

The Internalization of the “Father” Object Among Young Men and Its Relation to Separation–Individuation Patterns, Anxiety and Depression

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Abstract While the father’s influence on his offspring’s personalities and well-being has historically been neglected, literature on this topic has recently been accumulating. The father’s influence touches upon numerous practical and ethical implications for social work, psychotherapy, and psychodiagnosis. The present study draws from Mahler’s (Mahler, Separation individuation. The selected papers of Margaret S. Mahler, 1963, 1967, 1974; Mahler et al., The psychological birth of the human infant. Symbiosis and individuation, 1975) theory of the psychological birth of the child and offers a novel focus on the pivotal internal representation of the father. According to this theory, hindered developmental processes lead to depression and anxiety. 130 students took part in the current study, in which the internal father object was examined with regard to separation–individuation processes, and the levels of anxiety and depression were recorded. The study’s results show a significant negative relation between the quality of the paternal object and levels of anxiety and depression. A theoretical model was constructed to illustrate the similarities and discrepancies in the development of depression and anxiety in light of the father object as mediated by the separation–individuation processes that were examined.

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The Father's Role: A Historical Background

The body of research on fathers is small in relation to the research regarding motherhood. Yet it is nonetheless evident that the role of the father has undergone a number of fluctuations in the history of psychoanalytic thinking. Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory marks the shift in Freudian thought from the 'real' to 'phantasy' (Berman 1986) and so diverted the focal point from the real father to the father-object, which is the subject of the proposed research.

According to Freud, the oedipal complex and its interactions, conflicts, sexual inclinations, and murderous wishes within the father–mother–child triangle is an innate structure (Ogden 2006).

Freud, Ferenczi, Abraham, and others perceived the castration complex (which is an oedipal phenomenon) as a major organizer of emotional development. Their patrocetric and phallogocentric perspective neglected the role of motherhood in human development (Etchegoyen 2002).

While the mother is the object of desire and competition, the classical oedipal drama takes place in the space between father and son. At first the son hates his father, wishes to kill him, and to replace him. The son fears castration because of the father's superior power and therefore renounces and suppresses his aspirations to possess the mother. The child proceeds to solve the conflict and its accompanying anxieties within his inner phantasmal space. In the next stage of the developmental process the father is internalized and moulds the superego, while renewed sublimated contact with the "real father" is established. The 'dangerous', 'bad' father is reprocessed and internalized as strong, good and moral (Benjamin 1988). Only in later writings did Freud view the father as a protective, caring, and ideal figure that is worthy of the child's identification (Jones et al. 2003).

Unlike the founding generation, post-World War II psychoanalysts such as Winnicott, Bion, and Klein focus primarily on mother–child relations, while marginalizing the father. The mother is assigned the role of an attached figure that provides physical and mental needs, as well as a secure base. The father is perceived as an external, secondary figure that initially protects the mother–child relationship and then intervenes and penetrates the established mother–child link in order to form his own relationship with the child and to enable a healthy separation from the mother (Trowell 2002).

Mahler (1963, 1967, 1974) focuses on the mother–infant relationship during the pre-oedipal period. The father, according to Mahler, penetrates the mother–baby's consciousness from the outside. He can thus take on a non-ambivalent and supportive position throughout separation–individuation. His role is to offer the baby an alternative to the threat of regressing and drowning in the symbiotic dyad with the mother (Liebman and Abell 2000; Stein 2006). Thus, as pre-oedipal issues were highlighted the role of the father diminished on both theoretical and cultural levels (Benjamin 1988). This pendular movement in analytic thinking left the

father's role nearly absent from psychoanalytic literature for decades (Liebman and Abell 2000).

The Father's Role in Early Life

While men become fathers either willfully or unwittingly, babies are not born into a paternal void; the father archetype lays deep in the collective subconscious. The outline the baby uses to construct his experience in relation to the real father is ultimately internalized as the 'Dad' object (Samuels 1986). Like mothers, most fathers expect their children and need them. The wish to father stems from a desire for the fruition of the sexual act due to concerns about aging and infertility. It is also evident in men's relation to pregnancies and fetuses that they also long for a father-child relationship in light of past relationships, real or phantasmic, including internalized object relations between self, father, mother, siblings, significant relatives, or past and present sexual partners (Trowell 2002).

Freudian one-person psychology assumes that the oedipal complex is internal to the child's mind, while ignoring King Laius' conflictual emotional world, that is, the father's role in father-son relations (Berman 1986). Ferenczi (1930) was ahead of his times when he spoke of mutual relations, as he shed light on father-child erotism. He describes the tension between adult sexual wishes and infantile wishes; Adults seek sexual satisfaction, while children seek tenderness and playfulness. Benjamin (1988) notes that the meeting between father and son forces the former to face the fact that his days are numbered and that the newborn will succeed him after his death. In terms of the tragedy, this is Laius' anxiety about Oedipus (Benjamin 1988).

Many men feel pride and relief upon conception. Others are concerned over whether the child is theirs. On the unconscious level, ambivalent fantasies appear: The man expects the child while being threatened by him. Knowing that he is expecting a child unconsciously confirms his manhood, but through identification with his father he might experience feelings of anger, rejection or guilt, which most men are able to process. Jealousy toward the woman may arise given a sense that the fetus takes the man's place. Sometimes the father recalls losing his place with his mother to subsequent pregnancies, or a renewed sense of loss arises from the perceived oedipal loss of his mother to his father. With the loss of the current woman to a baby, the man may feel robbed of a position he has acquired (Trowell 2002).

The man's desire for the woman has a developmental role. By satisfying the mother's erotic and emotional needs he reduces her tendency to place too much libidinal investment for too long in her relationship with the baby (Bishop and Lane 2000). By reducing the mother's anxiety the father reduces the emotional burden imposed on the baby and enables the child's development beyond the stage of symbiosis towards separation-individuation (Liebman and Abell 2000).

