

## Psychological adjustment and separation-individuation: an exploratory study with greek adolescents

ANNA L. CHRISTOPOULOS

*University of Athens, Greece*

### ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the relationship between Greek adolescents' mental health and their psychological separation-individuation from their parents. Two hundred and forty adolescents, 15-17 years old, were administered Achenbach's Youth Self Report and the Psychological Separation Inventory. Higher levels of conflictual independence, i.e., freedom from dependent relationships with parents characterized by excessive guilt, anxiety, mistrust, inhibition, and anger were significantly associated with adolescents' better academic performance and social competence, as well as with fewer internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Academic competence was associated with lower levels of adolescents' functional independence from mother. Internalizing behavior problems were found to be related to less emotional independence from parents.

*Key words:* Adolescents, Psychological adjustment, Separation-Individuation.

### Introduction

The importance of the process of psychological separation-individuation of adolescents from their parents with respect to adolescents' personal adjustment has been frequently emphasized in the developmental and clinical literature to date (Bloom, 1982; Blos, 1962; Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1958; Laufer & Laufer, 1984; Sullivan & Sullivan, 1980). Successful negotiation of this process has been linked to healthy adjustment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Blos, 1979), whereas difficulties in separation from the parents has been associated with various psychological problems (Fulmer, Medalie, & Lord, 1982; Hoffman, 1984; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991), with concomitant effects on other aspects of adjustment, such as academic performance (Teyber, 1983) and relationships

with others (Hoffman, 1984; Kline, 1972).

However, the complexity of the separation-individuation process has been repeatedly underscored in the literature to date. Only recently has the multidimensional nature of this process been empirically demonstrated. Hoffman (1984) showed that the process of separation-individuation is comprised of four subtypes of independence from the parents. He distinguished between *functional independence*, or the adolescent's ability to manage practical and personal affairs without help from mother or father, *attitudinal independence*, or the differentiation of attitudes, values and beliefs from those of mother and father, *emotional independence*, or freedom from excessive need for approval, closeness and emotional support in relation to each parent, and *conflictual independence*, or freedom from excessive guilt, anxiety, mistrust, responsibility,

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*Address:* Anna L. Christopoulos, Department of Psychology, University of Athens, Panepistimiopolis, Ilissia, 157 84 Athens, Greece.

inhibition, resentment, and anger in relation to the mother and the father.

Although the association between psychological separation-individuation and adolescent adjustment has been discussed at great length in the developmental and clinical literature, this relationship has received relatively little empirical attention. The few existing studies have focused on college students (Hoffman, 1984; Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Τσελίκια, 2001) that is, with post adolescent populations or populations at the end of the adolescent period. Greater conflictual independence was found to be associated with better personal adjustment, that is, less symptomatology as well as with respect to love relationships, while emotional independence was significantly associated with better academic adjustment. Moreover, emotional independence was found to be an important mediating variable between students' psychological problems, and students' reports of parental psychological symptoms. In a sample with Greek university students, Τσελίκια (2001) additionally found that greater attitudinal independence was associated with more social problems and with severe depression. At present, there are no studies that have investigated the relationship between psychological adjustment and separation-individuation in an adolescent sample per se.

A major purpose of the present study was to empirically examine various dimensions of the separation-individuation process in relation to the psychological adjustment of adolescents who are in the central phase of the adolescent period. According to clinical and developmental theories, manifestations of separation-individuation are evidenced at this time, e.g., between 15 and 17 years (Blos, 1979; Freud, 1958). Thus, the focus on this age group seemed to be optimal for the present study. In view of the lack of previous empirical data on this topic, the present study was considered to be of a basic exploratory nature.

