

Emotional separation and detachment as two distinct dimensions of parent–adolescent relationships

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Abstract

The study examined adolescents' emotional separation and detachment from parents, analyzing their relations with connectedness and agency, with some aspects of self–other boundary regulation and with problem behavior. The participants were 331 Italian adolescents, aged from 16 to 19 years (mean age = 17.40, $SD = 1.14$). Separation and detachment were positively related; they were negatively related to connectedness; detachment was also negatively associated to agency. Emotional separation was negatively predicted by empathic concern, perspective-taking and separate self; emotional detachment was negatively predicted by empathic concern and self–other differentiation. Separation negatively predicted internalizing behavior, and detachment positively predicted internalizing and externalizing behavior. Globally, findings showed that emotional separation and detachment are two distinct dimensions of the parent–adolescent relationship.

Keywords

adolescent development, agency, behavior problems, emotional regulation, independent self, interdependent self, relationships between parents and adolescents, self

During the last decades, a growing body of research has focused on the process of attaining autonomy from parents, considered a key developmental task during adolescence (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Bray, Gerald, Getz, & McQueen, 2003; Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). According to several authors, autonomy is best conceptualized as a multifaceted developmental construct, in which multiple components may be discerned (see Goossens, 2006; Silverberg & Gondoli, 1996; Steinberg, 1990). Many scholars have suggested that a crucial part of youth autonomy development is the emotional distancing from parents; youngsters' attempts to distance themselves emotionally from mother and father may be expressed in two distinct ways—emotional separation and detachment (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003; Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Yeh & Yang, 2006). The general purpose of the present study is to investigate the psychological significance of these two dimensions of the parent–adolescent relationship in a sample of Italian adolescents in their mid and late teens. The study analyzed the associations of separation and detachment with agency and connectedness; their relations with characteristics of self–other boundary maintenance; and their linkages with psychological adjustment.

distancing from his or her parents, as perceived by the adolescent's understanding that they are different individuals from him/herself (Beyers et al., 2003; Lamborn & Groh, 2009). This involves moving away from the childhood representations of mother and father as omnipotent and omniscient toward a deidealized representation of them, and subsequently being not too dependent on them when encountering problems and taking responsibility for one's own behavior. According to Lamborn and Steinberg (1993), separation from parents involves the “development of mature, realistic, and balanced perceptions of parents that accompanies the acceptance of primary responsibility for personal decision making, values, and emotional stability” (p. 483). On the other hand, *detachment* has been defined as a more radical form of distancing from parents, associated with experiencing a lack of parental support and acceptance, feelings of disengagement from parents, as well as mistrust and alienation towards them. It may be defined as the loss of developmentally appropriate attachments, representing not merely a casting-off of infantile ties, but a more general reluctance to rely on parents and a distancing from them. As Ryan and Lynch (1989) pointed out, “detachment can [...] represent loss and separation, wherein a relatively dependent person is severed from a source of guidance, affection or nurturance” (p. 340).

Conceptualizing emotional separation and detachment from parents

The origins of the concepts of detachment and separation lie within psychoanalytic and neoanalytic theory (Blos, 1962, 1979; Freud, 1958), which has influenced the major part of modern theorizing on autonomy in adolescence. On the one hand, *separation* has been conceptualized as the adolescent's experience of emotional

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These dimensions of the parent–adolescent relationship have often been mixed together in past studies (e.g., Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Turner, Irwin, Tschann, & Millstein, 1993), so it has been difficult to discern their real significance for adolescent psychosocial development. Recently, Beyers et al. (Beyers et al., 2003; Beyers, Goossens, van Calster, & Duriez, 2005) have elaborated on the examination of these two constructs, showing that even though related to each other, separation and detachment have to be viewed as two distinct dimensions of the functioning of the relationship between adolescents and their parents. Beyers et al. (2003) tested a model of the relationship of separation and detachment with agency (defined as the ability to make decisions with assurance, and self-governance) and connectedness (defined as closeness, reciprocity, trust, and dependency in parent–adolescent relationships) in two samples of Dutch-speaking Belgian middle and late adolescents. Results revealed that separation and detachment were differently related to other aspects of autonomy. More specifically, connectedness was associated with both separation and detachment negatively, although the association was stronger with detachment than with separation. Agency was related positively with separation and unrelated with detachment. Beyers and his colleagues concluded that emotional separation could be viewed as a healthy dimension, involving true independence from parents, whereas detachment might be seen as a negative relationship process.

The first goal of the current study is to further examine the relationship of emotional separation and detachment with connectedness and agency, in order to better understand their psychological significance for adolescents' development. On the basis of literature, it was hypothesized that (a) separation and detachment would relate to each other positively; (b) connectedness would relate to both of them negatively; and (c) agency would be positively associated with separation, whereas the association with detachment would be negative or at least unrelated.

Separation, detachment, and self–other boundary regulation

One of the outcomes linked to the development of parent–child relationships during adolescence is the acquisition of a stable sense of self and clear boundaries between the self and parents. Both separation and detachment, intended as orientations towards autonomy which emphasize separateness, may be viewed as one part of self–other emotional dimensions, where the adolescent focuses on isolating his or her emotional experiences from the influence of parents (Huey & Henry, 2005). To further understand the difference between these dimensions, it seems important to investigate the relationship of separation and detachment with some aspects of the adolescent's psychological functioning as linked to self–other boundary regulation.

The individual's sense of self depends on the borders that separate the self from others; among these there is an individual "oneness" that makes each person different and separate from others. Self–other boundaries determine not only where *I* ends and *You* begins, but the space between *Us*. The process by which individuals regulate self–other boundaries may be viewed as characterized by several facets, each of which signals, in a different way, the degree to which the self is embedded in the relationship with the "other." Among these dimensions, we can find self–other differentiation, self-orientations, and disposition to empathic responsiveness.

Self–other differentiation reflects the degree to which the individual experiences a distinct and separate sense of self in the relationship with others. People who do not show a well-differentiated sense of self are characterized by a lack of independent judgment, a vulnerability to evaluation by others, a tendency to defer to the wishes of others, taking on their interests and orientations, and over-relying on them for criteria of self-worth (Olver, Aries, & Batgos, 1989). The achievement of clear boundaries between self and other influences the attainment of a definite individuality and the nature of interpersonal relationships, permitting emotional intimacy with another without fear of merger (Bowen, 1978; Kerig, 2005; Kerr, 1988). On the one hand, diffuse boundaries interfere with the preservation of a cohesive sense of self and the maintenance of emotional boundaries between self and other. On the other hand, rigid boundaries constrict an individual's relationships, limit emotional contact, and interfere with the experience of belonging and mutuality.

