

ATTACHMENT AND FORMING OF IDENTITY

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Abstract: Identity represents the sense of wholeness of one person, sense of continuity in one's behavior instead of different changes that are occurring inside an individual or around it. The identity consists of cognitive and emotional aspects of an individual and its self-perception about what happens „inside me” and what differ me from other people. Self-perception is developing under the influence of the environment, cultural factors and agencies in the process of socialization and it is the basis of our self-regard as once evaluation of one self. For developing of identity the most important period is adolescence, but we can find the roots in early childhood. For Ericson, in the period before adolescence, in different periods of childhood and early youth a person has to resolve different crises to develop the sense of autonomy, thrust, individuality ect. Globally, the results of identity development can be positive identity outcomes or foreclosure. Those identity development results primarily depend on socio-emotional factors where the great importance belongs to early interaction with caregivers and the mother on the first place. The sense of trust that is developing in the early childhood will result in the secure socio-emotional status and perception of one self and other persons in the environment as positive and reliable. On the other side, early developed sense of insecurity will probably result in the tendency of avoidance. So, consequences of those early interaction will influence characteristic affective style of one person which is related to self-regard and is the part of one's identity. The aim of this article is to analyze the role of attachment and its importance in forming of an identity which is the basis of our interactions, our feeling of controlling or being controlled, our emotions, attitudes and behavior. Understanding the interplay between these aspects helps us comprehend the complexities of human development.

Keywords: attachment, identity, early childhood

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity formation is a process where adolescence plays a crucial role, although its origins are rooted in early childhood. This process is influenced by societal factors and various social figures, with the final outcome of identity being shaped by these influences. Attachment relates to feelings of safety or threat, generally linked to a sense of security. The most significant social factors in identity formation are parental figures, with the mother being the primary figure initially, followed by the father (in most cases). Their involvement in child development begins in early childhood. Some authors (Dallos, 2003) emphasize a hierarchy of attachment based on who primarily cares for the child. According to Bowlby (1988), attachment refers to the quality of the specific relationship between the mother and child in early childhood, which endures throughout life and affects other relationships. Identity formation impacts subsequent intimacy development (Marcia, 2009). Thus, the emotional patterns of feeling secure or insecure, loved or unloved, become integral to one's identity and influence behavior and overall life. Different attachment styles—secure, anxious, or avoidant—affect how individuals interact with others and perceive themselves.

2. IDENTITY

Identity refers to the feeling of wholeness and continuity of oneself over time, despite varying circumstances and changes across different periods and environments (Erikson, 2008). The formation of identity is a dynamic process aimed at achieving relative stability. It begins in childhood, continues through adolescence, and culminates in maturity. Identity is closely linked to self-perception and comprises two main types: personal and social identity. Social identity involves defining oneself as part of a social group, answering the question “Who are we?” In contrast, personal identity pertains to defining oneself at the individual level, answering the question “Who am I?” (Van Doeselaar, 2020, p. 9). Personal identity represents how one's self-perception relates to others within the same social group, while social identity refers to aspects of self-perception that are shared with members of the same group and distinguish

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oneself from members of different groups (Arnold et al., 2005). Social identity is based on the values and emotional significance of a particular group and derives from one's membership in that group (Taylor et al., 2003). According to social identity and self-categorization theories, as shared social identity becomes more salient, individual self-perception can become depersonalized (Turner et al., 1992). There are at least two types of social identities: global and specific role identities (Leonard et al., 1999). Global social identity is forming very early in family as the primary social group, is consisting of values, traits, competences which were reinforced in that environment and influences on the choice of the group to which one would belong in adulthood. This identity expresses in all roles, all situations in relation to different social groups. Identity of specific roles derives from global one and consists of identities which are expressing in specific referent groups or social roles such as work identity, identity of parent, family member, student, friend ect. So, for each social role or social status there is identity attached to it which is present in specific interaction what means that self and identity are not the same one but self is the basis of identity (Cinoglu & Arıkan, 2021).

