

## THE PREDICTION OF SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION THROUGH SELF-ESTEEM IN TURKISH ADOLESCENTS

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### Abstract

*This study determines the relationship between separation-individuation and self-esteem in terms of how Turkish late adolescents evaluate themselves with the help of the prediction of self-esteem. The study group consisted of students studying 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grades in Anittepe High School, Ayrancı High School, and Cumhuriyet High School. High-school form of the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were used as research instruments. The data gathered were analyzed with a multiple regression analysis method. The findings of this study revealed that self-esteem predicts separation anxiety, engulfment anxiety, teacher enmeshment, practicing mirroring, need denial, and rejection expectancy in a meaningful way. However, self-esteem does not predict nurturance seeking, peer enmeshment, and healthy separation. Research findings from the literature were discussed with those of the previous research and recommendations are presented.*

Keywords: separation-individuation, self-esteem, adolescent, prediction

### Introduction

Separation-individuation is redefining the relationship between an individual and their caregivers such as mother and father by means of moving away from this dependency on parents on their way to independence and autonomy. It is believed that adolescents separate from their parents with the

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help of physical, mental, interpersonal, and emotional developments during separation-individuation process. According to Blos (1989), the idea of the self is experienced in a subjective manner during separation-individuation period when an adolescent becomes aware of himself/herself by getting rid of the dependencies on their parents. It is significant for adolescents to control the anxiety that they experience and manage self-esteem during the process of getting away from their infancy and childhood ties in separation-individuation period.

Adolescents possess unsolved conflicts and problems. Therefore, individuals going through adolescence perceive problems in a more difficult and traumatic manner compared with other periods of life (Gleerd, 1957; Lorand, 1961). They become aware of the need to come to an understanding with their environment; thus, they make an intense effort to understand and adjust to their surroundings. Due to their changeable nature, adolescents have an unshaped personality and they feel that they need to be in harmony with their surroundings (Blos, 1989; Horrocks, 1962). Rosenberg (1979) suggested that individuals with high self-esteem perceive themselves successful as a result of the self-evaluation of success and failure. It was also found that individuals with high self-esteem are loved and accepted by everybody. Therefore, if an adult holds the belief that s/he has poor performance, this will threaten his/her level of self-esteem (Tesser, 1980; Tesser & Campbell, 1983). Meanwhile, Pelham (1995) proved that the level of self-esteem increases when adults achieve their ambitions (*cited in* Harter & Whitesell, 2001).

Feelings of depression and anxiety are experienced unless adolescents achieve self-esteem during the process of gaining an identity when separation-individuation takes places (Dweck, 1999). The change in self-esteem takes place both in the long and the short terms. This change occurs gradually especially in the long term. This long-term alteration is defined as the fundamental change in the self-esteem of an individual (Rosenberg, 1986).

Rosenberg (1986) suggests that there is a decrease in basal self-esteem in terms of a decrease in self-esteem levels in most children until secondary and high school years, which are considered to be more active periods of time compared with primary school years. These changes in self-esteem levels of children may transform their positive feelings regarding themselves into negative ones as well as making alterations to their positive or negative emotions in time (Kernis & Goldman, 2003).

According to Leary and Mac Donald (2003), situational self-esteem reveals how individuals feel about themselves during a particular period in time while constant self-esteem usually reveals how individuals feel about themselves. Individual differences in self-esteem levels can help us better understand human behavior. Individuals with high levels of self-esteem tend to feel about themselves psychologically in a better mood, have higher level of self-confidence, express themselves in a positive manner, act in positive and social ways rather than acting in antisocial ways, and free people from being tied to strict social rules (Brown, 1993; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Leary & MacDonald, 2003). Rosenberg (1986) defines self-esteem as short-term unstable changes between feeling valuable and futile. According to Podesta (2001), self-esteem is the amount of feelings of how we feel about ourselves, how much we love ourselves, and how high the level of our self-confidence is. Self-esteem means being aware of our importance and value, acting toward ourselves and others with a sense of responsibility.