Questions of the positive and negative effects of the father's levels of closeness to his descendants evade unequivocal answers. Studies of entrepreneurs and leaders have found that they often experience their fathers as weak and insignificant and as emotionally or actually missing (Strenger and Burak 2005). However, most researchers agree that the son's experience of being loved and protected by his father

persists into adulthood and provides a sense of security throughout life (Liebman and Abell 2000), while the failure to internalize an ideal paternal model can lead to depression, lack of direction, and a vague sense of self (Strenger and Burak 2005).

Internalization of the father affects the self-created sense of personal authority, including the ability to accept authority and to exert authority on the environment through decisiveness, courage, and assertiveness (Samuels 1986). On a social level, the father's serves as lawmaker but also as liberator and provider of drive and ambition (Stein 2006). These features, alongside a stable sexual identity, are acquired through the consolidation of the oedipal triangle, as the son acquires a symbolic representation of the self by identifying with the father's desire for the mother. The identification with the father enables the child to move from a cognitively non-reflective stage to symbolic representations of self and other(s). This requires separation from the mother, who had been experienced as part of a unified symbolic existence, thus entailing a painful realization of separateness. Identification with the father's desire during separating from the mother breeds a new insight: There must be an 'I' who desires her like him (Liebman and Abell 2000).

The gap between the biological and psychological needs of the baby, and gaps in the care provided by parents, create a "basic fault" (Balint 1992). This gap is a site of narcissistic injury, anger and aggression. The role of the father is to create a 'security zone' around the dyad where primitive expressions of anger can be expressed more freely. The child can be less fearful of punishment following his expressions of outrage as the father assumes the role of 'shock absorber' for the baby's aggressive impulses (Liebman and Abell 2000). Parental inability to bear the expressions of such anger prevents the child from experiencing sadism, which is crucial for his emotional development. By internalizing the father an inner voice gradually evolves which has the authority and power to bring the child a sense of his own mass, stableness, and agency (Samuels 1986). In less successful instances the father is perceived as powerful and admired, yet as obscure and providing either protection or punishment regardless of the law. This figure resembles the 'pervert superego' that destroys the ego, as described by the British school (Stein 2006). In extreme cases the father's looming power threatens with destruction and requires the son's passive surrender. A positive outcome from the oedipal phase brings feelings of proximity and identification with the father and allows the son to feel comfortable with his maleness.

In adolescence the father-son dyad, initially formed in and before the phallic stage, cannot remain unresolved. The son strives to separate from the father since the sexual similarity between them, heretofore lending him protection and inspiration, now becomes threatening (Liebman and Abell 2000). Fathers influence their children in unique ways. Paternal interaction is characterized by active, playful stimulation and even playful wrestling, sometimes to the point of discomfort. Children of involved and close fathers are more curious and inquisitive. They feel less threatened in competitions and participate in them less aggressively (Bogels and Phares 2008).

According to the phenomenological approach, the father introject is reflected by the individual's inner idea of his father. There is no attempt to reconstruct the real childhood interaction; the internalized father figure is taken to influence the individual's behavior, affects, and personality regardless of its similarity to the

actual father (Finley and Schwartz 2004). Recent studies that examined children's perceptions of their father's image along dimensions of acceptance, rejection and lack of affection found the paternal factor to be as significant as the maternal factor in predicting social, emotional and cognitive development in boys and adolescents (Bogels and Phares 2008; Dick 2004; Jorem et al. 2003).

The Inner Father: A Representation of the Father Object

Object relations theories suggest that our inner worlds are populated by introjected objects that continually influence our experiences. These emotionally charged figures originate from past and present interpersonal interactions and fantasies, some of which remain repressed (Krampe 2003). The emergence of the 'Dad' object as a new intrapersonal structure is a dramatic event: It is the first time that the child has the ability to imagine a relationship between two significant others, while he himself is not a part of it. So far his inner world consisted of two participants, 'I' and 'she', and the first appearance of the father as a third object allows an experience of 'they'. Observing the 'new' father–mother relationship allows the child to form fresh identifications, such as an identification with the opponent (Edward et al. 1981). According to Bowlby (in Krampe 2003) these internal representations of significant figures and the image of the self are used to create "working models" of the outside world. These models are designed through the assimilation of real experiences and tend to be stable. They ultimately determine the individual's pattern of relations with others (Krampe 2003).

Nurturing figures who approach the baby sensitively and continuously contribute to the creation of a "working model" in which the self is experienced as lovable and others as trustworthy. Conversely, insensitive and intermittent treatment promote a "working model" in which the self is perceived as devalued and unworthy of love, and the other as dangerous and deceptive (Kenny and Sirin 2006). The new interior space that is created by the 'Dad' object allows the child to develop a symbolic verbal system that helps him create imaginary substitutes for realistic deprivations. Therefore, the formation of the father figure is a mental revolution and not just another figure added to the child's internal object world (Target and Fonagy 2002).

The developmental process in which the human being evolves from absolute dependence to a separate person with a complex inner world representing several images of his mother, father, and others, without losing a cohesive and consistent sense of self with a past, future and present, is named 'psychological birth' by Margaret Mahler, and separation–individuation is its central process (Mahler et al. 1975).

Separation–Individuation

Mahler (1963) differentiates between the moment of biological birth and the psychological birth of the child. According to her theory, after leaving the mother's physical womb the infant is carried by her in a kind of psychological womb. The

mother's attuned treatment of the baby's needs allows the newborn to hold on to the illusion of pre-birth a little longer, and gradually enables the forward trajectory from the state of autism through symbiosis toward separateness and individuation. This process, which unfolds throughout the lifespan, is perceived by Mahler as an innate drive (Mahler et al. 1975). The separation and individuation processes (roughly spanning between 4 and 36 months of age) are complementary and interdependent: Separation is a personal process in which the baby passes from symbiosis to separation from the primary object. Individuation is the achievement of a sense of independence and uniqueness (Jones et al. 2003). There are four sub phases in this process: Differentiation (5–10 months), Practicing (10–15 months), Rapprochement (15–22 months), and Consolidation of individuality and the beginning of emotional object constancy (22 months and onwards).

