

Young Adult Developmental Tasks: Relationships and Specificities

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes and examines a theoretical model of causal relations among psychological separation from parents, autonomy, capacity to establish love relationships, and self-esteem and inquires whether this model fits the data gathered from a sample of college students. The sample of college students was split into four groups: males from low socio-economic status (N = 71), males from high socio-economic status (N = 82), females from low socio-economic status (N = 66), and females from high socio-economic status (N = 96). The model, derived from psychodynamic theories, was tested separately on the four groups by employing a structural equation modelling analysis. Results indicate that, whereas the proposed model is adequate for all four groups, there are significant differences, according both to students' gender and socio-economic status, in their pattern of relationships among variables. Results are interpreted as supporting assumptions from psychodynamic theories of development, although drawing attention to the importance of the existential contexts of development. The implications of these results for counselling are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition phase occurring between adolescence and adulthood requires that young people progressively separate from their family of origin and establish the necessary conditions for the construction of their own family. The capacity to develop intimate relationships outside their present family is one of these. From the psychological point of view, the development of autonomy and the setting up of love relationships are the two great challenges young people face at the end of adolescence.

IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The issues related to this life phase have been conceptualised in the frame of reference of several psychodynamic theories. So, according to Blos (1979), adolescence corresponds to a **second separation-individuation process**. That is, a second process by reference to a first separation process occurring in childhood (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1980), which goes from a symbiotic relationship stage between the infant and his/her

mother, till a stage in which the child acquires independence relative to the mother's physical presence, because he/she has now internalised her. And also a separation process, since it corresponds to a de-idealisation of infantile image of his/her parents, to a greater independence and self-differentiation from the actual parents, and to a relinquishing of infantile fantasies and expectations about oneself. And an individuation process too because, concurrently with separation, a process of assertion occurs of who the newly separated person is. The quest for individuality, which translates into character formation at the end of adolescence, implies the development of autonomy, without which it is impossible for the adolescent to redefine himself/herself, and comprises the acquisition of a personal values system and the prospecting of a personal future. According to Blos, sexual identity consolidation, and the capacity to establish love relationships not restricted to duplicating or substituting for the parental relationship, depend on the quality of resolution of the separation-individuation process.

These very same aspects are also implicit in the approach of Erikson. For him identity consolidation and intimacy construction are the two great challenges at the end of adolescence and beginning of adulthood (Erikson, 1959, 1972). In addition, according to Erikson, psychosocial identity consolidation is essential for intimacy construction, and thus for establishing satisfactory love relationships. Indeed, when having an incomplete or weak identity, a deep involvement with the other can be felt as interpersonal fusion, giving rise to identity loss and leading the young person to isolate himself/herself. Accordingly, a real involvement with other people is simultaneously the result and proof of the young adult's harmonious personality development. Erikson doesn't explicitly mention the development of autonomy as an adolescent's task, but this development is needed for identity development. As a matter of fact, without autonomy development, then role experimentation, initiative taking, and the assuming of responsibilities - all necessary for identity consolidation - would be impossible. Psychological separation from parents is also implicit in Erikson's approach, given that the integration of the various identity components is both a negation process and affirmation one. That is to say, to have the capacity to consolidate his/her identity the youngster has to relinquish from his/her parents whilst all protective and powerful objects.

In the frame of reference of Kohut's Self Psychology (Kohut, 1987), the individual with an autonomous self has internalised a personal values system which prevents him/her becoming too dependent on others, and at the same time allowing him/her to establish satisfactory intimate relationships with them. According to Kohut, the construction of an autonomous self and self-esteem consolidation are the most important tasks at the beginning of adulthood, a period when the new social demands and expectations can make vulnerabilities in the self's former development appear, which had gone

unnoticed till then due to the adolescent life having taken place in a more protected environment. For Kohut (1987), self-esteem consolidation requires that the young person put aside his/her fantasies of infantile grandiosity and project his/her future life on the basis of the realistic evaluation of his/her capacities and talents.

At the end of adolescence, the resolution of the developmental tasks mentioned above is made easier by the cognitive and social-cognitive development. As a matter of fact, autonomy construction is dependent upon the ability of abstract thinking about a spat of hypotheses, of projecting possible futures (Inhelder & Piaget, 1976; Piaget & Inhelder, 1979). Added to this, parental tutorship emancipation rests on the increased capacity to establish egalitarian relationships with others, in particular with parents (Selman, 1991) and, in its psychological separation dimension, it is fostered by the growth of both the capacity for self-reflection (Shain & Farber, 1989) and for realistic appreciation of others (Bloom, 1980, 1987). In its turn, the self-esteem consolidation process is made easier by the cognitive development because the young person can evaluate himself/herself in a more differentiated, complex, and integrated way (Harter, 1983, 1985).

Some authors consider that self-esteem is a stable characteristic of the individual (Block & Robbins, 1993; O'Malley & Bachman, 1983; Tashakkori, Thompson, Wade & Valente, 1990). Nevertheless, others assume that self-esteem may depend on the success in dealing with the life tasks peculiar to certain stages in life (Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal & Higgins, 1986) namely, at the end of adolescence, the psychological developmental tasks such as autonomy development and intimacy construction. We adopt this second stance, and all the more so since the young person goes through a second separation-individuation process, where a reorganisation of the self occurs that allows changes in its former structure (Kohut, 1987).