When separation-individuation literature is reviewed, Puklek Levpuscek (2006) found that girls achieve individuation from parents more successfully than boys. Boys, on the other hand, make a greater effort to become independent during individuation period. In their study on freshman college students, Holmbeck and Wandrei (1993) found that self-esteem predicts adjustment rather than separation-individuation, family relationships, cognitive indicators of personality variations, and status of home leaving. When it comes to the findings regarding gender, it was found that girls who achieve less adjustment have higher separation anxiety and seek attachment whereas boys who achieve less adjustment separate more from important others (mother, father, siblings etc.). Mullins (1985) revealed that there is a relationship between self-confidence and university students' symbiotic state with the caregiver. McCurdy and Scherman (1996) indicated that there is a correlation between self-esteem and conflictual independence from mother and father. In their study on university students, Beyers and Goossens (2003) found that there is a negative correlation between psychological separation and independence from parents and emotions of separation. Meanwhile, there is also some research into multiple sclerosis regarding separation-individuation (Yahav, Vosburg, & Miller, 2007).

In Turkey, Goral (2002) carried out some research into the second separation-individuation of Turkish university students. Goral found that the

perception of parents' overprotective, overdisciplined, and democratic attitudes have a slight effect on separation-individuation and experiences in romantic relationships in young adults. In his study, Yaman (2005) indicated that high-school students with a low level of psychological adjustment experience more problems regarding many dimensions of separation-individuation process. It was found that there are more negative outcomes both in terms of separation-individuation process and psychological adjustment in children whose mothers experience dependency, disconnection, controlling, dependability with their spouses. In their study, Aslan and Guven (2010) found that there is a mediation of separation-individuation in the relationship between secure attachment to parents and personal adjustment in late adolescents.

When the literature regarding self-esteem is consulted, Zeigler-Hill and Besser (2011) found that there is mediation of humor in the relationship between self-esteem and the pathological forms of narcissism in university students. Taubman and Ari (2011) found that high self-esteem levels cause adults to increase their tendency to perceive their lives in a more meaningful manner. In their longitudinal study, Chase-Lansdale, et al. (2011) revealed that there is a correlation between the self-esteem of adolescents aged 16-20 and the decrease in their financial tensions. Witt, Massman, and Jackson (2011) indicated that self-esteem predicts some technologies such as playing video games, using computer and communication technologies. Erdle and Rushton (2011) suggested that five factor personality dimensions have an impact on self-esteem. Langdon and Preble (2008) found that perceived self-esteem predicts peer bullying. In their study on male students doing postgraduate studies, Zeigler-Hill, Fulton, and McLemore (2011) revealed that students with unstable high self-esteem levels are able to manage their romantic relationships. In their study on Dutch, Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch adolescents with an average age of 14.5, Wissink, et al. (2008) found that there is no correlation between cultural differences in self self-esteem and expression of problem behaviors. Kim and Sherraden (2011), in their longitudinal study, found that there is no relation between parental support and children's self-esteem.

Meanwhile, when the self-esteem literature in Turkey was reviewed, Özkan and Özen (2008) found that there is a meaningful relationship between self-esteem and submissive behavior of students studying in nursing department. Büyükşahin Çevik and Atıcı (2009) revealed that high-school students' self-esteem levels do not show differences according to gender and the

number of friends or close friends. In their study on university students, Karahan, et al. (2004) found that there is a meaningful difference in the loneliness levels of students according to their self-esteem.

The insight into how individuals evaluate themselves during the process of adolescent's separation-individuation from parents and then how they become integrated in society as different individuals is vital. On the one hand, adolescents are in the process of separation-individuation; on the other hand, they need to have self-esteem by controlling the anxiety resulting from this period and these circumstances will play an important role in whether they evaluate themselves as successful or unsuccessful on their way to gaining an adult identity. This study, therefore, determines the relationship between separation-individuation and self-esteem in terms of how Turkish late adolescents evaluate themselves with the help of the prediction of self-esteem.

### **Method**

A Convenience Sampling Method (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) was used by the researcher, and it involved those participants who can be reached during the course of the study to conduct this research.

#### *Participants*

The study group consisted of 432 students (217 females and 215 males) studying 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grades in Anittepe High School, Ayrancı High School, and Cumhuriyet High School during the spring term of 2009-2010 academic year. However, the data set gathered from 5 respondents was excluded from the analysis. The study consisted of 215 females (50.4 %, mean age=16.33, SD=1.06), and 212 males (%49.6, mean age=16.53, SD=1.18).

