

Gender Differences in the High School Years:
The Relationship between Ego Development, Individuation, Parental Representations
Psychosocial Development and Depression

By

Kelly Adams, M.S. Ed.

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

2003

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Beth Hart, my advisor on this project. Not only has Dr. Hart offered her continuous support and shared her wisdom and knowledge throughout my years at Pace University, but she has been a valuable role model in shaping my clinical work and perspectives on the field of psychology. Her warmth and regard for students is unflagging, and I am very honored to know Dr. Hart.

Many thanks and great regard also go to Dr. Florence Denmark, my consultant on this project. Dr. Denmark has been a steady source of love and support and I am deeply grateful for her work on this project and for all she has taught me over the years, especially when I had the honor of working as her assistant.

I am indebted to Steve Salbod for his patience and understanding, as well as his sound expertise and dedication in working out the statistical design of this project. My appreciation also to the wonderful administrative staff at Pace, with special thanks to Aqueda Portalatin for her humor, patience and support.

Finally, my daughter, Abigail, and my husband, Lee, deserve trophies for their support, love, and understanding throughout the years at Pace and especially during the writing of this dissertation. To all of you, I offer my love and my gratitude.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated differences and similarities in the development of boys and girls during the critical high school years as a function of adolescents' developmental orientation. Ego development, individuation, parental representations, psychosocial development and depressive symptoms were compared, using two new measures, the PADI and the IPR, which were developed under the auspices of Pace University.

It was expected that different patterns of progress and regression would emerge, with girls revealing a more complex pattern of development than boys, who were expected to show a more linear pattern. It was anticipated that females would score higher on depression, which is consistent with most research and which was supported in this study. Females were expected to report forms of depression related directly to the separation/individuation process; whereas males were expected to report greater symptoms of masked depression, such as grandiosity and stimulation-seeking/risk taking; these hypotheses were supported. It was further anticipated that ego development level would predict greater facilitation of individuation by parents, and that those at the lowest Pre-Conformist level would have the most problematic perceptions of their parents. These hypotheses were supported, as was the hypothesis that ego level would distinguish Erikson's psychosocial stages of development, with higher levels in ego development corresponding to greater resolution of Erikson's psychosocial stages.

Unsupported was the hypothesis that males would be higher than females on

the Industry subscale of the Eriksonian measure, the EPSI. The reverse was true, which was largely due to the heightened Industry of Conformist females. Results indicated that psychological conformity operated differently for the sexes.

Lending some support to the idea that female development may be more complex than male development, findings indicated that females were simultaneously working toward resolution of Identity and Intimacy issues, while males were primarily concerned with development of Identity. However, the more linear pattern for males, as hypothesized, was not supported. Different patterns of progression and regression emerged for males and females.

Unanticipated was the finding that males' perceptions of their fathers and mothers would be more problematic than females' perceptions of either mothers or fathers. Interventions and applications with regard to school and clinical psychology are discussed with regard to gender.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical life stage at which important decisions are made by young people who are experiencing varying types and degrees of turmoil, and who are equipped with resources that differ in their strength and effectiveness. A significant source of adolescent turmoil is the separation-individuation process. It requires the adolescent to remove the parents' authority in order to consolidate a personal identity and assume moral responsibility for one's own life. It entails a dramatic shift in adolescents' relationships to their parents and a significant sense of loss, if childhood dependencies and ways of loving (and hating) are to be replaced by those of greater differentiation and equality.

Anna Freud (1958) said that the loss of childhood and childhood ties to parents sets in motion an extended period of mourning, a process her father spoke of as essential to accepting the loss of a person, an ideal, or any life stage. Some adolescents have the internal resources to mourn and accept that something is being lost that they will never know again. Other adolescents may lack both the capacity to mourn and the parental support to separate with the result of a prolonged or lasting inability to resolve this important life stage by establishing a solid cohesive identity.

Among adolescent males, acting out, grandiosity, self-destructive behavior (Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, Seeley & Andrews, 1993), isolation from peers (Larson, Raffaelli, Richards, Ham, & Jewell, 1990) and an adoption of a negative identity are common. Adolescent females have been found to be more vulnerable to separation disorders (Hart, unpublished; Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993) and depression (Allgood-

Merton, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990). While phases of psychopathology are an expected part of adolescent turmoil, prolonged acting out or depression may denote more permanent character traits. Depression may be thought of as a character trait, a symptom, or an important developmental capacity. How male and female adolescents experience and express negative affect, including depression, is a relatively new inquiry in the psychological literature.