If the various psychodynamic authors consider, from their clinical experience, that there exist relationships among autonomy, capacity to establish love relationships, psychological separation from parent figures and self-esteem, the empirical confirmation of these relations is a more recent concern.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS RELATIONSHIPS

Separation and autonomy would correspond, according to Josselson (1980), to two faces of the same coin, since the loss associated with separation would compel the adolescent to develop his/her autonomy. Yet, little research has centred upon the characteristics of the psychological separation and autonomy relationship, due to the difficulty in operationalising the concept of autonomy, which is frequently mistaken for the perception of not being worthy of love as a result of attachment deficiency (Ryan &

Lynch, 1989). Nevertheless, empirical research suggests the existence of a positive relation between psychological separation and certain developmental manifestations associated with autonomy, such as self-efficacy (Lopez, Watkins, Manus & Hunton-Shoup, 1992), identity (Kroeger, 1985; Kroeger & Haslett, 1988), academic competence and psychosocial developmental (Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993), and identity exploration (Lucas, 1997). Other studies underscore the existence of a positive relationship between psychological separation and both psychological well-being plus personal-emotional adjustment (Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Kenny & Donaldson, 1992; Lapsley, Rice & Shadid, 1989; Lopez, 1991; Lopez, Campbel & Watkins, 1986, 1989; Rice, 1992; Rice, Cole & Lapsley, 1990), and love relationship adjustment (Hoffman, 1984). Moreover, the adjustment to separation seems associated with dating competence (Kenny, 1987). Research also suggests that a healthy family structure (relatively free of marital conflict and other dysfunctional interactions) is positively associated with the successful resolution of the separation-individuation process (Lopez, Campbell & Watkins, 1988). On the other hand, studies conducted within the systemic perspective indicate a positive relationship between the degree of differentiation from the family and both identity formation (Anderson & Fleming, 1986), and autonomy construction (Murphey, Silver, Coelho, Hamburg & Greenberg, 1963).

Autonomy construction seems to be a prerequisite for intimacy development (Orlofsky, 1978; Orlofsky, Marcia & Lesser, 1973), both of which are positively associated with psychological well-being (Aron, Paris & Aron, 1995; Laufer, 1972, 1974; Marcelli, 1990; Marcelli & Braconnier, 1989; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Solomon, 1990). In particular, the capacity to adopt a temporal perspective with realistic aspirations, which is paramount for autonomy construction, appears to be important for young people's well-being (Nuttin, 1985) while, on the contrary, instability of aims emerges as negatively related to self-esteem (Robbins & Patton, 1985).

Finally, intimacy development appears associated with a fewer number of disorders of separation-individuation (Levitz-Jones & Orlofsky, 1985), and the perception of being physically and sexually attractive is attached to a greater self-esteem (Fontaine, 1991a, 1991b; Griffiore, Kallen & Popovitch, 1990; Marsh, 1986). It must be noted that, in the setting up of heterosexual relationships, mutual attraction (in the sense of sexual attraction) seems a determinant precondition (Garbarino, 1985; McKnight, 1994; Simpson, Gangestad & Lerma, 1990); indeed, sexuality constitutes one of the main vectors or organisers of heterosexual intimate relationships (Alferes, 1993; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992).

GENDER DIFFERENCES

286 In the above mentioned associations, some gender differences have been found. Women

seem to be more sensitive than men to intrafamily conflicts and dysfunctional family interactions, as well as to the experience of internal conflict with parents, at least in what concerns self-reported problems, personal adjustment, and level of depression (Hoffman, 1984; Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Lopez et al., 1986, 1988, 1992). These associations are not exclusively moderated by the adolescent's gender, they can also be moderated by the parent's gender (Lapsley et al., 1989; Rice, 1992) and differ according to socio-economic status (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Besides, studies conducted within the framework of Erikson's theory show differences between men and women along the identity-intimacy developmental sequence (Craig-Bray, Adams & Dobson, 1988; Dyk & Adams, 1990; Hodgson & Fischer, 1979; Schiedel & Marcia, 1985).

CONCLUSION

In spite of the interesting data made available by empirical results, comparisons between variables are limited and never envisage the global relationship structure among the entire set of variables under scrutiny: separation from parents, autonomy, capacity to establish love relationships, and self-esteem. Added to this, whereas the empirical research points to the existence of gender differences in the pattern of relations among developmental tasks, research focused on socio-economic differences is practically absent. As socio-economic status is generally associated with different roles, expectations, opportunities, prestige and power, which overdetermines the individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1988), psychological development should be analysed taking into account the social context in which it takes place.