In the beginning of his developmental journey the human infant is helpless, incapable of intentional motion, perceives little of the environment, and lacks internalized objects. Normal autism and symbiosis then give way to a profound 'hatching': The baby turns his heretofore inward attention to the outside world, beyond the symbiotic 'mother-me' dyad (Mahler 1963). Differentiation begins around the fourth month, at the height of the symbiotic phase, and marks the exit from a fused state, where the presentations of objects and self are still indistinct from each other. This process is based on the development of new sensory awareness and results in a sharpened subjective and phenomenological differentiation between sleep and wakefulness. Memory develops simultaneously: Islands of memory of "good" and "bad" mother experiences, and maternal care that removes the "bad", are created. Comparison between the mother image and "Others" is now possible. Initial behavioral expressions of separation at this early stage are expressed by the baby's arching its body away from the mother's holding (Mahler et al. 1975).

With increasing freedom and control, attention and cathacted libido are directed inside and out (Mahler et al. 1975). The baby begins to observe, explore, and feel the surrounding world. Over time, prior to the second year of life, motor abilities usher in physical separateness (the practicing phase). Upon acquiring the ability to move away and to return the first internal representations of "self" and "other" objects emerge. This is an interpersonal process in which the mother's selective compliance and fostering unconsciously 'constructs' her unique child, and the seeds of personality are planted. At this stage the needs for autonomy, separateness and individuation break through, and 'me' and 'other' boundaries set in. It might seem to the infant that everything is possible, as mother follows and rescues him from danger. But during rapprochement the delusional characteristics of the child's inner world begin to wane due to the encounter with the impossible, the painful, and the prohibited. The child's self-image sustains injury. Identification with the parents brings increasing object constancy, albeit unstable at this stage. This physical oscillation also characterizes the movement of the child in space. He sets off on adventures, often returning to share his achievements with his mother. The meeting with her recharges him with the energy to set out again (Mahler 1967). The child's developmental task is now twofold: To acquire a distinct, stable, and continual sense of individuality, while achieving a certain level of continuity of the internalized object. These moderate the child's anxiety and longing while away from his parents and help him tolerate frustration.

Around the third year, alongside the emergent self and object constancy, 'good' and 'bad' become integrated and the internalized objects are infused with destructive and libidinal impulses, love and hate. Emotional stability and security are acquired through the child's confidence in his real mother, which is represented by the internalized 'mother' object. The child cultivates the ability to have imaginary and real complex relationships. The more the internalized objects are positive and fulfilling, the higher the sense of self-worth and the more positive the child's affective tone. The child's belief in his own and his parent's omnipotence breed his sense of well-being and self-worth. During separation–individuation these beliefs are gradually and partially replaced by understanding, confidence, object world stability, and enjoyment of one's sense of autonomy (Mahler 1966).

The Role of the Father During Separation–Individuation

The emergence of the father object differs significantly from the birth of the 'mother' object. The latter emerges from the symbiotic phase, a process characterized by motion, breakthroughs and setbacks, hopes and disappointments, needs and frustrations, tensions and angers. The father figure, however, is less tainted by projections, so that it is closer to reality (Edward et al. 1981; Mahler and Gosliner 1955). Similarly, the relations with the father are characterized by objective distance (detachment) He encourages the child to tolerate situations of frustration and demonstrates the ability to handle pressures without being overwhelmed by them (Target and Fonagy 2002). Such a father securely shows the way out of symbiosis and serves as a defense mechanism against regressive forces during the developmental process. During the moments of frustration that characterize rapprochement, the father is essential in calming the toddler in face of the anxieties which are typical for this age, namely, being reincorporated in the mother (Mahler and Gosliner 1955). The child draws a sense of security and confidence from the relationship with his father, thus assigning the father the role of separation–individuation agent (Jones et al. 2003). As a strong masculine figure, the father encourages the child's physical activity, his separate bodily awareness, and the exploration of space, all of which counterweight the physical and mental symbiotic fusion with the mother (Target and Fonagy 2002). Paquette (2004) proposes that physical rough-and-tumble play and contests initiated by the father encourage the child to develop a braver attitude towards anxiety-inducing experiences. These relationships, the researcher suggests, spark the desire to succeed in one's offspring (Paquette 2004). Complementarily, several studies have found a negative correlation between the quality of paternal relations and anxiety levels (Bogels and Phares 2008).

Anxiety, Depression and Separation–Individuation

Anxiety, according to Freud (1926), is an unpleasant feeling that accompanies neural aggravation; an increase in unmet needs intensifies to the point where the

baby experiences danger. Later, when he internalizes the mother object who provides his immediate needs, anxiety denotes object loss. In high levels of anxiety the baby experiences physical and mental helplessness, which is the essence of depression. Anxiety is also a necessary condition for symptom formation in general (Freud 1926). Unstable, insufficient, or aggressive parenting can create aggressive and ambivalent dependency in the offspring. The child may fail to direct libidinal energy towards other objects, thus strengthening his complete dependence on his parents, so that parental absence causes anxiety and helplessness (Mahler 1966). Conversely, in a secure and continuous bond (secure attachment), the caregivers are a source of support which helps to reduce anxiety, increase exploratory activity, and promote a sense of competence (Kenny and Sirin 2006).

Each stage of separation–individuation confronts the baby with either a developmental risk or an achievement. An inner sense of loss of the beloved object breeds feelings of helplessness, sadness and depression, even when separation is only symbolic. The differentiation phase, which marks the end of the symbiotic phase, entails annulling the union with the mother and renouncing delusions of omnipotent need-satisfaction. According to Mahler (1966), anxiety and depression are universal elements that form the basic experience of ‘psychological birth’. The desire for autonomy, the joy of conquests and new abilities, healthy narcissism, and libidinal investment in new objects ‘immunize’ against anxiety and depression. Lack of these brings about decreased self-esteem and increased levels of un-neutralized aggression, directed partly toward external objects and partly toward the self. These are the roots of the depressive mood (Mahler 1966).

