

Family Structure: Its Effects on Adolescent Attachment and Identity Formation

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This quantitative study examines the association between family structure, attachment, and identity formation. Results partially support the hypotheses and indicate that unresolved spouse conflict is associated with low levels of attachment in adolescents and attachment to father is linked to identity achieved and the diffused identity status. Lastly, parental coalition was inversely related to the moratorium and diffused identity statuses. These findings support a link between parent/adolescent relationships and the identity formation process. Directions for future research and clinical implications are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

An important developmental task of adolescence is the formulation of a sense of identity. An identity is a cohesive set of personal values regarding career goals, relationships, and political and religious values (Erikson, 1968). The achievement of a stable ego identity not only creates an integrated sense of self but also allows for future development and adjustment throughout life.

Through the use of Erikson's (1968) theoretical model of identity formation, Marica (1966) operationalized the identity formation process. Marcia (1966) developed four identity statuses: identity achieved, diffusion, moratorium, and foreclosure, which are models for dealing with resolving the task of identity formation in late adolescence. The identity-achieved status describes adolescents who have successfully achieved an identity through experiencing a crisis, exploring, and committing to a set of values. The morato-

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rum status refers to those individuals who are actively exploring but have not committed to an identity. Individuals in the diffusion status have not yet engaged in exploration nor arrived at any commitments toward an identity. The foreclosure status describes those individuals who have not engaged in any exploration of alternatives, but have made a commitment to their identity.

As a result of the importance of adolescents developing stable ego identities, much research has been devoted to exploring the factors that contribute to ego identity. Numerous studies have demonstrated that individual differences exist in identity formation during the college-age years. These differences are related to patterns of personal adjustment (Waterman, 1985), vocational behavior (Blustein, Devenis, & Kidney, 1989), and cognitive and moral development (Marcia, 1988). Theoretical literature (Minuchin, 1974) and empirical findings (Anderson & Flemming, 1986; Perosa, Perosa, & Tam, 1996; Palladino-Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994) suggest that the family context also plays a significant role in the adolescent's ability to develop a stable identity.

Theoretically, identity development requires a period of exploration. However, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall's (1978) work with infants suggests that exploration will not occur unless a secure home base from which one can further explore the external environment is established. This suggests that secure attachments enable adolescents to face the challenges of interpersonal and intrapersonal exploration, which will lead to the development of a stable ego identity. Several researchers (Campbell, Adams, & Dobson, 1984; Kroger, 1985; Kroger & Haslett, 1988) have investigated this connection between adolescent attachment and identity formation.

Recent studies examining identity formation and attachment levels to mother and father, found the importance of mother's attachment in identity formation. Benson, Harris, and Rogers (1992) found mother's attachment to be related to the identity-achieved status and inversely related to the moratorium and diffusion statuses. Father's attachment was only positively correlated with the foreclosure status.

A study by Palladino-Schultheiss and Blustein (1994) found similar results when individuation-separation and attachment were examined conjointly. Female adolescents who experienced some degree of attachment to their mother's, in conjunction with attitudinal independence from their mother's, were in the identity-achieved status. For males, attachment was not associated to identity achievement but psychological independence was.

From the research to date, the influence of attachment on identity formation has been supported. However, the influence of mother's and father's attachment levels on male and female adolescents is still ambiguous. Since attachment is developed through a parent-child relationship, an adolescent's family structure may then influence the level of attachment and independence an adolescent is able to experience.

Minuchin (1974) states, "As the child grows, his developmental demands

for both autonomy and guidance impose demands on the parental subsystem, which must be modified to meet them" (p. 57). Lopez, Campell, and Watkins (1988), found college students whose families were characterized by marital distress and inappropriate parent-child alliances (e.g., overinvolvement or role reversals) were more likely to face conflictual attachment to a parent and have poorer personal adjustment.

