

# Types of individuation in relation to parents: Predictors and outcomes

Joachim Kruse and Sabine Walper  
University of Munich, Germany

Individuation in relation to father and mother is one of the key developmental tasks of adolescence, and has been conceptualized as gaining autonomy while maintaining relatedness to parents. Research on high-conflict, divorced and step-families suggests that specific stressors in these family types may compromise successful individuation by undermining relatedness, triggering insecurities or leading to early independence. This study takes a typological approach (1) seeking to identify distinct patterns of adolescents' relationships to mother and residential father figure (biological or stepfather), (2) testing the effects of family structure and dynamics, and (3) investigating links between type of individuation and adolescents' adjustment. The sample consisted of  $N = 649$  adolescents in Germany aged between 10 and 20 years who lived in nuclear, single-mother or stepfather families. The Munich Individuation Test of Adolescence (MITA) was used to assess individuation. For  $n = 473$  adolescents data on individuation in relation to the biological or stepfather were available. Cluster analyses resulted in three types of individuation regarding mothers and four types regarding fathers. In particular, children from (nuclear) families with high interparental conflict were at risk for an insecure ambivalent relationship. Securely individuated youth showed significantly better adjustment in a variety of outcomes.

Keywords: adolescence; control; divorce; individuation; parenting; stepfamily; well-being

Adolescence is characterized by rapid growth and developmental changes in a variety of domains. Physical maturation, cognitive growth and expanding social relationships provide adolescents with new opportunities and challenges which call for increasingly autonomous decision making and self-regulated action in the context of social demands and relationships, thus triggering the development of individuality (Silverberg & Gondoli, 1996). Within the complex set of developmental tasks in adolescence (Cobb, 2001; Havighurst, 1976) individuation in relation to parents seems to play a key role.

While foregrounding individuality, individuation is not accomplished on one's own. In particular, attachment theorists stress that development takes place in the context of interactions and relatedness to significant others (Bowlby, 1982). Similarly, proponents of individuation theory emphasize the co-constructive nature of the individuation process (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Focusing on the interplay of autonomy and relatedness, the present study adopts a person-oriented approach seeking to identify distinct patterns of individuation. These are expected to reflect different experiences shaped by family structure and the quality of family dynamics. In addition, the significance of individuation for individual functioning and well-being will be addressed by investigating how patterns of individuation relate to adolescents' adjustment.

## *Conceptualizing individuation*

The origins of the concept of individuation lie with Margret Mahler (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975) who coined the term in 1930, focusing on early childhood. According to her, "individuation consists of those achievements marking the child's assumption of his own individual characteristics" (Mahler et al., 1975, p. 4). It is closely linked to the complementary process of separation, which allows differentiating between self and other, while individuation defines who and what the separated self is. Blos (1967) was the first to extend the concept of individuation to adolescence and assume a second individuation process during that life phase triggered by increasing cognitive competencies and framed by parents' reactions to adolescents' increasing striving for independence and autonomy. Although his view was rooted in psychoanalytic theory, assuming a necessarily rebellious position of adolescents towards their parents, more recent approaches reflect empirical evidence showing that the majority of children maintain positive relationships with their parents during and beyond adolescence (Holmbeck, 1996; Linssen, Leven, & Hurrelmann, 2002; Steinberg, 1990) with little indication of increasing conflict (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Respective definitions, especially in the tradition of Youniss or Grotevant and Cooper (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), stress the stable connectedness between adolescents and their parents as providing a facilitative context for increases in individuality and argue that both aspects of this relationship ought to be seen as theoretically orthogonal, independent dimensions (Buhl, this issue; Masche, this issue).

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Correspondence should be sent to Joachim Kruse; Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich; Department of Psychology, Leopoldstr. 13, 80802 Munich, Germany; e-mail: j.k@lmu.de

Along these lines, individuation may be conceptualized as gaining autonomy while maintaining relatedness in relation to significant others – particularly one's parents. With respect to the multiple dimensions of autonomy (Silverberg & Gondoli, 1996), our analyses will foreground emotional aspects of the parent–adolescent relationship which figure prominently in attachment research, i.e. insecurities and anxieties experienced in this relationship (Allen & Land, 1999; Bowlby, 1982; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Attachment and individuation have long been separate fields, although more recent research seeks to integrate both perspectives (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004), for example, showing how autonomy and relatedness in adolescents' interaction with their parents contribute to later secure–autonomous attachment representations (Allen & Hauser, 1996; Becker-Stoll et al., this issue). Fear of losing parental support as well as engulfment anxiety have been pointed out as major impediments to successful individuation both by Mahler et al. for early childhood and similarly for adolescence (Levine, Green, & Millon, 1986). Both aspects may be considered as indicating a lack of emotional autonomy vis-à-vis parents due to insecurities experienced in this relationship.

*Typological approaches.* In this study, we explore how these features of emotional autonomy combine with aspects of relatedness contributing to distinct types of individuation. Taking a typological person-oriented approach, we follow up on previous research seeking to identify qualitatively different patterns of parent–adolescent relationships (Delaney, 1996). These studies provided different typologies, either derived from a priori theoretical considerations (Lamborn & Steinberg, 1993; Ryan & Lynch, 1989) or empirical testing by, for example, cluster analyses (Frank, Avery, & Laman, 1988; McClanahan & Holmbeck, 1992), yielding a heterogeneous picture.

Across these analyses, the number of clusters varied (from three to six), as did the content description of types. However, three or four types were most frequently identified. For example, Delaney (1996) investigated early adolescents (age 12–13 years) employing cluster analyses and found three types, described as individuated, connected and detached. In her data employing, among others, the Emotional Autonomy Scales (EAS; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986) an ambivalent parent/adolescent relationship type was “conspicuously absent” (p. 293). Although Delaney suggests that ambivalent relations may be atypical for this age group, it is not clear whether the indicators used were well suited to capture ambivalences in relation to parents. Another recent study employing cluster analyses identified four patterns of attachment and autonomy (Lee & Bell, 2003). In this sample of young adults (age 18–25 years) a cluster of individuated relationships was surprisingly found to be missing, although high-, moderate- and low-attachment groups could be identified, as well as a group which reported low father but high mother attachment. The strong inverse relationship between attachment and (emotional) autonomy found in this study may point to flaws in operationalizing autonomy, but the authors also suggest that a second rapprochement with parents could be more prevalent in this age group. Thus, measurement, as well as developmental issues, seems to play a role.