Young adults may feel increasing pressures that might cause crises and evoke anxiety and depression. In these situations of rising tension, if the object world is positive one can muster coping skills and experiences himself as more competent since he can confidently expect the other to respond to his needs. A significant negative correlation was found between the quality of parenting and symptoms of depression and low self-esteem (Kenny and Sirin 2006), as well as between the degree of self consolidation and the ability to separate on the one hand, and high levels of chronic psychopathological anxiety on the other hand (Johnson et al. 2003). In addition, avoidant or anxious attachment styles in young adults mediate between severe life events during childhood and major depression and anxiety disorders (Bifulco et al. 2006).

According to a recent research, relations with fathers are more influential than relations with mothers in the formation of anxiety disorders. It suggests that more challenging and physical play in the paternal relationship promotes independence. Thus it serves to promote a ‘shield’ against panic and anxiety. The authors emphasize the role of the father during adolescence as a mediator between the youngster and the outside world (Bogels and Phares 2008).

Model Hypothesis

1. There are significant correlations between the internalized ‘Dad’ object and separation–individuation processes.

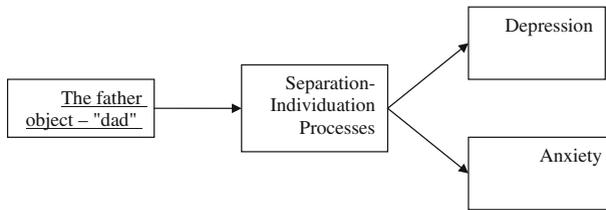


Fig. 1 The research model

- a. There is a positive correlation between the internalized 'Dad' object and healthy separation.
 - b. There are negative correlations between the internalized 'Dad' object and maladaptive separation–individuation processes.
2. There are negative correlations between the internalized 'Dad' object and depression and anxiety.
 3. The internalized 'Dad' object, mediated by separation–individuation processes, has a negative correlation with depression and anxiety levels (Fig. 1).

Method

Sample

130 men, aged 22–39 ($M = 26.2$, $SD = 3.72$), participated in this study. All subjects were students from various universities and faculties. In order to avoid contaminations resulting from the subject self fatherhood, married and father students were excluded.

Instruments

The 'Dad' Object Fatherhood Scale

The Fatherhood Scale (FS) is a questionnaire based on the hypothesis that fathers offer a qualitatively different parenting style than mothers. The scale measures adults' attitudes and subjective experiences of their relationships with their fathers in four domains: Actual occurrences with the father, perceptions of him, feelings towards the father, and the father's responsiveness as subjectively experienced by the respondent.

The FS includes 64 items ranked 1 (never) to 5 (always) distributed into nine subscales: Positive Engagement, Positive Paternal Emotional Responsiveness, Negative Paternal Engagement, the Moral Father Role, the Gender Role Model, the Good Provider Role, the Androgynous Role, Responsible Paternal Engagement, and the Accessibility of the Father.

In a former study the inter-item correlation within each subscale ranged between 0.8 and 0.96, while seven subscales had inter-item correlations of above 0.85.

Reliability was 0.98 (Dick 2004). Because multiple scales measured this variable, only the overall General Fatherhood paternity index was used in this study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.96$).

The Separation–Individuation Test of Adolescence

The Separation–Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA) is based on the Mahler’s concepts and on the psychoanalytic understanding that unresolved past conflicts carry on into adulthood (Levine et al. 1986). The SITA has undergone many modifications. Initially consisting of six dimensions of content, it was expanded during validation into 103 Likert items that were clustered into nine separation–individuation scales according to Mahler’s subphases: Engulfment Anxiety, Practicing–Mirroring, Dependency Denial, Separation Anxiety, Teacher Enmeshment, Peer Enmeshment, Nurturance–Caretaker Enmeshment, Rejection Expectancy, and Healthy Separation (see Fig. 2) (Levine 1986).

Engulfment Anxiety is experienced by people who perceive close interpersonal relationships as a threat to their independence. They often feel controlled, subdued or imprisoned by others, whom they perceive as threatening their autonomy (Levine et al. 1986). This anxiety appears in the late symbiotic phase with the onset of separation–individuation processes (Mahler and Gosliner 1955). Occasionally it indicates residues of unresolved rapprochement conflicts when the young child fears regression to symbiotic dependence (Levine et al. 1986). *Practicing–Mirroring* pertains to unresolved conflicts from the practicing subphase. This scale describes individuals with high levels of narcissism who expect often unrealistic feedback from their surroundings (e.g., item 43: “I feel that other people admire me”).

Dependency Denial describes individuals who deny or avoid dependency needs. Presumably this is a defense mechanism against Separation Anxiety that manifests as rejection or an inability to contain feelings of closeness, friendship or love (e.g., item 95: “I have no close friendships with other people”). These defensive patterns

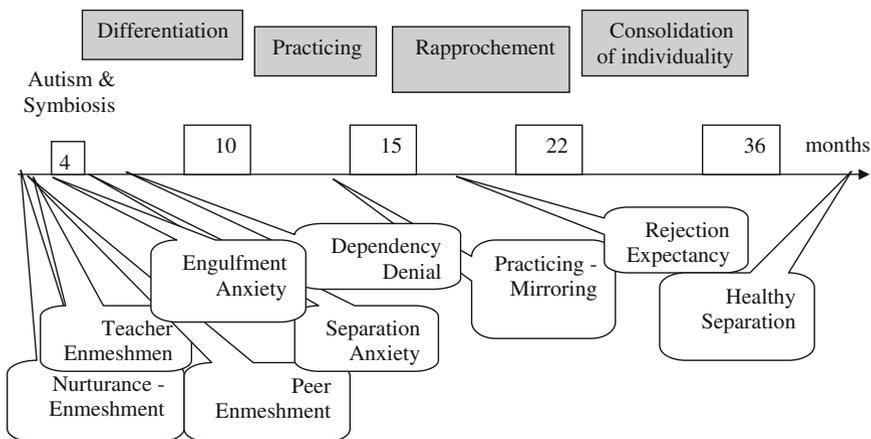


Fig. 2 Separation–individuation subphases and SITA subscales on the timeline

form in the early stages of the separation–individuation process and in the symbiotic phase, following mechanical, intrusive, and unattuned parenting.