Another facet of self–other boundary regulation may be represented by self-orientations—constellations of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning one's relationship to others and the self as distinct from others. In the literature, two basic orientations of the self have been described: the independent, separate self and the interdependent, connected self (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stivey, & Surrey, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Singelis, 1994). Persons for whom independence, separation, hierarchical organization of interchange, and justice are central have a highly developed *separate self*. On the contrary, persons for whom interdependency, connection with others, egalitarian interchange, and concern for individuals (including themselves) in their own contexts are central, have a highly developed *connected self*.

Lastly, another central dimension of self–other boundary regulation is a disposition to empathic responsiveness. Empathy is a complex, developmentally advanced human capacity, encompassing both cognitive and affective aspects; it is the ability to adopt the psychological point of view of another person, to understand his or her thoughts and feelings, to vicariously feel emotions that the other person is experiencing and to share his or her affective state (Bonino, Lo Coco, & Tani, 1998; Davis, 1983; Strayer, 1987; Strayer & Roberts, 1997). In order for empathy to occur, self–other boundaries must be flexible, since there is a momentary overlap of self and other representations as distinctions blur experientially; if either relaxation or restructuring of self boundaries is impaired, empathy will suffer (Hoffman, 1976; Jordan et al., 1991; Lopez, 2001).

The second goal of the study is to examine relationships between these adolescents' psychological functioning in terms of self–other boundary regulation and their experience of emotional separation and detachment from their parents. Relatively little is known about the relationship existing between these dimensions. Recently, Huey and Henry (2005) investigated the association between adolescents' empathic capacity and their emotional separation from parents; their study revealed that more empathic youngsters tended to be less separate from their parents. In the light of previous considerations, it may be hypothesized that adolescents' emotional separation and detachment may be positively predicted by high levels of self–other differentiation and a highly developed separate self, and they may be negatively predicted by high levels of empathic capacity and a highly developed connected self. Nevertheless, one might expect that these relationships would be stronger for detachment than for separation.

Separation, detachment, and socioemotional adjustment

According to several authors, the experience of separation and detachment from parents might be related to a young person's psychological adjustment in a different way in that they represent distinct aspects of the parent-child relationship (Beyers et al., 2003, 2005; Chen & Dornbusch, 1998; Lamborn & Groh, 2009). Empirical research seems to bear out this hypothesis. On the one hand, detachment appears to be consistently linked to a poor psychological functioning. The feeling of cool rejection by parents—an aspect of emotional detachment—was associated with lower self-esteem and lower academic achievement (Lamborn & Groh, 2009). Another facet of detachment, the perceived lack of knowledge or understanding in one's parents, foreboded greater susceptibility to negative peer pressure, lower educational expectations, greater psychological distress, and lower self-esteem (Chen & Dornbusch, 1998). On the other hand, association of the adolescent's emotional separation from his/her parents with his/her psychological adjustment is more equivocal. In some studies, the giving up of an idealized parental image—one aspect of the separation experience—was associated with lower susceptibility to negative peer pressure and higher educational expectations (Chen, 1999; Chen & Dornbusch, 1998), with healthy identity development (Frank, Pirsch, & Wright, 1990), or it was unrelated to self-esteem and competence (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). The absence of childlike dependency on parents, another aspect of separation, had no relationship with self-esteem and competence (Chen & Dornbusch, 1998; Ryan & Lynch, 1989). The general experience of separation was unrelated to psychological symptoms (Lamborn & Groh, 2009). In other studies, separation was associated with greater substance abuse, deviant behavior (McQueen, Getz, & Bray, 2003), lower self-esteem and negative attitude towards school (Lamborn & Groh, 2009). The deidealization of the parental image and the absence of childlike dependency on parents were associated with feelings of low lovability (Ryan & Lynch, 1989). Thus, studies reported mixed results, in which youngsters who report emotional separation from parents appear at the same time both more troubled with internalized and externalized problem behavior and more competent than their peers in other areas. Globally, these results support the idea that detaching emotionally from parental influence may have emotional costs and may be at odds with healthy psychosocial adjustment. Less clear is the relationship between the experience of separation from parents and the adolescent's functioning.

The third aim of the present study is to analyze the relationship of emotional separation and detachment with internalizing and externalizing problem behavior. Based on previous studies, one might expect that the detachment experience will be more strongly related to behavioral problems than the separation experience.

The present study

To summarize, the general purpose of the present study was to further investigate the experience of emotional separation and detachment in the parent-child relationship in a sample of Italian middle and late adolescents. More specifically, the first aim was to confirm the relationship of these two dimensions with connectedness and agency. On the basis of literature, it was hypothesized that (a) separation and detachment would relate to each other positively;

(b) connectedness would relate to both of them negatively; and (c) agency would be positively associated with separation, whereas the association with detachment would be negative or at least unrelated.

The second goal was to examine the relationship between self-other boundary regulation and emotional separation and detachment from parents. More precisely, it was hypothesized that adolescents who report low levels of empathic concern and perspective-taking, a more developed separate self, a less developed connected self, and a highly differentiated sense of self tend to show high levels of emotional separation and detachment from parents. It was expected that these relationships would be stronger for detachment than for separation.

Lastly, the third aim was to examine the relationship of emotional separation and detachment with internalizing and externalizing behavior. More specifically, it was hypothesized that adolescents who show high levels of separation and detachment from parents would tend to report high levels of both aggressive and disruptive behavior and depressive and anxious behavior. It was expected that these relations would be stronger for detachment than for separation.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 331 Italian middle and late adolescents (54% females), aged from 16 to 19 years (mean age = 17.40, $SD = 1.14$), attending four secondary schools in the area of Palermo (northern Sicily). All adolescents were Caucasian. Participation in the study was voluntary and written parental consent was obtained.

