

Parental and Relationship Representations and Experiences of Depression in College Students

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Young adults' descriptions of their parents and their relationships with their parents were used to reexamine the relations between object representation and depressive experience. One hundred eight students completed (a) four open-ended descriptions, including two written descriptions of the parents (mother and father, separately), and two written descriptions of the relationships with the parents; and (b) the Depressive Experience Questionnaire. Each of the four open-ended descriptions was rated on seven scales. Factor analysis yielded four distinct factors from the 28 dimensions of the descriptions. These factors were related to: (a) the degree of elaboration and investment, (b) the structural level of the descriptions, (c) the affective tone of the description of the father, and (d) the affective tone of the description of the mother. Significant differences and interactions were found regarding the interplay between the specific significant other represented (father or mother) and the specific framework of representation (parent description or relationship description). Measures derived from parents' and relationship descriptions significantly predicted depressive experiences of self-criticism and dependency. The results indicate the advantages of a joint exploration of the representation of distinct significant others (mother and father) and the use of two modes of relatedness (describe parent and describe relationship with parent) in the process of personality assessment.

The developmental theories of object relations and object representation stress the interaction between these two aspects of the representational world and their relation to normal and pathological development. The concept of object representation is focused on the ways in which the significant other is experienced, perceived, recalled, or projected using different methods (e.g., Thematic

Apperception Test stories, descriptions of significant others, Rorschach responses). Object representation is conceived as a result of maturation processes of cognitive functions interwoven with interpersonal life experiences. Object relation theories stress the emotional and developmental vicissitudes of the relationships with the significant others. Each interpersonal experience can be internally represented in three aspects: (a) self-representation, (b) the representation of the other (object representation), and (c) characteristics of the affective state of the relationships with the other (Kernberg, 1976). The internalized object relations influence real life relationships in normal development and in psychopathology. Studies have demonstrated the relationships between parental representations and psychopathology (e.g., Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1979; Bornstein & O'Neill, in press). The close linkage between object relations and object representation has blurred the distinction between these related but unidentical constructs. Furthermore, under the influence of cognitive-developmental approaches, developmental stages have been emphasized, whereas the study of object representation as a function of who is being described (i.e., mother or father) has been overlooked. Westen et al. (1991) suggested that the consideration of object relations as a single or unitary developmental line is an oversimplification of a much more complex structure of multiple dimensions. Our study was guided by the assumption that multidimensional exploration of the representations of distinct significant others (mother vs. father) would shed light on the stimulus-specific aspects of the representational world.

One of the major dimensions of the level of object representation is the distinction between the representation of the object and the representation of the self (Blatt, 1974; Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1979). A high level of object representation was inferred whenever a person, in describing a parent, portrayed that parent as a separate human being. The capacity to distinguish the other from the self was emphasized in addition to other cognitive aspects related to the degree of elaboration and richness of the description. The task of describing a parent was considered to challenge the ability to differentiate oneself from the object described (i.e., refrain from excessive self-reference). Based on the same rationale, our underlying assumption in this study was that a request to describe the relationship with parents would stimulate greater involvement with the internal representation of the relationship described and thus challenge the individual capacity to deal with object relations from a different emotional stance. In addition, we assumed that the interplay between these two representational models—parental descriptions (object representation) and the relationship descriptions (object relation representation)—would yield valuable information.

In a number of studies Blatt (1974) and Blatt, D'Afflitti, and Quinlan (1976) hypothesized and demonstrated a relationship between type of depression and the level of object representation. Blatt and his colleagues differentiated between