Separation Anxiety is attributable to individuals with a strong sense of having actually or emotionally lost a significant other. Feelings associated with this dimension are rejection or abandonment by another, and are often generalized (e.g., item 23: “I often feel unwanted by friends”). Anxiety or depression often result from expected or actual separation. The scale attributes Separation Anxiety to the differentiation subphase, when the cognitive and physical developmental leaps that are made might confront the individual too sharply with his separateness. The three Enmeshment scales describe individuals with intense needs for closeness and dependence, who tend to equate their fulfillments with positive feelings. These people seek fusion in relationships as a result of unresolved issues from the symbiotic phase. *Nurturance-Caretaker Enmeshment* represents the participant's tendency to form intimate relationships with his parents that lack clear boundaries, a wish to merge with them, and strong dependency needs (e.g., item 98: “I want to always live in the same place as my parents and my siblings so that we can spend a lot of time together”).

Similarly, the *Peer Enmeshment* subscale describes the participant's need for intense, intimate, and symbiotic relationships with friends. The *Teacher Enmeshment subscale* describes the desire for close and fused relationships with teachers (e.g., item 64: “One of my favorite teacher's personality is amazingly like mine”) (Levine et al. 1986). Rejection Expectancy represents people's tendency to avoid intimacy due to a pessimistic outlook whereby closeness will lead to rejection (e.g., item 80: “If I let myself get close to someone, I'd probably get hurt”). Fear of rejection is taken to reflect unresolved conflicts from rapprochement (Mahler and Gosliner 1955).

Finally, the Healthy Separation subscale describes individuals who have achieved significant progress in resolving early separation–individuation conflicts. Since they can calibrate between dependency needs and needs for independence and are able to bear both likeness and difference, they are able to experience higher degrees of separation without anxiety (e.g., item 39: “Although I'm like my close friends in some ways, we're also different from each other in other ways”). According to Mahler's theory, these individuals have successfully achieved integration and consolidation of self and object (Levine et al. 1986).

In this study, all nine subscales, representing eight less adaptive patterns of separation–individuation and the healthier one, were examined (see Fig. 2). It was found that the Cronbach's α internal reliability coefficient ranged between 0.69 and 0.88. Five items were removed due to low internal reliability (see Table 1).

Depression and Anxiety: Cognition Checklist Questionnaire

The depression and anxiety Cognition Checklist (CCL) measures the prevalence of automatic thoughts related to anxiety and depression. The questionnaire was developed by Beck et al. (1987) based on the premise that each disorder is characterized by specific cognitive contents. CCL was constructed with a sample of 618 adult subjects and was validated against the Hamilton Psychiatric Rating scales for depression and anxiety and against diagnoses made with structured clinical interviews based on DSM-III criteria. Content analyses of verbatim of diagnosed

Table 1 SITA subscale Cronbach's α reliability coefficients

	Cronbach's α
Engulfment Anxiety	0.69
Practicing-Mirroring	0.88
Dependency Denial	0.82
Separation Anxiety	0.75
Teacher Enmeshment	0.82
Peer Enmeshment	0.74
Nurturance Enmeshment	0.69
Rejection Expectancy	0.75
Healthy Separation	0.76

patients were performed in order to identify their automatic thoughts. 43 items were selected based on their frequency and their ability to characterize the disorder. The subjects rated the prevalence of the thoughts under consideration on a 0–4 Likert scale in one of four situations: A social event, while staying with a friend, while working on a project, and while experiencing physical discomfort or pain. Factor analysis reduced the items to 26–14 for depression and 12 for anxiety. The Cronbach's α reliability coefficient for each scale was found to be high (0.92 and 0.90 respectively) (Beck et al. 1987). In the current study a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.93 was found for the depression scale and 0.89 for the anxiety scale.

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered anonymously during class hours. Participants received a brief explanation about the purpose of the study. The questionnaires were collected immediately upon completion or a week later. Data was processed by SPSS.

Results

Descriptive Statistics: Means and Standard Deviations

According to Table 2, participants scored nearly average paternity levels.

Table 3 describes SITA subscales. The highest mean was received for the Healthy Separation subscale. Other separation–individuation patterns whose means were higher than average are Peer Enmeshment and Practicing Mirroring. The lowest means were for Rejection Expectation and Dependency Denial.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics: paternity index mean and standard deviation ($N = 130$)

Variable	Number of items	Mean	Standard deviation
General Fatherhood	64	3.62	0.55

Table 3 Descriptive statistics: separation-individuation subscales—means and standard deviations ($N = 130$)

Subscales	Engul. Anxiety	Pract. Mirro.	Depen. Denial	Separa. Anxiety	Teacher Enmeshment	Peer Enmeshment	Nurturance Enmeshment	Rejection Exp.	Healthy Separa.
Number of items	8	14	14	15	8	11	8	12	10
Mean	2.35	3.22	2.14	2.33	2.28	3.43	2.78	2.02	3.77
Standard deviation	0.56	0.62	0.54	0.52	0.72	0.56	0.72	0.52	0.54

Table 4 Descriptive statistics: measures of anxiety and depression—Cognition Checklist—means and standard deviations ($N = 130$)

Variable	Number of items	Mean	Std. deviation
Depression	14	1.46	0.59
Anxiety	12	1.70	0.62

The mean depression and anxiety scores were very low; anxiety was found to be slightly higher than depression (Table 4).