Salvador Minuchin's structural family theory views families as organizational structures composed of subsystems (e.g., parental, spousal, and sibling), which dictate how family members interact. Alignment describes how family members, as individuals and as parts of subsystems are related to each other in comparison to other family members and subsystems. A parental coalition is established when parents work together to meet the needs of their child while excluding the child from marital issues. If marital discord exists, parents may attempt to enlist the support of the child against the other parent, thus forming a parent-child coalition. Triangulation can ensue if both parents compete for the loyalty of the child. Each parent demands that the child side with them against the other. Another way parents may attempt to manage unresolved tension between themselves is through detouring. Detouring involves a pseudo-coming together to either attack a "bad" child or to protect a "sick" child. It has been documented that well-functioning families contain a marital bond that is the primary coalition within the family (Teyber, 1981; Westley & Epstein, 1970).

In initial studies on systemwide dynamics and identity formation, Anderson and Flemming (1986) and Fullinwider-Bush and Jacobvitz (1993) found that marital stability, clear boundaries, and the absence of intergenerational alliances within the family facilitates identity development in adolescents. However, the measures used in these studies were not grounded in a specific model of family theory and therefore the results lack validity.

In recent studies, the Structural Family Interaction Scale (Perosa, Hansen, & Perosa, 1981) has been used and is grounded in Salvador Minuchin's structural family model. A study by Perosa and Perosa (1993) found the ability for family members to express and resolve conflict was related to identity achievement status, while clear parental subsystem and the absence of crossgenerational triads had little influence on identity achievement.

A second study conducted by Perosa, Perosa, and Tam (1996), which involved a sample of only females, found that a strong parental coalition with clear intergenerational boundaries, in which the parents resolved their differences without forcing their daughter to take sides, was linked to identity achievement. In addition, females who reported dissolved intergenerational boundaries and estrangement from their fathers were associated with the moratorium or diffused statuses. Lastly, in families where the mother was too involved and overprotective of their daughter and the family was very cohesive in which differences were not expressed, the daughters were in the identity-foreclosed status.

Research has deemed family structure an important influence on identity formation; however, in what ways family structure influences adolescent attachment levels and the identity formation process has yet to be explored. It has been noted that adolescents who are securely attached to their parents are the ones who explore their environment. On the contrary, adolescents who are involved in triadic family patterns such as triangulation, parent-child coalition or detouring may experience low levels of attachment to both parents, which would inhibit exploration and identity formation.

A strong parental coalition creates clear boundaries between the parents and the child, resulting in a secure attachment. Clear boundaries define responsibilities and authority (Minuchin, 1974), which creates consistency in the interactions between parents and child. Arneson (2001) states that clear boundaries create a sense that the world is predictable for the child, which in return gives him or her the freedom to explore and grow.

A diffuse boundary between parent and child creates an anxious/ambivalent attachment. A child who is diffused with the parental subsystem is less differentiated or separated from the attachment figure and therefore does not have the freedom to explore. Arneson (2001) states that the child's sense of belonging and connectedness to the parents is heightened at the expense of autonomy and separateness.

Rigid boundaries keep the child disconnected from the parents and create an avoidant attachment style. The child develops a great sense of independence but forfeits his or her interdependence and is unable to rely on his or her parents for support. Minuchin (1974) states that a sense of not belonging inhibits the child to request support from one's parents in the time of need.

No empirical research exists on the relationship between family structure and attachment. This study will provide empirical evidence to support these theoretical premises. In addition, previous studies have found support that family structure does have an impact on identity formation. However, this relationship has mainly been explored within females. This study will demonstrate that family structure significantly impacts both male and female identity formation. The purpose of this study is to explore the hypothesis that family structure influences an adolescent's attachment level and his or her ability to explore and develop an identity.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 157 subjects, 104 females and 53 males, selected through voluntary participation from students attending undergraduate classes at a small Midwest university. The researcher explained the research and informed participants that the study was strictly voluntary and anonymous.

Packets of questionnaires including the instruments described herein were distributed to participants. Surveys were returned through campus mail.

Instruments

MEASUREMENT OF IDENTITY STATUS

The revised version of the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (EOM-EIS; Bennion & Adams, 1986) was used to provide a continuously measured index for each of the four identity statuses (i.e., diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and identity achieved). This 64-item measure is anchored along a 6-point Likert-type response format. Sixteen items are included for each identity status with one-half of the items on each scale assessing for ideological beliefs, while the other eight items assess interpersonal concerns related to friends or dating. In this study the ideological and interpersonal subscales for each identity status were combined to form four total scores.