A particular point of reference for our analyses is the study presented by McClanahan and Holmbeck (1992, 1994) who used the Separation–Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA;

Levine et al., 1986; Levine & Saintonge, 1993), a multidimensional set of scales that provided the background for developing our research instrument. Based on the SITA, as well as other indicators of family climate and psychosocial adjustment, they identified four clusters of individuation among college students who were labeled as healthy separators, anxious deniers, peacefully detachers and succorance seekers. Healthy separators scored high on healthy-separation and low on separation-anxiety, engulfment-anxiety and dependency-denial. They appeared to be the healthiest group showing high adjustment in various domains. By contrast, anxious deniers scored high on separation-anxiety, engulfment-anxiety and dependency-denial while indicating low self-involvement and little healthy-separation. Peaceful detachers were characterized by high engulfment-anxiety and low separation-anxiety as well as nurturance-seeking. Although detached they reported high self-esteem and scored low on negative adjustment scales. Finally, succorance seekers scored high on nurturance-seeking and separation-anxiety. They also reported high anxiety.

While seeking to replicate this typology for a younger age group and with separate analyses for mothers and fathers, our second aim was to investigate risk factors for less optimal types of individuation in the context of parental separation and impaired family dynamics.

### *Individuation in the context of interparental conflict and separation*

The desired balance of relative gains in autonomy with a continued sense of connectedness to parents is often difficult to achieve (Frank, Pirsch, & Wright, 1990). Any family disruption due to internal or external stressors is likely to interfere with this renegotiation of expectations and emotional bonds, be it by impeding adolescents' autonomy or by triggering premature detachment (Stierlin, Levi, & Savard, 1977). Parental divorce has been pointed out as a major stressor for parents and children which involves losses not only in relation to the non-custodial parent, but also threatens the custodial parent's well-being and parenting competencies as well as the family's social and economic resources (Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Although overall effects of parental divorce on children and adolescents seem to be only moderate, parent–child relations and children's well-being and competencies may be compromised in a variety of domains (Amato, 2001).

Interparental conflict seems to explain many disadvantages for children and adolescents from divorced homes (Amato, 1993; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999), and the detrimental effects of high parental conflict on child adjustment are well-documented for nuclear families, too (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Fincham, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Interparental conflict exploits children's emotional resources and increases the risk of insecure attachment (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002) as well as problems in the individuation process (Walper, 1998). The likely spill-over of negativity from the interparental to the parent–child dyad (Erel & Burman, 1995; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000) contributes substantially to such effects (Harold, Fincham, Osborne, & Conger, 1997; Miller, Cowan, Cowan, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1993). Furthermore, interparental conflict may result in loyalty conflicts on the children's side, particularly if parents urge the child to take sides against the other parent

(Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 1998).

When single parents re-partner, the social function of parenting may be shared with the custodial parent's new partner. This is particularly likely – if not inevitable – when establishing a shared household. Large numbers of studies on stepfamilies have pointed out the particular challenges involved in developing supportive relationships between step-parents and stepchildren who lack the biological bond and share only parts of children's family history (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Adolescence seems to be a particularly vulnerable phase carrying a higher risk of conflict and lower cohesion in stepfamilies compared with nuclear families (Barber & Lyons, 1994; Coleman et al., 2000; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Although stepfathers frequently assume a less-involved role in parenting, authority conflicts seem difficult to avoid and adolescents frequently seek company and attachment outside their family (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Accordingly, one might assume that problems with individuation will also be more widespread in these families.

*Research questions.* Our analyses take a person-oriented approach aiming to establish and compare individuation typologies or adolescents' relationship to mother and father or – in the case of separated families – mother's new partner. In addition to stepfathers co-residing with adolescents and their mothers, this study allows us to explore adolescents' relationship to single mothers' nonresidential new partner. Family structure and dynamics, as well as adolescents' age and gender, are considered as predictors of individuation type, while several indicators of adolescent adjustment are tested as likely outcomes of individuation type. Given the cross-sectional nature of our analyses, however, this distinction is theory-driven and cannot be tested for in a strict sense.

In particular, we address the following research questions. (1) What types of individuation can be identified and do these types differ for mother–adolescent and father–adolescent or stepfather–adolescent relationships? We expect to find at least three types of individuation indicating a healthy, distant and anxious pattern of relationships. (2) To what extent do adolescents' age and gender as well as family characteristics such as family structure, interparental conflict and parenting quality affect the likelihood of belonging to a given individuation type? While previous research does not suggest strong gender effects, older adolescents should be more likely to evidence a pattern of successful individuation. Furthermore, adolescents living in a nuclear family should be more likely to report a successfully individuated pattern of relationships. This advantage of nuclear families is expected to be particularly pronounced when comparing adolescents' individuation vis-à-vis their biological father in nuclear families and mothers' new partner in separated families. As to the latter, a higher prevalence of distant relationships is expected for stepfathers and most likely even more so for non-residential new partners. Within nuclear families, high conflict between parents is assumed to undermine successful individuation. Although similar detrimental effects of interparental conflict would be expected for separated families, our focus regarding the role of interparental conflict is on nuclear families. In general, low loyalty conflicts, high parental empathy and moderate control are hypothesized to facilitate successful individuation.

Finally we ask: (3) How does individuation relate to adolescent adjustment? We hypothesize that successful individuation goes

along with positive adjustment, that is, high self-esteem and low anxiety as well as depression, whereas all forms of less successful individuation should result in low adjustment, that is low self-esteem and high internalizing problem behavior.