Our study aims at examining a model of causal relations among psychological separation, autonomy, capacity to establish love relationships, and self-esteem. The hypotheses of the research are inscribed within psychodynamic and clinical points of view. Nevertheless, they will be empirically tested by resorting to a quantitative methodology both at the level of data collection from a non-clinical population, as well as at the level of its analyses. This standpoint allows answering classical critiques of validity and reliability levelled at clinical measures, and to evaluate the gap between certain plausible models and reality.

Although psychodynamic theories, like as any other theory, may not be proven correct but only provisionally true, they can be constrained so as to resist the tests they are subjected to, as well as logically constrained to avoid internal inconsistency. So, theoretical hypotheses must be consistent among themselves, with any known data, and the predictions afforded by them must not be falsified by observation. This research is set in this frame of reference, though it is not common to test psychodynamic hypothesis with observable quantitative data.

2. THEORETICAL MODEL

For testing the system of relations among psychological separation, autonomy construction, capacity to establish love relationships and self-esteem consolidation, an exploratory causal model is proposed (Fig. 1). Although this model is supported by empirical research results reviewed above, it is also mainly based on our clinical experience and our interpretation of the theoretical literature (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1959, 1968; Kohut, 1987).

The model aims at testing the following hypothesis:

- 1) getting through the psychological process of separation from parents with success is a necessary condition for autonomy development and for the capacity to establish love relationships¹;
- 2) establishing love relationships is easier for those young people having already developed a certain autonomy²;
- 3) the resolution of psychological separation from parents, the autonomy development, and being able to establish love relationships, because they are fundamental competencies at this life stage, influence the psychological well-being of the young adult, contributing to self-esteem consolidation³. The effects of these variables on self-esteem consolidation can either be direct or indirect. Notice that empirical research suggests (e.g. Lapsley et al., 1989; Rice, 1992) a different influence of separation from father or from mother on other developmental tasks. So, we consider them separately, although separation from father and from mother are themselves related to each other;
- 4) according to empirical research, we anticipate that the relations defined in Fig. 1 will exhibit variations according to gender, though the research results available do not allow specific hypotheses regarding these variations, except that there is a link to gender;
- 5) finally, as argued above, we expect that there will be differences in the pattern of relations among developmental tasks too according to socio-economic status of origin, but still the lack of information available makes the study of this topic an exploratory one.

¹ This hypothesis is also supported by the empirical research of Hoffman, 1984; Kenny, 1987; Kroeger, 1985; Kroeger & Haslett, 1988; Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993; Levitz-Jones & Orlofsky, 1985; Lopez et al., 1992; Lucas, 1997.

² This hypothesis is also supported by the empirical research of Orlofsky, 1978; Orlofsky, Marcia & Lesser, 1973.

³ This hypothesis is also supported by the empirical and clinical research of Aron et al., 1995; Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Kenny & Donaldson, 1992; Lapsley et al., 1989; Laufer, 1972, 1974; Lopez, 1991; Lopez et al., 1986, 1988; Marcelli, 1990; Marcelli & Braconnier, 1989; Nuttin, 1985; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Rice, 1992; Rice et al., 1990; Robbins & Patton, 1985; Solomon, 1990.

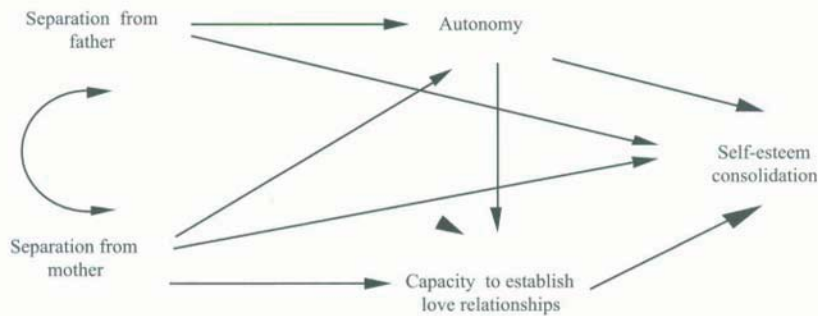


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of relationships among psychological separation, autonomy, capacity to establish love relationships and self-esteem consolidation

3. METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The participants were 315 university students from a university college in Lisbon, with ages between 18 and 25 and mean age of 21.83 years ($SD = 2.20$) whose distribution by gender and socio-economic level is indicated in Table I. The socio-economic level was determined from information collected about the parents' level of study and profession, on a 9-point scale. Subsequently, each student's socio-economic level was categorised as either low or high, such that the totality of students were divided into two roughly equal-sized homogeneous groups. The mean of parents' levels of study was of six years for the low group and of 12 years for the high group. It is worthwhile noticing that nowadays there are still in Portugal young people entering the university whose parents barely know how to read and write.

The vast majority of the sample was Caucasian (91%). Most of the students lived with their parents (71%) or other family members (8%) during the school year.

TABLE I. Subjects Distribution According to Gender and Socio-economic Status (SES)

Socio-economic Status	Men	Women	Total
Low SES	71	66	137
High SES	82	96	178
Total	153	162	315

The instruments were applied in a sole session, in different classrooms. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. The students were told that the research aimed at getting a better knowledge of some young people's personality characteristics. Participation was on a voluntary basis. The order of instrument application was random to cancel out, in the global sample, the eventual effects of sequence, but General Information presented at the end. The time to fill-in the instruments lasted between 35 and 50 minutes.