The alpha coefficients for the combined scales have been adequate to excellent (i.e., diffusion, .64, foreclosure, .85; moratorium, .72; identity achieved, .77) (Bennion & Adams, 1986; Blustein et al., 1989; Craig-Bray & Adams, 1986). Evidence for the validity of the EOM-EIS can be inferred from high correlations with numerous other self-report measures such as personality development (ego development), psychosocial development, and interview based measure of identity including semiprojective indexes (Adams, Bennion, & Huh, 1989; Bennion & Adams, 1986, & Berzonsky, 1989).

MEASUREMENT OF FAMILY STRUCTURE

The Structural Family Interaction Scale Revised (SFIS-R; Perosa, Hansen, & Perosa, 1981) is comprised of 83 items using a 4-point Likert scale of agreement. The items represent family interactions described by Salvador Minuchin's structural model of family functioning.

The SFIS-R is comprised of eight scales, two of which were used for this study. The Parental Coalition/Cross Generational Triads (PC/CGT) scale assesses the degree to which boundaries between parents and child are crossed to form rigid triadic patterns of communication (i.e., triangulation, parent-child coalition, and detouring). The Spouse Conflict Resolved/Unresolved (SPCR/U) scale assesses the degree to which conflicts between spouses are satisfactorily resolved. The SFIS-R has demonstrated good internal reliability based on alpha coefficients from each scale ranging from .71 to .93.

ATTACHMENT TO PARENTS

To assess attachment between adolescent and parent, the parent subscale of the Inventory of Parent and a Peer Attachment Scale (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) was used. The scale assesses the affective and cognitive dimensions of adolescent's relationship with their parents. The IPPA is a self-

report measure with 28 Likert-type items. It assesses three broad dimensions of attachment: degree of mutual trust, quality of communication, and extent of anger and alienation. The IPPA demonstrates high validity based on its clear three-factor structure and its predictable relations with measures of family cohesion, depression, loneliness, life satisfaction (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987, 1989), identity development, and adjustment to college (Lapsley, Rice, & FitzGerald, 1990). The IPPA has also demonstrated good construct validity when conducted with two family measures: the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1981) and the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES, Olson, Bell, & Portner, 1978).

A modification to this measure was done for this study. Instead of reporting attachment to "parents" as a unit, subjects were asked to report attachment to "mother" and "father" separately. This modification has been used in previous studies (Benson et al., 1992; Palladino-Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994) and has demonstrated high internal consistency (α of .90 and .94 respectively for both subscales).

RESULTS

Family Structure and Attachment

Regressions were conducted to examine the influence of parental coalition/spouse conflict on adolescent's attachment level to mother and father. Two regressions models were constructed with the dependent variable being mother's and father's attachment. The independent variables were parental coalition/cross-generational triads, resolved/unresolved spouse conflict, and all of the demographic variables (age, sex, race, grade point average, class, number of siblings, first generation to attend college, and who subject resides with).

The first model was found to be significant (Adjusted $R^2 = .24$, $p < .01$). Resolved/unresolved spouse conflict was negatively associated with mother's attachment, $p = .000$. Parental coalition/cross-generational triads, however, was not found to be significantly associated with mother's attachment, $p = .67$. None of the demographic variables were found to be significant.

The second model explained 18% of the variance but the model was not significant, $p = .13$. Parental conflict resolved/unresolved was the only variable related to father's attachment, $p = .005$ (Table 1).

Attachment and Identity

Pearson correlations revealed a negative correlation between mother's attachment and the diffused identity status ($r = -.165$, $p < .05$). Father's attachment demonstrated a positive correlation with the identity achieved status ($r = .17$, $p < .05$).