## Method

### *Participants*

This study is based on a sample of 649 children and adolescents who participated in the second wave of a longitudinal study on families in east and west Germany conducted in 1997. The families were recruited through a school-based screening involving more than 6000 children and adolescents in five large cities in Germany. Every family had a target child in grades 5–11. The selection procedure aimed at obtaining a quota sample with similar proportions of nuclear, single-mother and stepfather families. In addition to a random sample of nuclear families, an additional smaller sample of high-conflict nuclear families was identified during the screening procedure (based on adolescents' report on a single item which showed high correlation to parents' report of interparental conflict during the first wave of intensive assessment). In the present sample, 38.5% ( $n = 250$ ) of the adolescents lived in a nuclear family with both biological parents ( $n = 203$  random sample,  $n = 47$  high-conflict families), 33.9% ( $n = 220$ ) were raised by their single mother and 25.4% ( $n = 165$ ) lived with their biological mother and a stepfather. The family structures for the remaining 2.2% of the participants included single-father families, children who lived with their grandparents or those who had already established their own household. In single-mother and stepfather families, adolescents' biological parents were separated, divorced or never married to each other. Stepfather families included remarried as well as cohabiting couples. All three family types are stratified by the target children's age and gender. The children's mean age was 15.2 years ( $SD = 1.8$ ) with a range of 10–20 years. Approximately half of the participants were male (47.8%). The sample was biased to a better education, with 54% having attended the highest school track (Gymnasium).

All participants in the second wave had complete data on individuation in relation to their mothers. For a subsample of 473 participants (72.9%), there was also information on individuation in relation to their (step)fathers. Adolescents from nuclear families reported individuation in relation to their biological father, whereas those from separated families indicated individuation concerning stepfather or mothers' non-residential partner if the mother had re-partnered.

### *Measures*

All indicators for the present analyses are based on adolescents' questionnaire data that were assessed during extensive individual interviews at the children's home. Hence, these analyses highlight the perspective of the children and adolescents. Information on *family structure* comes from mothers' and adolescents' interview data. The indicator used here is based on household composition rather than legal family status and distinguishes nuclear families from single-mother families (without a new partner of the mother in the household) and stepfather families (including remarried and cohabiting couples).

**Table 1**  
Scales and sample items of the Munich Individuation Test of Adolescence (MITA)

Scale	Sample item	No. of items	$\alpha$ Mother	$\alpha$ Father
Nurturance seeking	When she is near me, I have the feeling that nothing bad can happen to me.	6	.73	.76
Denial of attachment needs	I get along well without her affection.	6	.78	.78
Engulfment anxiety	It drives me crazy if she questions me about my personal matters.	7	.84	.79
Fear of love withdrawal	If I have disappointed my mother I am anxious that she does not like me any more.	5	.68	.61
Ambivalence	I would like to do more things with her, but I am anxious not to be a nuisance.	5	.65	.65

Note. Item wording translated from German;  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's index of internal consistency.

*Individuation.* Adolescents' individuation in relation to their parents was assessed using five of the six scales of the Munich Individuation Test of Adolescence (MITA; Walper, 1998), a revised version of the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA; Levine et al., 1986; Levine & Saintonge, 1993) (Table 1). Different from the SITA, the MITA allows assessment of individuation in relation to mother and father or stepfather separately, with identical scales for each of these relationships. Furthermore, a revision of items allowed for more homogeneous scales, and a scale on ambivalence in the relationship was newly devised.

The first two scales cover the relatedness dimension: (1) *nurturance-seeking* expresses a strong wish for physical and emotional closeness and support, while (2) *denial of attachment needs* (inverted) measures the degree to which the need for closeness and support is negated. Insecurities in relation to parents are expressed in the remaining three scales: (3) *engulfment anxiety*, perceiving parents' closeness as a threat to one's autonomy and regarding him/her as intrusive; (4) *fear of love withdrawal*, indicating a fear of losing emotional contact and a lack of security about the others' affection; and finally (5) *ambivalence*, assessing an asymmetrical relationship due to adolescents' striving for closeness although the parent is perceived as indifferent. As can be seen in Table 1, all scales show satisfactory internal consistency ranging from Cronbach's alpha = .65 to .84.

*Parenting.* Measures for mothers' and fathers' parenting styles were derived from different sources. *Monitoring* indicates the amount of control parents seek to exercise over their children outside the family by staying informed about the children's whereabouts and friends. The items were translated from the Parental Supervision scale by Steinberg and colleagues (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). The internal consistency of the six items is  $\alpha = .86$ . *Strict control* measures rigid, authoritarian parenting behavior employing punishment after rule violations (example item: "My mother punishes me, if I do something against her will."). Two of the five items are derived from the scale of psychological autonomy from Lamborn et al. (1991). The scale has an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .76$ . *Overprotection* is a four-item scale developed for this study (Schwarz, Walper, Göttsche, &

Jurasic, 1997) that assesses whether parents underestimate their children's competencies and try to control and protect them too much. Example item: "My mother/father has no confidence in me and always wants to do everything for me." Considering the small number of items, this scale has a satisfactory internal consistency of  $\alpha = .68$ . Parental *empathy* is another four-item scale that was developed for this project and is meant to measure an aspect of parental sensitivity and warmth. An example item is: "My mother/father only has to take a look at me and knows immediately if something is wrong." The internal consistency of this scale is  $\alpha = .75$ .

*Adolescent adjustment.* A variety of outcome measures was used to assess the adjustment of the children and adolescents. The measure of *self-esteem* is a translated version of the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1989). The translation ensured that the items were comprehensible for younger participants. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the 10 items is .84 in our sample. The *depression* scale is the 15-item short version of the German adaptation (Hautzinger & Bailer, 1993) of the CES-D (Radloff, 1991). This scale yields a high internal consistency of  $\alpha = .91$ . *Somatic complaints* were measured using a 13-item short version of a widely used and well-validated German instrument (Brähler, 1992). Given the broad range of symptoms assessed, the internal consistency is satisfactory ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Two scales were translated and adapted from the Psychosocial Maturity Inventory (Greenberger, Josselson, Knerr, & Knerr, 1975). The *work orientation* scale assesses concentration and persistency when confronted with manifold and long-term tasks. All of the 10 original items were used and the scale has an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .74$ . As an aspect of self-confidence, *dependency on others' judgments* measures how much an adolescent is affected by what his or her peers say. The four-item scale has an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .69$ . A scale from the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) was used to assess the quality of relationships with significant others outside the family. The three-item scale on *appreciation from adults* (other than parents) has an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .70$ .