All participants were living in one household with their parents; 94% of them came from intact, two-parent families, 5% had divorced or separated parents, and 1% came from a family in which one of the parents had died. The adolescents' parents were socioeconomically diverse (14% professional or managerial, 36% tradespeople, 15% skilled workers, 33% unskilled workers, 2% retired). Of all participants, 55% had parents who had obtained their secondary school-leaving certificate.

Measures

Emotional separation. The participants were administered the Emotional Autonomy Scale (EAS; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986) to assess adolescents' emotional separation from parents. Because of several negative correlates associated with emotional autonomy, as indicated by high total EAS scores, some authors (e.g., Ryan & Lynch, 1989) have claimed that this scale does not measure emotional autonomy. Beyers et al. (2005) found empirical support for two higher order constructs of separation and detachment. Following their approach we constructed a separation scale measured by means of the subscales (a) deidealization (4 items, e.g., "My parents hardly ever make mistakes" reverse coded), which taps the extent to which adolescents relinquish childish perceptions of parental omnipotence, (b) nondependency (4 items, e.g., "I go to my parents for help before trying to solve a problem by myself" reverse coded), which taps the extent to which adolescents abandoned the childish dependency from parents, (c) nonimitation (2 items, e.g., "There are things that I will do differently from my mother and father when I become a parent"), which taps the extent to which adolescents will behave in a different way from

their parents, and (d) privacy (2 items, e.g., "There are some things about me that my parents don't know"), which taps the extent to which parents do not know everything about their children. The items were presented as declarative statements; respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). In the present study, the subscales had adequate internal consistency: Cronbach's α ranged from .65 to .78.

Connectedness. Adolescents completed three subscales of the Relationship with Father/Mother Questionnaire (RFMQ; Maysseless, Wiseman, & Hai, 1998) in order to derive a measure of connectedness: (a) emotional closeness (10 items, e.g., "We get along really well between ourselves"), which taps the strength of the emotional bonds with parents; (b) communication (10 items, e.g., "They always listen to my ideas and opinions"), which taps the extent to which adolescents may talk openly to their parents; and (c) mutuality (7 items, e.g., "When we talk, my parents consider my point of view"), which taps the extent to which adolescents perceive the relationship with parents as characterized by reciprocity. The items were presented as declarative statements; participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale (1 = very untrue; 5 = very true) the extent to which each statement was true of their relationship with their parents. In the present study, the subscales had adequate internal consistency: Cronbach's α ranged from .70 to .82.

Emotional detachment. Adolescents completed two other subscales of the RFMQ (Maysseless et al., 1998) in order to derive a measure of detachment: (a) coolness/rejection (10 items, e.g., "I feel that my parents don't understand me"), which taps the levels of lack of warmth in the relationship with parents; and (b) open confrontation (10 items, e.g., "We fight and argue a lot"), which taps the issue of open conflict. In the present study, the subscales had adequate internal consistency: Cronbach's α ranged from .74 to .81.

Participants were also administered the EAS (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986) to assess detachment from parents. Following Beyers et al. (2005), we constructed a detachment scale measured by three subscales: (a) perceived ignorance (2 items, e.g., "My parents would be surprised to know what I'm like when I'm not with them"), which taps the extent to which parents are unaware of who their children really are; (b) distrust (3 items, e.g., "My parents probably talk about different things when I am around from what they talk about when I'm not"), which taps the extent to which adolescents do not trust their parents; and (c) perceived alienation (3 items, e.g., "My parents act differently when they are with their own parents from the way they do at home"), which taps the extent to which adolescents feel their parents behave differently with them than with other people. In the present study, the subscales had adequate internal consistency: Cronbach's α ranged from .64 to .73.

Agency. Adolescents were administered the Adolescent Autonomy Questionnaire (AAQ; Noom, Deković, & Meeus, 2001) to assess their ability to function in an autonomous manner. AAQ is a 15-item self-report scale consisting of three different subscales; in this study just two subscales were used: (a) attitudinal autonomy (5 items, e.g., "I can make a choice easily"), which refers to the cognitive process of listing one's possibilities and making a choice between different options; and (b) functional autonomy (5 items, e.g., "I feel at ease in new situations"), which describes the process

of developing a strategy to achieve one's goals by means of self-regulation and self-control. Adolescents were asked to indicate the degree of agreement with each statement on a 5-point scale (1 = a very bad description of me; 5 = a very good description of me). In the present study, the subscales had adequate internal consistency: Cronbach's α ranged from .75 to .84.

Self-other differentiation. Adolescents were administered the Self-Other Differentiation Scale (SODS; Olver et al., 1989) to assess the degree to which they experience a separate sense of self, in their relationships with others. SODS is an 11-item scale (e.g., "If someone close to me finds fault with what I do, I find my self-evaluation lowered"), tapping such relational aspects as deferring to the wishes of others, taking on the interests and orientations of others and over-reliance on others for criteria of self-worth. Each item is rated as either true (0) or false (1); individual item ratings are summed up to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating greater self-other differentiation. In the present study, the scale had a high internal consistency: Cronbach's α was .70.

Self-orientations. Adolescents were administered two subscales from the Relationship Self Inventory (RSI; Pearson et al., 1998) to assess their general self-orientations: (a) connected self (12 items, e.g., "Caring about other people is important to me"), which taps the extent to which interdependency, connection with others, egalitarian interchange, and concern for individuals in their own context are central to the description of the self; and (b) separate self (18 items, e.g., "The feelings of others are not relevant when deciding what is right"), which taps the extent to which independence, separation, hierarchical organization of interchange, and justice are central to the description of the self. The items were presented as declarative statements; participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale (1 = very untrue; 5 = very true) the degree to which each statement was true for themselves. In the present study, the subscales had adequate internal consistency: Cronbach's α was .72 for connected self and .76 for separate self.

Empathy. To assess adolescents' disposition to empathic responsiveness, they completed two subscales from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980, 1983; translated and validated by Albiero, Ingoglia, & Lo Coco, 2006): (a) empathic concern (7 items, e.g., "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than I am"), which measures the tendency to experience feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern for others; and (b) perspective-taking (7 items, e.g., "I believe that there are two sides to every question and I try to look at them both"), which measures the tendency to adopt the point of view of other people in everyday life. The items were presented as declarative statements; participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale (1 = very untrue; 5 = very true) the degree to which each statement was true for themselves. In the present study, the subscales had adequate internal consistency: Cronbach's α was .73 for perspective taking and .78 for empathic concern.