#### *Instruments*

*High-school form of the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA)*: SITA was developed by Levine, Green, and Millon (1986) and Levine and Saintonge (1993), and was adapted to Turkish by Kosem-Sen (2002, *cited in Yaman, 2005*). The SITA consists of a total of 103 items and nine subscales. These subscales are as follows:

1. Separation Anxiety: Significant others experienced as abandoning.
2. Engulfment Anxiety: Intimacy experienced as envelopment.
3. Nurturance Seeking: Strong caretaker attachment.
4. Peer Enmeshment: Strivings for intense peer intimacy.
5. Teacher Enmeshment: Strivings for intense, intimate attachments to teachers.
6. Practicing-Mirroring: Narcissistic strivings.
7. Need Denial: Attachment needs denied.
8. Rejection Expectancy: Significant others experienced as callous and hostile.
9. Healthy Separation: Flexible balance of dependence and independence strivings.

The total internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) was measured 0.87. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient measured for each subscale were 0.64 for separation anxiety, 0.74 for engulfment anxiety, 0.69 for peer enmeshment, 0.67 for teacher enmeshment, 0.86 for practicing-mirroring, 0.59 for need denial, 0.80 for rejection expectancy, 0.41 for healthy separation, and 0.57 for nurturance seeking. Test-retest reliability coefficient of the scale was measured between 0.70 and 0.82 except for healthy separation measured at 0.58. The result of the factor analyses applied in the structure validity study (the rate of variance was found to be 32.7 %) is in parallel to the theoretical structure of the scale (Kosem-Sen, 2002, *cited in* Yaman, 2005). Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of SITA subscales -were 0.67 for Engulfment Anxiety, 0.85 for Practicing Mirroring, 0.63 for Dependency Denial, 0.61 for Separation Anxiety, 0.62 for Teacher Enmeshment, 0.90 for Peer Enmeshment, 0.58 for Nurturance Seeking, 0.87 for Healthy Separation, and 0.81 for Rejection Expectancy, which were also found later on by Tamar, et al. (2006).

*Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)* was developed by Rosenberg (1965). The first ten items of this scale were used to assess self-esteem. Reliability and validity was carried out by Çuhadaroglu (1986). RSES, 4-point Likert-type subscale, constitutes the first 10 items of the inventory. The width of the point spread varies between 0 and 6 because the answers were calculated in groups of one, two, and three. If the total score ranges between 0-1, it indicates that the level of self-esteem is high. If it is between 2-4, the level of self-esteem is moderate, and if it is between 5-6, it shows that the level of self-esteem is low. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient belonging to the whole scale was found to be 0.71. In the frame of this study, language validity of this scale was implemented in the first place and as a result of the reliability and validity tests,

the test-retest reliability coefficients of the subtests varied between 0.46 and 0.89; it was also found that to be the criterion referenced.

### *Procedure*

Before administration of the scales, appointments were made with the class instructors at Anittepe High School, Ayrancı High School, and Cumhuriyet High School in Ankara, Turkey. The purpose of the study was explained, and their permission was sought to apply the instruments during their classes. Subsequently, the researchers applied the instruments with volunteers. Before starting administration, informed consent and permission to report the findings were obtained from the volunteer participants. During the administration, the participants were also informed about the purpose and the completion of the study and assured about the anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. The administration took approximately 40 min.

### *Design*

In this study, the explanation level of self-esteem of separation-individuation was analyzed. Therefore, a multiple regression analysis method was used in this study. This study also involves descriptive statistics regarding different variables.

## **Results**

The findings and the correlations of variations among themselves were analyzed in the frame of a multiple regression analysis. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the scales implemented on the participants.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Statistical Values	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
Separation Anxiety	37.44	8.63
Engulfment Anxiety	20.54	6.04
Nurturance Seeking	25.70	5.53
Peer Enmeshment	30.11	6.04
Teacher Enmeshment	19.64	5.87

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics - *continued*

	Statistical Values	
	Mean	Standard Deviation
Practicing-Mirroring	47.92	10.12
Need Denial	26.29	6.94
Rejection Expectancy	29.95	7.99
Healthy Separation	26.15	4.54
Self-Esteem	27.79	3.96

