SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION

Separation-individuation is a fundamental organizing principle of human growth that has implications for adaptive functioning across the lifespan. In its most general sense individuation refers to a process "by which a person becomes increasingly differentiated from a past or present relational context" (Karpel, 1976, p. 66). Mature differentiation resolves the relational tension between agency and communion. Regarding communion, individuation requires maintaining a sense of attachment and connection to others—children and parents, mentors and protégés, friendship dyads, romantic partners and spouses—but without enmeshment and fusion with them. Indeed, the extent to which one experiences the self as fused with another is an indicator of how well communion is differentiated from enmeshment. Regarding agency, individuation requires a mature sense of autonomy and independence, but without isolation and alienation. Hence the goal of individuation is the capacity for autonomous selfhood in the context of ongoing relational commitments.

Separation-individuation in the narrow sense refers to specific developmental challenges of early childhood and adolescence. During infancy this process is likened by Margaret Mahler to a "psychological birth" that unfolds over several phases (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1977). In a *differentiation phase*, infants are alert to events, objects, and persons and so begin to "hatch" from the symbiotic orbit with their caregiver. Differentiation is advanced in a *practicing* phase as children's developing motor skills permit far-ranging exploration of their environment. The affective tone of practicing toddlers is one of pleasure, energy, and narcissism as they revel in their motor autonomy, although children occasionally return to their caregiver for reassurance, encouragement, and "re-fueling." In a *rapprochement* phase, toddlers must resolve mounting ambivalence over the advantages of autonomous functioning, as they invariably run into impediments and frustrations when parents scale back vigilant monitoring of their children's explorations. The affective tone of the rapprochement crisis includes tantrums, sad moods, and anger—the terrible twos have arrived—and children may resort to transitional objects ("blankies") and defense mechanisms ("ego splitting" of the object world into "good" and "bad") to cope with new demands for ego maturity. By 36 months, children enter a *consolidation* phase in which the split maternal image of the good and bad mother is now consolidated into a stable intrapsychic representation that is comforting to children in their mother's absence, an outcome called "object constancy."

Adolescence is the second phase of separation-individuation (Blos, 1979). Adolescents must disengage from or transcend the internalized representations of caregivers formed in early childhood and establish a sense of self that is distinct and individuated, thereby reducing psychological dependence on parental introjects for approval, self-esteem, and standards of conduct. Adolescents must learn to take over for themselves the tasks of self-esteem regulation and self-definition. Josselson (1980) suggested that Mahler's infancy phases are recapitulated during adolescent separation-individuation, particularly the rapprochement phase and its ambivalence over autonomy. Mourning (over the loss of childhood identifications) and a surge of narcissism (to sustain the impoverished ego until self-esteem is regulated from internal sources) are affective reactions that are attributed to the adolescent phase of separation-individuation.

Disturbances in separation-individuation are manifested in a range of clinically significant problems, including borderline and narcissistic personality, family and marital dysfunction, suicidal ideation, and college maladjustment. Pine (1979) distinguishes between higher- and lower-order forms of pathology of separation-individuation. Lower-order disturbances include the experience of fusion or merger with another and the general lack of self-other boundaries. Higher-order disturbances are manifested as intolerance of being alone, the use of coercion to gain omnipotent control over others as an extension of the self, and defects in object constancy.

Empirical research on separation-individuation relies on a small number of extant assessments. The Psychological Separation Inventory assesses the functional, conflictual, attitudinal, and emotional independence of young people from their parents. The Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA) measures key aspects of Mahler's theory using 7 or 9 subscales, including a healthy separation scale. The various SITA scales appear to be associated robustly with the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and other indices of psychological adjustment, although it does not seem suitable as a clinical or diagnostic screening measure. An assessment of pathology of separation-individuation has been used successfully in several studies (Lapsley, Aalsma, & Varshney, 2001). Other assessments include the projective Separation Anxiety Test and the Emotional Autonomy Scale, which is considered a measure of adolescent detachment.

There have been attempts to link separation-individuation with both attachment and family systems theory. Attachment theory also provides resources for understanding the early relational foundation of the healthy effective self, and periodic revision of internal working models across the lifecourse may point to the process of separation-individuation. Moreover, individuation unfolds within family systems that vary in their tolerance for separation, autonomy, and independence. Poorly differentiated families, on this account, view individuation as a betrayal of the family or as a threat to its stability, and they may consequently require individuals to sacrifice agency for communion and individuality for belongingness. In contrast, well-differentiated families balance flexibly the

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need for individuation with renegotiated boundaries and stage-appropriate degrees of connectedness. Once again, the dialectic between individuation as a psychological process and differentiation as a property of family systems underscores the fundamental duality of agency and communion in human development.

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See also: **Adolescent Development; Attachment Styles; Child Psychology**

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