

Abstract

Separation-individuation is one of the main developmental tasks for emerging adults in the transition to adulthood and can be defined as the ability to gain autonomy within relatedness in attachment relationships. The aim of this study is to explore the current relationship dynamics of parent-child separation-individuation and to examine the links between this developmental task of emerging adults and the ability to establish an autonomous and differentiated self in an intimate relationship with a romantic partner. This study is part of the YAGISSP research project (*Young Adults in Germany, Italy, Sweden, Spain and Portugal*) that addresses emerging adults in Europe in a cross-cultural perspective. The sample consists of 463 college students, 167 male and 296 female, with a mean age of 21.09 (SD = 2.63), 53% of which have a stable relationship with a romantic partner and 81% live with one or both of their parents. A Portuguese version of the Munich Individuation Test of Adolescence (MITA) (Walper, Schwarz & Jurasic, 1996) was used to assess separation-individuation. In general, results support the main hypotheses and showed differences in the individuation process in the parental relationship as a function of sex, age and parental figure. Distinct types of individuation were found regarding mother and father that reflect specific relationship patterns between emerging adults and their parents. Results also showed an association between the individuation processes in relation to parents and to the romantic partner. The patterns of this association differ as a function of the style of individuation and the length of the romantic relationship.

Participants and Procedure

463 Portuguese emerging adults (age 18 – 30 years), mean aged 21.09 (SD = 2.63):

- 167 male and 296 female
- 94% (n = 435) are university students
- 97% are single
- 81% live with one or both parents
- 53% have a stable relationship with a romantic partner (n = 244) with a mean length of 35.50 months (SD = 25.75; Md = 32.00; Mo = 12, 24; Min = 1, Max = 132).

- ✓ Data collected in university setting during class periods
- ✓ All questionnaires were filled out voluntarily
- ✓ All participants were informed of nature, purpose and confidentiality of the study

Objectives and Hypothesis

Study the separation-individuation process in Portuguese emerging adults:

- Toward parents
 - Expect to find different styles of individuation.
 - Differences as a function of age, gender and parental figure are expected
- In relation to the romantic partner
 - Differences as a function of gender, style of individuation and relationship length are expected
- Explore the links between these two developmental tasks of emerging adulthood

Results Cluster analysis was performed through a combinatory method of hierarchical and non-hierarchical procedures
➤ Ward's method was used for cluster formation

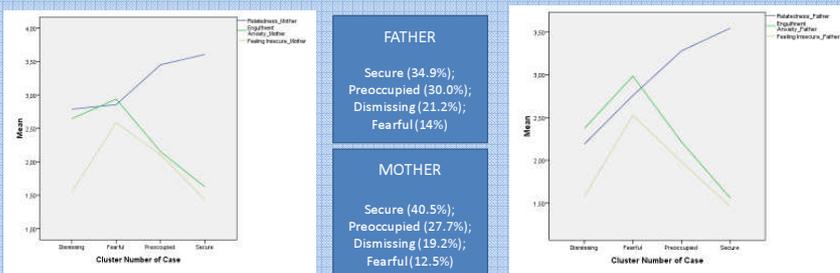


Figure 1. Types of individuation concerning mother.

Figure 2. Types of individuation concerning father.

Secure emerging adults display less engulfment anxiety and feelings of insecurity towards the romantic partner than preoccupied and fearful emerging adults
Mother, $F(6, 696) = 7.65, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$, Father $F(9, 669) = 6.05, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$

Instruments

Relationship to Mother/Father
Munich Individuation-Test of Adolescence (MITA)
(rating scale: 1 = not true; 4 = really true)

- Feeling Insecure (9-Items; $\alpha = .78/.75$)
- Relatedness (11-Items; $\alpha = .87/.89$)
- Engulfment Anxiety (6-Items; $\alpha = .82/.82$)

Relationship to Romantic Partner
Munich Individuation-Test of Adolescence (MITA)
(rating scale: 1 = not true; 4 = really true)

- Feeling Insecure (8-Items; $\alpha = .86$)
- Relatedness (10-Items; $\alpha = .71$)
- Engulfment Anxiety (6-Items; $\alpha = .85$)

Parental figure

	Mother	Father	t
Relatedness	3.30 (.49)	3.18 (.58)	5.99***
Feeling Insecure	1.79 (.50)	1.83 (.50)	-3.49**
Engulfment Anxiety	2.14 (.66)	2.11 (.64)	2.00*

