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The relationship of maternal separation anxiety and differentiation of self to children's separation anxiety and adjustment to kindergarten: A study in Druze families

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Abstract

The study explores relationships between preschoolers' separation anxiety and adjustment to kindergarten and their mothers' separation anxiety and levels of differentiation. It also examines the universality of several theoretical and clinical notions in Bowen's [Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Aronson: New York] Family Systems Theory, by testing them in the Eastern-collectivist Israeli-Druze society. The main findings were positive correlations between mothers' and children's separation anxiety, as well as negative correlations between children's separation anxiety and maternal differentiation (for total DSI score and for emotional cutoff), so that lower differentiation and higher cutoff were associated with higher levels of anxiety. Another interesting finding was that teachers perceived the children of Druze working mothers as having more problematic behaviors than non-working mothers, pointing to poorer adjustment to kindergarten. Results suggest that a crucial balance of separation and closeness provides an optimal context for meeting the needs and promoting the healthy development of both mother and child. The present study is the first to indicate relations between mothers' differentiation and preschoolers' separation anxiety among Druze participants, partially supporting the universality of Bowen's theory "in all families and

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in all cultures” [Kerr, M., & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation*. New York: Norton, p. 202].

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1. Introduction

The abundant research on mothers’ anxiety regarding separation from their children supports the belief that maternal anxiety is an important psychological construct and is meaningfully related to both maternal behaviors towards the child and other aspects of maternal personality (e.g., DeMeis, Hock, & McBride, 1986; Hock, Hart, Kang, & Lutz, 2004; Hock, McBride, & Gnezda, 1989; Hock & Schirtzinger, 1992; Lutz & Hock, 1995; McBride & Belsky, 1988). Yet, the familial antecedents of maternal anxiety have not been fully explicated, nor has their impact on children’s separation anxiety and their adjustment to kindergarten. Moreover, these have never been examined in Eastern and collective societies. The present study is a first attempt to explore the relationships between preschoolers’ separation anxiety and adjustment to kindergarten, on the one hand, and their mothers’ levels of differentiation and separation anxiety in Druze families.

Separation anxiety has been increasingly identified as a common and debilitating problem for children and adolescents (Clark, Smith, Neighbors, Skerlec, & Randall, 1994). It is characterized by a non-age-appropriate, excessive worry and anxiety regarding separation from caregivers or from home. Additionally, children may refuse to go to school or to sleep alone, and have nightmares about separation, disrupted sleep patterns, and psychosomatic symptoms. Separation anxiety has been associated with several secondary problems, including poor academic performance, impaired peer socialization, and emotional adjustment difficulties (e.g., Cronk, Slutske, Madden, Bucholz, & Heath, 2004).

The key features of separation anxiety are the non-age-appropriate and excessive nature of the symptoms. For instance, a fear of being away from caregivers may be age-appropriate for a small child but becomes problematic when the child refuses to go to pre-school or school (Cronk et al., 2004). This disorder is relatively common, with prevalence estimates near 4% (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Although separation anxiety may disrupt children’s functioning and cause distress, to date, relatively little investigation has been conducted into its etiology. Very little is known about the links between parent–child interaction and children’s separation anxiety.

1.1. Parental influences on the child’s separation anxiety

In a recent study, Cronk et al. (2004) examined genetic and environmental influences, including the contribution of two measured aspects of the shared

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