

The Role of Attitudinal Familism in
the Separation-Individuation Process of Latinx Emerging Adults

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
ABSTRACT	x
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II LITERATURE REVIEW	3
The Separation-Individuation Process in Early Childhood	3
Forerunners of the Separation-Individuation Process	4
Normal Autism	4
Symbiosis	4
The Four Subphases of the Separation-Individuation Process.....	5
Differentiation.....	5
Practicing.....	6
Rapprochement.....	6
On the Way to Object Constancy	7
Separation-Individuation in Adolescent	7
Research in Separation-Individuation	8
Gender Differences	10
Ethnic Differences	11
Familism	12
Statement of Purpose	14

III	METHODS	16
	Materials	16
	Informed Consent.....	16
	Screening/Inclusion Question.....	16
	Demographic Questions	16
	Separation-Individuation	17
	Familism.....	19
	Procedure	19
	Hypotheses	20
IV	RESULTS	22
	Participants.....	22
	Demographic Variables	25
	Hypothesis One	25
	Hypothesis Two.....	26
	Additional Findings.....	26
	Hypothesis Three.....	27
	Additional Findings.....	27
V	DISCUSSION	30
	Hypothesis One	30
	Hypothesis Two.....	32
	Hypothesis Three.....	33
	Nurturance-Seeking	33
	Practicing Mirroring.....	35

V	DISCUSSION CONTINUED.....	36
	Implications for School and Clinical Child Psychology.....	36
	Limitations of the Present Study	36
	Areas of Future Research.....	38
	REFERENCES	40
	APPENDICES	
	A. Informed Consent Form.....	49
	B. Screening/Inclusion Criteria Questions	53
	C. Demographic Questions.....	54
	D. Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence	57
	E. Attitudinal Familism Scale.....	63

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PREVIEW

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants.....	24
Table 2. Independent Samples t-test with Gender as a Grouping Variable and SITA Subscales as Test Variables.....	26
Table 3. Multiple Simple Regression Analyses of Associations Between AFS and SITA Scales.....	28

PREVIEW

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Regression Line for AFS as a Predictor of SITA Nurturance-Seeking..... 29

Figure 2. Regression Line for AFS as a Predictor of SITA Practicing-Mirroring..... 29

PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

This study examined the association between familism and separation-individuation outcomes in Latinx emerging adults. The sample consisted of 116 participants between the ages of 18 and 25 who identified as Latinx. Participants completed demographic questions, the Attitudinal Familism Scale (AFS), and the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA). Results revealed significant gender differences. Females scored significantly higher than males on the SITA Engulfment Anxiety, Separation Anxiety, and Teacher Enmeshment scales. Males scored significantly higher than females on the SITA Dependency Denial scale. Additionally, familism predicted the SITA Practicing-Mirroring and Nurturance-Seeking scales. This study has important implications for theory and practice in clinical psychology, specifically for working with Latinx populations. This study supports using a multicultural approach in clinical work and fosters clinicians' understanding of cultural values in Latinx populations.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The term *Latinx* is operationally defined as an “ethnic group including any persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (United States Census Bureau, 2019). The United States has seen a steady increase in the Latinx population over the past decade. Krogstad and Noe-Bustamante (2021) report that 51% of population growth is attributed to Latinx individuals. As the Latinx population grows, there is an increased demand for culturally competent mental health providers equipped to treat this population. The American Psychological Association (APA) created a task force to address this growing concern and adequately train psychologists on diversity and multiculturalism issues (2017). Despite their efforts, the National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) reports a chronic lack of cultural competence in mental health providers working with a Latinx population (2022).

Research has begun to examine Latinx cultural values to enhance the understanding of the impact of culture on psychological functioning. For example, *Familismo*, a collectivist cultural value that emphasizes the importance of family relationships, has been found to impact mental health outcomes in Latinx adolescents. However, these studies have yielded mixed results. While some studies found that familism serves as a protective factor, others found it was associated with additional stress and poor outcomes in psychological functioning (Kuhlberg et al., 2010; Nolle et al., 2012; O'Donnell et al., 2004; Zayas et al., 2020).

Since adolescence and emerging adulthood represent a developmental time frame in which separation-individuation issues predominate, it is necessary to understand how cultural ties can impact this process. Previous research in separation-individuation has focused predominantly on White/European populations. As a result, there is a gap in the literature in which the impact of culture on separation-individuation remains to be addressed. The present research aims to understand how familism impacts separation-individuation outcomes in Latinx emerging adults. Additionally, the present research aims to explore the intersection of ethnicity and ego development to enhance cultural competency and inform psychological theory and practice.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mahler (1979) postulated that her theory of separation-individuation was founded on two basic tenets of Freud's psychoanalytic theory: the first being that infants are entirely dependent on the mother at birth and to some degree thereafter, and the second being that one's capacity for object relationships determines their psychological health and ability to engage therapeutically. Her theory of separation-individuation is viewed as "complementary" to Freud's drive theory, which she considered was primarily concerned with discharging libidinal energy to maintain homeostasis (Mahler, 1968, p. 219). Mahler's theory focused on the importance of the relational patterns between a mother and her infant, noting that optimal outcomes of the early stages of separation-individuation determined the developmental achievement of individual identity and object constancy (Mahler et al., 1975).