As can be seen in Table 1, the Scale of Adolescent Separation-Individuation (SITA) regarding the participants involved in this study, the mean for separation anxiety is 37.44 and the SD is 8.63, the mean for engulfment anxiety is 20.54 and the SD is 6.04, the mean for nurturance seeking is 25.70 and the SD is 5.53, the mean for peer enmeshment is 30.11 and the SD is 6.04. For teacher enmeshment, the mean is 19.64 and the SD is 5.87, the mean for practicing mirroring is 47.92 and the SD is 10.12, the mean for need denial is 26.29 and the SD is 6.94, the mean for rejection expectancy is 29.95 and the SD is 7.99, the mean for healthy separation is 26.15 and the SD is 4.54, and the mean for self-esteem is 27.79 and the SD is 3.96.

Table 2. Correlations of Dependent and Independent Variables

Dimension	SA	EA	NS	PE	TE	PM	ND	RE	HS
Self-esteem	0.19**	0.18**	0.09*	0.08*	0.10*	0.13**	0.20	0.27**	0.05

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

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

Table 2 proves that there is a positive meaningful relationship between self-esteem and separation anxiety ( $r=0.19$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), engulfment anxiety ( $r=.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ), nurturance seeking ( $r=.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ), peer enmeshment ( $r=.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ), teacher enmeshment ( $r=.10$ ,  $p < .05$ ), practicing mirroring ( $r=.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and rejection expectancy ( $r=.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ) subscales of SITA.

Table 3. Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

Dimension	R <sup>2</sup>	F	$\beta$	t
SA	0.03	16.92**		
Self-esteem			0.19	4.11**
EA	0.03	15.12**		
Self-esteem			0.18	3.88**
NS	0.00	3.57		
Self-esteem			0.09	1.89
PE	0.00	2.72		
Self-esteem			0.08	1.65
TE	0.01	4.88*		
Self-esteem			0.10	2.21*
PM	0.01	7.36*		
Self-esteem			0.13	2.71*
ND	0.04	18.78**		
Self-esteem			0.20	4.33**
RE	0.07	35.44**		
Self-esteem			0.27	5.95**
HS	0.00	1.16		
Self-esteem			0.05	1.08

In Table 3, in the frame of the model developed to find out whether self-esteem subscale of Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale predicts the nine subscales of Separation-individuation Scale, it was found that self-esteem ( $\beta=0.19$ ,  $p<.00$ ) predicts separation anxiety ( $R=0.19$ ,  $R^2=0.03$ ,  $F_{(1, 425)}=16.92$ ,  $p<.00$ ) in a meaningful way. Self-esteem ( $\beta=0.18$ ,  $p<.00$ ) predicts engulfment anxiety ( $R=0.18$ ,  $R^2=0.03$ ,  $F_{(1, 425)}=15.12$ ,  $p<.00$ ) in a meaningful way. Self-esteem ( $\beta=0.10$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) predicts teacher enmeshment ( $R=.10$ ,  $R^2=0.01$ ,  $F_{(1, 425)}=4.88$ ,  $p>.05$ ) in a meaningful way. Self-esteem ( $\beta=0.13$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) predicts practicing mirroring ( $R=0.13$ ,  $R^2=0.01$ ,  $F_{(1, 425)}=7.36$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) in a meaningful way. Self-esteem ( $\beta=0.20$ ,  $p<.00$ ) predicts need denial ( $R=0.20$ ,  $R^2=0.04$ ,  $F_{(1, 425)}=18.78$ ,  $p<.00$ ) in a meaningful way. Self-esteem ( $\beta=0.27$ ,  $p<.00$ ) predicts rejection expectancy ( $R=0.27$ ,  $R^2=0.07$ ,  $F_{(1, 425)}=35.44$ ,  $p<.00$ ) in a meaningful way. However, self-esteem does not predict nurturance seeking, peer enmeshment, and healthy separation.