Problem behavior. Adolescents were administered a scale derived from the Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987) to assess their perception of their behavioral problems. This scale is a 47-item self-report measure consisting of two subscales: (a) internalizing problems (24 items, e.g., "I feel worthless or inferior"), which taps anxious and depressive symptoms and social withdrawal behavior; (b) externalizing problems (23 items,

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and range scores of study variables

	Mean	SD	Range
Deidealization	2.85	0.58	1–5
Nondependency	2.96	0.70	1–5
Nonimitation	2.95	0.96	1–5
Privacy	3.16	1.03	1–5
Open confrontation	2.07	0.82	1–5
Coolness/Rejection	1.86	0.65	1–5
Perceived ignorance	2.97	0.99	1–5
Distrust	2.52	0.75	1–5
Perceived alienation	2.11	0.80	1–5
Emotional closeness	3.56	0.79	1–5
Communication	3.43	0.87	1–5
Mutuality	3.20	0.83	1–5
Attitudinal autonomy	3.30	0.76	1–5
Functional autonomy	3.52	0.63	1–5
Empathic concern	3.88	0.57	1–5
Perspective-taking	3.33	0.55	1–5
Self–other differentiation	0.62	0.23	0–1
Connected self	3.99	0.49	1–5
Separate self	2.83	0.57	1–5
Internalizing problems	0.49	0.34	0–2
Externalizing problems	0.50	0.31	0–2

e.g., “I destroy things belonging to others”), which taps delinquent and aggressive behavior. Participants were asked to rate on a 3-point scale (0 = very untrue; 2 = very true) the degree to which each statement was true for themselves. In the present study, the subscales had adequate internal consistency: Cronbach’s α was .72 for internalizing problems and .81 for externalizing problems.

Procedure

As a first step in the sampling procedure, four schools were randomly selected from the 2008 city of Palermo registries of secondary schools in the metropolitan area of Palermo. As a second step, four classes were randomly selected from each school. For the students of selected classes, participation in the study was voluntary and written parental consent was obtained; participants represented 90% of the initially selected students.

The self-report questionnaires were administered during the regular school day at the start of the second term (February). Data collection took place in small group sessions under the supervision of four undergraduate students in psychology and took no longer than 50 minutes.

Data analysis approach

The analyses were aimed at examining the associations of separation and detachment with agency and connectedness, with adolescent characteristics related to self–other boundary regulation, and with youngsters’ behavioral problems. The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique using EQS 6.1 (Bentler, 2006) was used to test whether (a) emotional separation and detachment (two latent factors indexed by multiple indicators) were correlated with connectedness and agency (two latent factors); (b) emotional separation and detachment (two latent factors) were predicted by some aspects of self–other boundary regulation (observed variables); (c) emotional separation and detachment (two latent factors) predicted

internalizing and externalizing problems (observed variables). All models testing used maximum likelihood estimation. In addition, robust statistics were used in order to account for the multivariate non-normality of variables; robust statistics included the Satorra-Bentler χ^2 test statistic and robust Comparative Fit Index (Satorra & Bentler, 1994), both of which adjust standard errors to calculate parameter estimates in situations where multivariate normality cannot be assumed. In evaluating the overall goodness of fit for the SEM models, the following criteria were used: the Satorra-Bentler robust χ^2 test statistics (S-B $\chi^2/df < 3$), the robust comparative fit index (CFI $> .90$), the standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR $< .08$), and the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA $< .05$). In order to test the hypotheses of equality for certain parameters regarding separation and detachment, equality constraints were imposed in each final model and their significance was tested with the χ^2 difference test ($\Delta\chi^2$).

Preliminary analyses indicated that the study variables varied by gender. Although mean gender differences occur in some variables’ scores, there was no expectation that associations between these variables would differ by gender. Therefore, gender was included in later analyses as a control variable.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Means, standard deviations, and range of scores of study variables are presented in Table 1.

Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients of the study variables are summarized in Table 2. Variables measuring separation and detachment were associated negatively with those measuring connectedness and unrelated or related negatively with those measuring agency. They were also related negatively to empathic concern, perspective-taking, self–other differentiation, and connected self, and unrelated to separate self. Lastly, variables measuring separation and detachment were related positively to internalizing and externalizing problems.

Relationships between separation, detachment, connectedness, and agency

To determine whether separation and detachment were correlated to connectedness and agency, a latent variable structural equation model was constructed. The original model did not evidence a good fit to the data (see Table 3), so it was modified on the basis of modification indices and theoretical considerations. More specifically, the model was modified by adding four covariances between the measurement errors of certain variables related to separation and detachment factors (see Figure 1). These modifications improved the model fit (see Table 3).

The invariance hypotheses regarding the correlations of separation and detachment with connectedness and the correlations of separation and detachment with agency were tested by placing equality constraints. The Lagrange Multiplier (LM) test was used to test these equality constraints and to determine whether any of them should be released. An analysis of the univariate and multivariate statistics produced by the LM test revealed that the correlations of separation and detachment with agency should not be constrained to be equal. Therefore a final SEM analysis was run in which the correlations of separation and detachment with agency were freely estimated, while the correlations of separation