The possible role of cultural factors that may be involved in the relationship between

adjustment and separation-individuation was also of interest in the present study, particularly since culture has been linked to each of these variables. That is, cultural dimensions have been considered of critical importance in defining psychopathology (Harkness & Super 1990; Murphy, 1982; Super & Harkness, 1986). A number of empirical studies have demonstrated that there are basic differences between cultures regarding criteria of mental health for child and adolescent populations (Crijnen, Achenbach, & Verhulst, 1997; MacDonald, Tsiantis, Achenbach, Motti-Stefanidi, & Richardson, 1995; Motti-Stefanidi, Tsiantis, & Richardson, 1993; Tsiantis, Motti-Stefanidi, Richardson, Schmeck, & Poustka, 1994). These studies indicated that the same behaviors may be considered deviant and problematic or, in contrast, normal and desirable according to the cultural context in which they appear. Moreover, these investigations demonstrated that Greek criteria regarding psychopathology are different from those of other cultures, such as North America, Germany or Holland, but more similar to others, such as Puerto-Rico.

The role of separation-individuation posited in the clinical/theoretical literature as critical for healthy adolescent adjustment, is based on western cultural values regarding family dynamics and mental health. However, several studies have shown that cultural factors are significantly implicated in determining how separation-individuation is perceived and conceptualized with respect to psychological adjustment (Dien, 1992; Georgas, 1993; Osterweil & Nagano, 1991; Roland, 1989). Whereas in certain cultures greater autonomy from the parents is considered indicative of psychological maturity, in other contexts such independence may be considered aberrant and pathological. Empirical support for this position may be seen in studies comparing patterns of attachment and separation in infancy across cultures, which have demonstrated significant differences in these patterns depending on the cultural context

(Mizuta, Zahn-Waxler, Cole, & Hiruma, 1996; Sagi, van Ijzendoorn, & Koren-Karie, 1991). Moreover, clinical studies in India and Japan indicate that separation-individuation as defined by traditional Western culture is considered deviant and is linked to difficulties in adolescent and adult adjustment (Dien, 1992; Roland, 1989; Takahashi, 1980). However, there are no studies in the literature to date that have *empirically* examined the relationship between cultural context and perceptions of separation-individuation in adolescents or, with the exception of the recent work of Τσελίκια (2001), adults.

A series of social psychological studies have indicated that Greek culture is both similar to, and yet different from mainstream Western culture on a variety of dimensions (Δραγώνα, 1994; Γεώργας, 1998; Κατάκη, 1984; Triandis, Bontempo, Betancourt, Bond, Leung, Brenes, Georgas, Hiu, Marin, Setiadi, Sinha, Verma, Spangenberg, Tousard, & Demontmolling, 1986). Traditionally, the Greek society has been based on a "collective" orientation that emphasized group cohesion rather than individualism. The family subgroup is highly valued, and separation from the parents occurs later in life and to a lesser degree than in mainstream western cultures. It is the norm rather than exception for offspring to remain in the parental home at least until completion of university studies. Even afterwards, and following their own marriages, offspring may live in the same building as their parents, or nearby. However, rapid changes toward the direction of a mainstream Western lifestyle and values have also been noted in the recent literature (Γεώργας, 2000). Thus, it was of interest to see whether psychological separation-individuation is associated with mental health of Greek adolescents in the direction indicated by the western mainstream, or whether these relationships are of a different nature. Although cross-cultural comparisons were beyond the scope of the present investigation, it was hoped that findings

from this study could lead to such comparisons in the future.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 240 adolescents (113 male, 127 female) who were students in the 1st and 2nd grades of Lyceum, i.e., 15-17 years old. Three schools in Athens were chosen to represent the general urban population of Athens.

### Instruments

Students completed the Youth Self-Report (Y.S.R.; Achenbach, 1991), which asks 11-18 year olds to report on their competencies in the social and academic areas, yielding three (3) competence scores: Activities, Social Competence, and a Total Competence Score. In addition, adolescents rated 112 items on a three-point scale (with a score of 0 for *not true*, 1 for *sometimes true*, and 2 for *very true or often true*). These items, which describe various behavior problems, yield eight syndrome scales, which in turn comprise Internalizing, Externalizing and Total Problem scales. This instrument has been standardized on a Greek adolescent population (Roussos, Francis, Zoubou, Kiprianos, Prokopiou, & Richardson, 2001).