To address negative outcomes of interparental conflict and parental separation, adolescents' *feelings of being caught in the middle* were assessed. This newly developed scale focusing on adolescents' loyalty conflicts consists of six items, each to be rated on a 4-point scale (example item: "I feel torn back and forth between my parents."). The scale has high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .86$ ). Finally, *feeling helpless* and *feeling competent* concerning the family stem from an instrument developed by Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, and Mullan (1981) for use with adults, which is widely used in stress research. The slightly

<sup>1</sup> Item wording: How well do your parents get along with each other? Adolescents answering 'very badly', 'rather badly' or 'so-so' were selected for the high-conflict group. Adolescents' report on this item of the screening questionnaire correlates  $r = .65$  with a five-item scale assessing frequency and persistence of interparental conflict (adapted from the CPIC, see (Göttsche & Walper, 2001)) which was used in the first wave of intensive interviewing of the target sample.

adapted scales consist of four and seven items respectively and their internal consistencies are  $\alpha = .79$  and  $.73$ .

### Analyses

In order to identify different groups or types of individuation we used two-step cluster analysis as implemented in SPSS 12 (Chiu, Fang, Chen, Wang, & Jeris, 2001; Zhang, Ramakrishnon, & Livny, 1996). This procedure can handle both continuous and categorical variables. The two steps consist of a pre-clustering of cases into many small sub-clusters and a final clustering of these sub-clusters into the desired number of clusters. The number of groups is derived with the help of information criteria. Again, two steps are implemented. In the first step, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) for each number of clusters within a specified range is calculated and used to find the initial estimate. In the second step, this estimate is refined by finding the largest increase in distance between the two closest clusters in each hierarchical clustering stage. We used the BIC to decide on the number of groups because it assigns a greater penalty to model complexity compared with other information criteria, and so has a greater tendency to pick parsimonious models.

Comparisons between different individuation types and between different family types were performed using multivariate analyses of variance and regression analyses. Family type was defined by family structure and level of interparental conflict among nuclear families yielding four groups: nuclear families (random sample), high-conflict nuclear families, single-mother families and stepfather families. Finally, discriminant analyses were used to identify those outcome variables indicating adolescents' well-being and functioning which distinguish most between successful individuation and the other types of individuation identified in this sample.

## Results

### *Types of individuation in relation to mother and father*

Our first research question addresses how many and what types of adolescents' individuation vis-à-vis parents can be identified. Separate analyses of adolescents' report on their relationship with mother and father or stepfather allowed to us compare whether these individuation types differ by parental gender and fathers' biological relatedness. A series of cluster analyses showed that the BIC unambiguously favored three clusters for adolescent-mother relationships but four clusters for adolescents' relationship with their father/mother's partner. The types of individuation are depicted by their mean values in the respective scales in Figures 1 and 2.

*Mother.* The largest group of adolescents' reported a pattern of high nurturance-seeking while being comparably low on all the other scales, especially ambivalence and denial of attachment needs (labeled "securely individuated"). These youth also showed little fear of love withdrawal or engulfment anxiety. This group seems to have achieved successful individuation vis-à-vis the mother, combining high relatedness with high emotional autonomy. Of the total sample, 39.4% ( $n = 256$ ) fall into this group.

The second largest group of adolescents ( $n = 211$ ; 32.5%) indicated similarly high nurturance-seeking as the securely

individuated type, but at the same time reported significantly higher denial of attachment needs and engulfment anxiety. This seemingly inconsistent pattern of closeness and avoidance goes along with highest reports on ambivalence and fear of love withdrawal of all three groups. Hence, we labeled this group as "dependent ambivalent". Adolescents with dependent-ambivalent individuation patterns seem to experience an unfavorably asymmetrical relationship to their mother with considerable fear of rejection and intrusion while still fluctuating between their desires for closeness and support and denying these needs. Autonomy and relatedness both prove undermined and imbalanced.

Finally, there is a quite different group of adolescents (25.9%,  $n = 168$ ) with especially high scores in denial of attachment needs and engulfment anxiety while reporting lowest nurturance-seeking ("avoidant"). Concerning these three scales, this group contrasts the first, whereas ambivalence and fear of love withdrawal are equally low in both groups. These youth seem to avoid maternal closeness and control which is seen as a threat to their autonomy (indicated by high engulfment anxiety). At the same time, they indicate little emotional dependence on their mother as would be evident in elevated scores in ambivalence and fear of love withdrawal. Accordingly, their emotional autonomy seems to have been achieved at the expense of closeness to their mother.

*Father/mother's partner.* As can be seen in Figure 2, the same three types of individuation could be identified among the four types of individuation which emerged for fathers or stepfathers. Again, adolescents who report a securely individuated pattern of relationship with fathers form the largest group (25%), while adolescents indicating an avoidant pattern belong to the smallest group (10.8%) and dependent-ambivalent adolescents show an intermediate prevalence (17.9%). In addition, there is a fourth type (17.3%,  $n = 112$ ) with low scores for all scales. Adolescents in this group ("detached autonomous") are as low in nurturance-seeking as the avoidant group but – contrary to that group – do not indicate elevated engulfment anxiety and do not deny attachment needs. Furthermore, their ambivalence score is the lowest overall, indicating little emotional dependence and insecurity in the relationship. Overall, they seem to be emotionally autonomous but little involved in their relationship with their fathers.

In a next step, we tested for similarities and differences in adolescents' individuation type in relation to mothers and fathers. Despite the different number of individuation types for mothers and fathers, type of individuation does co-vary significantly. The overlap is generally between 60 and 80%.