two variants of depression—introjective depression and anaclitic depression. *Introjective depression* was characterized by self-criticism and guilt, and it was conceived as the expression of a criticizing and reproaching object representation. In contrast, *anaclitic depression* was characterized by dependence and a threat of imminent object loss resulting from unstable or inconsistent object representation (Blatt, 1974; Loewald, 1962; Rubin, 1984). The empirical value of this clinical distinction has been demonstrated in studies with normal and clinical samples (Blatt et al., 1976; Zuroff & Mongrain, 1987; Zuroff, Moskowitz, Weilgus, Powers, & Franko, 1983). As was hypothesized and clinically demonstrated in Blatt's (1974) early work, the level of object representation of persons manifesting anaclitic depressive elements was less developed than that of persons manifesting introjective depressive elements. Those individuals who did not experience any depression had the highest level of object representation (Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1979). This study also demonstrated significant relationships between the qualities attributed to the parents and the depressive experiences. In Blatt's works, limited attention had been given to the unique qualities of specific objects (i.e., mother vs. father). Psychodynamic developmental theories have stressed the unique role that mothers and fathers play in the actual and the representational world of their developing child (Abelin, 1971; Greenspan, 1982; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Within these theoretical frameworks, the mother is considered as the primary object of attachment, and separating from her is one of the hallmarks of early development. In contrast, the father is perceived as the first significant other outside the mother-infant dyadic system that represents external reality, and this perception helps the child (and the mother) in the separation-individuation process (Loewald, 1962). This process is replayed and echoed throughout the developmental process. Our assumption was that eliciting and examining the distinct features of each parent representation would shed light on the young adults' organization of their experience of the parent figures.

In accord with clinical practice, measures close to clinical work were chosen. The use of open-ended descriptions of the parents and the relationships with the parents as a method of investigation has special appeal for clinicians. Inquiries such as "Describe your mother," or "Describe your relationship with your father" are very common in clinical interviews or evaluation procedures. A method for systematic, standardized, and meaningful analysis of data generated by these enquiries may become a very practical clinical assessment tool.

In this study, we expanded and utilized this methodology to examine the interplay between representations of parents and representations of the relationships with parents. In particular we were interested in: (a) assessing to what extent dimensions of object relations are object specific (e.g., one parent being perceived distinctively different from the other parent); (b) determining the extent that changing the focus of the request from describe your parent to describe your relationship with your parent stimulates variations in the access to

and characterization of the individual's internal representational world; and (c) considering the contribution of a complex, multidimensional investigation of object relations to the understanding of depressive experiences of college students in Israel.

METHOD

Subjects

One hundred eight first-year students (94 females and 14 males), enrolled in Introduction to Psychology courses, participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 31 ($M = 23.3$, $sd = 4.5$). No formal screening procedures were employed, but students with insufficient mastery in the Hebrew language were asked to refrain from participation. After the nature of the study and the tasks involved were explained to the students, they were allowed to refuse participation. Six of the original 114 subjects were not included in the study due to insufficient linguistic skills or refusal to participate (thus $N = 108$).

Procedure and Instruments

Subjects completed questionnaires in anonymous group administration. They were informed that they are participating in a study of students' perceptions of their parents.

The instruments used in this study included:

1. 5-min, open-ended written descriptions of each parent (parental description [PD]).
2. 5-min, open-ended written description of their relationship with each parent (relationship description [RD]).
3. The Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (DEQ; Blatt, D'Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1979).

The PD was introduced as a measure of the level of object representation (Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1979). In this study, some modifications were made to reduce the number of scales derived from the descriptions.

The open-ended RD was specially developed for this study. Scoring followed the guidelines of scoring PDs with minor modifications required by the different nature of the task. The scales of PDs included: conceptual level of representation, nurturance by the parent, criticism by the parent, affect experienced from and toward the parent (from highly positive through neutral to highly negative), power of the parent, and clinical evaluation of the description in terms of developmental level. The conceptual level scale was the only scale that was not

modified and was scored according to the original guidelines (Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1979). The scales of the RDs included: conceptual level, dominance in the description (parent vs. self), affect, communication in the relationships (from highly positive through nonexistent to highly negative), level of conflict, and clinical evaluation. A synopsis of the scales of the PD and the RD is presented in Table 1. The conceptual level scale is a 9-point scale, whereas all other scales are 7-point scales. Additional measures of the length of the descriptions were used based on the number of words counted in each description. The open-ended descriptions were administered in random order to eliminate order effects.

