger, 1979). The purpose of this paper is to help clarify empirically the nature of ego shifts while helping to establish a link between empirical and theoretical suppositions as to ego development during adolescence.

Outline of Review of the Literature Section

The review of the literature is divided into five general areas. The first section reviews literature covering the concepts of adolescence as a difficult but necessary stage where the adolescent suffers significant losses in attempts to establish an adult identity. The second general section presents literature which addresses concepts of ego regression in general and ego

regression during adolescence specifically. What follows next is a discussion of various theories addressing major aspects of adolescent ego development. An understanding of such aspects as psychic restructuring, ego ideal, ego identity are necessary to understand adolescent ego regression, and provide background for understanding the next area covered, the area of ego development. Loevinger's (1976) ego developmental model and her method of measuring ego level provided the basic definition of ego development and a means by which to integrate research with theories of adolescent ego development utilized in this study. The next area discussed in the literature review section concerns developmental aspects of depression as these are related to adolescent ego regression, self-representation and narcissism. Depression is presented here as a developmental achievement. The final section addresses the need for research in the area of adolescent development and provides an understanding for the design, instrument and hypotheses of this study.

Review of the Literature

Adolescence.

Kaplan (1984) points out that in studying adolescents we are studying the process of change. It is the most challenging and critical time of human development, a time when social pressures cause confusion, excitement and fear. In post-industrial society the adolescent transition period is more prolonged for more individuals who comprise a greater segment of society than in any other period. In view of the recognition of a widening chasm between childhood and adulthood, it has become increasingly important to study this developmental stage. Adolescence is both a process and an achievement, a reinstatement of infantile positions where regression is an integral part of the disengagement process and which becomes possible at this time due to increased cognitive

capacity (Blos, 1968; Piaget, 1969).

Adolescence and Identity Formation as Psychic Achievement.

The most significant psychic achievement of adolescence is identity formation (Erikson, 1959). Character synthesis incorporates changes in conception and representations of self and parents. Gittleson (1948) states that what appears as character in childhood is merely patterned ego attitudes stabilized by identifications. According to Blos (1968), Kaplan (1984) and Jacobson (1961, 1965), adolescence is not merely a recapitulation of the psychic past but a time devoted to active revisions of childhood. During the adolescent period there is a "clash between progressive and regressive forces" (Deutch, 1967). Detachment from parental authority is regarded as one of the most significant but also one of the most painful psychic achievements (A. Freud, 1958, Greenson, 1968; Laufer, 66). According to Blos (1962), along with ego development there is an increased ability to see others and self in a more differentiated way during adolescence. There is increased cognitive capacity with a new found ability to think about thinking, to think about oneself and one's place in the world and one's future (Erikson, 1959, 1964; Piaget, 1972).

Adolescence -- Loss and Depression.

During this period the adolescent suffers many losses. These losses relate to naivete, dependency, playfulness, freedom from responsibilities, loss of idealized omnipotence, and loss of the parents of childhood. New ways to relate and new ways of integrating changing representations must be found. There is fear of losing the object and insecure attachments come to the fore. Heightened disillusionment of parental omnipotence and subsequent devaluation of parental objects can result in depression (Jacobson, 1964). Freud (1917) called attention to the

significant role of mourning in the struggle of the adolescent who must disengage from parents and set out on a search for new objects. Adolescence involves giving up past wished for idealized states and the acquiring of new phase specific reality adapted ideals. In Mourning and Melancholia (1917), Freud explains that the painful work of reality testing shows that the loved object no longer exists. This awareness requires all libido to be withdrawn from the object. Significant opposition is aroused. Idealization of the self is a typical aspect of adolescence. This idealization displays its narcissistic origin as well as its function as a regulator of self-esteem while the adolescent deals with losses. Ideally, omnipotence is ultimately tamed and made realistic in adolescence (Blos, 1973; Laufer, 1964; Ritvo, 1971).

Adolescence -- Turmoil or Not.

~~Jay~~ Stanley Hall's 1904 treatise on adolescence set forth a belief in the "sturm and drang" of the period of adolescence. However, there has been increasing research to the contrary (Ostrov & Offer, 1981). For example, while there is still the popular belief that adolescence is a time of conflict, some present a picture of transversing this time with little problem, as opposed to others who are seen as suffering visibly whether through anxiety, depression or self-centered rebellion (Offer, 1969). Ostrov and Offer (1981) find no disruption in adolescence for all. Offer (1969) states that while adolescence does in fact present with age-appropriate miseries, it is the course for severely disturbed teenagers to become psychiatrically ill adults. These authors suggest that while adolescence is realized to be a period of intensive qualitative and quantitative change, the assumption of turmoil at this time has not been researched empirically. The majority of research of the past 20 years refutes the notion that most adolescents undergo severe emotional stress during this time (Ostrov & Offer, 1981).

In summarizing the commonalties of adolescent depression, Sandler and Joffe (1965) state that they are more sensitive to loss because they are undergoing the process of loss. The adolescent's feeling of emptiness reflects an unperfected transition period between the decathexis and recathexis of objects. Erikson (1959) saw adolescence and the resultant turmoil as a normative crisis. The increased crisis, according to Blos (1973), is characterized by restructuring of the ego with increased ego strength as an outcome. What appears as neurosis is an aggravated crisis which is complimentary to the process of adult identity formation (Erikson, 1959). It is often difficult to differentiate this developmentally determined depression from adult depressive illness. Freud describes adolescence as an interruption of a previous state of equilibrium. Upholding a state of equilibrium at this time may in itself be abnormal (Erikson, 1959; A. Freud, 1958; Kaplan, 1984).