OVERVIEW: History

Since the time of Freud, the ways in which adolescent males and females navigate this powerful stage of transition has been the subject of lively controversy, beginning with Freud's discrimination of male and female developmental processes based upon his postulated "penis envy." According to his theory, girls, upon early recognition of missing that organ of the body, become envious, subsequently blame their mothers, and thus is initiated the Oedipal phase of female development, wherein the young girl transfers her affections to her father.

Freud described the young boy's reaction to the girl's missing penis as "...horror at the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her" (Freud, 1925, p. 675). The boy is therefore reacting to his own fear of castration. Freud believed that the foundation of the superego evolves through resolution of the Oedipal conflict, which is based upon castration anxiety. Because girls do not experience castration anxiety, they are unable to form as competent a superego (Freud, 1925). "Their superego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men" (Freud, 1925, p. 677). Freud's later speculations, however, are less emphatic with regard to gender differences (See Blos, 1980).

Since Freud's time, many theorists have questioned, challenged and enriched his views. Karen Horney was the first to dispute the concept of penis envy, declaring that men rely on infantile fantasies to compensate for envy over the reproductive capacities of women, as well as a lingering need for the mother's breast (Horney, 1944, as cited in Turkel, 2000). Feminist writers such as Nancy Chodorow (1978), Carol Gilligan (1982), and Jean Baker Miller (1976) gave strong voice in disputing Freud's ideas and enhancing our understanding of female development as not only different from male development, but as neither deficient nor inferior, as Freud implied (Turkel, 2000, Baker, 1976).

Carol Gilligan challenged the idea of males' superior moral development by alerting us to the primacy of relationships in the lives of women and by dignifying women's ethic of caring as being the "formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach" (Gilligan, 1993, p. 73).

Jean Baker Miller was one of the first to suggest that for both sexes, both autonomy and relatedness are necessary components of development (1976, Baker). Importantly, Miller revised the common definition of dependency, which was usually applied pejoratively to women:

In recognizing the empowering value of relationships for women, dependency is viewed as positive movement along the path of healthy growth and development (Turkel, 2000, p. 234).

Miller removes the stigma of dependency by casting light upon the overvaluing of independence to the neglect of relationships. More recently, writers have suggested that the closeness between mothers and daughters should not be construed as "pathological dependency," but rather as an intimacy between two

women from different generations (Guezaine, Debry & Vinciens, 2000).

Nancy Chodorow, in articulating differences between male and female development, believed males to have the more difficult path, and females to have the more gradual path of development. She emphasized the importance of relationship and connection as critical to female development, while boys adopt strategies of distance and boundaries. For boys to develop they must reject the primary object, the mother, so as to form a masculine identity. To do this, they must repress and deny their dependent attachment to their mothers, resulting in the male need to establish boundaries, and separateness. This process of male disengagement is accomplished with the resolution of the Oedipal conflict around the age of 4 or 5.

The premature emphasis on male separation has been the subject of research which was stimulated by both the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the feminist revolution of the 1970s. A major shift in the way in which gender role socialization had been conceptualized occurred (Levant, 1996). The old nativist ideas were replaced by the new constructionist perspectives. From the nativist approach, a prescribed inner psychological need for gender identity is presumed. Inherent in this idea is the notion of “a clear masculine [or feminine] essence that is historically invariant” (Levant, 1996, p. 260). The newer concept is that gender roles are socially prescribed, relationally dictated, and subject to change over time. This line of thought has led to substantial questioning of accepted dictums, and has broadened the research, especially regarding the traditional masculine role in Western society, and its implications for male development and psychopathology.

For example, Pollack (1992, 1995) was among the first to propose that the message imported to males to separate early from mothers leads to “traumatic

abrogation of the holding environment” which can place in jeopardy subsequent relationships (p. 41). The male’s early separation from his mother entails becoming something ‘other’ than the mother, something different enough to lead boys to repel feminine qualities and deny their dependency with a ferocity and urgency that may leave them feeling bereft, isolated and prone to acting out behavior.

The female’s separation from the mother need not, in her mind, be so traumatic or absolute because she is a female and can safely retain female qualities. However, the complexity for the girl in identifying with her mother, separating from her, and changing the gender of her primary love object is indeed challenging and may lead to regressive episodes. Blos (1980), Dahl (1995), Josselson (1980) and others have suggested that female adolescent development is more uneven because of this increased complexity.