Three raters analyzed and evaluated the PDs with an interrater reliability ranging from .57 to .86. (The mean correlation over all scales over 45 paired descriptions was .74.) Once the scoring procedure was completed, discrepancies among raters were resolved in a discussion focused on factors contributing to the disagreement, and the raters arrived at mutual agreement on the appropriate scores.

The DEQ identifies two basic phenomenological factors of depression—Dependency and Self-Criticism—and a third Efficacy factor (Blatt et al., 1976). The DEQ was translated into Hebrew, and the translated version was tested for its factors' reliability and compatibility. The correlations between the original factor scoring and the new scoring following independent factor analysis were .962 for the Dependency factor, .967 for the Self-Criticism factor, and .871 for the Efficacy factor. The interitem reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .791.

RESULTS

Twenty-eight scales of the PDs and RDs were subjected to factor analysis to explore the structure of relations between the factors. This exploratory factor analysis was to obtain a global picture of the interrelationships between the various scales. The resulting factors were not used in the following analyses. The factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed four significant factors (Table 2). The first factor, which accounted for 15.8% of the variance, was highly loaded on six scales that reflected the extent of elaboration and investment in the written descriptions. The second factor, which accounted for 12% of the variance, was highly loaded on six scales related to the father. They reflected the general affective tone in which the father was experienced and described. The third factor, which accounted for 10% of the variance, was highly loaded on the conceptual and clinical scales for both mother and father descriptions. This suggested its relevance to the structural–developmental aspect of the conceptual and the clinical scales. The fourth factor, which accounted for 8.9% of the variance, was virtually identical to the second but related to the mother.

Further multivariate explorations of the underlying relationships between the

TABLE 1
Brief Synopsis of PD and RD Scales

Scale	Meaning	High Score	Low Score
PD			
Conceptual level	Level of elaboration and complexity of the description and the extent of object-self differentiation.	Multidimensional elaborated description. Lack of diffusion between self and object. Insight.	Self-referenced, very simple and restricted description.
Nurturance	The extent to which the parent is perceived as nurturant and caring individual.	The parent is described as very warm and nurturant, to the extent of over-idealization.	The parent is described as very cold, hostile, and uncaring.
Criticism	The extent to which the parent is described as critical, judgmental, and punitive.	The parent is described as very judgmental, critical, and punitive. Set extreme standards.	The parent is described as acceptant and nonjudgmental.
Affect	The affective tone of the description. Does the subject identify with and give a positive sense in representing the parent?	Positive, idealized description of the parent. Sense of lack of critical view of the parent.	Negative, totally "black" picture of the parent, with no sense of acceptance.
Power	The extent that the parent is described as competent, powerful, and successful.	Very powerful, competent, and successful parent.	Very limited, incompetent parent.
Clinical	Clinical content analysis. Score based on content related to developmental psychoanalytical psychosocial stages.	Contents related to genital/latency/adolescence/adulthood, productivity, self-fulfillment, and so on.	Contents related to oral-symbiotic stages of trust, need satisfaction. Diffused boundaries.
Length	Number of words		
RD			
Conceptual level	Level of elaboration and complexity of the description and the extent of object-self differentiation.	Multidimensional, elaborated description. Lack of diffusion between self and object. Review of interactions, affects, and reciprocity.	Self-referenced, very simple, and restricted description. Egocentric and lacks reciprocity.

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Scale	Meaning	High Score	Low Score
Affect	The affective tone of the description. Is the relationship described as positive, nurturant, warm enjoyable?	Positive, idealized relationships. Sense of lack of critical view of the relations. Full acceptance.	Negative, totally "black" picture of the relationships. No sense of acceptance.
Dominance	The extent to which the subject or the parent is dominant in the description in terms of devoted space.	The subject is dominant. Almost no presence of the parent.	The parent is dominant. Almost no presence of the subject.
Conflict	Level of conflict in the relationship. Tension, opposition, rivalry, and hostility.	High level of conflict.	Low level of conflict.
Communication	Level of communication with parent.	Open, free, and productive communication.	Lack of or stressful forms of communication.
Clinical	Clinical content analysis. Score based on content related to developmental psychoanalytical psychosocial stages.	Contents related to genital/latency/ adolescence/ adulthood, productivity, self-fulfillment, and so on.	Contents related to oral-symbiotic stages of trust, need satisfaction. Diffused boundaries.
Length	Number of words		