The Separation-Individuation Process in Early Childhood

While conducting naturalistic observations of mother-infant dyads at the Masters Children's Center nursery, child psychoanalyst Margaret Mahler (1968) observed that a subset of children did not fit into the neurotic level of functioning. Instead, these children presented with borderline psychotic functioning characterized by extreme polarization in relational preferences, with some entering into a "complete autistic withdrawal" while others sought "incessant...fusion" and "symbiotic engulfment" with their mother (pp. 5-6). Mahler concluded that these conditions resulted from deficiencies in the mother-infant relationship. She found that it is vital for infants to experience a symbiotic relationship with the mother in the first months of life, followed by a multiphasic separation process.

During the separation process, the mother must uphold her caregiving behaviors and negotiate changes to this routine as the infant grows and his need for autonomy increases.

Forerunners of the Separation-Individuation Process

Normal Autism. This phase was characterized by Mahler (1979) as an "object-less phase" due to the infant's preoccupation with his own needs and wish-fulfillment, a phenomenon that Mahler (1968) originally referred to as *normal autism*. The early weeks of the infant's postnatal life shock the infant, who experiences physical discomfort such as hunger pain, self-soiling, and disturbances in the external environment. Mahler described the newborn's experience as a traumatic disruption of his previous intrauterine existence. To maintain homeostasis, the infant depends entirely on his mother to alleviate discomfort through her caregiving behaviors such as feedings, changings, and aiding him in the expulsion of gas. However, the infant is unable to distinguish his mother's contributions from his ways of eliminating discomfort through "urinating, defecating, coughing, sneezing, splitting, regurgitating, and vomiting" (Mahler, 1968, p. 8). The primary goal of this phase, for both the infant and the mother, is to reduce physical discomfort. Through this process, the infant learns to discriminate between the quality of his experiences and categorize them as "good" or "bad" (Mahler & Gosliner, 1955 as cited in Mahler, 1968).

Symbiosis. Mahler (1968) borrowed the term *symbiosis* from biology, which is used to describe a mutual give-and-take relationship between two organisms. She noted that symbiosis generally occurs in the second month of life when the "infant behaves and functions as though he and his mother were an omnipotent system— a dual unity within a "common boundary" (1968, p. 8). Mahler chose the term symbiosis to represent the "state

of undifferentiation, and fusion with the mother, in which the 'I' is not yet differentiated from the 'not-I'" (p. 9). In comparison to the state of absolute primary narcissism that the infant experienced in the autistic phase, the infant now, in a symbiotic union with his mother, begins to perceive the mother as an external need-satisfying object. Mahler posits that the differentiation of selfhood marks ego development in this stage, and others support what Pine (2004) refers to as "moments of merger" between infant and mother, seen with "breastfeeding, holding each other's gaze and the rocking motion of cradling" (p. 517). Mahler (1968) described the ideal symbiotic experience as existing through mother-infant interactional patterns, noting that mothers who engage in "holding behaviors" such as face-to-face interactions with their infant allow for eye contact and other forms of engagement (i.e., talking and singing) provide organizing experiences.

The Four Subphases of the Separation-Individuation Process

Differentiation. Around 4 to 5 months, the infant begins to show interest in the outside world, contrasting his previous inward preoccupation; Mahler (1968) termed this process *hatching*. In this subphase, the infant is "more awake to the world and to the otherness of the mother," as indicated by the infant's preferential use of the social smile (Pine, 2004, p. 521; Mahler, 1979). During the hatching process, the infant begins to absorb information perceptually and shows interest in the mother's features, also referred to as part-object representations, including her hair and face. This phase is also marked by "gratification-frustration sequences," in which the mother's inevitable failure to meet her infant's needs causes him to rely on his resources to soothe.

Practicing. The *practicing* subphase of the Mahlerian separation-individuation process begins around 10-16 months of age and is achieved through the development and

exercise of gross motor functioning. As the toddler practices whole-body movements, including sitting, crawling, edging, and walking, he distances himself from the mother in favor of exploring environmental stimuli. From the mother's perspective, "the practicing period confronts her with her realization of her toddler's autonomy" (Mahler, 1968, p. 20). Mahler notes that this phase marks a shift from the symbiotic phase and represents the toddler's journey into autonomy through "the functions of the ego—locomotion, perception, and learning" (1968, p. 20).

Rapprochement. Pine (2004) noted that during the *rapprochement* phase, the child goes through a "double emotional crisis," marked by ambivalence surrounding the child's wish to explore and maintain his relationship with his mother. By the time this subphase begins, the toddler has achieved successful motor functioning and is in the throes of explorations separate from those of the mother. As the toddler becomes increasingly aware of his autonomy, there is a corresponding wish to know his mother's whereabouts. Reengulfment fears are observed in a toddler's shadowing and darting-away patterns of behavior, in which he will follow his mother and then suddenly dart away from her with the expectation that he will be caught and swooped up by her. Mahler et al. (1975) consider this behavior to "indicate the toddler's wish for reunion with the love object along with his fear of reengulfment by her" (p. 77). The mother's emotional availability during this subphase is crucial to the toddler's development. Mahler et al. described the delicate balance of the mother's reaction in responding to moments of connection while encouraging her toddler's independence.

On the Way to Object Constancy. Mahler (1968) described the last subphase of the separation-individuation process, *on the way to object constancy*, as the process