Doris Bernstein (1993) describes the paradox entailed in female development as follows:

The sense of oneness with mother must be maintained for female gender identity to flower into an individuated feminine self; the sense of oneness must be disrupted for the girl to develop an individuated femininity or womanhood (p. 128).

Thus, the literature reflects an effort to define differences between male and female development and individuation as broadly related to issues of a balance between separation/connection and autonomy/relatedness experienced uniquely by the two sexes.

The present investigation explores gender differences and similarities between male and female high school students on critical developmental variables of

individuation, psychosocial maturity, perceptions of parents, and depression, as seen through the lens of ego development. Ego development has been found to be a reliable marker of psychological maturation. It encompasses capacities for cognitive complexity, self-other differentiation, self-awareness, relatedness, moral responsibility, as well as one's defense mechanism structure. Ego level will, to a great extent, indicate the strength of internal resources and the nature of adolescents' emotional/personality deficiencies.

Various theoretical perspectives as related to the aforementioned aspects of adolescent development will be reviewed. The Psychodynamic initiatives of Peter Blos's theory of Individuation will be succeeded by a review of the theoretical perspectives of Eric Erikson (Psychosocial development) and Jane Loevinger (Ego development). The general theory of Object Relations will be discussed as related to Parental Representations, to be followed by theories of Depression put forth by Sigmund Freud, Sandler and Joffe, and Elizabeth Zetzel. Each theoretical position will be followed by a review of past and current empirical research relevant to theory and gender differences.

CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW

Individuation: Psychodynamic Theory

Peter Blos (1962) was the first to term adolescence the “second individuation.” The term ‘individuation’ was borrowed from Margaret Mahler (1968) who describes the infant’s emergence from the symbiotic relationship with the mother to discover the self as distinct from mother, while internalizing a positive representation of her. In Blos’ theory, adolescents have a second opportunity to individuate, over time, by removing their parents’ authority over them. Blos conceives of individuation as both a process and an accomplishment in adolescent development (Blos, 1967).

Individuation implies that the growing person takes increasing responsibility for what he does and what he is, rather than depositing this responsibility on the shoulders of those under whose influence and tutelage he has grown up (Blos, 1967, p. 128).

As adolescents strive to assume responsibility for themselves, they experience regressive pulls to more primitive, less differentiated modes of being. Blos suggests that the capacity to “tolerate and master such regressive episodes is a central feature of normal adolescent development” (Esman, 1980, p. 322). Before Blos, Hartman (1958) described adaptive regression as “withdrawal from reality the better to master it” (p. 18).

Contrary to much interpretation in the literature, Blos did not view the second individuation process in terms of cutting off ties with parents; rather he proposed a reworking of those ties intrapsychically (Guezaine et al., 2000; Boles, 1999). This process becomes essential during adolescence because the earlier parental internalized objects which promoted autonomy in childhood no longer serve progressive development in adolescence (Josselson, 1980). What is required in adolescence is a “sharpened sense of one’s self as distinct from others...and a feeling of self hood and will. “ (Josselson, 1980, p. 191).

In psychodynamic theory, the family of the adolescent takes on a keener importance because of the regressive trend. These regressive forces are thought to drive the adolescent perilously closer to the family, “so much so that the adolescent’s psychological life is given over to oscillation between closeness and flight” (Adelson and Doehrman, 1980, p. 105).

The ambivalence of the adolescent’s striving for autonomy is described by Josselson (1980):

The most common complaint of the middle adolescent is, “My parents don’t understand me,” a cry that condenses both the wish for distinctness and the wish for approval” (p. 195).

Like the toddler who has just discovered his separate self and has moved toward a new level of independence, but then, recognizing his psychological and physical separateness, runs back to his mother for confirmation and support, so the adolescent is vacillating between the need for greater autonomy and the need for sustenance.

Each gain in ego separateness is followed by efforts to reassure himself that the parents are still there, approving and loving. And with each gain in ego autonomy, the adolescent becomes less reliant on the parental ego for the very approval he seeks (Josselson, 1980, p. 195).

Like Freud, Blos concludes that because the adolescent girl must change the gender of the primary love and hate object, the maternal figure, this shift creates an added complexity in female development which males do not share.

Blos (1979) discusses female adolescent development in terms of the struggle to handle conflicted internal representations of the dichotomous good/bad mother revived during regression. He notes that incest - a more common occurrence in female than in male experience - represents for the female "a defense against maternal merger" (p. 492); whereas incest and its consequential merger for males represents the ego's fall into an undifferentiated infantile state causing psychosis (Blos, 1979).