The adequacy of the model of relationships to empirical data, presented below, was tested using a structural equation modelling approach (LISREL)⁵.

VARIABLES AND INSTRUMENTS

Several dimensions of autonomy and of the capacity to establish love relationships, whose significance had been underscored by either clinical experience, theoretical literature, or empirical research, were identified in the course of previous studies (Dias, 1996; Dias & Fontaine, 1994, 1997, 1998). These dimensions were evaluated through a questionnaire specifically elaborated for this purpose, applied to a sample of 530 university students from various university colleges in Lisbon. A number of factors emerged from a factor analysis of the collected data, allowing several scales to be constructed. These previous studies have shown that the capacity for projecting the self into the future is a good indicator of autonomy, and that the sexual self-esteem is a good indicator of the initial capacity to establish love relationships. Although the projecting the self into the future capacity is only one aspect of autonomy construction, it can be considered a good indicator of this process given the importance of young people being able, at the beginning of adulthood, to construct a project for their future life (Blos, Kohut, Piaget). This scale has also the advantage of not mistaking autonomy for detachment, as occurs with some other autonomy scales. Sexual self-esteem seems to be a good indicator of the initial capacity to establish love relationships, because it evaluates a fundamental precondition enabling it, the conviction that one is worthy of love as a sexual partner (McKnight, 1994; Simpson et al., 1990).

Projecting the self into the future. This scale comprises 10 self-report items (e.g., "I'm postponing decisions all the time"; "I have well-defined plans for the future"; "generally, what I want to be seems unattainable"). Subjects responded to each item by

⁵ The program LISREL (Linear Structural Relations) determines the values for parameters describing the hypothetical causal relations among variables. The adjustment of the model to raw data is indicated by several indexes, particularly the chi-square, which should not be significant, the adjusted goodness-of-fit index, which should be as close as possible to one, and the root mean square residual, which should be as close as possible to zero. In the analysis the weak relations are considered null, as long as the adjustment of the model to the data is kept satisfactory, thus favouring the principle of simplicity.

situating themselves on a 6-point rating Likert-scale (totally agree, agree, agree more than disagree, disagree more than agree, disagree, totally disagree). This scale has a good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .86 in the present investigation) and several elements supporting its construction validity were gathered in the course of a preliminary study. For example, it was found that the individuals who have good academic results have significantly higher levels on this scale than those who have bad academic results. The variable "academic results" was used to support the construct validity of the instrument because other studies have found a positive association, among students, between the capacity to have a future perspective and the academic success (Lens & Decruyenaere, 1991).

Sexual Self-Esteem. This scale comprises 11 self-report questions (e.g., "sometimes I think no man (woman) will be interested in me", "I feel I am desired by some men (women)", "I feel as attractive as the majority of my colleagues")⁶. Students rated each item on a 6-point rating Likert-scale (from totally agree to totally disagree) according to how closely it applied to them. This scale has good internal consistency (Cronbach's coefficient alpha = .89 in the present investigation) and showed a good construct validity in a preliminary study. For example, it was found that young people who never dated have significantly lower levels on this scale than those who have already done so; and that higher levels of sexual self-esteem are associated with a greater facility to relate to the opposite sex, as evaluated by the Self Description Questionnaire (Marsh, 1984).

Global Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale, which appreciates the phenomenological experience of general self-worth, was used to assess self-esteem. This 10-item self-report instrument (e.g., "on the whole, I am satisfied with my self"; "I certainly feel useless at times"; "I feel that I have a number of good qualities") has a good construct validity confirmed in several cultures (Harter, 1983; Rosenberg, 1965, 1979, 1985). The adjustment of the student to the statements was assessed on a 4-point scale (totally agree, agree, disagree, totally disagree). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha value for Global Self-Esteem obtained was .86.

Conflictual Independence. This measure is part of the larger Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI; Hoffman, 1984), an instrument used to assess separation from parents in the vast majority of empirical research on the separation-individuation process. This self-report questionnaire has four scales corresponding to four dimensions of separation (functional independence, emotional independence, conflictual independence and attitudinal independence) and was previously adapted to the portuguese population

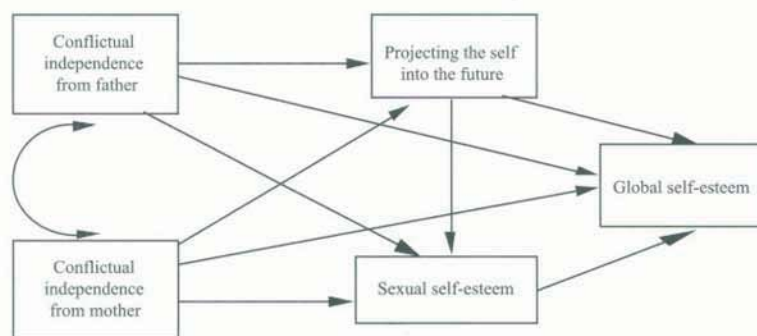
⁶ As it was not assumed that all respondents were heterosexual, it was stated in the administration instructions that any item not applicable should not be answered.

