

Separation/Attachment Theory and Career Decidedness and Commitment: Effects of Parental Divorce

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This study tested separation and attachment theory in relation to the career choice commitment of college students, including those from divorced families, and the impact of family status on separation, attachment, and career variables. Partial or limited support was found for separation and attachment theory. For example, conflictual independence, attachment, and financial press related moderately to vocational exploration and commitment, but not the tendency to foreclose on a career choice. The former relations tended to be stronger for students with recently divorced parents than for students whose parents divorced earlier or for those from intact homes. Students from intact families displayed more career decidedness and financial connectedness to their parents. Students with divorced parents reported higher financial press and greater attitudinal, functional, and emotional independence from fathers. © 2001 Academic Press

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The influence of familial factors on career choice and vocational identity has long been of interest to vocational psychology researchers (Bordin, Nachmann, & Segal, 1963; Lucky, 1974; Roe, 1956). However, for many years career development researchers were more likely to investigate family demographic variables rather than family relationship variables. Recently, family cohesion and adaptability (Eigen, Hartman, & Hartman, 1987; Kinnier, Brigman, & Noble, 1990), family conflict (Lopez, 1989), and psychological separation and attachment (Blustein, Walbridge, Friedlander, & Palladino, 1991; Lopez, 1989) have been proposed as critical influences on career development. The present study examined the influence of selected family relationship variables on the career decidedness of college students generally, with a special focus on those students whose parents have divorced. The career development of college students with divorced parents has rarely been the primary focus in studies of vocational behavior, despite the fact that family relationship variables would seem to be especially salient for these students.

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Separation–Individuation, Attachment, and Career Choice

Some theorists have argued that the process of separation from parents is a key to progress in all identity formation tasks, including commitment to a career choice. For example, Blos (1979) described a second individuation stage of adolescence, the “shedding of family dependencies,” that leads to solidification of individual identity. Hoffman (1984) conceptualized the separation–individuation task of adolescence in terms of four types of independence from parents: (a) emotional independence, a decreased need for the parents’ approval and support; (b) attitudinal independence, the adoption of one’s own beliefs and values; (c) functional independence, the ability to manage one’s own affairs; and (d) conflictual independence, freedom from guilt, resentment, and anger in relation to parents.

In previous studies, conflictual independence has been the most consistent predictor of the adjustment variables (Blustein et al., 1991; Kenny & Donaldson, 1992). For example, Kenny and Donaldson (1992) reported that conflictual independence was associated with indicators of healthy psychological functioning including adjustment to college, absence of depression, fewer eating disorder symptoms, and personal adjustment. In addition, Lopez, Campbell, and Watkins, Jr. (1989) reported that children of divorce demonstrated higher emotional, functional, and attitudinal independence, but lower conflictual independence, especially from fathers, than their counterparts from intact families.

Other theorists have argued that attachment to parents is an equally important component of adolescent development. The ethological perspective of Ainsworth (1989; Ainsworth, Blehar, Walter, & Wally, 1978) and Bowlby (1969, 1988) views parents as the *secure base* from which not only small children, but also children on the brink of adulthood, can engage in the challenging tasks of a critical developmental period. In this view, adaptive social and psychological functioning are fostered by the connectedness and support which promotes exploration and risk taking in the process of identity resolution. For example, Kenny and Donaldson (1992) reported a positive relation of parental attachment to social competence, psychological functioning, and adjustment to college.

More recently, some theorists have noted the importance of an appropriate balance between healthy attachment to parents and the separation–individuation process in late adolescent development (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Josselson, 1988). In this view, separation–individuation occurs within an attachment relationship that is transformed rather than repudiated. For example, researchers have reported that both conflictual independence and attachment relate to positive perceptions of college adjustment (Kenny & Donaldson, 1992) and to progress in career development tasks (Blustein et al., 1991). Indeed, Blustein et al. (1991) reported that psychological separation and secure attachment together exhibited a stronger relation to these career development constructs than did psychological separation alone. However, these researchers did not investigate whether the operation of these separation/attachment dynamics differed for young people whose parents have divorced.

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