Testing the Research Hypotheses

The research hypothesis was that a correlation between the internalized ‘Dad’ object and other study variables would be found. Positive correlations between the internalized ‘Dad’ object and Healthy Separation, and negative correlations between the internalized ‘Dad’ object and the other subscales representing unresolved conflicts were expected. To test the hypothesis, Pearson correlation tests were performed (see Table 5).

The research hypothesis was partially confirmed. As hypothesized, strong negative correlations were found between the Fatherhood Index and Separation Anxiety and Rejection Expectancy. Positive correlations were found between the Fatherhood Index and the Practicing Mirroring, Peer Enmeshment, and Nurturance Enmeshment subscales, in contrast to the hypothesis. There were no significant correlations between the Fatherhood Index and Engulfment Anxiety, Dependency Denial, Teacher Enmeshment and Healthy Separation.

Negative correlations were expected between the internalized ‘Dad’ object and the Anxiety and Depression variables. A Pearson correlation test was performed in order to check the hypothesis (see Table 6).

The hypotheses concerning the correlations between the Fatherhood Index and depression and anxiety were fully confirmed. Accordingly, more positive paternity predicted lower depression and anxiety.

Positive correlations between indices of separation–individuation representing unresolved conflicts and anxiety and depression were expected. Negative correlations between healthy separation and anxiety and depression were also expected.

Pearson correlation tests were performed to test the hypotheses (see Tables 7, 8).

As expected, positive correlations between Depression and Dependency Denial, Separation Anxiety, and Rejection Expectancy were found, while a negative correlation between Depression and Healthy Separation was yielded. Contrary to the research hypothesis, negative correlations between Depression and Practicing Mirroring and Peer Enmeshment were found. There were no significant correlations between Depression and Teacher Enmeshment or Nurturance Enmeshment.

Tables 7 and 8 show positive correlations between Anxiety and indices of Separation Anxiety, Rejection Expectancy, Engulfment Anxiety, Dependency Denial, and Nurturance Enmeshment. All of these support the research hypothesis.

It was hypothesized that the Fatherhood Index, mediated by separation–individuation indices, would influence the study variables representing impaired

Table 5 Significant correlations between fatherhood and separation-individuation sub scales ($N = 130$)

	Engul. Aan.	Pract. Mirro.	Depen. Denial	Separa. Anxiety	Teacher Enmeshment	Peer Enmeshment	Nurturance Enmeshment	Rejection Exp.	Healthy Separa.
Fatherhood Index	-0.10*	0.26***	0.04	-0.16*	0.12	0.16*	0.36***	0.31***	0.11

* $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 6 Significant correlations between the Fatherhood Index to indices of depression and anxiety ($N = 130$)

	Depression	Anxiety
Fatherhood Index	-0.23**	-0.21**

** $p < 0.01$ **Table 7** Correlations between separation-individuation and depression and anxiety ($N = 130$)

Separation-individuation subscales	Engulfment Anxiety	Practicing Mirroring	Dependency Denial	Separation Anxiety	Teacher Enmeshment
Depression	0.25**	-0.26***	0.43***	0.42***	0.06
Anxiety	0.35***	0.02	0.27***	0.47***	0.11

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ **Table 8** Correlations between indices of separation-individuation and depression and anxiety ($N = 130$)

Separation-individuation subscales	Peer Enmeshment	Nurturance Enmeshment	Rejection Expectancy	Healthy Separation
Depression	-0.2**	0.07	0.53***	-0.18*
Anxiety	0.07	0.19*	0.46***	0.02

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

personality development, such as depression and anxiety, negatively. To test the hypotheses a linear regression analysis was carried out. The Fatherhood Index was first tested, while all nine indices of separation-individuation were subsequently examined separately for statistical significance with a stepwise method.

When Fatherhood was used as a sole measure of Depression its negative influence was significant; a more positive internalized father object predicts a lower degree of depression. However, when taking separation indices into account the influence of paternity on the degree of depression disappeared. Speaking of the general model, one can see that an increase in Rejection Expectancy, Separation Anxiety, and conversely, a decrease in the Practicing Mirroring, predict higher levels of depression. This model significantly predicts 39 % of the variance of the Depression index ($F(4.125) = 21.46, p < 0.001$).

Table 9 also shows that Fatherhood taken alone had a significant negative impact on anxiety. Thus, more positive fatherhood predicts lower levels of anxiety. But once the influence of separation-individuation indices are accounted for, Fatherhood lost its ability to predict Anxiety levels. The model as a whole shows that higher indices of Separation Anxiety and Rejection Expectancy and lower Teacher Enmeshment predict higher levels of Anxiety. This model clearly predicts 31 % of the variance of measured anxiety ($F(4.125) = 15.26, p < 0.001$).

Table 9 Regression analysis by steps to predict indices of depression and anxiety ($N = 130$)