Note. n = 431; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Sex differences

Mother $F(3, 448) = 12.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$; Father $F(3, 432) = 7.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .05$

	Men	Women	F	η_p^2
Mother				
Relatedness	3.14 (.56)	3.40 (.42)	31.20***	.07
Feeling Insecure	1.73 (.55)	1.82 (.48)	2.85	
Engulfment Anxiety	2.22 (.66)	2.09 (.65)	4.27*	.01
N	162	290		
Father				
Relatedness	3.06 (.60)	3.24 (.57)	9.01**	.02
Feeling Insecure	1.75 (.51)	1.88 (.49)	6.17*	.01
Engulfment Anxiety	2.19 (.66)	2.06 (.66)	4.25*	.01
N	157	279		

Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Counts above expected in the dismissing and fearful group

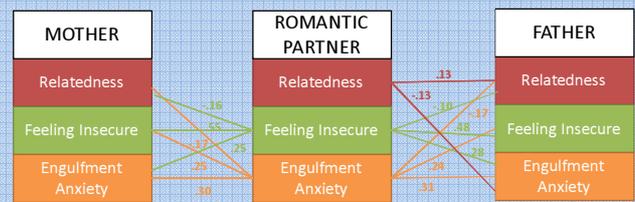
Age differences

Mother $F(6, 890) = 2.47, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$; Father $F(6, 858) = 2.74, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$

	18-22 years old	23-25 years old	26-30 years old	F	η_p^2
Mother					
Feeling Insecure	1.80 _a (.49)	1.82 _a (.58)	1.54 _b (.43)	3.95*	.02
Father					
Relatedness	3.19 _{a,b} (.57)	3.00 _b (.66)	3.33 _a (.54)	3.76*	.02
Feeling Insecure	1.85 _a (.49)	1.84 _a (.55)	1.60 _b (.53)	3.12*	.02
Engulfment Anxiety	2.12 _a (.64)	2.21 _a (.66)	1.76 _b (.54)	4.84**	.02

Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001. Different letters represent significant differences between age groups.

Figure 3. Pearson Correlations between MITA dimensions concerning Mother, Father and Romantic Partner (n = 229)



Correlations between the MITA dimensions as a function of relationship length (4 categories: 1 to 12 months, 13 to 24 months, 25 to 48 months, more than 48 months): a positive and increasing association was found between the difficulties in the separation-individuation process towards parents and the romantic partner (e.g. correlation between F.I.-M. and R.P. is .43 in romantic relationships up to 12 months, but .68 for emerging adults with relationships longer than 48 months).

Discussion

- **Cluster analysis:** individuation patterns are similar to the ones found in other studies (Kruse & Walper, 2008; McClanahan & Holmbeck, 1992)
- Similarity between separation-individuation styles and attachment styles proposed by Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991): interplay between connectedness and individuality in psychological development
- **Gender differences:** results support existing literature, but the effect size is small
 - Importance of meaningful connections with others for differentiation and maturity in women,
 - Men tend to display less involvement in attachment relationships and to perceive closeness as intrusive and threatening to autonomy and differentiation
- **Parental figure differences:** results support the existing literature
 - Relationships with mothers are seen as being closer and more intimate, but also more intrusive
 - Relationships with fathers are seen as more distant and less intimate, and therefore prone to the emergence of doubts and insecurities regarding parental love.
- **Age differences:** separation-individuation as a developmental process – difficulties tend to decrease as a function of age, especially towards the father
- **Association between separation-individuation dimensions of parents and the romantic partner:**
 - A positive resolution of the separation-individuation task toward parents seems to be associated with a perception of less difficulties in the same task toward the romantic partner.
 - Problematic psychological separation from the romantic partner tends to be associated with differences in the style of individuation toward parents
 - Relatedness as a more independent dimension: it seems to reflect the relational quality of each intimate relationship

References

Bartholomew, K. & Horowitz, L. M. (1991). Attachment styles among young adults: a test of a four category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61, 226-244.
 Kruse, J. & Walper, S. (2008). Types of individuation in relation to parents: predictors and outcomes. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 32 (5), 390-400.
 Walper, S., Schwarz, B. & Jurasic, S. (1996). *Entwicklung und Erprobung des Münchner Individuationsstests. Berichte aus der Arbeitsgruppe "Familienentwicklung nach der Trennung"*. Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München.