

Separation-Individuation and Assertiveness in Late Adolescents

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An adolescent can experience some problems regarding assertiveness during the course of separation-individuation from their caregivers. The purpose of this study is to describe the relationship between separation-individuation and assertiveness, which was examined in terms of how assertiveness predicts the separation-individuation of Turkish late adolescents. The sampling group consisted of 283 university students. The data gathered were analyzed by involving several simple regression analysis method. The findings revealed that assertiveness predicts separation anxiety in a meaningful way. Furthermore, the assertiveness predicts engulfment anxiety, peer enmeshment, need denial, practicing-mirroring, rejection expectancy, and healthy separation. These findings suggest that psycho-educational studies improving assertiveness can be carried out for the late adolescents who experience separation-individuation problems.

Keywords: separation-individuation; assertiveness; late adolescence

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Introduction

The separation-individuation is redefining the relationship between an individual and their caretakers, by getting away from infantile object ties to their parents on their way to independence and autonomy. It is expected that adolescents separate from their parents at an increasing pace with the help of physical, mental, interpersonal, and emotional developments during the separation-individuation process (Blos, 1989). The separation-individuation process takes place in every culture; however, some cultural differences regarding this process are observed. The need for autonomy and detachment is high in individualistic cultures (Kagitcibasi & Berry, 1989; Takano & Osaka, 1999; Kagitcibasi, 2006). On the other hand, in collectivist cultures, such as Turkish culture, personality is explained in terms of the group to which the individuals belong. Also, the aims of groups are more influential than those of individuals in collectivist cultures (Goregenli, 1997).

There are two crucial stages in the separation-individuation period. The first stage occurs during the first three years of a child's life while the second stage is adolescence period in which infantile ties weaken and parental dependency changes (Blos, 1989; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). During the adolescence period, as an adolescent is in an angry mood, a peaceful and healthy process of separation from parents is necessary in order for them to be relieved from distress. The personality of adolescents is shaped during the separation-individuation process. The conflicts during this development process are prerequisites for teenagers to become mature and undergo

changes by separating from their parents. In addition, during this period, the experiences of late adolescents with their teachers and peers help them to make a transition from adolescence to adulthood period (Blos, 1989).

Geen (2001) stated that adolescents have a negative attitude towards themselves during this period. In other words, the conflicts that the adolescent experience when differentiating from his/her parents might sometimes make them either assertive or shy. The aim of the present paper is to investigate whether the adolescents' level of assertiveness is related to a more adaptive separation-individuation process. An assertive person is neither an aggressive person nor a shy person. Therefore, assertiveness is not the opposite of aggressiveness or shyness, but is a halfway point of balance where two opposite poles, namely, shyness and assertiveness, are in harmony with each other (Voltan-Acar 2004). According to McWhirter and Voltan-Acar (2005), assertive individuals establish a more effective communication with their environment. Thus, they have a more healthy adjustment, and they neither sacrifice themselves nor violate the rights of others. In addition, an assertive person praises the people around themselves and gains the approval of people in their surroundings easily, and while doing this, they do not show shyness. Hence, assertiveness is essential so that adolescents overcome the separation-individuation stage by establishing a harmony between themselves and their surroundings.

An overview on the separation-individuation process

On reviewing the literature about separation-individuation, Kroger (1985) found that college students

who achieved an identity have less anxiety. In their study, Kroger and Haslet (1988) determined the indirect relationship between the attachment styles of college students and separation anxiety. Schultheiss and Blustein (1994) found that female college students have more attitudinal loyalty and attachment to their parents. It was found that people with encumbered identity have a low level of conflictual independence from their mothers. On the other hand, it was found that male university students with disintegrated and moratorium identity status display attitudinal loyalty to parents. A review of separation-individuation literature presented some studies (Saintonge, Achille, & Lachance, 1998) that focused on separation-individuation in single-parent families (Perosa, Perosa, & Tam, 1996), examining the significant effect of family structure on the individuation of female university students within the Minuchin structural family model.

Goral (2002) conducted research on the second separation-individuation process of Turkish college students. In his study, it was found that the perception of parent attitudes such as being over-protective, over-disciplined, and over-democratic have a relatively small effect on the separation-individuation of young adolescents (separation-disintegration, separation difficulty, and relationship problems) and on experiences in romantic relationships (separation anxiety, fear of abandonment, being uncomfortable with closeness, and self-efficacy). In his study, Yaman (2005) found that high-school students with a low level of psychological adjustment experience more problems in multiple dimensions of the separation-individuation process. It was found that there are more negative outcomes both in terms of the separation-individuation process and in terms of psychological adaptation of the children whose mothers experience dependency, disconnection, controlling, and dependability with their spouses. It was also found that adolescents with a low level of emotional adjustment have more problematic relationship with their parents than those with a high level of psychological adaptation. Furthermore, it was observed that females experience more problems, when compared with males, in terms of both separation-individuation process and psychological adjustment. In their study, Aslan and Güven (2010) found that separation-individuation is a mediator in the relationship between secure attachment to parents and personal adaptation in late adolescents. It can be seen in the above-mentioned studies that the problems experienced during the separation-individuation period cause some difficulties in late adolescents in establishing a balanced relationship with their parents.