(Almeida, Dias & Fontaine, 1996). Among its several scales, Conflictual Independence Scale is the one that seems to best capture the quality of the separation-individuation process resolution. As a matter of fact, this scale assesses the young person's capacity for not feeling too much culpability, anxiety, responsibility, resentment, when facing the conflicts that sometimes occur in the course of the normative process of acquiring greater independence from parents. Thus, this scale captures the acceptance of separation and how much the young person is in peace with his parents. Accordingly, a number of previous studies pointed out the existence of positive associations between several measures of adjustment and well-being of university students and their Conflictual Independence (Hoffman, 1984; Hoffman & Weiss, 1987; Kenny & Donaldson, 1992; Lapsley et al., 1989; Lopez, 1991; Lopez et al., 1986, 1989; Rice, 1992; Rice et al., 1990), thus favouring the scale construction validity. In its portuguese version, the scale is composed of 11 statements addressing father and 11 identical statements addressing mother (e.g., "I blame my mother (father) for many of the problems I have"; "I feel like I am constantly at war with my mother (father)"; "sometimes my mother (father) is a burden on me"). Respondents rate their level of agreement with each item, using a 4-point scale ranging from totally agree to totally disagree. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for Conflictual Independence addressing Father and Mother were .87 and .88 respectively.

General Information. Demographic data has been collected, including on parents' level of study and profession.

4. RESULTS

Given the indicator variables chosen to operationalise the different developmental tasks, the causal model tested is the one indicated in Fig. 2.



292 Fig. 2. Causal model of relationships among variables

In this model, independence from the mother and the father are considered as "independent" variables whose contingent association, indicated by a curved arrow, results from external influences on the model. The capacity to project the self into the future, the sexual self-esteem, and the global self-esteem are considered as "dependent" variables that may also admit causal relations among them. The orientation of the arrows indicates our hypotheses about the causality direction. This causal model puts this study's hypotheses concerning the relations among variables in concrete form. Notice, however, that the model of causality relationships cannot be really tested with our data, given their correlational nature. Study results might only be compatible or not with this cause-and-effect theoretical model. However we cannot affirm that the same data might not be compatible with another model of causality. This specific aspect must be tested in a future longitudinal research.

The model was first tested with the whole data and no good adjustment was found. This result was by itself in agreement with our hypothesis that there would be differences between genders and socio-economic levels in the system of relations among developmental tasks.

The model was then analysed separately, for men and for women, from low and from high socio-economic levels. The quality of the simplest adjustments for the different genders and socio-economic levels is pointed out in Table II, these adjustments being represented in Fig. 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Certain aspects of the model seem adequate for all groups. In fact, for all the four groups, Projecting the Self into the Future directly influences both Sexual Self-Esteem and Global Self-Esteem. On the whole, a simpler model than the one that had been foreseen also adjusts to the empirical data. As a matter of fact, no significant direct influence was observed between Conflictual Independence from Father and the Sexual Self-Esteem, in either of the four groups.

TABLE II. Goodness-of-Fit Measures for the Model

Measure	Men		Women	
	High SES	Low SES	High SES	Low SES
Degrees of freedom	4	4	4	6
Chi-square	3.07	3.59	1.15	6.33
(p)	(.55)	(.47)	(.89)	(.39)
Adjusted goodness-of-fit index	.94	.92	.98	.91
Root mean square residual	1.50	1.80	.76	2.63

Nevertheless, comparison of the male (Fig. 3 and 4) and female (Fig. 5 and 6), and comparison of the high socio-economic level (Fig. 3 and 5) and low socio-economic level (Fig. 4 and 6) show the presence of significant differences between genders and between socio-economic status (SES). Indeed, for the male gender a significant direct influence between Conflictual Independence (Mother) and Sexual Self-Esteem occurs, which is absent for the female gender.

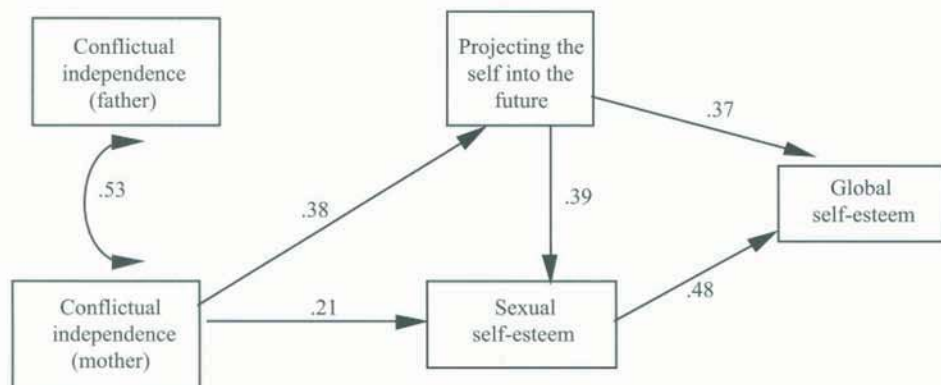


Fig. 3. LISREL parameter estimates for men from high socio-economic status.