### *Effects of adolescents' age and gender*

Significant age differences were found between individuation types in relation to mother ( $F(2,632) = 12.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as (step)father ( $F(3,469) = 7.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Mean age was lowest for youth in the dependent-ambivalent group (in relation to mother:  $M = 14.9$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ; (step)father:  $M = 14.8$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ), followed by adolescents in the securely individuated group (mother:  $M = 15.3$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ; (step)father:  $M = 15.0$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ), and those of the avoidant type (mother:  $M = 15.8$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ; (step)father:  $M = 15.6$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). Adolescents reporting a detached-autonomous relationship with their father were on average of similarly high age ( $M = 15.7$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ) as those of the avoidant group. Although the mean age differences between individuation types are

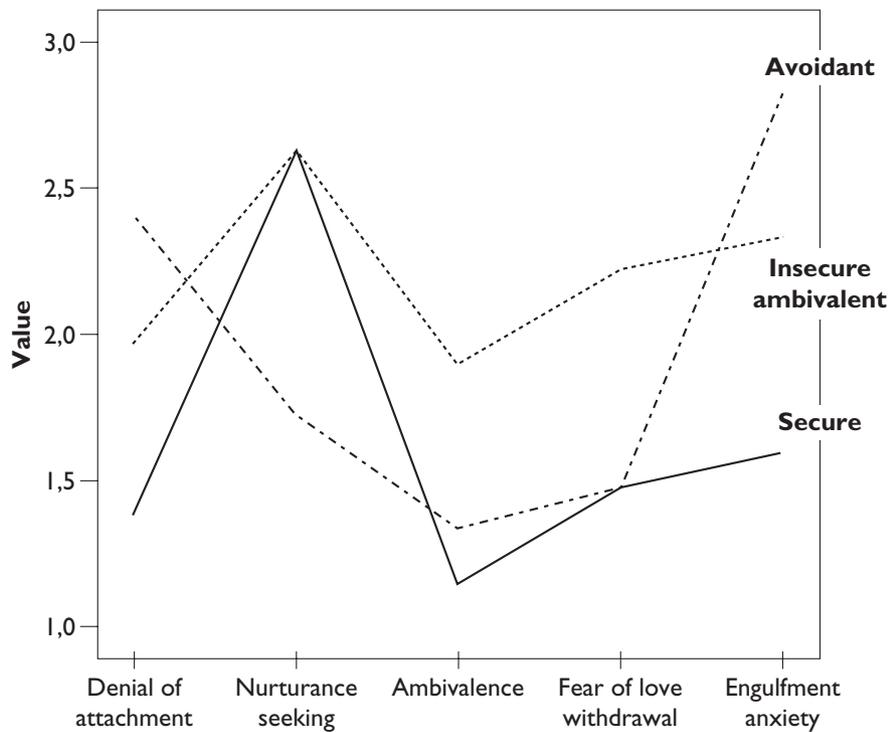


Figure 1. Three types of individuation concerning mothers.

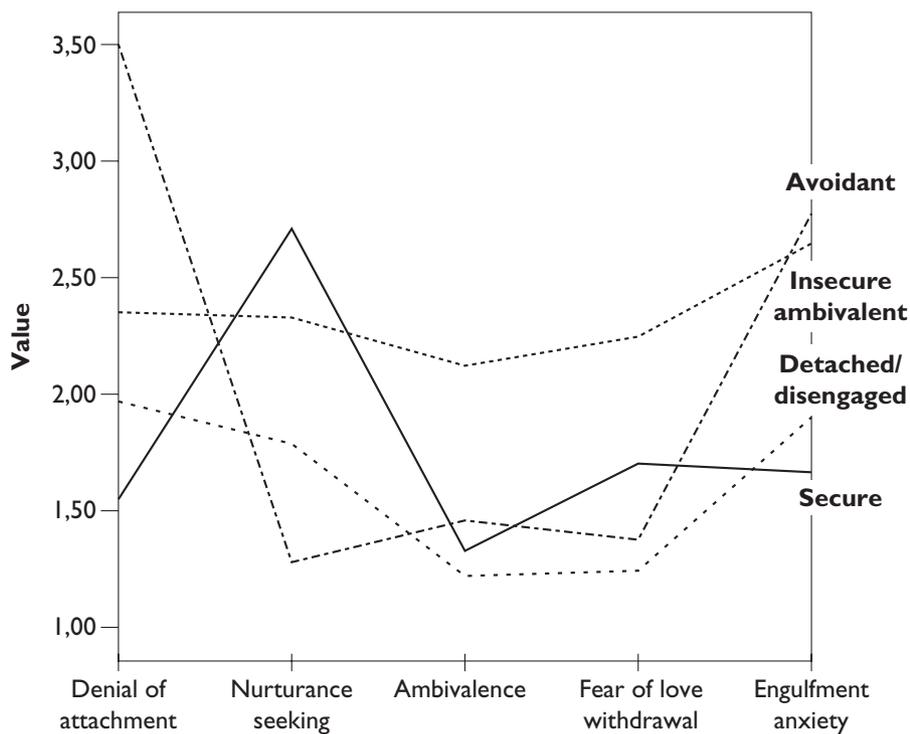


Figure 2. Four types of individuation concerning fathers (or mother's partner).

significant, they are small, amounting to less than one year between the youngest (dependent-ambivalent) and oldest (avoidant) group, and the standard deviations indicate considerable overlap in the age distribution of different types.

No significant gender differences emerged. Boys and girls were equally represented in the three individuation types which were similarly identified for adolescents' relation to mother and (step)father. There is only a small disparity for the avoidant

group in relation to (step)father. More girls than boys (67.1 vs. 32.9%) fall into this group but the difference is only marginally statistically significant ( $\chi^2(3, n = 473) = 6.93, p < .10$ ).

#### *Effects of family type*

As noted earlier (see Methods), our comparison of family types involved four groups: a random sample of nuclear families, an

additional sample of high-conflict nuclear families, single-mother families and stepfather families. The distribution of individuation types in relation to mother for each of these family types is shown in Figure 3. As expected, nuclear families (random sample) comprised the highest percentage of securely individuated youth (Kruskal–Wallis  $\chi^2 = 6.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Comparing both types of separated families, adolescents' individuation vis-à-vis mothers in stepfamilies and single-mother families proved rather similar (Kruskal–Wallis  $\chi^2 = 1.42$ ,  $p = .23$ ). The most pronounced differences were found between these three groups and adolescents living in nuclear families with high interparental conflict. These latter youth showed the highest percentage of dependent-ambivalent relationships with their mothers ( $\chi^2 = 9.96$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and were least likely to report secure individuation ( $\chi^2 = 16.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings support our hypothesis that high interparental conflict puts adolescents at risk for problems in the individuation process.