A major premise of this study is that the psychopathology of depression could be, at least in part, attributed to normal developmental turmoil, and can be viewed as age-appropriate and even desired to some degree, for teens at this time.

Ego Regression in Adolescence.

If, as some authors suggest, adolescence is a stage when turmoil signifies disturbances in equilibrium, this turmoil could be evidenced in temporary ego regressions. This study seeks to show that these ego regressions can be understood, at least in part, as evidence of the adolescent developmental process. In other words, ego regressions may signify the adaptive processes of psychic reorganization, modification and consolidation necessary for the formation of the adult identity.

According to Blos (1968), adolescent development progresses via the detour of regression.

Jacobson (1961) states that over long periods the adolescent's philosophy of life may vacillate between opposite trends depending on the predominant influence of either superego or id on thinking. A lowering of ego strength, along with increased aggressive and sexual impulsivity, occurs at this time. Intensified instinctual aims come to the fore during this period (Blos, 1973; Loewald, 1971). Blos stresses that adolescence is the only period in life where regression constitutes an obligatory component of normal development; regression operates in the service of development as needed for consolidations. In The Epigenesis of Adult Neurosis (1972), Blos states that adolescent regression facilitates the overhaul of faulty development from earlier stages. This regression brings about the settlement of early residues which have survived and which would otherwise become part of the formation of the post-adolescent personality. He refers to this process as consolidation:

The task of psychic restructuring by regression represents the most formidable psychic work of adolescence. Only through regression of drive and ego can fixations be modified by bringing to bear on them the ego's extended resources that draw support from developmental momentum of growth and maturation. (p. 113)

Geleerd (1961) suggested that a partial regression to an undifferentiated phase of object relationship occurs during adolescence. She suggested that the growing adolescent passes through many regressions.

During these stages all three structures, id ego and superego, participate. The superego undergoes considerable reorganization during adolescence (A. Freud, 1958). The superego is peculiarly prone to regression in the direction of re-externalization (Loewald, 1971). The modification of the superego in late adolescence has elements of separation, union and reunion.

These are all characteristic of the process of separation and individuation (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1966). During regressive episodes there are occasional psychotic periods where reality testing becomes impaired (Blos, 1962). Adolescence takes place within the context of physical and genital dominance. Thus, the ego is faced with stresses which are qualitatively and quantitatively different from earlier ones.

Anna Freud (1958) saw the adolescent period as one where a capacity for consistent and stable object relations is absent. Regression to an undifferentiated phase of object relationship is an essential factor in ego development. This trend might be overlooked in dealing with pathology. Hartmann (1939) laid the foundation for developmental considerations in the formulation of regressive adaptations. He proposed that regression could be understood as an adaptive modality which plays a role throughout all life in all types of situations.

According to Geleerd (1961), partial ego regression may be essential for later health and maturation. Where it occurs only partially, development of the personality remains blocked. In Erikson's (1959) terms, in adolescence, regressors are living in a state of psychosocial moratorium wherein new and non-conforming patterns of behavior are thought and tried. As Gilligan (1982) points out, extreme doubt which characterized only a minority previously, appeared earlier and more pervasively in the 1960's. One has only to observe behavior of adolescents today, within the context of our society with its increased pressures and lessening of traditional roles and models, to understand how doubt would be more pronounced, extended and pervasive today.

Kris' (1952) developmental hypothesis assumes a psychic apparatus capable of progressive and regressive responses to both internal and external challenge and change. This apparatus may be considered an essential part of the learning and creative process and may be seen as the necessary

part for genuine insight during psychoanalysis. This apparatus may also be an essential factor in allowing for growth within the context of today's seemingly unpredictably changing society.

Healthy and Pathological Regression.

Regression, has both healthy and pathological attributes (Zetzel, 1965). Regression can be of two types according to Alexander (1956). The first type is regression from a conflictual stage to formerly successful adaptive pattern. In this case, points of fixation have retained some cathexis. Since adaptation of ego is never complete, there is a reciprocal relationship between fixation and regression. The greater the cathexis to a point of fixation more likely will there be regression to this when conflict arises. Regression serves the gratification of needs, according to old patterns, that have remained unsatisfied in a new conflict which the ego has not yet mastered. The second type of regression is to an unresolved traumatic conflict. The example Alexander (1956) offers here is that of the traumatic dream. In regression to a traumatic situation, there is an attempt at mastery of an, as yet, unmastered conflict. Both types of regression have implications for the adolescent stage of development.

Blos (1962) makes the distinction between the pathognomic and normal nature of ego regression as in the alternative as to whether ego regression to the undifferentiated is approximated or consummated. According to Piaget (1932), when a schematic system is appropriately challenged and cannot be assimilated into new experiences, disequilibrium occurs. A change in structure is required in order to accommodate the experience and once again find equilibrium. Disequilibrium refers to a sense of imbalance which occurs while these structures are changing, when existing ways of thinking about things no longer fit present conceptions. This concept defines aspects of the adolescent process and offers a rationale for regression at this time.