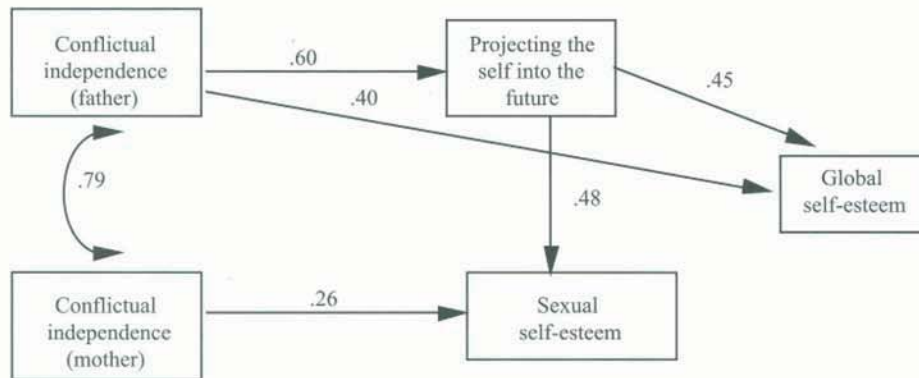


Fig. 4. LISREL parameter estimates for men from low socio-economic status.

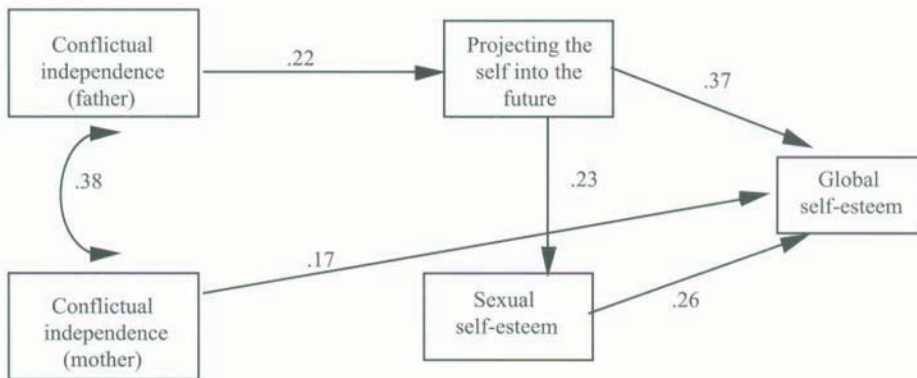


Fig. 5. LISREL parameter estimates for women from high socio-economic status.

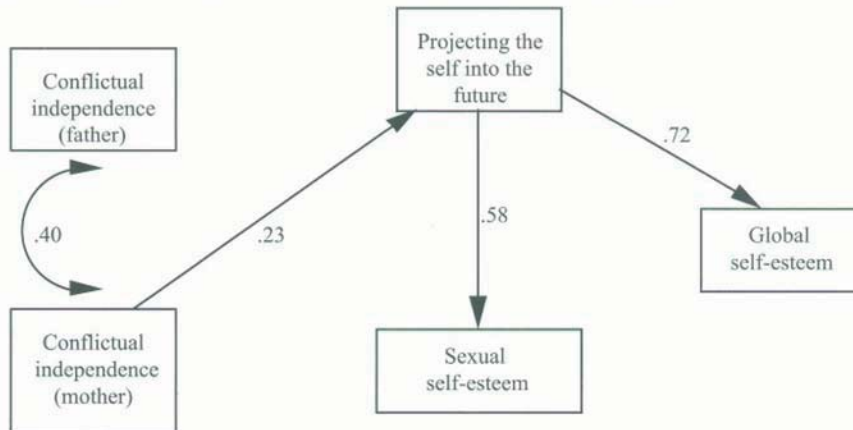


Fig. 6. LISREL parameter estimates for women from low socio-economic status

As to the differences between socio-economic levels, for low SES, the influence of Sexual Self-Esteem on Global Self-Esteem fails to be significant, while important for high SES. Other differences between socio-economic levels occur, distinguished according to gender. Thus, for women from low SES, Conflictual Independence (Mother) influences Projecting the Self into the Future, while for women from high SES it is Conflictual Independence (Father) that influences Projecting the Self into the Future, Conflictual Independence (Mother) exhibiting a relationship to Global Self-Esteem. In contradistinction, for men the situation is, in part, the opposite: for those from low SES it is Conflictual Independence (Father) that seems determinant for Projecting the Self into the Future, and also influences Global Self-Esteem, while for those from high SES it is Conflictual Independence (Mother) that turns out associated with Projecting the Self into the Future.