The positive effects of assertiveness

Rotenberg et al. (2004) found that there is a statistical correlation between independence about a peer's choice and audacity that a peer reported. Crouch and Neilson (1989) determined that there is a relationship between assertiveness and college students' perception of child upbringing by their parents. Steinberg and Hill (1977) observed that male high school students are assertive due to their changeable nature. Mullins (1985) found that the assertiveness of college students is consistent with emotional stability. Poyrazlı, et al. (2002) found that the level of assertiveness of master students predicts their loneliness. Volpe (1975) revealed that school counsellors are essential for students to gain assertiveness during adulthood. Borbely et al. (2005) reported that assertiveness

plays a significant role in resolving conflicts with peers and parents. Nota et al. (2011) found that assertiveness as a function of self-determination level varies according to age and gender in a study on Italian adolescents. In his paper on undergraduate and graduate students, Magno (2011) found that assertiveness is one of the concepts constituting the structure of scientific thinking. Ullrich (2011) showed in his longitudinal study that there is a relationship between assertiveness and depression. Furthermore, Given-Wilson, et al. (2011) found that open narcissism is related to not being assertive. In their study, Egan and Lewis (2011) revealed that emotional instability is the predictor of aggressiveness. It was also observed that agreeableness and extroversion encourage narcissistic aggression at a low level. In their study, Williams and Warchal (1981) found that college students showing a high level of adaptation are less assertive than those showing a low level of adaptation. In the literature on assertiveness, there is also the study of Lang (2001) that focuses on sexual behaviours and risk beliefs.

On the other hand, Kılıç (2010) in Turkey determined that there is a positive correlation between the assertiveness levels of adolescents and attachment to parents. It was found that the total score of Rathus Assertiveness Inventory shows significant differences according to socio-economic level, whereas, it exhibits no significant difference according to gender. Voltan-Acar, et al. (2008) found that there are no differences in assertiveness based on gender, university entry scores, and the residential area of college students. However, they found differences in assertiveness based on parental attitude, adolescents receiving a democratic upbringing style being more assertive than those receiving a harsher upbringing style. Sadık and Doganay (2007) revealed that educational program developed based on assertiveness discipline model, proved successful in helping classroom teachers cope with student misbehaviors. Karahan (2005) determined that communication and conflict resolving skills program have a positive impact on the assertiveness levels of college students. Also, in Turkey, a study was found such as the study of assertiveness scale (Voltan, 1980). At the same time, there are also studies regarding the relationship between assertiveness and different other variables such as: whole and broken families (Bicer, 2009), misbehaviors of primary school students (Ozkilinc Nezhoglu, & Sabancı, 2010), trainee psychological counselors (Ikiz, 2011), or aggressiveness (Ates et al. 2009; Erkiran, Erkiran, Evren, & Sainler, 2001).

The expected link between assertiveness and the separation-individuation process

As it can be seen in the above-mentioned studies, problems experienced during the separation-individuation period have adverse effects on the relationship between adolescents and their parents. In addition, the troubles that adolescents experience regarding assertiveness cause difficulties in establishing healthy relationships and harmony by considering the needs of their mothers, fathers, peers, their surroundings, and their own. Adolescents can experience problems regarding assertiveness during the process when they separate from their mothers and fathers, and when they integrate in the society as unique individuals.

An adolescent can face some problems regarding assertiveness during the course of separation-individuation from their caregivers. While a teenager is involved in the

process of separation-individuation, they have to solve the potential problems regarding assertiveness as an individual. Therefore, an adolescent will move towards becoming an independent individual and during this process, being assertive is one of the factors that determine if a person is to become successful in the process of separation-individuation from his or her parents. Thus, in this study, the relationship between separation-individuation and assertiveness was studied in terms of how assertiveness predicts the separation-individuation of Turkish late adolescents. The general hypothesis developed for the purpose of the research was the following: The assertiveness significantly affects the sub-dimensions of separation-individuation (separation anxiety, engulfment anxiety, nurturance seeking, peer enmeshment, teacher enmeshment, practising mirroring, need denial, rejection expectancy, and healthy separation).