Table 2. Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients among study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
1. D	–																					
2. ND	.51																					
3. NI	.45	.44	–																			
4. P	.47	.55	.41	–																		
5. OC	.37	.39	.49	.31	–																	
6. CR	.33	.40	.43	.34	.80	–																
7. PI	.20	.21	.40	.34	.39	.37	–															
8. Di	.01	.01	.20	.17	.19	.18	.40	–														
9. PA	.13	.19	.30	.22	.29	.31	.31	.42	–													
10. EC	–.45	–.50	–.41	–.40	–.57	–.65	–.16	–.03	–.23	–												
11. C	–.50	–.61	–.48	–.51	–.57	–.66	–.26	–.06	–.27	.85	–											
12. M	–.41	–.50	–.40	–.41	–.46	–.58	–.20	–.11	–.21	.77	.87	–										
13. AA	–.01	–.12	–.10	–.11	–.11	–.18	–.21	–.15	–.13	.05	.12	.06	–									
14. FA	–.04	–.08	–.09	–.09	–.04	–.17	–.09	–.06	–.10	.19	.24	.19	.56	–								
15. ECo	–.14	–.20	–.18	–.06	–.14	–.26	–.05	–.09	–.22	.29	.29	.31	–.08	.01	–							
16. PT	–.09	–.12	–.17	–.11	–.19	–.21	–.14	–.10	–.13	.21	.22	.28	.02	.02	.40	–						
17. SOD	.15	.11	–.01	.04	–.15	–.19	–.14	–.21	–.13	.01	.03	.02	.41	.39	–.19	–.01	–					
18. CS	–.07	–.15	–.11	–.07	–.15	–.20	–.06	.00	–.22	.27	.34	.37	.10	.18	.47	.47	–.07	–				
19. SS	–.12	–.06	.04	–.04	.14	.17	.02	.13	.18	–.05	–.03	–.08	.06	.10	–.28	–.32	–.04	–.10	–			
20. IP	.14	.23	.22	.21	.43	.43	.29	.12	.14	–.21	–.30	–.25	–.46	–.39	.06	–.11	–.46	–.04	.06	–		
21. EP	.24	.23	.30	.26	.47	.34	.32	.16	.19	–.15	–.17	–.10	–.03	.14	–.18	–.27	–.07	–.02	.20	.36	–	

Note. D deidealization, ND nondependency, NI nonimitation, P privacy, OC open confrontation, CR coolness/rejection, PI perceived ignorance, Di distrust, PA perceived alienation, EC emotional closeness, C communication, M mutuality, AA attitudinal autonomy, FA functional autonomy, ECo empathic concern, PT perspective-taking, SOD self–other differentiation, CS connected self, SS separate self, IP internalizing problems, EP externalizing problems. Absolute values greater than .16 are significant at $p < .05$.

Table 3. Goodness-of-fit indexes for the three models tested

		χ^2	df	$S-B\chi^2$	$S-B\chi^2/df$	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Robust CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Model 1	Original model	338.40***	81	315.37***	3.89	–	–	.89	.07	.09
	Modified model	235.24***	77	220.47***	2.86	–	–	.93	.06	.07
	Modified model with two constraints	241.01***	79	226.93***	2.87	6.46*	2	.93	.04	.07
	Modified model with one constraint	235.27***	78	220.62***	2.83	0.15	1	.93	.06	.07
Model 2	Original model	155.68***	64	147.15***	2.30	–	–	.94	.05	.06
	Model with five constraints	224.11***	69	212.09***	3.07	64.94***	5	.89	.07	.08
	Model with one constraint	156.05***	65	147.57***	2.27	0.42	1	.94	.05	.06
Model 3	Original model	113.31***	43	110.42***	2.57	–	–	.94	.05	.07
	Model with two constraints	137.94***	45	133.34***	2.96	22.92***	2	.92	.06	.08

* $p < .05$ *** $p < .001$

and detachment with connectedness were constrained to equality. This final model evidenced a good fit to the data (see Table 3). Figure 1 presents the standardized parameter estimates. Separation and detachment were positively correlated, whereas they were both negatively related with connectedness; only detachment was negatively related with agency. Agency alone was negatively predicted by adolescents' gender.

Relationships of separation and detachment with adolescents' self–other boundary regulation

To determine whether the adolescents' characteristics associated to self–other boundary regulation foreboded separation and detachment, a latent variable structural equation model was constructed. The model evidenced a good fit to the data (see Table 3). The invariance hypotheses regarding the paths from the observed variables associated with self–other boundary regulation to separation and detachment factors were tested by placing equality constraints. An analysis of the univariate and multivariate statistics produced

by the LM test revealed that the paths from perspective-taking, self–other differentiation, connected self, and separate self, to separation and detachment should not be constrained to be equal. Therefore a final SEM analysis was run in which these paths were freely estimated, while the paths from empathic concern to separation and detachment were constrained to be equal. This final model evidenced a good fit to the data (see Table 3). Figure 2 presents the standardized parameter estimates. The results showed that separation was negatively predicted by empathic concern, perspective-taking, and separate self, while detachment was negatively predicted by empathic concern and self–other differentiation. Gender had an effect on all the observed variables related to self–other boundary maintenance and on the separation factor.

Relationships of separation and detachment with problematic behavior

To determine whether separation and detachment foreboded behavioral problems, a latent variable structural equation model