Students also completed the Psychological Separation Inventory (P.S.I.; Hoffman, 1984), which is comprised of 138 items that assess level of psychological separation-individuation. Adolescents rate each item on a five-point scale (with 1 being "not at all true of me" and 5 "very true of me"). These items yield scales of Functional Independence, Emotional Independence, Conflictual Independence, and Attitudinal Independence from mother and father separately. Higher scores reflect greater independence. The Psychological Separation

Inventory was translated into Greek, followed by independent back translation to ensure linguistic accuracy. In our study, the P.S.I. scales proved to have high internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were as follows: Functional Independence from mother,  $\alpha = .84$ ; Attitudinal Independence from mother,  $\alpha = .89$ ; Emotional Independence from mother,  $\alpha = .85$ ; Conflictual Independence from mother (total),  $\alpha = .86$ ; Independence from mother,  $\alpha = .93$ ; Functional Independence from father,  $\alpha = .85$ ; Attitudinal Independence from father,  $\alpha = .91$ ; Emotional Independence from father,  $\alpha = .89$ ; Conflictual Independence from father,  $\alpha = .90$ ; Independence from mother (total),  $\alpha = .95$

### Procedure

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Questionnaires were completed during class time in-group administration format. Students were told that this was a study of adolescents' attitudes on a number of issues, and were told that the results would be made available to them upon completion of the study.

### Results

Pearson's product moment correlations were computed to determine the degree of relationship between behavior problems scales of the Y.S.R. and each of the four scales of the P.S.I. for mother and father. The results are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Although correlations significant at the .05, .01, and .001 levels are indicated, only those at the latter two levels of significance are discussed given the size and the large number of correlations. The only exceptions are correlations at the .05 level that appear recurrently with the same variables, indicating a trend.

It will be noted that a number of significant correlations were obtained, most of which are of a modest nature. Moreover, correlations between Competence Scales and Psychological Sepa-

ration Scales are smaller than those between Behavior Problem Scales and P.S.I. Scales. In general, correlations between Y.S.R. Scales and P.S.I. Scales for mother are larger than those between Y.S.R. Scales and P.S.I. Scales for father.

### Youth competence and psychological separation-individuation

Functional independence from mother had a low and negative correlation with academic competence ( $r = -.18, p < .01$ ). A similarly low, although significant, negative correlation was also found between emotional independence from mother and social competence ( $r = -.16, p < .05$ ). Conflictual independence from mother was positively associated with social competence ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ), and academic competence ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ).

As can be seen in Table 2, two low, yet marginally significant correlations were obtained between Competence Scales and P.S.I. Scales for father. Emotional independence from father was negatively correlated with social competence ( $r = -.18, p < .05$ ). Conflictual independence from father was positively associated with social competence ( $r = .17, p < .05$ ).

### Behavior problems and psychological separation-individuation

**Conflictual independence.** A clear relationship emerged between Behavior Problem Scales and Conflictual Independence for mother as well as for father. Significant moderate negative correlations were obtained between all syndrome scales and conflictual independence from mother, that is, withdrawal ( $r = -.29, p < .001$ ), somatic complaints ( $r = -.40, p < .001$ ), anxiety/depression ( $r = -.44, p < .001$ ), social problems ( $r = -.34, p < .001$ ), thought problems ( $r = -.26, p < .001$ ), attention problems ( $r = -.41, p < .001$ ), delinquent behavior ( $r = -.24, p <$

**Table 1**  
**Correlations (Pearson's *r*) of the Youth Self Report and the Psychological Separation Inventory scales for mother**

Y.S.R. Scales	P.S.I. Scales			
	Functional Independence	Emotional Independence	Conflictual Independence	Attitudinal Independence
	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>
<b>Competence</b>				
Activities	.02	.06	.02	-.05
Social Competence	-.10	-.16*	.20**	.00
Academic Competence	-.18**	.00	.26***	-.16*
Total Competence	.10	.18	.22	-.02
<b>Syndromes</b>				
Withdrawal	.05	-.07	-.29***	-.02
Somatic Complaints	-.08	-.18**	-.40***	-.01
Anxiety/Depression	-.05	-.18**	-.44***	-.11
Social Problems	-.02	-.12	-.34***	-.01
Thought Problems	.11	-.03	-.26***	.02
Attention Problems	.10	-.07	-.41***	.05
Delinquent Behavior	.26***	.10	-.24***	.22***
Aggressive Behavior	.05	-.10	-.37***	.03
Identity Problems	.09	-.07	-.36***	.06
Internalizing Problems	-.04	-.19**	-.47***	-.08
Externalizing Problems	.14*	-.02	-.35***	.12
Total Problems	.04	.12	-.49***	.01

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Identity Problems refer to boys only.