In his later writings, Blos (1980) expanded upon his ideas of female adolescent development. From his clinical practice, Blos noticed that adolescent girls, but not boys, invariably regressed to pre-oedipal ties to the maternal object, and he noted the ambivalence with which they struggled in the integration of the "good" and "bad" mother. Blos (1979) wrote:

In every successful analysis of an adolescent girl we observe that the ambivalence toward the early mother, as perceived and acted on in the present, has markedly declined (p. 17).

Compared to boys, the adolescent girl can tolerate a "greater fluidity between infantile attachments" (p. 16) to her parents and her mature personality consolidation.

Behind the emotional closeness to and partial identification with the father looms lastingly and dreamlike the realm of the pre-oedipal mother and the yearning to regain it (Blos, 1980, p. 17).

Blos hastens to add that this resolution between mother and daughter by no means implies a totally conflict-free relationship; rather the liberation from intrapsychic pre-oedipal fixations through regression during adolescence is the means by which the girl achieves a sense of self “free to seek fulfillment of her own choosing in the realm of her own body and mind “ (Blos, 1980, p. 17).

A central concept of Blos’s theory concerns the deidealization of parents, which accompanies the process of individuation. The term ‘deidealization’ refers to the adolescent’s attempt to forgo the omnipotent parental image of childhood in favor of a more realistic view, resulting in a more realistic self-appraisal. Furthermore, this process can only be accomplished if the ego of the latency-aged child is adequately developed (Blos, 1979). The concept of deidealization will be discussed more fully in relationship to parental representations.

Research on Individuation

Empirical research has found support for the concept of the second individuation and its relationship to psychological adjustment in *late* adolescents (Boles, 1999 and Lapsley, Rice & Shadid, 1989). In terms of the present investigation of high school students, results of a longitudinal study of Israeli youth (ages 9 - 22) supported the idea of adaptive regression as well as the concept of a second individuation process (Mazor, Alfa, & Gampel, 1993). Projective data revealed dramatic changes from late childhood (9-10 years) to early adolescence (13-14 years).

There was a significant increase in engulfment anxiety as well as mechanisms which deny dependency needs (Mazor, et al., 1993). During the stage of mid-adolescence (16-17 years), “primitive themes” on projective measures appear which indicate “an increase of persecution anxiety and lower levels of differentiation in object relations” (p. 662), thus documenting regressive tendencies.

The “second individuation” process [Blos, 1967] appears clearly throughout early adolescence and is distinguished from late childhood. Subjects in mid adolescence and late adolescence show continuing dynamic conflicts in self-object separation, accompanied by engulfment and other persecutory anxieties (Mazor, et al., 1993, p. 663).

The authors studied individuation from both an object relations perspective and the social-cognitive view. They found that development precedes more rapidly in the social-cognitive domain than in the unconscious, intrapsychic realm (Mazor, et al., 1993).

Further support for the process of adaptive regression was found in a study employing late adolescents (Mean Age = 18.9). Those participants classified as in the Moratorium stage, that is, those who were actively seeking and exploring ego identity, were the most prone to regressive experiences. In addition, the study found that females, more than males, were disposed toward regression (Bilsker and Marcia, 1991).

In a study of gender differences in patterns of individuation as related to psychosocial development among college students (Mean Age = 21. 7), results were mixed depending on the measurement device used (Garbarino, Gaa, Swank, McPherson, & Gratch, 1995). In terms of autonomy within peer and intergenerational

family relationships, males were more highly individuated. However, in terms of autonomy within all relationships, females were more highly individuated. The writers suggest that individuation may have different effects on the genders, with males being more oriented to separation and females being more oriented to self-in-relationship. For males, high levels of individuation may actually represent “a loss of relations with others and a resultant loss of support and connection with others” (p. 317).

The study of individuation has gone hand-in-hand with the study of autonomy. Much debate in the literature has focused on the operationalization of Blos’ theory of individuation by Steinberg and Silverberg (1986). It has been argued that their measure of Emotional Autonomy, rather than assessing individuation, is really a measure of detachment from parents, which has been shown to have negative consequences (Ryan and Lynch, 1989; Chen, 1999).

Specifically, Ryan and Lynch (1989) emphasize the distinction between emotional detachment and autonomy, with detached adolescents feeling less secure within their families and having less trust in their family situations and what can be provided for them (Ryan and Lynch, 1989).