The period of adolescence during which individuals analyze and experiment with different roles is referred to by Erikson as a psychological moratorium (Erikson, 2008). During this period, the degree of emotional conflict varies among individuals and can influence identity formation. The central aspect of identity formation is the identity crisis, which can be resolved in two ways: identity synthesis, leading to the development of self-constructed values, ideals, and goals, resulting in a consistent sense of self over time and often accompanied by high self-esteem, a sense of self-control, and purpose in life; and identity confusion, where the crisis persists, leading to mood changes, rebelliousness, and difficulty forming close and intimate relationships (Gandhi et al., 2019). Typically, adolescents undergo a transformation towards independence (Al-Zoubi, 2020). They strive to ensure that their self-perception aligns with significant others' perceptions of them and seek confirmation that their behavior is consistent with their identity (Cadely et al., 2018). Failures in establishing identity during this period can lead to self-doubt and role confusion, which may result in a lack of personal integration, unclear identity, and subsequent psychological disturbances.

Based on Erikson's theory, Marcia (Marcia: Rice, 2001) defined four identity statuses which are ways of dealing with identity issues in late adolescence: Identity achievement is the most advanced developmental status, where the individual has navigated through a period of crisis, explored various alternatives, made strong commitments, and developed an internal locus of control. Moratorium precedes identity achievement and is characterized by active exploration of alternatives, during which individuals are not yet ready to make decisions or accept obligations. Foreclosure represents a lack or minimal amount of exploration, resulting in commitment to values and ideologies that are not the result of personal searching but are instead adopted from parents or other early reference figures. This status is often accompanied by an external locus of control. Identity diffusion applies to individuals who are not committed to any definite direction in their lives, including aspects such as occupation, religion, political attitudes, or personal criteria for behavior.

Not all identities are equally adaptive. The most adaptive identity is that of achievers, characterized by a strong sense of meaning in life, general well-being, high levels of ego development, self-esteem, moral reasoning, and self-respect (Schwartz et al., 2011). In contrast, individuals with a foreclosure identity may exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety, as they often become defensive and display high levels of authoritarianism, obedience to authority, stereotypical thinking, an external locus of control, and dependent relationships with significant others (Kroger, 1993). Meanwhile, those in a moratorium status may experience increased self-knowledge but also significant levels of confusion, anxiety, and depression (Schwartz et al., 2011).

3. ATTACHMENT

The term "attachment" was first introduced by John Bowlby. Before Bowlby, the psychoanalytic approach described the emotional connection between a mother and child as emotional dependence, which was seen as deriving from the process of forming object relations.

Attachment refers to the specific relationship which is developing between primary caregiver (most often it is mother) and a child in earliest childhood and lasts through the whole life as the permanent psychological connection between two people (Holmes: Stefanović-Stanojević, 2015). For Lafreniere et al. (2008) attachment is strong emotional connection which provoke feelings of happiness, pleasure and security in the presence of caregiver and anxiety and fretfulness in their absence. So, here we have very strong connection and such relationship, once formed, further influences different social interactions which a person realizes as adult in life. Early interactions with primary caregivers shape internal working models

(IWMs) of self and others. These models are cognitive frameworks that influence individuals' expectations and behaviors in relationships throughout their lives. Caregivers who are available and responsive to the child's needs, establish a predictable routine and provide a stable environment, validate the child's feelings and experiences, empathize with the child and acknowledge their emotions, offers support and guidance during exploration, represent a safe haven if children wish to return when they need acceptance, are the caregivers who will most probably raise a child with secure attachment (Lazović, 2022).

Among adults, such emotional connection appears in the form of friendship and intimacy (Kim, 2005). The level of intimacy depends on primary formed patterns of attachment. The ways individuals' approach to the relationships through their lives, reflect the level of security or insecurity that they bring from relationship with primary caregivers. Insecurities are related to feeling of dependence in relationships or avoiding of intimacy (Cadely et al., 2018). One of the key factors that mediates in this process is the way of communication of parents with children which can be unfolding on different levels of freedom or restrictiveness, and this is the reason why some children grow up healthy and other with disturbance (Bowlby, 1988).