.001), aggressive behavior ( $r = -.37, p < .001$ ), identity problems ( $r = -.36, p < .001$ ), as well as internalizing ( $r = -.47, p < .001$ ), externalizing ( $r = -.35, p < .001$ ), and total problems ( $r = -.35, p < .001$ ).

With respect to father, significant negative correlations, again of a moderate level for the most of them, were obtained between Conflictual Independence and almost all syndrome scales, that is, withdrawal ( $r = -.18, p < .05$ ), somatic complaints ( $r = -.34, p < .001$ ), anxiety/depression ( $r = -.40, p < .001$ ), social problems

( $r = -.24, p < .001$ ), thought problems ( $r = -.15, p < .05$ ), aggressive behavior ( $r = -.27, p < .001$ ), identity problems ( $r = -.28, p < .001$ ) as well as internalizing ( $r = -.40, p < .001$ ), externalizing ( $r = -.23, p < .001$ ), and total problems ( $r = -.37, p < .001$ ). The correlation between conflictual independence from father and delinquency was not significant.

**Functional, emotional and attitudinal independence.** Functional independence from mother was positively associated with delinquent behavior, although at a low level ( $r = .26, p <$

**Table 2**  
**Correlations (Pearson's *r*) of the Youth Self Report and the Psychological Separation Inventory scales for father**

Y.S.R. Scales	P.S.I. Scales			
	Functional Independence	Emotional Independence	Conflictual Independence	Attitudinal Independence
	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>
<b>Competence</b>				
Activities	.02	.01	.00	-.14
Social Competence	-.13	-.18*	.17*	-.02
Academic Competence	-.07	.01	.12	-.10
Total Competence	-.06	.15	.25	-.02
<b>Syndromes</b>				
Withdrawal	-.01	-.09	-.18**	.06
Somatic Complaints	.04	-.12	-.34***	.08
Anxiety/Depression	.01	-.15*	-.40***	.05
Social Problems	.02	-.06	-.24***	.06
Thought Problems	.07	.03	-.15*	.05
Attention Problems	.05	-.05	-.30***	.06
Delinquent Behavior	.22***	.18**	-.10	.24***
Aggressive Behavior	.09	.01	-.27***	.11
Identity Problems	.12	.04	-.28***	.19**
Internalizing Problems	.01	-.14*	-.40***	.06
Externalizing Problems	.16*	.09	-.23***	.17*
Total Problems	.09	-.03	-.37***	.13

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Identity Problems refer to boys only.

.001) and with externalizing problems ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ). The latter correlation was very low. A similarly low, yet significant negative correlation was obtained between emotional independence and somatic complaints ( $r = -.18, p < .01$ ), anxiety/depression ( $r = -.18, p < .01$ ), and internalizing problems ( $r = -.19, p < .01$ ). Attitudinal independence from mother was positively correlated at a low level with delinquent behavior ( $r = .22, p < .001$ ).

Functional independence from father was significantly associated at a low level with delinquent behavior ( $r = .22, p < .001$ ), and

externalizing problems ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ). Emotional independence from father was negatively correlated also at a low level with problems of anxiety/depression ( $r = -.15, p < .05$ ), and with internalizing problems ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ ), and positively correlated at a low level with problems of delinquency ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

The results of the present study provide empirical evidence for the premises posited in

the developmental and clinical literature linking psychological separation-individuation in adolescence with psychological adjustment. In the present investigation, various dimensions of psychological independence from parents were associated with psychological adjustment of their adolescent offspring, although the correlations found were low.