TABLE 1. Summary of Regression Models for Attachment

	Mother's Attachment	Father's Attachment
Parental Coalition	67	93
Spouse Conflict	000	005
Adjusted R ²	24	18

To control for confounding demographic variables, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used to analyze the difference between the four identity statuses on the components of mother's and father's attachment (independent variables). Covariates were those demographic variables found to differ significantly between the identity statuses: they were subject's sex, age, and who they reside with (i.e., parents, alone, significant other). This analysis revealed no significant differences between the identity statuses on the dimension of mother's attachment ($F(4,124) = 1.26, p > .05$). However, significant differences were found between two of the identity statuses on the dimension of father's attachment: Diffusion (Wilk's lambda = .004, $df = 1, p < .05$); Identity Achieved (Wilk's lambda = .004, $df = 1, p < .05$). These findings predict a positive relationship between the two identity statuses and father's attachment (Table 2).

Family Structure and Identity

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used to analyze the difference between the four identity statuses on the components of parental coalition and spousal conflict, as the independent variables. Covariates were those demographic variables found to differ significantly between the iden-

TABLE 2. MANCOVA Results for Identity Statuses and Attachment

	Achievement		Foreclosure		Moratorium		Diffusion	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother's Attachment	50	47	49	48	14	70	2 68	10
Father's Attachment	5 78	018	3 25	074	3 68	057	5 06	026
Age	1 23	26	11	73	08	76	2 7	10
Sex	2 93	08	1.47	22	46	49	4 22	04
Who They Reside with	51	72	1 91	11	70	59	78	53
Subject's Class	1 33	26	62	59	1 38	25	22	88

TABLE 3 MANCOVA Results for Identity Statuses and Family Structure

	Achievement		Foreclosure		Moratorium		Diffusion	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Parental Coalition	12	.72	53	.46	4.94	.028	7.42	.007
Spouse Conflict	.07	.78	.66	.41	.07	.79	.11	.73
Age	.76	.38	.27	.59	.49	.48	1.39	.24
Sex	3.19	.07	1.24	.26	.22	.63	3.33	.07
Who They Reside With	.74	.56	2.22	.07	.71	.58	1.21	.31
Subject's Class	1.07	.36	.40	.74	1.66	.17	.19	.90

tity statuses: they were subject's sex, age, and who they reside with. This analysis revealed significant main effects for two of the identity statuses on the dimension of parental coalition: Diffusion (Wilk's lambda = .065, $df = 1$, $p < .01$), and moratorium (Wilk's lambda = .065, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). The results signify the weaker the parental coalition the more likely the subject is to be in the diffused or moratorium identity status. No significant differences were found between identity statuses on the dimension of spouse conflict ($F(4,126) = 3.4$, $p > .05$) (Table 3).

Sex Differences in Attachment, Family Structure, and Identity Formation

An Independent Samples T-Test and a multiple regression revealed no significant sex differences in attachment and family structure. An Independent Samples T-Test did detect a significant mean difference in the diffused identity status, in which males were more diffused than females ($t(153) = 2.103$, $p < .05$, two tailed). Multiple regressions were used to analyze the four identity statuses as the dependent variables. Significant sex differences were found in the diffused identity statuses ($p = .006$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study extend current research in the areas of family structure, attachment, and identity formation by linking them together within a theoretical and empirical framework. In addition, this study highlights patterns of relations between parent-adolescent relationships and the identity formation process.

Partial support was found for the hypothesis that a strong parental coalition creates high attachment levels between parents and adolescent. Unresolved spouse conflict was strongly associated with low levels of attachment to mother, illustrating the negative effects spouse conflict has on children. Although parental coalition was not found significantly related to attachment, one could speculate that parents who demonstrate high unresolved spouse conflict would also have a greater tendency to form crossgenerational triads at times. Pearson correlations did reveal a very strong positive relationship between unresolved spouse conflict and crossgenerational triads.

Partial support was found for the second hypotheses regarding attachment and identity achievement. Attachment to mother was not found to play a role in the identity formation process. Attachment to father was found to be positively related to the identity-achieved status and the diffused status. Signifying that for some adolescents being attached to their father inhibits them from exploring and committing to an identity; and for others being attached to their father enables them to explore and commit to an identity. However, the significance levels were much higher for the identity-achieved status than the diffused status. One possible explanation for this finding was thought to be that the attachment score might also signify an enmeshed relationship between father and adolescent. This meaning, adolescents who have a crossgenerational coalition with their father may report feeling very close to their father and consequently have a high attachment score and be in the diffused identity status.