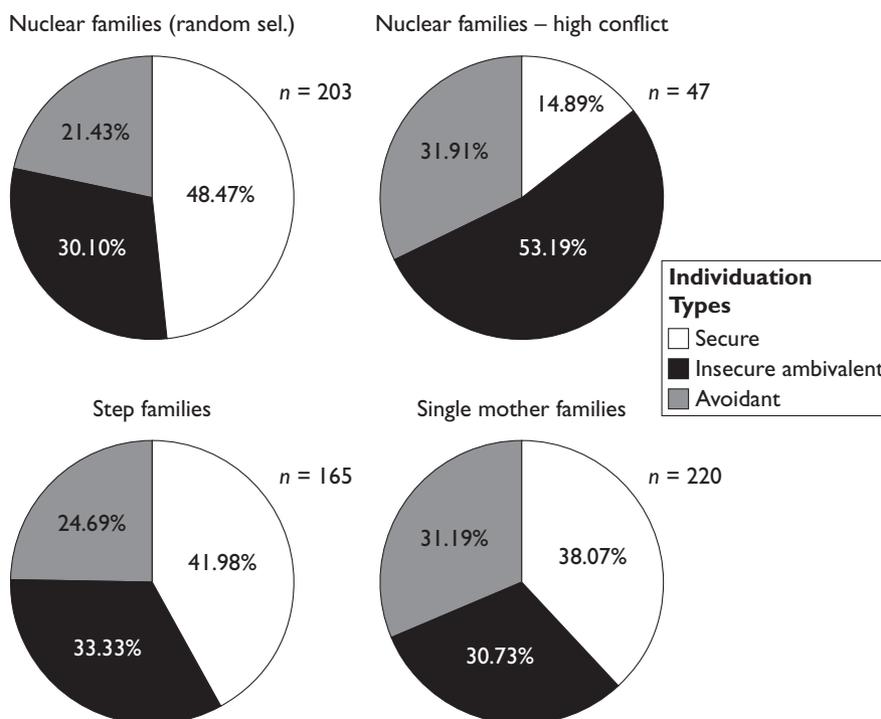
This latter finding also holds for adolescents' individuation vis-à-vis father or mother's partner (see Figure 4). Here too, youth from high-conflict nuclear families were significantly less likely to report secure individuation ( $\chi^2 = 9.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and most at risk for a dependent-ambivalent type of relationship ( $\chi^2 = 11.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than the random sample of nuclear families. As expected, adolescents from the random group of nuclear families compared with those from other family types were substantially more likely to develop a securely individuated relationship with their father than was reported by youth from separated families for their relationship to mother's new partner ( $\chi^2 = 77.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Compared with father-adolescent relationships in average nuclear families (random sample), relationships with stepfathers are more likely to be avoidant or detached-autonomous. Not surprisingly, these patterns of distance to mother's new partner were most prevalent among youth from single-mother families who did not co-reside with their mother's new partner. Of these 60 adolescents, 68.3% indicated a detached-autonomous or

avoidant relationship with their mother's new boyfriend, while only 11.7% reported a securely individuated relationship. This group differs most from all other family types ( $\chi^2 = 95.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Interestingly, it is particularly the avoidant type of relationship that is most prevalent in this group with a relative frequency twice that for stepfamilies (35% vs. 17.2%), while detachment is only slightly more likely to be found in relation to mothers' new boyfriend than to a stepfather (33.3% vs. 28.2%). This may be seen as indicating even more problems than experienced if co-residing with mother's new partner in a stepfamily.

### *Parenting and social support as predictors of successful individuation*

Our previous findings concerning the negative effects of interparental conflict highlight the significance of family dynamics for adolescents' individuation. In particular, parenting was expected to play an important role in the individuation process. The following analyses test the extent to which overprotection and strict control inhibit and how strongly parental monitoring and empathy for adolescents' feelings facilitate successful individuation. Because the effects of parenting may spill over into adolescents' relationships with the other parent, both parents' quality of parenting was considered simultaneously. Furthermore, it was tested whether adolescents' loyalty conflicts due to unhealthy triangulation between biological parents puts the individuation process at risk. And finally, social support outside the family as indicated by adolescents' appreciation by other adults was assumed to provide an additional resource which should facilitate self-confidence and autonomy development.

*Predictors of secure individuation vis-à-vis mothers.* Discriminant analyses for dummy-coded individuation type (comparing secure individuation with the other types combined) revealed that six variables contribute to a good classification