There is accordance between different authors that child can develop three patterns of attachment styles: Secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment style. Secure attachment style derives from consistent response from the parents who provides reassurance and comfort for child, so the child can predict parent's reactions and express its own emotions (Dallos, 2003) and have the feeling of acceptance (Stefanović-Stanojević, 2015). We can assume that identification with such parents and introjections of such pattern will develop ability for predicting events in social contacts and to acquire wider range of emotions with mostly positive emotions. Secure attachment results in self-confidence, confidence in others and readiness for intimate relationships (Al-Zoubi, 2020). As adult, such persons are open for communication, exploration, growing and developing, becomes autonomous personalities ready for taking risks and able to struggle with life problems (Stefanović-Stanojević, 2015). Avoidant attachment style belongs to people who feel uncomfortable in close relationships and have fear of failure in intimate relationships (Feeney, 2008). As children, such persons have experienced that parent was not available and instead of the child's attempts to gain closeness, they were rejected, where the child attempts to disregard the need for attachment by withdrawing into non-social situations (Dallos, 2003). As adults such persons become rigid, defensive, distrustful, closed and turned to material achievement in the aim of keeping positive self-image (Stefanović-Stanojević, 2015). Anxious/ambivalent attachment style represents individuals who seek closeness while simultaneously fearing rejection (Feeney, 2008). This style derives from child's experiences of inconsistent presence and responding of parents when child display distress. If this state lasts for extensive period of time, other features of surrounding can become associated with feelings of fear and anxiety resulting in dominantly negative feelings (Dallos, 2003). As adult such persons become dependent on others, blocked by anger, offensive in social relationships, burdened with unresolved conflicts, insensitive for other's needs (Stefanović-Stanojević, 2015). Each of these attachment patterns tends to persist, but persistence is not necessarily guaranteed. There is evidence that when a child's attachment with their mother and father differs, and when parents treat the child differently, attachment patterns may change depending on the parent involved (Bowlby, 1988). Recent research has shown that if a child does not form a secure attachment with primary caregivers, there is a possibility that secure attachment can be established with another figure during development, such as a teacher, or a member of the extended family (Lazović, 2022).

4. THE ROLE OF ATTACHMENT IN FORMING OF IDENTITY

One of the main settings of attachment theory was that there is powerful influence of the way the child is treated by its parents, especially mother figure, on child development (Bowlby, 1988). This means that a significant role in forming and facilitating identity development belongs to the support and encouragement from the environment, particularly from family and other reference groups (Bosma & Kunnem: Al-Zoubi, 2020). The more of support and encouragement, the more of identity stability. Every child forms its working models as frameworks for relationships with significant others based on past experiences with them about their responsiveness and availability, and these models help children to predict and interpret behavior of attachment figures (Delgado et al., 2022). These internal working models consist of expectations about the self and others and become integrated into the personality, guiding future social relationships. Some authors (Cumming & Davies; Harlow, 2021) stress that internal working models are dynamic and subject to change, and that the potential for change can be found outside of primary dyadic relationships.

People with different attachment styles perceive themselves in different ways, which influences

the knowledge component of self-concept (Wu, 2009). Psychological identity is influenced by attachment as the social factor. Attachment influences a child's physical, neurological, cognitive, and psychological development by providing a fundamental sense of trust or mistrust, which further affects future relationships with the world, social interactions, and other behavioral patterns. (Crouch, 2015). When a person of any age feels secure, this provides a strong basis for exploring their surroundings, based on the relationship with attachment figures from their childhood. "The presence of an attachment control system and its linking to the working models of self and attachment figure(s) that are built in mind during childhood are held to be central features of personality functioning throughout life" (Bowlby, 1988:123). Marcia (Marcia; Putri & Kusumaningrum, 2023) emphasizes that identity formation begins at birth and is shaped by the child's interactions with their mother and other family members, influenced by several factors, including: the level of identification with parents during childhood and adolescence; parenting style; the presence of a role model; social expectations related to identity alternatives and choices among family, peers, and other environments; the child's openness to different identity alternatives; and the level of personality development in pre-adolescence, which forms the foundation for addressing identity issues. During childhood and adolescence, friendships as a form of peer attachment become the environment for social comparison, the development of social competencies, and the formation of self-esteem (Delgado et al., 2022).