These results contradict previous studies in which mother/adolescent attachment, not father/adolescent attachment, was found to be important in achieving an identity. This discrepancy may be explained by the analysis used. Benson, Harris, and Rogers (1992) used multiple regressions in which the variance between the identity statuses may have not been taken into consideration. Palladino-Schultheiss and Blustein (1994) used canonical correlations but with two separate samples consisting of males and females, which may have given different results as compared to analyzing males and females together. Nevertheless, these results demonstrate that father's attachment is an important factor in the achievement of an identity.

Partial support was found for the third hypothesis that a strong parental coalition is important in achieving an identity. Parental coalition was inversely related to the diffused and moratorium identity statuses. This means that adolescents who were involved in cross-generational triads had neither explored nor committed to an identity or they had entered a period of exploration but had not yet committed to an identity. Thus, it appears that cross-generational triads in some way prevent the adolescent from being able to commit to an identity. These results are consistent with previous research (Perosa, Perosa, & Tam, 1996).

However, this study found no significant relationship between parental coalition and the identity-achieved status, which is inconsistent with Perosa, Perosa, and Tam's (1996) study on females. In another study by Perosa and Persoa (1993) in which both males and females were studied, parental coalition was not related to the identity-achieved status. It may be that parental coalition is a larger factor in achieving an identity for females than it is for males.

One overall explanation to the discrepancies between the findings in this study and others, may lie within the sample. This study's sample consisted of subjects from a commuter college, of which 88% reported still living with their parents. This is in comparison to other studies using college students from non-commuter schools whom were more than likely not living with their parents. The fact that these subjects were still living at home may have resulted in subjects reporting different scores as compared to subjects not living with their parents and being removed from the family system.

Evidence from this study should be used with caution for there are a few limitations. Through the use of self-report methods, accuracy is questioned. Furthermore, the fact that only one family member completed the data raises the possibility that the description of families may be biased. Lastly, the generalization of this study is limited due to the sample, which consisted of predominately female, Caucasian college students.

Future research should address how the identity statuses are analyzed either as separate variables or together controlling for the variance. Theoretically, not all adolescents are clearly in one identity status but rather transitioning between statuses. Therefore, whether or not there is variance between the statuses needs to be addressed. Furthermore, additional research needs to explore the relationship between family structure and attachment. Lastly, the study of identity formation also needs to be expanded to incorporate adolescents who choose not to attend college and those adolescents who still live with their parents.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Identity formation is part of a developmental task in which all adolescents undertake. Being able to enter into a period of exploration and then commit to an identity has tremendous impact upon one's further development and successes in life. Therefore, by understanding the factors that influence one's ability to achieve an identity, therapists can aid an adolescent's search for an identity.

The link found between spouse conflict and attachment to parents supports the need for clinicians to address spouse conflict when working with families. By clinicians assessing and helping to reduce spouse conflict, clinicians can help enhance the attachment level between adolescent and par-

ents. In return, the adolescent's emotional concerns may dissipate and his or her adaptive functioning may improve.

The significance of father/adolescent and mother/adolescent attachment in the successful development of an identity demonstrates the important role that parents play in the development of an adolescent's identity. It is imperative that clinicians assess attachment levels between adolescents and parents when working with this population. By clinicians helping to repair strained relationships and elevate attachment levels, the adolescent has an increased chance of developing a healthy identity.

The results revealing how cross-generational triads may significantly impair an adolescent's ability to successfully develop an identity emphasize the need for clinicians to assess the family's structure when working with adolescents and their families. Clinicians need to restructure families that have formed cross-generational triads and re-establish a parental coalition in order for healthy identity development to occur.

Moreover, clinicians can help families through this developmental process by educating the family about identity development and normalizing the exploration process. In addition, clinicians can work with parents to find ways to support their adolescent during this developmental period.

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