Note. PD and RD scales are rating scales based on interpretation of the open-ended descriptions of the parents and relationships with parents.

various dimensions of the PDs and RDs were conducted. Four corresponding dimensions of the PDs and RDs were subjected to multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) according to the methodology of repeated measures design (Table 3). These scales included conceptual level, affect, clinical evaluation, and length of description (number of words). These scales were chosen because they were the only scales that were equivalent with PDs and RDs.

Significant interactions between type (PD vs. RD) and object of description (mother vs. father) was found in regard to conceptual level, $F(1, 92) = 9.79, p < .005$; affect, $F(1, 92) = 7.75, p < .01$; and length of description, $F(1, 92) = 5.15, p < .05$. Examination of these interactions showed that mothers tended to receive high ratings on RDs and low ratings in the object descriptions. The ratings related to the father were more similar in the PDs and RDs. On the other hand, the affect manifestations toward the father tended to vary. PDs of the father were characterized by high positive affect, but RDs with the father had a much lower degree of affect. RDs with the mother were much longer than any

TABLE 2
Highly Loaded Dimensions on Factor Analysis of Open-Ended PDs and RDs

Factor Name	Highly Loaded PD and RD Scales	Loading
Factor 1: Elaboration and Investment	Conceptual level of mother-RD	.54
	Length of mother-RD	.82
	Conceptual level of father-RD	.58
	Length of father-RD description	.81
	Length of mother-PD description	.81
	Length of father-PD description	.79
Factor 2: Affect-Father	Affect in father-RD	.82
	Communication in father-RD	.44
	Conflict level in father-RD	-.56
	Nurturance in father-PD	.63
	Affect in father-PD	.73
	Power of father in father-PD	.62
Factor 3: Structural Level	Conceptual level of mother-PD	.60
	Clinical evaluation of mother-PD	.59
	Conceptual level of father-PD	.78
	Clinical evaluation of father-PD	.76
Factor 4: Affect-Mother	Affect in mother-RD	.70
	Communication in mother-RD	.40
	Conflict level in mother-RD	-.51
	Nurturance in mother-PD	.45
	Criticism in mother-PD	-.55
	Affect in mother-PD	.75

TABLE 3
MANOVA of Repeated Measures of RDs and PDs

	Description Type				Effect ^a		
	RD		PD		Type	Object	Type* Object
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother			
Conceptual level	5.11	5.59	4.79	4.46	36.1****	0.41	9.79****
Affect	4.68	4.78	5.11	4.80	4.77*	0.29	7.75**
Clinical evaluation	4.39	3.10	4.21	3.48	0.86	18.3****	0.02
Length of description	52.8	58.9	53.8	52.7	1.19	1.86	5.15*

^aF(1, 92).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .005$. **** $p < .0001$.

other description, $F(1, 92) = 5.15, p < .05$; but the PDs and RDs for mother were evaluated lowest on the clinical scale, $F(1, 92) = 18.3, p < .0001$.

The relationships between the written descriptions and the DEQ factors were analyzed following procedures used by Blatt, Wein, Chevron, and Quinlan (1979). Subjects were divided into four groups according to the nature of the dominant depressive experience. The groups were: introjective, anaclitic, mixed

anaclitic and introjective depression, and nondepressed. Table 4 presents the mean scores of each group on conceptual level of descriptions. These results failed to replicate Blatt, Wein, Chevron, and Quinlan's (1979) finding regarding the association between anaclitic depression and lower conceptual level in PDs. No significant group differences were found for the conceptual level of PDs and for the RD with the father. The only significant group difference was on the conceptual level of the RD with the mother, $F(3, 90) = 2.87, p < .05$. The mixed group had the highest conceptual level, and the nondepressed group had the lowest.

The last stage of the statistical analysis utilized stepwise regression procedures to test the predictive value of all 28 measures derived from the descriptions to the depressive experience scales. The results are summarized in Table 5.