**Figure 3.** Types of individuation in relation to mother by family type.

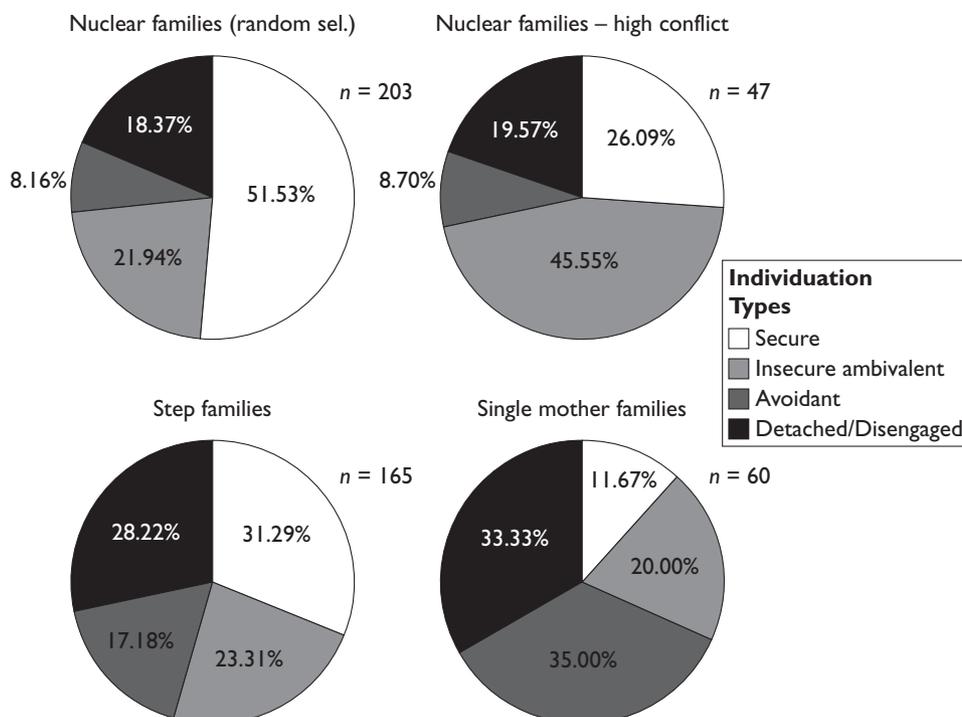


Figure 4. Types of individuation in relation to father/mother's partner by family type.

(discriminant function weights in parentheses): low maternal overprotection (−4.8); high maternal empathy (4.1); no strict control from (step)father, if present (−3.7); appreciation by adults outside the family (2.8); and finally, no or little loyalty conflicts (−2.4). This discriminant function leads 80.0% correctly classified cases overall, with 71.1% correctly classified for nonmembership (0) and 90.7% for membership (1) in the securely individuated type. It should be noted that the first four and most important variables directly address aspects of autonomy granting and support for relatedness: maternal overprotection and strict control by (step)fathers are likely to undermine autonomy attempts, high empathy should facilitate closeness. Loyalty conflicts as a likely outcome of high interparental conflict and antagonisms also seem to undermine emotional autonomy.

*Predictors of secure individuation vis-à-vis (step)fathers.* Similar analyses were conducted to predict a securely individuated relationship with (step)fathers. The discriminant analyses suggest that three aspects of (step)fathers' parenting allow us to distinguish securely individuated youth from all others (discriminant function weights in parentheses): high empathy (5.9), low overprotection (−5.7) and high monitoring (3.6). Together, these variables lead to 70.6% correctly classified cases overall. Mothers' parenting did not prove to be relevant. For each parent, his/her empathy and overprotection were the most important predictors for adolescents' secure individuation in the respective relationship. Interestingly, monitoring was found to be relevant for secure individuation in relation to (step)fathers, only.

### *Individuation and adolescents' adjustment*

Finally, we sought to identify correlates of individuation type in youth adjustment, focusing on adolescents' relationship with

mother. Analyses of variance showed significant main effects concerning almost all outcome variables (Table 2). Securely individuated youth reported generally best adjustment, for example, higher self-esteem, lower depression scores, less somatic complaints, higher work orientation and lower helplessness concerning the family. Avoidants fared second best. They were less dependent on others' judgments and indicated higher self-confidence than insecure ambivalent youth.

For individuation in relation to (step)fathers, the effects are similar but generally not as strong as for individuation in relation to mothers. Detached-autonomous adolescents have loosened their ties to the family but obviously not to their disadvantage. They experience less loyalty conflicts and have higher self-confidence than insecure ambivalents, feel less helpless and have higher feelings of competence than dependent-ambivalent youth.

## Discussion

This study takes a person- or group-oriented approach in investigating individuation in relation to parents during the adolescent years, aiming to identify different types of individuation and comparing them with respect to a broad range of family factors and features of adolescents' adjustment. Among predictors of adolescents' individuation, special attention was paid to features of family structure. In addition to testing the effects of parental separation and stepfamily formation on individuation vis-à-vis mother, this study allowed us to compare adolescents' individuation vis-à-vis biological fathers in nuclear families, stepfathers and single-mother's new boyfriend living outside the family. In discussing our findings, we first consider the typology suggested by our data in the light of other findings and draw a comparison to attachment types. We then turn to predictors and outcomes of individuation type.

**Table 2**

*Analysis of variance for individuation types in relation to mother and youth adjustment: Means, standard deviations (in parentheses) and F-statistics, controlling for age*

Source	Securely individuated	Dependent-ambivalent	Avoidant	F	Eta <sup>2</sup>
Self-esteem	3.55 (.33)	3.21 (.42)	3.35 (.42)	42.51***	.12
Depression	1.71 (.26)	1.84 (.37)	1.83 (.33)	13.61***	.04
Somatic complaints	1.53 (.31)	1.70 (.43)	1.71 (.37)	16.27***	.05
Low work orientation	2.06 (.48)	2.33 (.44)	2.37 (.47)	26.09***	.08
Low self-confidence	1.74 (.42)	2.11 (.46)	1.89 (.46)	29.85***	.10
Dependency on others' judgments	1.66 (.50)	2.09 (.59)	1.80 (.54)	28.10***	.09
Competence in family	3.15 (.45)	2.73 (.46)	2.90 (.49)	41.03***	.13

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### *Individuation typology*

Previous studies which similarly adopted a typological approach yielded inconsistent findings with respect to the number of types identified, ranging between two and six. However, three types were most frequently reported, and our analyses of adolescents' report on their relationship to mother confirm these findings. As expected, three types of individuation could be identified and validated as distinct groups labeled as "securely individuated", "dependent-ambivalent" and "avoidant". With respect to individuation vis-à-vis father, stepfather or mother's new partner, respectively, three highly similar types of individuation emerged, but in addition, a "detached-autonomous" type was found which was not evident for mothers. Given the variations in father status in our sample, the higher differentiation of individuation types in relation to father/mother's partner is not surprising. In fact, this detached-autonomous pattern was most prevalent among youth in stepfather families and those from single mother families describing their relationship to mother's new partner.