5. DISCUSSION

The model based on psychodynamic theories was supported, in all four groups, although the importance of the relationships between variables varies for the distinct groups, as expected. As a matter of fact, the model adjusts well to empirical data for all genders and socio-economic levels, although its adjustment is best for subjects from high SES, specially women, as can be inferred from the parameters shown in Table II. Accordingly, we can assert that, whatever the gender or the SES, on the whole the resolution of the separation-individuation process from parents (evaluated by the degree of conflictual independence from parents) helps in the successful resolution of the other young adult's developmental tasks, namely the construction of their autonomy, in its dimension of ability to project their future. In the same way, the construction of autonomy is important for the development of the capacity for establishing love relationships and is associated with the young person's self-esteem, in all groups.

That is to say, as predicted, the young person's capacity for assuming, in a normal way, the restructuring of their relationships with parents, namely without experiencing feelings of guilt or anger, promotes their psychological development, and namely expresses itself in their capacity for realistically projecting their future life. Nevertheless, important differences between genders and socio-economic levels were found.

In the first place, our results indicate that men's sexual self-esteem is influenced by the resolution of the internal conflict with mother, but this doesn't seem to be the case with women. This is in agreement with psychodynamic theories, which consider the resolution of the separation-individuation process from the mother fundamental for the

male capacity to establish love relationships outside the familial orbit (e.g. Blos, 1979; Kernberg, 1976). Since a girl's gender identity is considered to be more firmly rooted and less complex than a boy's identity, given that mother and daughter share the same sex (Dujovne, 1991), it is natural that a girl doesn't need, as much as a boy, to free herself from dependencies on her mother to be able to assert herself as a sexual being. Our results are consistent with this perspective, in that the internal conflict with the mother doesn't seem important to a woman's sexual self-esteem, while for men it does seem so.

Second, the capacity to project oneself into the future seems to be influenced by the psychological separation from parents, but in a different way for men and women from diverse socio-economic levels. As a matter of fact, for men from lower socio-economic levels, the resolution of the process of separation-individuation from the father seems fundamental for the capacity to project into the future, while for men from higher socio-economic status, it is the resolution of the process of separation-individuation from the mother, and not from the father, that emerges as important for this task. Moreover, the smaller the internal conflict vis-à-vis separation from the father, the greater is the global self-esteem for men arising from lower status, while for men from higher levels the existence of such a conflict doesn't seem to affect their global self-esteem.

On the whole, these results suggest that, for men from lower social levels, the father has a direct fundamental role both for their capacity to project the future and for their global self-esteem, the resolution of the first of these tasks being also paramount for global self-esteem. For men from the higher status, the construction of future plans does not seem to be so clearly influenced by the resolution of the separation-individuation process from the father, and self-esteem consolidation depends also, in large measure, on the sexual self-esteem.

We can advance a possible interpretation of these results. On the one hand, the father is an important identification figure for young men, and so it is natural that he play a fundamental part in their autonomy's global construction. On the other, it is expected that young men attending university and arising from low levels experience a greater distance between themselves and their fathers, from the cultural and future economic level point of view, and from the life-style and achievement opportunities one as well, than young men issued from higher status backgrounds. Thus, it is natural that the resolution of the separation-individuation process may be more difficult for the former young men, specially in what concerns internal conflicts of loyalty, culpability, and shame, which can be experienced as more susceptible of threatening the continuity of the relationship with their fathers, or of risking conflict permanence. It is worth noting that the level of internal conflict with the father, in this study, emerged identical for young men from both socio-economic levels, which doesn't mean that its resolution

might not be more important, with respect to distinct consequences, for lower status young men.

Besides, although the level of conflict may be similar, the conflict theme may be different. It is possible to envisage that, for young men from the lower economic levels, the issues on which the conflict falls upon are directly related to their future projects. At this level, presumably the father sacrificed himself, more so than those at a higher level, to make it possible for his son to pursue university studies. He has invested more, emotionally too, on this kind of project and has possibly pressed more for his son's accomplishment. These facts can stimulate on the youngster's part, on the one hand a feeling of debt towards his father which he must pay off through loyalty when projecting his future; and, on the other hand, a greater resentment towards the father for his pressure and expectations concerning his son's future, which limit the youngster's freedom of choice and increase his anxiety. In addition, the difficulty in the resolution of the separation process can be reinforced by the father's own conceivable ambivalence towards his son, who will be able to rise to a social level to which he couldn't, and with his assistance. So, along this line of interpretation, our results indicate, not that the separation from the father is more important for young people from lower social status than for those issuing from a higher social status, but instead that the internal conflict associated with the separation from the father may be more deleterious for autonomy construction and for self-esteem consolidation for the former rather than for the latter, and that, complementary, conflict resolution may bring more benefits to the former than to the latter.

With regard to psychological separation from the mother, it has a clear influence on the ability to project into the future for men from a high socio-economic level, but not so for men from a lower one. This fact can be interpreted by considering that, because the separation from the father is more "peaceful" for young men from the first group, the quality of the relation with the mother may comparatively assume more importance than in the second group. Thus, for young men from a high socio-economic level, it will be in relation to the mother - who in general maintains a more engaged relationship in the daily life organisation of her sons - that infantile dependencies, and thus separation related conflicts, manifest themselves more clearly. It appears also to us that, for upper status young men, there is perhaps an increased maternal protection than for the lower ones, due to more time and money being available to the mother. This can give rise to their sons' greater dependency on the relationship in these milieus and, consequently, also to a possibly increased autonomy difficultation.