## **Discussions and Suggestions**

According to the findings of this study, it was found that there is a low-level positive relationship between self-esteem and separation anxiety, engulfment anxiety, practicing mirroring, need denial, and rejection expectancy subdimensions of separation-individuation. Of these subdimensions, separation anxiety, engulfment anxiety, need denial, and rejection expectancy are the unsupportive forms of interpersonal relationships during the process of separation-individuation. According to Baumrind (1980), children are vulnerable to external effects because they are immature and inexperienced. According to Blos (1989), individuals tend to get away from their parents and homes where they take shelter during the adolescence period. The nature of individuals is changeable because their personality is in the process of embodiment. This situation is reinforced by an individual's developing physical, mental, and interpersonal emotions (Quintane & Lapsley, 1990). Adolescents are people who experience a period of conflicts and instability. Adolescence is especially different from other periods of life as it becomes more significant for them to gain a place and establish relationships among their peers rather than their parents. Adolescents also experience transitions in their emotions during this process (Horrocks, 1962). Therefore, peer relationships play a significant role in the formation of their personalities during the separation-individuation period. However, this study found that there is no correlation between peer enmeshment and self-esteem.

Gilligan (1982) emphasizes the role of separation in the formation of personality during adolescence period while the attachment process comes to an end. Thus, because the participants in the sample group are in their early years of adolescence, it can be argued that their process of separation from their parents does not come to an end and accordingly their efforts to attach and adjust to their peers can be in progress. In other words, adolescents begin to shape their personality with the help of the experiences with their peers rather than those with their parents. Thus, it can be argued that this is the reason why there is a positive relationship between self-esteem and separation anxiety, which is experienced during the process of getting away from the dependencies on parents, and engulfment anxiety, which results from the sincerity of parents, and also rejection expectancy, a kind of anxiety resulting from the feeling that individuals are unwanted by their parents.

According to Baumrind (1980), children can learn the skills that their culture requires by means of education, imitation, and insight during socialization period. The factors that play an important role in this learning process include their parents in the first place and then their peers during adolescence period and finally their teachers and school environment. Adolescents are expected to be independent from parents and in solidarity with their elders during adolescence period. Thus, it can be argued that this is the reason why there is a positive relationship between teacher enmeshment and self-esteem.

According to Quintana and Kerr (1993), adolescents fulfill their needs of being loved, respected, and valued by practicing mirroring and also the need to arouse admiration about themselves. Therefore, adolescents in need of practicing mirroring might tend to establish communication with their environments to feel good and perceive themselves in a positive way. This can be the reason why there is a positive relationship between practicing mirroring and self-esteem.

This study found that there is no correlation between healthy separation and self-esteem. Healthy separation, the efforts to be dependent and independent, is usually experienced with mothers (Blos, 1989; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Adolescents are expected to move away from dependencies on their parents during individuation period. Therefore, it can be argued that there is no relationship between healthy separation and self-esteem. On the other hand, the efforts to move away the dependencies on parents and the attachment need may result in ignoring and trying not to accept these concepts. Hence, it can be argued that there is no relationship between need denial and self-esteem.

According to Blos, adolescents are expected to separate psychologically from their parents at an ever-increasing rate during separation-individuation period (Quintana & Lapsley, 1990). When it is considered that adolescents' separation from their parents is an expected condition from a developmental perspective, it can be argued that this is the reason why there is no relationship between nurturance seeking and self-esteem.

## Conclusions

As a result of this study, it was found that there is a low-level positive relationship between self-esteem and separation anxiety, engulfment anxiety, practicing mirroring, and rejection expectancy subdimensions of separation-individuation. This study found that there is a positive relationship between teacher enmeshment and self-esteem. It was also found that there is no correlation between peer enmeshment, healthy separation, need denial, nurturance seeking, and self-esteem.

Some recommendations for future studies are as follows:

- This study can be repeated with participants who have completed their separation-individuation period and the findings can be interpreted to see whether they developmentally support the findings of this study.
- Similar studies can be carried out with different cultures to determine the impacts of culture factor in the relationship between separation-individuation and self-esteem.
- Trainings concerning self-concept and self-esteem can be implemented for the adolescents who encounter difficulties regarding separation-individuation.
- Psychoeducational programs can be implemented so as to increase adolescents' self-esteem levels and also support their separation-individuation period.
- This study can be conducted in high schools such as vocational schools, Anatolian high schools, science high schools, social studies high schools, and Anatolian fine arts high schools, in different regions. The results may give an insight into the determination of the sources of students' problems regarding separation-individuation and self-esteem.

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