Edmon (Edmon; Al-Zoubi, 2020) has outlined five processes in identity formation: distinguishing between the self and the external world, based on the child's ability to recognize bodily sensations and emotions; imitation, which occurs when a child observes and begins to replicate other models; narcissistic encouragement, deriving from the emotional support provided by the environment and primary family; the acquisition process, which involves the progression of self-awareness and the stabilization of feelings independent of various experiences and roles; and the achievement process, which entails an individual's openness to future experiences and activities. These processes are essentially related to the internalization of communication patterns. Attachment, which initially characterizes the relationship, gradually becomes an inherent quality of the child as they grow older. The child then attempts to apply these internalized communication patterns in interactions with others, such as peers and teachers (Bowlby, 1988). So, children with secure attachment are generally cooperative, popular, and resilient, while children with avoidant attachment are often emotionally unstable, hostile, or antisocial. Children with anxious attachment, on the other hand, frequently seek attention, are easily frustrated, impulsive, and feel helpless.

Many studies have found a relationship between attachment styles and the formation of identity. In general, children with sensitive and responsive parents tend to develop healthy personalities with stable identities, while children with insensitive, unresponsive, neglectful, or rejecting parents may develop vulnerable, unstable personalities with weak or confused identities (Bowlby, 1988). Park et al. (2004) found that secure attachment is associated with an achieved identity and that securely attached individuals exhibit greater independence from external validation. In contrast, insecure attachment styles are related to lower self-esteem, suggesting that individuals with insecure attachments view themselves as having little value and feeling worthless (Bartholomew & Horowitz; Wu, 2009).

At the pinnacle of attachment dynamics within a psychologically healthy personality is the attainment of intimacy. True intimacy involves "willingness to risk the ego-synthesis of the identity stage to form new, joint identity with another person." (Franz & White, 1985: 235). For the same authors, a precondition for intimacy with others is having intimacy with oneself, which includes a sense of security in one's own identity. If an individual's internalization of their caregivers' behavior is positive and they develop a positive self-representation, it is highly likely that the individual will trust that others love and care for them and will actively seek social support and intimacy (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Those with a negative self-perception are often anxious and ambivalent in their relationships with others. If they do not trust others, they may develop a tendency to avoid interpersonal relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Berman et al. (2006) found that achieved and foreclosed identities have a weak relationship with anxiety and avoidance attachment styles, while diffuse identities, and especially moratorium status, have a stronger relationship with these attachment styles. Putri and Kusumaningrum (2023) found a link between peer attachment and foreclosure identity, explaining that adolescents with a foreclosure identity tend to follow their parents' opinions, are obedient, exhibit minimal antisocial behavior, and maintain good relationships with their peers. In the context of dating, Pitman et al. (2012) found that avoidant attachment was negatively correlated with identity exploration, while anxious attachment was positively correlated and associated with greater situational exploration. Brennan et al. (1998) stated that anxious orientation is associated with a dependence on and valuing of closeness with romantic partners, even at the risk of losing one's sense of self. In contrast, individuals with avoidant orientation resist forming close relationships with their

partners despite a desire for intimacy, due to fears of rejection or loss of independence. In one study, in a sample of middle childhood children it was found that peers can be ad hoc attachment figures (Lazović, 2022). Itsna et al. (according to Putri & Kusumaningrum, 2023) found that peer acceptance and support can help adolescents feel more valued and loved by their surroundings and contribute to the formation of a positive self-identity. Thus, peer opinions can influence identity formation.

5. CONCLUSION

The intricate interplay between attachment styles and identity formation underscores the profound impact of early relationships on psychological development. Attachment theory highlights that the quality of early interactions with primary caregivers significantly shapes one's self-concept and interpersonal dynamics. Secure attachment fosters a robust identity, characterized by self-confidence and stability, while insecure attachment styles—such as avoidant and anxious—can lead to challenges in self-esteem and relationship patterns. The dynamic nature of identity formation, influenced by attachment experiences, emphasizes the importance of both early and ongoing social interactions in shaping personal and social identities. Research indicates that individuals with secure attachments are more likely to achieve a coherent identity and exhibit healthier psychological outcomes, while those with insecure attachments may struggle with identity confusion and interpersonal difficulties. The evolving nature of internal working models suggests that while early experiences are foundational, positive relationships later in life can foster change and growth. Furthermore, peer relationships and social contexts play a critical role in reinforcing or challenging one's identity. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of attachment and identity formation can inform interventions aimed at promoting psychological well-being and healthy relational patterns. Future research should continue to explore these relationships to enhance strategies for supporting individuals across different stages of development.

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