However, in a subsequent study employing high school students (Lamborn and Steinberg, 1993), emotional autonomy related to both positive and negative outcomes. Individuated youth, classified as being high on both emotional autonomy and parental support were distinguished from those described as “detached”, that is, youth high on autonomy but low on support. A “connected” group was described as high on support but low on autonomy, and an “ambivalent” group was described as low on both support and autonomy. Those described as “individuated” were more advanced on psychosocial development and academic competence than the other

groups; paradoxically these youths also reported greater internal distress and more behavior problems. However, the behavior problems, upon closer analysis, were not related to serious delinquency. In explaining their findings, the authors endorse Blos' theory:

...although the ultimate outcome of individuation is healthy - as evidenced by the higher scores on the various measures of psychosocial development evidenced among individuated youngsters - the process is phenomenologically distressing. This account is consistent with traditional psychoanalytic perspectives on individuation (Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993, p. 496).

Boys and girls in this study also demonstrated significant differences. Within the context of high parental support, individuated girls evidenced more emotional autonomy than their male counterparts. However, emotional autonomy for girls was also "associated with more negative outcomes" (p. 497). Thus, the process of gaining autonomy and individuating, even within a healthy family environment, is perhaps more complex for females, as Blos suggested.

The current thinking is in line with Blos' ideas that individuation proceeds within the context of the family and peers, and that separation-individuation is depicted as "a process wherein the parent-adolescent bond is transformed, but maintained" (Quintana and Lapsley, 1990, p. 382). Others agree with this evaluation stating that growing evidence is emerging that a state of "autonomous relatedness," a term coined by John Bowlby, is the desired outcome for the relationships of adolescents with their parents (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994).

As to the girl's more extended need for closeness to the mother as proposed by Blos, one study documented this trend among college students, 18 to 22 years old.

Boys and girls displayed similar levels of emotional dependency on their fathers, but girls' emotional ties to their mothers were greater than to their fathers (Geuzaine et al., 2000).

Two studies illustrate the separation/individuation process as related to an inter-generational transmission of gender role, with an implication for gender differences. In an empirical study using qualitative data, researchers examined the relationship between mothers' and their young adult daughters' internal working models of the separation/individuation process (Charles, Frank, Jacobson, & Grossman, 2001). Mothers were classified into one of three groups: enabling, constraining coherent, or constraining incoherent, in accord with the work of Hauser, Powers and Noam, (1991), as cited in Charles, et al., 2001. Daughters perceived their mothers as enabling of their autonomy when their mothers also recalled having enabling mothers. However, daughter reports concluded that the daughter's need to challenge the asymmetry of the mother-child relationship was the catalyst which resulted in periods of emotional stress and estrangement before individuation was ultimately accomplished (Charles et al., 2001). Moreover, mothers classified as constraining and coherent continued, while in middle-age, to experience negativity regarding their own separation experiences, which impeded their intentions to "respond in a more balanced fashion to their daughter's" joint requirements for autonomy and support (Charles, et al., 2001, p. 724).

In terms of the male separation/individuation process, a recent study of college males (Mean age = 21.31) investigated the relationship between fathers' and sons' gender role strain and attachment/separation patterns (DeFranc, & Mahalik, 2002). Gender role stress is defined as "...stress resulting from men's appraisals of failing to

live up to traditional masculinity standards” (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987, as cited in Defranc and Mahalik, 2002, p. 52). The writers hypothesized that

..men’s own gender role strain and their estimates of their father’s gender role strain would be associated with less attachment to, and more psychological separation from both mother and father (p. 53).

As predicted, stereotypical masculinity, as seen in greater gender role stress, produced less attachment to both parents, especially fathers. Conversely, those males whose perception of fathers as less bound by rigid beliefs regarding the traditional masculine role and as less stressed by a failure to meet gender role requirements, were more bonded to their fathers (Defranc and Mahalik, 2002). Thus, females appeared to benefit from mothers who experienced their own process of separation/individuation as one which promoted both support and autonomy. Males appeared to benefit from fathers who are less constrained by traditional concepts of masculinity insofar as the father/son bond is strengthened.

Before proceeding to Eric Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, it is worth noting the contribution of Josselson (1980) in clarifying the relationship between individuation, autonomy and identity formation. Erikson considered identity formation to be the key issue in adolescent development. Josselson’s perspective is that individuation, autonomy and identity formation are an interdependent sequence, which, though separate, are an “indivisible phenomena.” (p. 192). “Aspects of the self which have become individuated and autonomous must be incorporated into identity” (p. 192).