As hypothesized, "securely individuated" adolescents indicate high relatedness alongside high emotional autonomy. This group strongly resembles the "healthy separators" as identified by McClanahan and Holmbeck (1992) as well as the "secure" group described by Ryan and Lynch (1989). With respect to their closeness to parents, they clearly differ from members of the "avoidant" group who actively seek distance. Given that this latter group shows few insecurities or lack of emotional autonomy in relation to parents, their pattern of relationships largely resembles the "avoidant" type reported by Ryan and Lynch (1989) while differing from the "anxious deniers" identified by McClanahan and Holmbeck (1992). The dependent-ambivalent group found in our study, by contrast, is most distinctly characterized by high ambivalence and fear of love withdrawal along with high support seeking, but also elevated levels of distancing. They resemble the "anxious" group described by Ryan and Lynch while falling between the "succorance seekers" and "anxious deniers" found by McClanahan and Holmbeck. Given that this dependent-ambivalent type has emerged as a considerably frequent pattern of unsuccessful individuation (32% for mothers and 18% for fathers/mother's partner), our findings clearly contrast with those reported by Delaney (1996) who did not find an ambivalent cluster in her data of 12–13 year olds, but only a detached pattern. Age differences between both samples do not seem to provide a plausible account for such different findings given that in our sample dependent-ambivalent youth had the lowest mean age ( $M = 14.8$  years) of all types, whereas our detached group was

oldest ( $M = 15.5$  years). Rather, our measures seem to be better suited to identify ambivalent relationships.

Finally, our data suggest a "detached-autonomous" type for adolescents' relationships with male parents only (father and particularly stepfathers or mothers' new partner). These youth are not ambivalent, anxious, nurturance-seeking or actively distancing. They best resemble the "peaceful detachers" found by McClanahan and Holmbeck. Since the SITA used in this latter study does not allow us to distinguish adolescents' individuation in relation to mothers and fathers, the overall finding of this fourth type may also largely reflect adolescents' experiences with fathers.

Overall, despite some variations in patterns, our findings based on a German sample and those previously reported for US samples seem to converge considerably. They suggest that three types of individuation allow to characterize the large majority of adolescents, even in a sample with wide age range and heterogeneous family background, at least as far as their relationship to mother is concerned.

### *Individuation and attachment*

There is an obvious similarity between our adolescent/parent individuation typology and attachment styles. Such similarities between individuation type and attachment types were evident in the individuation typology reported by McClanahan and Holmbeck (1992), too, with considerable resemblance to the four-category model of attachment styles proposed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) which distinguishes "secure", "preoccupied", "fearful" and "dismissing" attachment. Similarly, four theoretically derived types of attachment were conceptualized in subsequent research employing questionnaire assessment of "anxiety" and "avoidance" as two dimensions underlying attachment styles. The combination of high versus low values for each dimension yields four different types. In fact, the MITA employed here allows the independent assessment of features of relatedness (support seeking) versus avoidance (denial of attachment needs), on the one hand, and anxiety (fear of love withdrawal, ambivalence, engulfment anxiety), on the other hand, similar to conceptions in attachment research. However, our data suggest that these anxieties are not homogeneous and seem to follow different developmental trends (see later). Fear of love withdrawal and ambivalence indicate emotional insecurities in relation to parents which point to emotional dependence on the adolescents' side. Engulfment anxiety, however, mostly appears in the context of active distancing from parents and is

likely to indicate a phase in the individuation process when closeness is avoided to gain autonomy.

### *Effects of age and gender*

The large age range in our sample allowed testing for age effects on individuation type. In line with findings on autonomy development (Silverberg & Gondoli, 1996), dependent-ambivalent youth proved to be youngest. However, contrary to our expectations, securely individuated adolescents were not older but rather somewhat younger than “avoidant” and “detached-autonomous” adolescents. At the same time, the absolute age difference between the youngest and oldest group was only about one year and age varied considerably within types. Rather than suggesting a normative succession of types, our data provide only moderate support for age trends in the individuation process. While the chances for resolving insecurities as well as the likelihood of emotional distance seem to increase with age, relational dynamics between adolescents and parents may contribute to developing any type of individuation at any age. Adolescents’ gender hardly mattered.

### *Risk and protective factors*

As expected, parental separation was a risk factor for secure individuation, but the effects were not strong. Even in relation to stepfathers, secure individuation was achieved by one third of the participants. Interparental conflict proved to be a much more critical variable in predicting problems for individuation, particularly dependent-ambivalent relationships. In stepfather and single-mother families, avoidant and detached-autonomous relationships with the mother’s new partner were particularly likely.

Among characteristics of parenting, high empathy and low overprotection proved closely and most consistently linked to successful individuation. Some differences in predictors of secure individuation in relation to mother and father/mother’s partner emerged. Interestingly, strict paternal control seems to undermine secure individuation in relation to mother, only, while not affecting individuation vis-à-vis father or mother’s new partner, respectively. The latter, however, proved to be linked to high monitoring on the (step)father’s side. Given that this indicator highlights (step)fathers’ knowledge of adolescents’ whereabouts, it may be a particularly salient feature of open communication and involvement for male parent figures. At the same time, our cross-sectional analyses leave the causal nature and direction of influence open. Because monitoring depends strongly on adolescents’ self disclosure (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000), it may as well be that monitoring is only possible in the context of a trustfully connected relationship.

Secure individuation is linked to a variety of positive features of adolescent adjustment. As expected, self-confidence is higher, whereas somatic and internalizing symptoms are less likely. Admittedly, the influences are probably not unidirectional. Adolescents’ characteristics like high self-efficacy beliefs will facilitate individuation development as well as vice versa.

Overall, our findings illustrate the advantages of a typological approach as compared with the analysis of separate scales. For example, we found that high relatedness may go along with high as well as low ambivalence yielding quite distinct types of relationships and different outcomes. Thus it is not surprising that previous findings from this study showing

that the amount of relatedness per se (defined as support seeking and low denial of attachment needs) does not predict changes in adolescents’ outcomes while insecurities (defined by ambivalence and fear of love withdrawal) do (Walper, 2003). The interplay of these features of relationships proves even more important to consider.

Although our study is longitudinal in nature, we restricted our analyses to a cross-sectional approach, because a larger number of indicators concerning individuation in relation to mothers and (step)fathers was available for the second wave. It would be desirable to extend our analyses and results to longitudinal data. Furthermore, it will be of particular interest to complement findings about mothers’ new partners by findings concerning the nonresidential biological father.

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