The two best predictors of experiences of the Self-Criticism factor derived from the RDs with father. Level of conflict in these descriptions accounted for 20% of the variance. The additional contribution of the conceptual level was relatively limited (4%).

The Dependency factor was primarily explained by two measures of the RD with mother— affective tone and level of conflict—which together contributed 16.7% of the explained variance. The next contribution (4.2%) was made by the father nurturance in the PD, which was negatively correlated with Dependency. An additional contribution was derived from the clinical evaluation of RD with father and the level of criticism in mother PDs (8.5%).

The Efficacy factor was explained, though to a lesser extent than the other factors, primarily by two parameters of the length of description related to the mother (9%). Although the first contribution of the length in mother descriptions was a positive one, the contribution of the length in the RD was a negative one. An additional explanatory scale was the nurturance in father PDs (3.2%).

TABLE 4
ANOVA of Conceptual Level as a Repeated Measure on Groups With Different Dominant Depressive Experience

Description	Dominant Depressive Experience				F
	Introjective	Anaclitic	Mixed Anaclitic and Introjective Depression	Nondepressed	
Mother relations	5.46	6.38	6.73	5.33	2.87*
Father relations	4.92	5.23	5.36	4.62	0.70
Mother-object	3.62	4.15	5.27	4.12	1.97
Father-object	3.85	5.08	4.55	4.54	1.73

* $p < .05$.

TABLE 5
Stepwise Regression Criteria: DEQ Factors, Predictors, PDs and RDs Measures

Factor	Step	Predictor	R-Sqr	Simple R	Reg Coef	F	p
Self-Criticism	1	FR—conflict	.201	.40	.28	16.36	.0001
	2	FR—structure	.241	.28	.11	4.74	.0320
Dependency	1	MR—affect	.117	.27	.40	26.56	.0001
	2	MR—conflict	.167	.06	.14	3.40	.0686
	3	FP—nurturance	.209	-.10	-.22	7.59	.0072
	4	FR—clinical	.251	-.16	.12	6.43	.0130
	5	MP—criticism	.294	.07	.20	5.21	.0248
Efficacy	1	MP—length	.047	.21	.01	10.07	.0021
	2	MR—length	.090	-.04	-.01	4.77	.0316
	3	FP—nurturance	.121	.13	.16	3.12	.0806

Note. FR = father RD; MR = mother RD; FP = father PD; MP = mother PD. R-Sqr is the squared multiple correlation of the criterion with the variables included (the explained variance); Simple R is a simple Pearson correlation with one measure entered in a specific step; Reg Coef is the coefficient for linear regression using all variables included.

DISCUSSION

Prior to considering the results of this study, a few methodological issues and limitations should be addressed. The majority of the subjects were females, and although no significant sex differences were found, the results may not represent male students to the extent that they represent female students. Other confounding variables, such as the effects of parent loss, or parental representation in blended families, could not be assessed in this pilot study.

The results underscore three issues: (a) the differences between the young adults' internal experiences of their father and mother, (b) the differences between a task eliciting a written PD as opposed to a written RD, and (c) the complex nature of the depressive experience relationship to these aspects of parental representation. These issues are considered in turn.

The factor analysis of all the representational scales yielded a clear structural pattern underlying these measures. The factorial pattern demonstrated the joint and differential aspects of the various representations. Thus, two structural aspects (common for all representations) and two parent-specific aspects emerged. The emerging structural aspects were: (a) elaboration and investment and (b) developmental-conceptual level of the description. The parent-specific aspects were the affective-evaluative qualities (affect, communication, conflict, nurturance, and criticism) of the representations of the mother and the relationship with her and the equivalent developmental-conceptual factor regarding the father.