The most consistent finding of the current study was that higher levels of conflictual independence are clearly associated with better social and academic competence. In addition, lower levels of conflictual independence are related to behavior problems of internalizing as well as of externalizing nature. It would appear that conflictual independence is related to adjustment more broadly and pervasively than the other three dimensions of psychological separation-individuation, i.e., emotional, attitudinal and functional independence. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies with college students in the United States (Hoffman, 1984; Hoffman, & Weiss, 1987) as well as in Greece (Τσελίκια, 2001). It thus appears that irrespectively of culture, the more an adolescent is embroiled in a dependent relationship with parents that is characterized by mistrust, resentment, anger and guilt, the greater the likelihood of his/her experiencing a variety of psychological symptoms of an internalizing and externalizing sort and the more problems s/he experiences in social and academic functioning.

The results of the present study are somewhat contradictory with respect to the relationship between emotional independence and psychological adjustment. On the one hand, emotional independence was found to be associated with fewer internalizing problems, particularly symptoms of anxiety and depression, and somatic complaints. This is in line with the developmental and clinical literature which posits that adolescent adjustment is predicated on the ability to function without excessive need for approval and closeness from the parents and concomitantly creating stronger emotional

bonds with the peer group. However, in the present study, a trend was obtained linking greater emotional independence with lower levels of social competence which is at odds with the above finding. Thus it would seem that the association between emotional independence and psychological symptomatology is stronger than that between emotional independence and social competence. Moreover, it may be that mental health and social functioning are independent domains with respect to the adolescent's degree of emotional dependence-independence. That is, it is possible that emotional independence is a necessary prerequisite for adolescent mental health but that an adolescent must have some degree of emotional dependence on parents in order to have a sense of social competence.

Emotional independence was not found to be associated with academic functioning in the present study, contrary to findings of a previous study with college students (Hoffman & Weiss, 1987). This discrepancy may be due to the age difference in the two studies. That is, it may be that freedom from an excessive need for closeness and approval is of greater importance in late adolescence or early adulthood than it is in adolescence *per se* as far as academic performance is concerned. However, it is also possible that emotional independence has a different meaning in Greek and mainstream North American culture, given the differences *vis à vis* collectivist and individualist characteristics of these societal frameworks. Emotional dependence of greater magnitude may be not only normative, but necessary in Greek culture, to ensure adaptive functioning in social and academic domains.

Attitudinal independence was found to be positively associated with externalizing problems, especially delinquency. Moreover, a trend was obtained linking attitudinal independence from mother with lowered academic competence in adolescents. Similar results have been obtained in studies with college students in the

United States (Hoffman, 1984) and in Greece (Τσελίκι, 2001) wherein greater independence in attitudes from the parents was linked to poorer academic and psycho-social adjustment. One possible explanation that has been posited is that attitudinal similarity is a manifestation of internalization of the parent, which is important in facilitating a positive parent-child relationship, which in turn leads to better adolescent adjustment. The present study provides further evidence for this position by the finding that attitudinal independence from father was linked to identity problems in boys, underscoring the importance of the internalization of parental attitudes in the process of identification with the parents.

Functional independence in the present study was found to be associated with less academic competence and with more overall externalizing problems as well as problems of delinquency in particular. The less an adolescent feels s/he needs parental help and direction in handling practical and personal matters, the poorer his/her academic performance, and the greater the likelihood of manifesting problems of an externalizing sort, especially delinquency. It would appear that adolescents at this age are not yet ready to function without parental input and support. Premature efforts to function independently may be the result of difficulties with parents, which are related to other problems in adjustment. Conversely, when pressed to forgo parental guidance and support, adolescents may be forced to resort to acting-out behaviors of an antisocial nature.

Overall, the findings of the present study are in accord with the relationships posited between degree of separation-individuation and adolescent adjustment in the clinical and theoretical literature of the Western mainstream. It would appear that Greek adolescents are in general quite similar to their Western mainstream counterparts with respect to these dimensions. The meaning of these findings, however, cannot be conclusively determined at present. It may be

that these results indicate that the relationship between separation-individuation and psychological adjustment is similar across cultures, and is thus of a "universal" nature. Alternatively the results of the present study may be reflective of rapid changes in Greek culture that have created a psycho-social framework and concomitant values parallel to those of Western countries. However, these findings underscore the importance of further work, both within specific cultural domains as well as across cultural lines to lay an empirical foundation for the understanding of the relationship between cultural factors, separation-individuation, and psychological adjustment in adolescence.

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