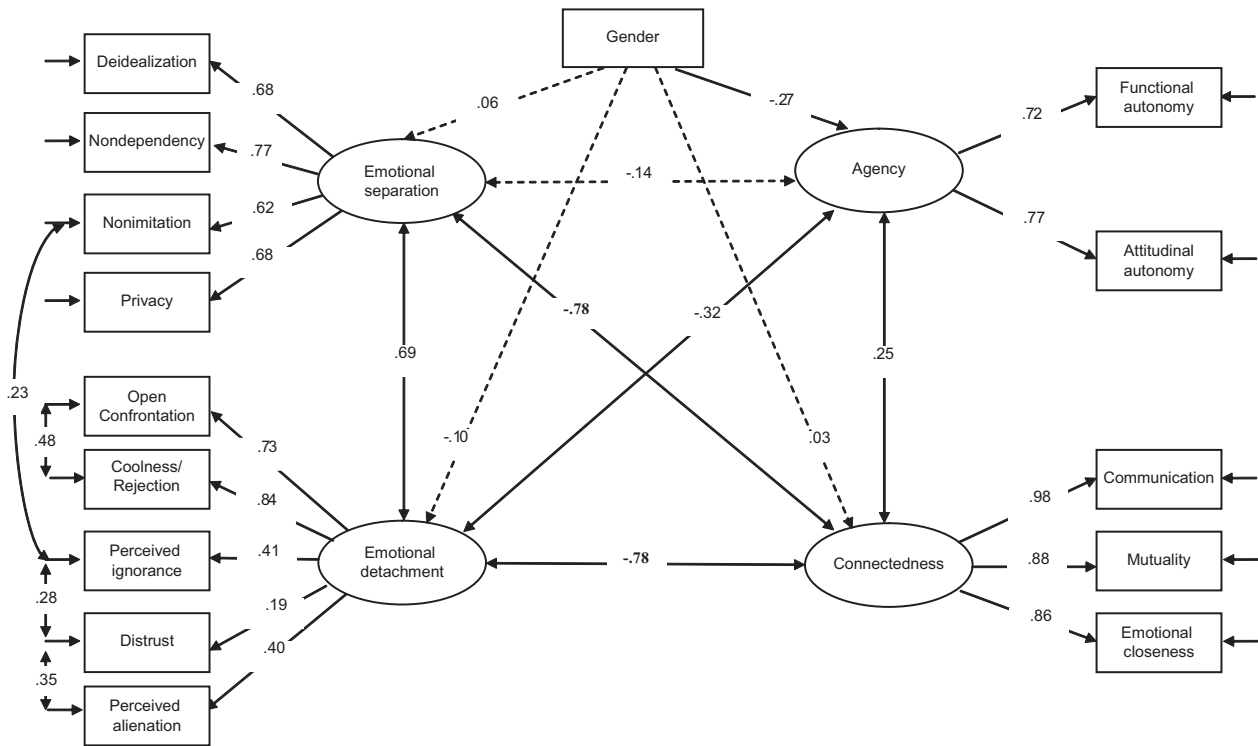


Figure 1. Statistical model of the relations between emotional separation, detachment, connectedness, and agency. Standardized solution.

Note. On parameter estimates represented by bold fonts, equality constraints were imposed. All parameters are significant with $p < .05$, except those represented by dashed lines.

was constructed. The model evidenced a good fit to the data (see Table 3). The invariance hypotheses regarding the paths from separation and detachment to internalizing and externalizing problems were tested by placing equality constraints. An analysis of the univariate and multivariate statistics produced by the LM test revealed that the paths from separation and detachment to internalizing and externalizing problems should not be constrained to be equal. Figure 3 presents the standardized parameter estimates. Separation negatively predicted internalizing problems, whereas detachment positively predicted both internalizing and externalizing problems. Gender positively affected internalizing problems only.

Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to show that adolescents' emotional separation and detachment from mother and father are two separate constructs, each related to different dimensions of the functioning of the parent-adolescent relationship. This general hypothesis was tested in three distinct ways. Particularly, the study analyzed the association of separation and detachment with agency and connectedness; their relations with characteristics of self-other boundary regulation; and their linkages with problem behavior. In each case, although the data did not follow exactly the predictions that were made, support was provided that separation and detachment are distinct constructs in theoretically meaningful ways. Findings showed that youngsters' separation and detachment from parents are two emotional experiences related to each other; the more adolescents are detached from their mother and father the more they tend to be separated from them. Nonetheless, relevant differences do exist between

them, suggested by their various associations with the other dimensions investigated.

Firstly, we found that the adolescents' emotional separation from parents was negatively related to connectedness to them and uncorrelated to agency. Viewing themselves as separate from mother and father was associated with difficulties in the parent-child relationship, characterized by low levels of mutuality and emotional closeness and problems in talking openly; nevertheless this emotional experience did not seem to be linked to the adolescents' autonomous functioning. We also found that emotional detachment was negatively related to both connectedness to parents and agency. More detached adolescents tended not only to perceive their relationship with parents as characterized by problems in communication, low reciprocity, and emotional closeness, but they also tended to report low autonomous functioning.

Globally, these findings show that the two components of adolescents' emotional separation and detachment from parents seem to be differentially related to other autonomy components, and that detachment shows a more problematic pattern of association when compared to separation. Moreover, these results seem to confirm the strong association of adolescents' separation and detachment from parents with lower connectedness to them, as evidenced by several researchers, and which has led some authors to conceptualize adolescents' separation and detachment as attempts to state their own autonomy through an increase in the interpersonal distance with parents (Beyers et al., 2003; Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Yeh & Yang, 2006). At the same time, the relationship of these two dimensions with agency seems to be more complex. In finding separation and agency to be unrelated, the present study differed from Beyers et al. (2003), who found a positive correlation between these two dimensions. Recently Lamborn and Groh (2009) replicated Beyers