Step number	Predicting variable	<i>B</i>	SE	Beta	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2	Adjusted R^2
Predicting measure of depression							
1	Fatherhood Index	-0.25	0.09	-0.23	2.70**	0.05**	0.05
2	Fatherhood Index	-0.08	0.09	-0.07	-0.93		
	Rejection Expectancy	0.57	0.09	0.51	6.39***	0.23***	0.27
3	Fatherhood Index	0.02	0.08	0.02	0.27		
	Rejection Expectancy	0.62	0.09	0.55	7.32***		
	Practicing Mirroring	-0.29	0.07	-0.30	-4.02***	0.08***	0.35
4	Fatherhood Index	0.03	0.08	0.03	0.37		
	Rejection Expectancy	0.51	0.09	0.45	5.57***		
	Practicing Mirroring	-0.29	0.07	-0.31	-4.24***		
	Separation Anxiety	0.26	0.09	0.23	2.96**	0.04**	0.39
Predicting measure of anxiety							
1	Fatherhood Index	-0.23	0.10	-0.21	-2.38*	0.04*	0.04
2	Fatherhood Index	-0.15	0.09	-0.13	-1.68*		
	Separation Anxiety	0.54	0.09	0.45	5.78***	0.20***	0.23
3	Fatherhood Index	-0.07	0.09	-0.06	-0.78		
	Separation Anxiety	0.39	0.10	0.33	3.97***		
	Rejection Expectancy	0.35	0.10	0.29	3.34***	0.06***	0.29
4	Fatherhood Index	-0.02	0.09	-0.02	-0.26		
	Separation Anxiety	0.55	0.12	0.47	4.50***		
	Rejection Expectancy	0.30	0.10	0.27	3.13**		
	Teacher Enmeshment	-0.18	0.08	-0.20	-2.15*	0.03*	0.31

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Path analysis models for the Anxiety and Depression were drawn according to the research model (see Fig. 1). The models show the impact of the internalized ‘Dad’ object on each of the aforementioned dependent variables, with and without the influence of the mediators.

Path analysis shows that the influence of the internalized ‘Dad’ object on Anxiety and Depression diminishes when mediated by separation–individuation indices. This fact also emerges from the regression analysis on which the pathways models were based (see Table 9). This weakening of the influence and loss of significance of the independent variable strengthens (without proving) the research hypothesis that separation–individuation variables mediate between the father figure’s effect and anxiety and depression levels (see Fig. 1). Indices of Anxiety and Depression are both influenced by the internalized ‘Dad’ object when mediated by Separation Anxiety and Rejection Expectancy. However, the weight of Separation Anxiety was found to be higher for Anxiety (Fig. 4) and lower for Depression (Fig. 3), while the weight of Rejection Expectancy was higher for Depression and lower for Anxiety. As shown by the path analysis, the impact of the internalized ‘Dad’ object on the Depression index is also mediated by “Practicing Mirroring”.

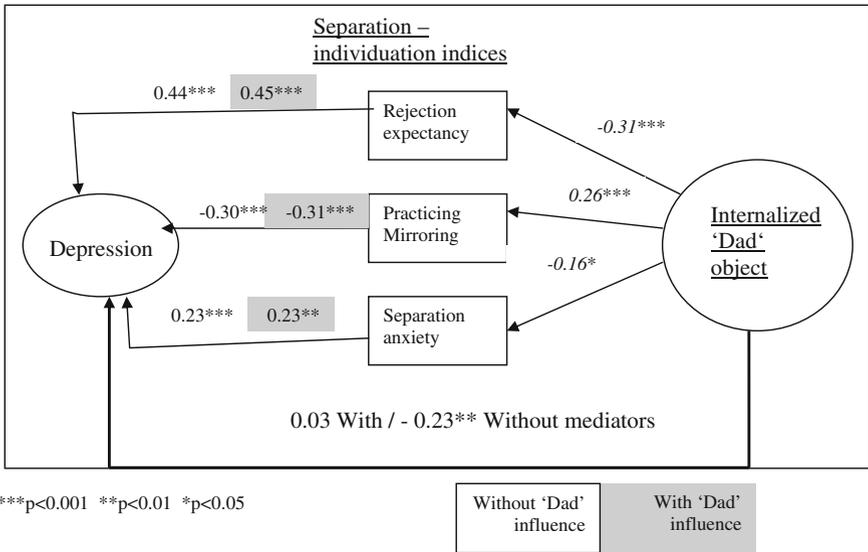


Fig. 3 Path analysis of the internalized 'Dad' object's influence on depression, as mediated by separation-individuation indices (the whole model/without mediators). $R^2_{adj} = 0.39^{***}/0.05^{**}$

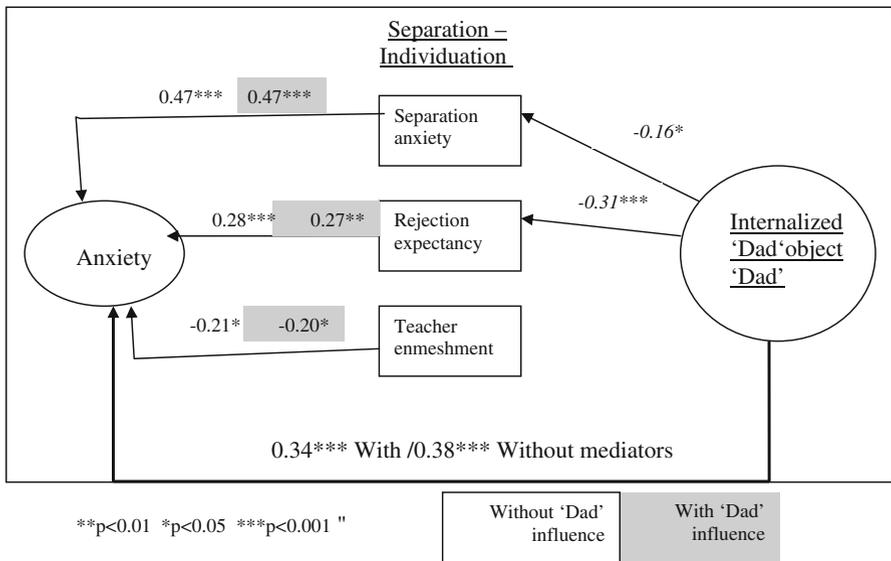


Fig. 4 Path analysis of the internalized 'Dad' object's influence on anxiety, as mediated by separation-individuation indices (the whole model/without mediators). $R^2_{adj} = 0.31^{***}/0.04^*$

Discussion

Many researchers have pointed to the importance of the relationship between mothers and their children (e.g., Kenny and Sirin 2006; Winnicott 1988). For many

decades the initial mother–baby interaction served both as a space to explore developmental issues (e.g., Mahler 1963) and as a metaphor in patient–analyst relationships (e.g., Berman 1986), while the father figure has been theoretically overlooked for many years (Bogels and Phares 2008; Liebman and Abell 2000; Trowell 2002).

