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 relationships and to give up the roles of parent-child separation-individuation. 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 was carried out. It has a cross-cultural perspective. The sample consists of 453 college students, 167 male and 286 female, with a mean age of 21.09 (SD = 1.65), 53% of which have a stable relationship with a romantic partner and 32% live with one or both of their parents. A Portuguese version of the Munich Individuation-Test of Adolescents (MITA; Walper & Kruse, 1986) 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. The study's results support the existing literature, but the effect size is small and need a more consistent sample. A wealth of research aids in understanding the development of the relationship between separation-individuation and the individual's ability to establish an autonomous and differentiated self in an intimate relationship with a romantic partner.

Participants and Procedure

463 Portuguese emerging adults (age 18 – 30 years), mean aged 21.09 (SD = 2.63), 167 male and 296 female, were included in this study. 54% (n = 431) are university students aged 18–26 years. 68% live with one or both parents. 53% have a stable relationship with a romantic partner (n = 244) with a mean length of 33.50 months (SD = 27.53; Mm = 12.00; Mm = 15.24; Mm = 24; Mm = 31.25; Mm = 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.

Instruments

Relationship to Mother/Father

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

Feeling Insecure (5 items; α = .87/5)

Relatedness (11 items; α = .71/5)

Engulfment Anxiety (6 items; α = .82/5)

Relationship to Romantic Partner

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

Feeling Insecure (6 items; α = .82/5)

Relatedness (10 items; α = .71/5)

Engulfment Anxiety (6 items; α = .85/5)

Discussion

• Relationship with Father 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:

o 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.

o Problematic psychological separation from the romantic partner tends to be associated with differences in the style of individuation toward parents.

o Relatedness as a more independent dimension: it seems to reflect the relational quality of each intimate relationship.

References


Correlation analysis of MITA dimensions concerning Mother, Father and Romantic Partner

Feeling Insecure

Engulfment Anxiety

Relatedness

Mother

Father

Romantic Partner

Figure 2: Types of individuation concerning mother.

Figure 3: Types of individuation concerning father.

Sex differences

Mother [F (3, 448) = 22.87, p < .001, η² = .06]; Father [F (3, 432) = 7.59, p < .001, η² = .09]

Feeling Insecure

Engulfment Anxiety

Relatedness

Mother

Father

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

Age differences

Munich Individuation-Test of Adolescence (MITA)

Feeling Insecure (5 items; α = .87/5)

Relatedness (11 items; α = .71/5)

Engulfment Anxiety (6 items; α = .82/5)

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