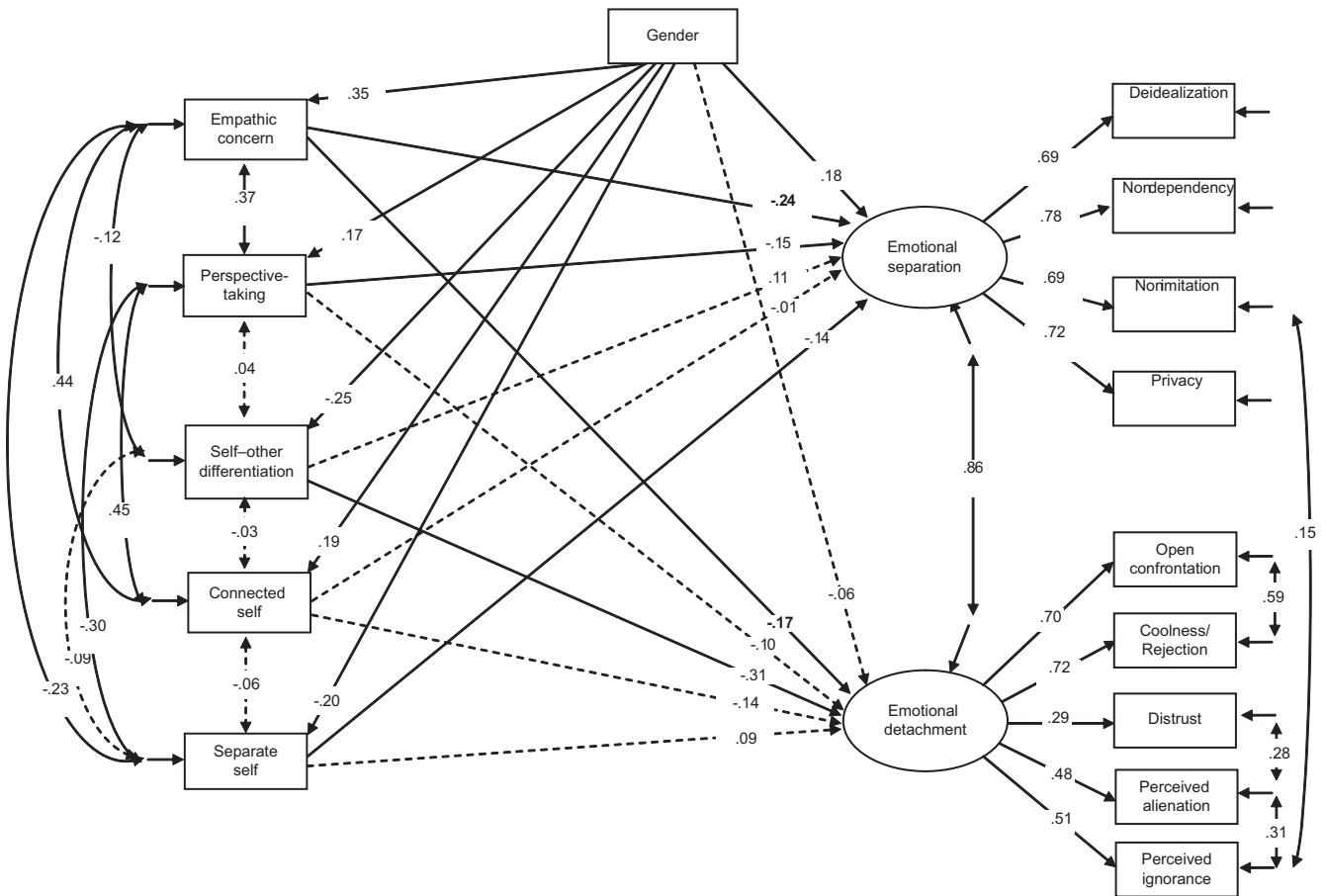


Figure 2. Statistical model of the relations between self–other boundary regulation, separation, and detachment. Standardized solution. Note. On parameter estimates represented by bold fonts, equality constraints were imposed. All parameters are significant with $p < .05$, except those represented by dashed lines.

et al.’s (2003) study on a U.S. college sample, finding that agency was unrelated to both separation and detachment. Taken together these results outline the need to further investigate the link of adolescents’ emotional detachment and separation from parents with agency, taking into account other aspects of autonomous functioning, such as self-regulation, self-determination, and decision-making abilities.

Regarding the relationship of adolescents’ separation and detachment from parents with some aspects of self–other boundary regulation, our initial hypotheses were only partially confirmed. On the one hand, emotional separation was negatively predicted by a disposition to empathic concern, perspective-taking and, against expectations, by separate self. The hypothesized relationship of emotional separation with self–other differentiation and connected self were not confirmed. On the other hand, emotional detachment from parents was negatively predicted by empathic concern and, contrary to the hypothesis, by self–other differentiation. The hypothesized relationships of detachment with perspective-taking, connected and separate self were not supported.

The overall pattern of these results seems to bear out the idea that emotional separation and detachment are related to different facets of youngsters’ processes of self–other boundary regulation. The experience of separating from parents seems to be linked to a low disposition to adopt the other’s point of view and to vicariously share his or her emotional state. But it was also associated

to a low-developed separate self-construal; adolescents for whom independence, separateness and justice were less relevant in their own self-view tended to report higher levels of emotional separation from parental figures. This latter, counterintuitive result leads us to ask about the psychological significance of emotional separating from parents, which seems to be very different from the relevance of independence in one’s own self-view. One possible explanation for this result is that the adolescents’ development of mature, realistic perceptions of their parents, accompanying the acceptance of responsibility for their own behavior, may be viewed as a healthy process of emotional separation from mother and father, which does not imply a search for separateness in their interpersonal relationships. Anyway, this hypothesis needs further investigation; no specific study has been found regarding these issues which might help to better understand this result.

The experience of emotional detachment is also linked to a low disposition towards sharing the other’s emotional state, and to a low self–other differentiation. Among the features of self–other boundary regulation taken into account in the present study, empathic concern and self–other differentiation may be considered to be those most closely linked to the individual’s emotional functioning (Bowen, 1978; Davis, 1983; Lopez, 2001; Strayer, 1987). This consideration may be particularly helpful for our understanding of detachment as a process signaling serious emotional difficulties. As previously stated, diffused boundaries between self and other