The current study belongs to the growing discourse on this subject of fatherhood and the importance of the father's unique role during the developmental period and as an internalized object in the emotional sphere (cf. Bogels and Phares 2008; Jorem et al. 2003; Paquette 2004). Mahler's "The psychological birth of the child" (Mahler et al. 1975), usually taken to be mother–child focused, was selected as a framework. The study's aim was to examine the effect of the father in terms of the variables which Mahler herself marked as developmental milestones.

According to the Mahler's theory two intertwined processes of separation and individuation occur in the early dyad that lead to the birth of a new person. Moreover, Mahler asserts that rather than universal developmental processes, separation–individuation are innate, lifelong drives that reflect existential needs for separateness and individuality and whose frustration gives rise to depression and anxiety. For Mahler, the individual seeks to shape himself as unique and special, and is anxious lest he "disappear" and live a life devoid of personal meaning. From a few weeks after biological birth and throughout life the person seeks ego identity (Mahler 1958) and autonomy (Mahler et al. 1975), yet when unresolved conflicts persist and the personality gets caught up in maladaptive solutions, the ego remains confused and incoherent (Mahler 1967, 1974) and depression (Mahler 1966) and anxiety (Mahler et al. 1975) prevail.

In order to empirically approach the subjective experience of 'Dad', the FS (Dick 2004) was chosen to examine the relationships between the internalized 'Dad' object and separation–individuation patterns. Subsequently, the internalized 'Dad' object was tested in relation to measures of anxiety and depression.

It was hypothesized that a positive, accessible, warm and stable father figure would affect the separation–individuation process positively, as Mahler claimed (Mahler and Gosliner 1955; Mahler et al. 1975), and will contribute to low levels of anxiety and depression in his descendant. A model was built in which the 'Dad' object serves as an independent variable, while separation–individuation indices serve as mediating variables, and the anxiety and depression are the dependent variables.

In order to test the research model hypotheses, questionnaires were distributed to 130 male students. The results show that the hypotheses were confirmed, as positive fatherhood was found to predict lower levels of depression and anxiety. This converges with the existing body of knowledge that shows the importance of the paternal relationship in preventing and treating anxiety and depression (Bogels and Phares 2008; Jorem et al. 2003; Paquette 2004).

The study model also checked whether the father figure's influence is a distinct factor or if it interacts with specific personality outcomes of separation–individuation. To this end the SITA (Levine et al. 1986), which highlights nine developmental milestones, was used. The hypothesis was that the impact of the father is mediated by the mother and the mother–infant relationship.

As expected, a stepwise regression analysis demonstrated the isolated influence of the internalized 'Dad' object. But this effect disappeared when separation–individuation subscales were included, so that the predictive power of separation–individuation seems higher than paternity in predicting anxiety and depression. This strengthens the mediation hypothesis, namely, that the internalized 'Dad' object is mediated by separation–individuation indices in affecting these parameters. In line with the research hypotheses, the internalized 'Dad' object was found to have negative correlations with anxiety and depression levels, but different mediator paths were found. While both Separation Anxiety and rejection expectancy take part in predicting anxiety and depression, the weight of rejection expectancy is higher in depression and Separation Anxiety is more powerful in predicting anxiety. Though the effect of paternity on depression disappears when separation–individuation mediators are included, its effect remains almost unchanged when these mediators are introduced to the anxiety model.

These findings can be explained in terms of Mahler's theory. Separation Anxiety appears at the end of the symbiotic phase with the beginning of the separation process, while rejection expectancy appears much later, after the child has experienced separation in the rapprochement subphase, when external objects for relief from inner mental stresses are sought after (Mahler and Gosliner 1955). The earlier appearance of Separation Anxiety than depression on the developmental axis is also a basic assumption of object relations theories (Mitchell and Black 1995).

The results showing the paternal element's potency in predicting the intensity of anxiety conforms with recent studies that have identified the father's unique contribution to the development of anxiety (Jorem et al. 2003) in different points on the developmental axis and his significance in the etiology of anxiety disorders (Bogels and Phares 2008). The results of the current study fit in with the body of contemporary research that views fatherhood as a significant factor in the offspring's healthy emotional development from pre-oedipal stages and on (Paquette 2004; Liebman and Abell 2000) and in his social integration (Krampe 2003; Stein 2006; Strenger and Burak 2005; Holmbeck and Leake 1999). Research in this field supports paternal involvement in child rearing as an immunizing factor, as well as paternal participation in the treatment of children's mental disorders such as anxiety and depression (Bogels and Phares 2008). There is still much room to explore the gap between the actual father and the internalized 'Dad' object.

Some limitations on the current research findings should be noted. While relationships between fathers and sons were examined, further research is needed in order to compare similar dimensions between mothers and sons. Also, complementary comparisons are required in relation to girls.

The sampling of young, high-functioning university students, whose paternal experiences and separation–individuation outcomes are relatively positive, and whose anxiety and depression levels are relatively low, reduces the findings' representativeness as to the entire population. It appears that expanding the study beyond the student population, and also comparing them with samples of subjects with histories of psychopathology, will yield richer and more significant results.

The quantitative research of deep and complex issues faces serious limitations when translating theoretical variables into operational ones. Thus, future research could qualitatively investigate father–child relationships.

We hope the research results pertaining to the correlation between Separation Anxiety and rejection expectancy with the influence of negative fatherhood, and higher levels of depression and anxiety, could prove useful for both individual and family therapists in the understanding of these states. The results might also be relevant for social workers for better understanding and finer evaluations facing familial dysfunction and contribute to solutions when questions of fatherhood are raised, such as custody, imprisonment, sickness, orphanhood, adoption, insemination, and more.

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