Method

Participants

A convenience sample (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) consisting of 283 1st to 4th year students studying at Ankara University Faculty of Political Science and Faculty of Education Sciences, Hacettepe University Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, and Kirikkale University Faculty of Education during the spring 2009- 2010 academic year was used in this study. However, the data gathered from three respondents were excluded from the analysis due to incorrect or missing marking; therefore, the analysis was conducted using a 280-person data set. The number of female students participating in the study was 166 (59.3%, mean age=20.30, SD=1.25) and the number of male students participating in the study was 114 (40.7%, mean age=20.95, SD=1.76).

Materials

The Scale of Adolescent Separation-Individuation

The scale developed by Levine et al. (1986) and adapted by Aslan and Güven (2008) for Turkish college students. The Scale of Adolescent Separation-Individuation (SITA) is a five-point Likert-type scale consisting of 9 subscales and 103 items. The SITA subscales refer to: Separation Anxiety (separation from significant others experienced as abandonment), Engulfment Anxiety (intimacy experienced as envelopment), Nurturance Seeking (strong caretaker attachment), Peer Enmeshment (strivings for intense peer intimacy), Teacher Enmeshment (strivings for intense, intimate attachments to teachers), Practicing-Mirroring (narcissistic strivings), Need Denial (attachment needs

denied), Rejection Expectancy (significant others experienced as callous and hostile), and Healthy Separation (flexible balance of dependence and independence strivings) (Levine and Saintonge 1993). Test-retest reliability coefficient of SITA was found to be 0.85 for Rejection Expectancy, 0.86 for Separation Anxiety, 0.85 for Engulfment Anxiety, 0.78 for Nurturance Seeking, 0.66 for Peer Enmeshment, 0.65 for Teacher Enmeshment, 0.82 for Practicing-Mirroring, 0.70 for Need Denial, and 0.55 for Healthy Separation. Meanwhile, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was found to be 0.79 for engulfment anxiety, 0.75 for separation anxiety, 0.82 for rejection expectancy, 0.91 for practicing-mirroring, 0.71 for peer enmeshment, 0.72 for need denial, 0.63 for teacher enmeshment, 0.65 for nurturance seeking, and 0.39 for healthy separation.

Volcan-Acar Assertiveness Scale

The scale developed by Volcan Acar and Ogretmen (2007), Assertiveness Scale, is a six-point Likert type scale consisting of 28 items. The scale is composed of two dimensions, namely "Shy" and "Assertive." Furthermore, the scale comprises 17 items for shyness and 11 items for assertiveness. The minimum score to be gained from the scale is 28, and the maximum is 168. The more points a person scores, the higher is the level of assertiveness. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was found to be 0.83 for Shy dimension and 0.78 for Assertive dimension. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the entire scale was noted to be 0.87. Furthermore, the test-retest reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.89.

Procedure

Before administration of the scales, appointments were arranged with the class instructors at the Faculty of Political Science and Faculty of Educational Sciences, Ankara University, the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Hacettepe University, and the Faculty of Education, Kirikkale University. The purpose of the study was explained to them, and their consent was sought to apply the instruments during their classes. The researchers applied the instruments after obtaining the participants voluntary agreement. During the administration, the participants were also informed about the purpose of the study and were assured about the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

Results

The main findings are presented in tables 1 and 2, containing the descriptive statistics and the results of several simple regression analyses.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between Assertiveness and Separation-Individuation subscales*

Dimension	SA	EA	NS	PE	TE	PM	ND	RE	HS
A	-0.34**	-0.18**	-0.07	0.22**	-0.09	0.31**	-0.16**	-0.33**	-0.18**
Mean (M)	34.03	18.25	23.53	39.28	10.96	48.20	27.71	27.15	9.33
Std. dev. (SD)	8.45	5.86	4.88	5.51	3.51	9.57	6.86	9.17	2.30

Note. * p<.05, **p<.01

A: Assertiveness (M=117.12, SD=20.70), SA : Separation Anxiety, EA: Engulfment Anxiety, NS: Nurturance Seeking, PE: Peer Enmeshment, TE: Teacher Enmeshment, PM: Practicing-Mirroring, ND: Need Denial, RE: Rejection Expectancy, HS: Healthy Separation

As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, it was observed that there is a meaningful relationship between assertiveness and separation anxiety ($r=-0.34$, $p<0.01$), engulfment anxiety ($r=-0.18$, $p<0.01$), peer enmeshment ($r=0.22$,

$p<0.01$), practicing-mirroring ($r=0.31$, $p<0.01$), need denial ($r=-0.16$, $p<0.01$), rejection expectancy ($r=-0.33$, $p<0.01$), and healthy separation ($r=-0.18$, $p<0.01$) subscales of SITA.