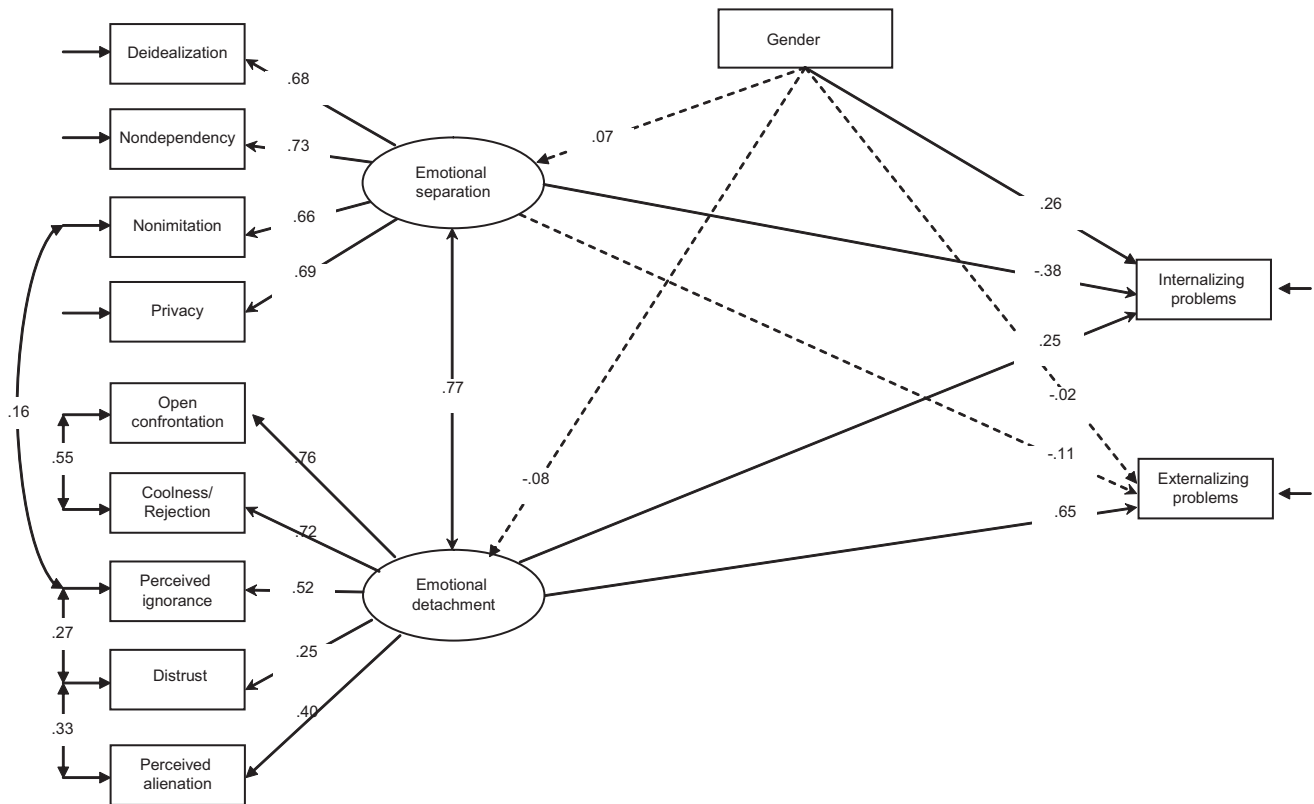


Figure 3. Statistical model of the relations between emotional separation, detachment, and internalizing and externalizing problems. Standardized solution.

Note. All parameters are significant with $p < .05$, except those represented by dashed lines.

interfere with the preservation of a cohesive sense of self and the maintenance of borders between self and other (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 1988). In this light, detachment from parents may be interpreted as an emotional regulatory strategy which may help poorly differentiated youngsters to manage the developmental task of distancing from parents. These adolescents may use detachment as an emotional regulation device akin to avoidance, arising from a strong need for distancing from caregivers (probably perceived as too invasive for the self) (Hodges, Finnegan, & Perry, 1999; Maysless & Scharf, 2009). Adolescents' self–other boundaries might be too weak to be able to maintain a mature distance from parents, thus resulting in a conflictual distancing as a reaction against invasive parent–child ties. This hypothesis also needs further investigation.

With regard to the relationships between adolescents' emotional separation and detachment from parents with problem behavior, our initial hypotheses were only partially supported. As hypothesized, detachment positively predicted both internalizing and externalizing problems; more detached youngsters tended to report high levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, and aggressive and disruptive behavior. On the contrary, the hypotheses of positive relationships between separation and problem behavior were not confirmed in the present study. The experience of separating from parents negatively predicted adolescents' internalizing problems and was unrelated to externalizing behavior; youngsters showing high levels of separation from mother and father tended to report low levels of depressive and anxious behavior.

Again, the results of the present study seem to corroborate the general hypothesis of separation and detachment as two different dimensions of the adolescents' relationships with their mother and

father. Emotional detachment takes on a highly problematic dimension of a parent–adolescent bond associated with relatively more intense psychological distress, expressed by both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. On the contrary, emotional separation can be viewed as a healthy dimension of a youngster's relationship with mother and father, associated with lower levels of internalizing problem behaviors. We could hypothesize that separation may be linked with adolescent's feelings of well-being: it could foster self-confident behavior and render the individual more resistant to feelings of weakness, helplessness, anxiety, low self-esteem, and withdrawal in the face of challenges and depression (Hodges et al., 1999). But these hypotheses need to be investigated in future research.

To better understand the significance which the emotional experience of separating from parents may have for youngsters' psychological adjustment, we need to take into consideration a further relevant point coming from a comparison of bivariate and multivariate analyses. The four dimensions of separation (i.e., deidealization, nondependency, privacy, and nonimitation) were positively correlated with both internalizing and externalizing problems. But when we controlled for detachment (in the multivariate analysis context), separation was unrelated with externalizing problems and negatively related with internalizing problem behavior. These findings suggest that only when we control for the levels of adolescents' detachment it is possible for us to evidence the healthy significance of separation for teens' psychological adjustment (as evidenced by low internalizing problems). The experience of emotionally distancing from parents and moving away from the childhood representations of them seems to be most adaptive when

it is not accompanied by any feelings of lack of support, feelings of radical and conflictual disengagement, mistrust and alienation towards parents.

Even if no specific hypotheses were initially expressed about the relations between gender and the study variables, gender was specified as a control variable in the analyzed models. Results showed that girls relative to boys reported lower agency, self-other differentiation, and separate self. Girls also reported higher empathic concern, perspective-taking, connected self, and internalizing problems. Finally, gender was unrelated with separation, detachment, connectedness, and externalizing problems. Globally these results show that even if gender was not directly related with separation and detachment, it was linked to many relevant variables associated with these two dimensions of the parent-adolescent relationship.

As with any study, there are a number of shortcomings that limit the interpretability of the present findings. Firstly, the cross-sectional design of the research restricts the causal inferences that might be drawn from the results. To investigate the developmental processes such as those examined here, and to understand them correctly, we need longitudinal studies. Only future longitudinal research might therefore provide more conclusive findings in terms of cause and effect, as well as teasing out the potential long-term effects of self-other boundary regulation on separation and detachment and on the implications of these latter dimensions for psychosocial adjustment in adolescents. Secondly, the study relied only on self-report data from adolescents, including no information from the parents themselves. Although previous research suggests that adolescents' reports on how they perceive their parents' behavior is not inherently inferior to more objective measures (Chen & Dornbusch, 1998; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994), sole reliance on self-report instruments may have led to an overestimation of some of these relationships. These considerations call for a multi-informant replication of this study in which, in addition to the adolescents, parents should also be questioned and other methods of research used to confirm the pattern of findings.

Despite these limitations, the present study has important implications for future empirical investigation. Firstly, the findings from this research suggest that although separation may be conceived as a healthy process, more needs to be known about its nature. It seems to be a multilayered process that may be understood more fully in the context of other aspects of the parent-youth relationship. Future researchers also need to examine the potential mediating factors that might account for some of the associations between emotional separation and lower internalizing problems, taking into account the adolescents' levels of detachment. Secondly, as we continue our studies of family dynamics (regarding emotional detachment in parent-child relationships) that might place adolescents at risk of maladaptive outcomes, it will be equally important for future research to try to uncover protective processes that might mitigate these effects. Uncovering the mechanisms that allow parents to support their child's autonomy, or that allow the adolescent to regulate self-other boundaries in his/her relationship with his/her mother and father, will help to inform future intervention efforts.

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