Contrariwise, for women, the influence of psychological separation from parents on future plans construction seems to be, in part, opposite to that described for men. As a

matter of fact, the ability to project oneself into the future manifests itself, in this case, associated with conflictual independence from the mother in the low socio-economic strata, and with conflictual independence from the father within high socio-economic ones. When attempting to interpret this result, one must on the one side consider that, in the university context where the instruments were administered, it is plausible the questions posed regarding future plans would have likely been projected (for men as for women) on professional future plans. On the other, it seems to be in the higher social levels that the image of women associated with a professional career is more strongly established. There still exists however, in general, a tendency to construe the professional world on the basis of the family world, more so for women than for men. Since the father's professional success is generally more salient than the mother's, it is plausible that the relational issues with the father be more influential in what concerns the projection into the future of women from a higher socio-economic level. To the contrary, in lower social status, the father may be, for cultural reasons, less involved and engaged in this type of future projects in relation to his daughters and, for that reason, independence from mother may have an important role for women's future plans. As a matter of fact, young women from these milieus must be able to psychologically separate from their mothers so as to construct future projects very different from their mothers'. For women from a high socio-economic level, conflict with the mother, though not influencing future projects, seems to have a direct and significant negative impact on the maintenance of a positive self-image, that had been found also by Lopez et al. (1992).

It must be noted that other factors, besides the ones mentioned, may account for the differential impact of internal conflict with parents, either on sexual self-esteem, on projection into the future, or on global self-esteem, for both men and women from different socio-economic status. The gender differences found in our results are consistent with other empirical investigations (e.g., Benson, Harris & Rogers, 1992; Berman & Sperling, 1991; Fleming, 1988; Kenny, 1987, 1990; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Lapsley et al., 1989; Rice, 1990), and also with the theoretical positions of some more recent authors (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1988), who consider that the way adolescent normative tasks are resolved is distinct for men and for women.

Third, the fact that sexual self-esteem does not seem to significantly influence global self-esteem of young people of lower socio-economic levels, contrasts with the influence it does have for young people of higher status. We can advance the hypothesis that such an influence may be negligible in comparison with the stronger importance, for the global esteem in the first group, carried by the capacity to project into the future. Indeed, it is possible that the priorities ascribed to the normative tasks of future

constructing and finding of a loved one, might be distinct for young people from a low or from a high social status. Those from a low socio-economic level might not be concerned as much with sexual self-esteem, comparatively with other goals like academic and professional success, as those from a high socio-economic level. Actually, for young people from more privileged backgrounds, academic and professional success may be less problematic, as these correspond to a more natural and previously trod route, with better known strategies. Sexual self-esteem assuming then, comparatively, greater importance, because less predictable and controllable.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the results obtained suggest that the relationships among normative tasks and the underlying developmental processes seem not to be identical in the divers contexts of existence. Being male or being female, having low or high socio-economic status, proffers experiences, conveys norms and inculcate values which introduce qualitative changes in the pattern of relations among variables.

Finally, our results have important implications for the counselling of university students. First, due to the interrelationships of developmental tasks. For instance, young people who come in for counselling following difficulties in love relationships may need help with their autonomy development and with their psychological separation from parents. As to young people asking after career planning, it is known that career indecisiveness may be underscored by problems in the ability to project into the future. But the liable difficulties in this domain may in turn come forth as a result of difficulties with the psychological separation from parents. It is desirable for the counsellor to identify such problems and explore them with the student.

Second, our results suggest that the interrelationships of developmental tasks is distinct according to gender and socio-economic status. Being male or being female, belonging to high or to low socio-economic status means dealing with these tasks differently and having diverse peculiar vulnerabilities. Specially at risk may be the young male from low socio-economic status. For these young men to assume their independence from their father, without feelings of guilt and problems of loyalty, may prove specially difficult.

The conclusions referred to above must take into account the limitations of this study and their consequences. First, the non-random nature of our sample does not allow generalisation of the results obtained to the whole of the portuguese university population. Second, the correlational nature of this study does not establish, but only

suggest, the presence of a cause-and-effect relation among the variables of interest. The confirmation of our model will require the use of longitudinal studies. Third, the use of a self-reporting questionnaire for data collection limits the information gathered to the participants' subjective conscious perceptions about themselves, to what they are predisposed to reveal from such perceptions, to their honesty, and to their availability to do so. Finally, our sample consisted entirely of college men and women, and we employed a single measure for each variable. Replications of this study with other samples of young adults (e.g., young people from the same age range not having pursued university studies but having instead entered the labour force), and with alternative measures for the same variables, are required to confirm the stability and generalisability of our findings.

In spite of this, we believe these results provide an interesting contribution to the equating of the developmental tasks' interrelations, as they draw attention to the need for studying such processes in specific contexts and, moreover, alert to the danger of improper generalisation of results from subjects with particular cultural characteristics to all those at the beginning of adulthood.

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