Table 2. *Multiple Simple Regression Analyses*

Dimension	R ²	F	β	t
SA - Assertive	0.11	37.13**	-0.34	-6.09**
EA - Assertive	0.03	9.79**	-0.18	-3.13**
NS - Assertive	0.00	1.42	-0.07	-1.19
PE - Assertive	0.05	14.81**	0.22	3.84**
TE - Assertive	0.00	2.36	-0.09	-1.53
PM - Assertive	0.10	30.84**	0.31	5.55**
ND - Assertive	0.02	7.43*	-0.16	-2.72*
RE - Assertive	0.11	35.95**	-0.33	-5.99**
HS - Assertive	0.03	10.04**	-0.18	-3.17**

Note. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study investigated the relationship between assertiveness and various dimensions of the separation-individuation process. It was found that assertiveness correlates with most dimensions of this process.

We found that assertiveness correlates inversely with separation anxiety and engulfment anxiety. Thus, we have noticed that the higher the level of assertiveness, the lower the adolescents' level of separation and engulfment anxiety. This is normal since separation anxiety and engulfment anxiety are made up of forms that do not support an adolescent's relationships in the separation-individuation process. Separation anxiety is the anxiety regarding separation from parents, and engulfment anxiety is the parents' limitations on the life of a teenager by controlling him/her.

On the other hand, the assertiveness positively predicts the practicing-mirroring sub-dimension of separation-individuation in students. Assertive individuals are able to establish relations with their surroundings in a more effective and healthy way. The learning aspect of self-assertiveness forms assertiveness ability (McWhirter & Voltan-Acar, 2005). It can be argued that the assertiveness predicted practicing-mirroring, which is the positive self-perception of an individual in the sense of a person's ability, skill, and human relations, which might have occurred.

According to Levine and Saintonge (1993), rejection expectancy, which reflects the inter-personal negative expectancy, is experiencing the feeling that an individual is unwanted by his/her mother, father, sibling, etc. On the other hand, assertiveness ensures late adolescents to establish a more effective and harmonious communication. Therefore, it can be stated that assertiveness negatively affects rejection expectancy.

It was found in this study that assertiveness predicts the peer enmeshment sub-dimension of separation-individuation in a positive and low-level manner. Adolescence is a transitional developmental stage. During this period, the adolescent is neither a child nor an adult. According to Horrocks (1962), peer relationships and the

tendency to gain a place among them become more important for adolescents than their relationships with their parents. This tendency might be the reason for the positive relationship between peer enmeshment and assertiveness, which is an adolescent expressing his/her feelings, thoughts and expectations, etc., sincerely and overtly.

It was also found that assertiveness predicts healthy separation dimension of separation-individuation. Assertive individual is the person who actualizes himself/herself, gets inner support, and has internal control (McWhirter & Voltan-Acar, 2005). In other words, assertive late adolescent establishes communication with others without denying his/her own needs. As an adolescent's need of parental attachment continues, he/she also has the tendency to turn away from their parents. Owing to these tendencies, it can be argued that assertiveness might have predicted need denial in a negative direction.

Healthy separation means experiencing the harmony of getting away from parents and depending on them. In collectivist cultures, independence from parents, family, and relatives is not a desirable thing (Takano & Osaka, 1999). Assertiveness helps an individual to use his/her social skill properly in the sense of respecting the rights and thoughts of others as well as defending his/her own (Voltan-Acar et al. 2008). As a result, it can be argued that assertiveness might disturb the balance of healthy separation in Turkish culture in terms of cultural perspectives. Therefore, it can be reasoned that assertiveness predicts healthy separation at low level.

According to Alberti and Emmons (2002), assertiveness has behavioral characteristics such as adolescents' expressing themselves as they are, conveying their negative or positive feelings and opposing the requirements that are not suitable for them. In collectivist cultures such as the Turkish culture, demonstrations of these behavioral characteristics of late adolescents can make parent-teacher relationships difficult because a teacher might play the role of a parent and an authority. Thus, this might be the reason why assertiveness did not predict nurturance seeking and teacher enmeshment.

In line with the findings of this study, psycho-educational studies improving assertiveness can be carried

out for the late adolescents who experience separation-individuation problems, in the context of psychological counselling and guidance services should be conducted. Moreover, similar studies in different cultures can be carried out to determine the effectiveness of cultural influence in separation-individuation and assertiveness relationship. In addition, students studying in different regions can be involved in the studies on the relationship between assertiveness and separation-individuation. The most notable limitation of this study is that the sample group consisted of only college students and in the cross-sectional and non-experimental design of the study. Therefore, further studies involving varying age groups or more conservative designs (i.e. at least longitudinal approaches) could be carried out to determine whether their findings support those of the present study, thus contributing to enriching the scholarly literature referring to the separation-individuation process.

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