As predicted, interaction effects between the nature of the description (PD or RD) and specific PD (father or mother) were found. The conceptual level of mother (PDs) was lower than that of any other representation (father PD or RD

and mother RD). Considering the nature of the conceptual level scale and its sensitivity to separation and boundaries issues, this finding suggests that separation difficulty was specific to the mothers' RD. The affect expressed in the fathers' PD was greater (more positive) than that of the fathers' RD. In contrast, the affect expressed in both the mother PDs and the mother RDs were equally positive. This finding may reflect a common image of the father as desirable (positive affect in the father PD) but unreachable (less positive affect in the RD). In terms of content, the main conflict issue regarding the father was his relatively high emotional distance, whereas the conflict with the mother was centered on her being too close emotionally.

Additional differences between the representation of the parent figures and relationship were present. Involvement as measured by the length of the descriptions was highest in the mothers' RDs. Overall the clinical evaluations of the mothers' PDs and RDs were lower than those of the fathers. Mothers' PDs and RDs tended to involve more regressed or early developmental themes, a finding that may also reflect the links between the internalized mother representation of adulthood and the specific role of the mother in early development (Blatt, 1974).

The results imply that the relationship between depression and the structural aspects of parental representation are more complex than originally suggested (Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1979). The early findings of Blatt, Wein, Chevron, and Quinlan (1979) regarding the relationships between parental representation and depressive experiences in normal young adults have been clearly supported by our findings. However, the conceptual level of the description was not directly correlated with specific types of depression (anaclitic or introjective). The failure to replicate this specific finding may have resulted from unique sample characteristics of Israeli students (age, military service that includes in many cases forced separation from parents, etc.). Results suggest that this typology of dominant depressive experience may be invalid or insufficiently robust in the normal spectrum of the population. Interestingly, Bornstein and O'Neill (in press) also failed to find significant differences in PDs of their clinical diagnostic subgroups, although psychiatric patients described their parents more negatively, on a lower conceptual level, and expressed greater ambivalence than their matched normal subjects. These findings suggest that parental representations are important predictors of psychopathology and its severity, rather than of specific diagnostic entities.

As predicted, representations of mother and father (based on both PDs and RDs) were related to experiences of anaclitic and introjective depression in accord with psychoanalytic developmental theory (Blatt, 1974; Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1979; Greenspan, 1982; Mahler et al., 1975). Anaclitic experiences were related to descriptions of warm and positive mothers and negatively related to these qualities in fathers. Introjective experiences were related to degree of conflict and level of structure of fathers' RDs. This

parent-specific pattern of results support theories on the complementary role of each parent in the developmental process (Abelin, 1971; Greenspan, 1982; Mahler et al., 1975). The mother, representing the prime object of the early relationship, creates strong nurturant ties to the child. These serve as models for anaclitic-dependent representation of object relations with mothers. It has been hypothesized that the fathers as the second significant other support the resolution of this early mother-child anaclitic matrix, leading to a more separate representation of the self and the other. The father, the second significant other distinct from the undifferentiated mother-child matrix, represents the demands of external reality or the precursors of the superego and may thus be associated with introjective experiences (Freud, 1913/1973; Lacan, 1966).

The methodology for the joint exploration of object representation and object relation utilized in this study yielded valuable information regarding the interplay between these two aspects of development. PDs and RDs are linked with specific ties to experiences of depression associated with normal development and psychopathology. The use of experimental within-subject design via manipulation of the nature of the task (PD or RD) and the object described (mother or father) facilitates the understanding of the internal dynamic underlying the representational world. In light of the growing emphasis on the assessment of representational aspects of personality (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) and their demonstrated diagnostic value in assessing psychopathology (e.g., Nigg, Lohr, Westen, Gold, & Silk, 1992) and assessing the process of therapeutic interventions (Blatt, Wiseman, Prince-Gibson, & Gatt, 1991; Diamond, Kaslow, Coonerty, & Blatt, 1990; Gruen & Blatt, 1990), our findings suggest that PDs and RDs have the potential of becoming applicable clinical tools. Further research is needed to explore the clinical value of our methodology for the study of the internalized objects and their significance in normal development and psychopathology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We thank Meir Saadon, Dvora Dichterman, and Yael Sadeh for their significant contribution. We also thank Dr. Sidney Blatt for his thoughtful critique of an early draft of this article.

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Received February 10, 1992
 Revised May 8, 1992