REVIEW ARTICLE

A Brief Overview of Margaret Mahler's Theory of Separation-Individuation: What It means to Educational Therapists, Early Interventionists & Early Childhood Educators

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a brief exploratory examination of Margaret Mahler's theory of separation-individuation, which targets at the development of young children between birth and 4 years, focusing on two key aspects, i.e., separation and individuation. Within the dynamic context of separation-individuation during that period, the four developmental stages – differentiation, practicing, rapprochement, and consolidation – are being reiterated by the author over and over again throughout this paper to highlight their importance. It is from this developmental substage of separation-individuation that a young child's personality evolves over the next few years to shape him/her into what the child's self eventually becomes. When applying Mahler's separation-individuation theory in the context of working with young children identified or diagnosed with special needs, the condition of what is termed as 'borderline phenomena' comes into the picture. In this paper, the authors examine how separation-individuation is viewed differently from the perspectives of three groups of professionals, i.e., educational therapists, early interventionists and early childhood educators, especially when they have to work with young children with special needs.

Keywords: *Early childhood educator, Early interventionist, Educational therapist, Margaret Mahler, Individuation, Separation, Special needs*

1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Mahler (b.1897-d.1985), the Austrian-born American psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and pediatrician, did her pioneering research in the development of infants and young children. She is best known for her separation-individuation theory, a cornerstone in developmental psychology, that has provided a vital framework for understanding the emotional and psychological maturation of young children (Winestine, 1973; Wolfs, 2022), including those with special needs (Bergman, 2000; Ozhek, 2007) as well as what Mahler (1971) described as 'borderline phenomena'[1]. Her theory, delineating the process through which infants develop a distinct sense of self separate from their primary caregivers, typically the mother (Mahler, 1981; Mahler & La Perriere, 1965), as the infant develops a sense of individuality, is divided into three phases and four subphases from birth to around three years of age (Mahler, 1972a).

First, the Normal Autistic Phase (NAP; 0-2 months) constitutes the initial stage when an infant primarily focuses on basic physiological needs and experiences the world in a self-contained manner, with minimal awareness of the external environment (Mahler, 1965, 2018; Mahler et al., 1959).

Second, during the Normal Symbiotic Phase (NSP; 2-6 months), the infant begins to recognize its mother as a separate being but still perceives her as part of a symbiotic relationship (Mahler, 1965, 2018; Pine, 1986). The infant and mother are experienced as a single entity, and the infant's sense of well-being is closely tied to the mother's presence and care (Mahler, 1981; Mahler & La Perriere, 1965).

Third and last, the Separation-Individuation Phase (SIP; 6-36 months) is the crtical stage which is further divided into four subphases (Mahler, 1972a): (i) differentiation (6-10 months), (ii) practicing (10-16 months), (iii) rapprochement (16-24 months), and (iv) consolidation (24-36 months). Each subphase represents a critical juncture in the child's journey towards independence, characterized by varying degrees of attachment and exploration.

For young children with special needs, the trajectory of separation-individuation may manifest differently, often requiring tailored support to navigate the challenges posed by developmental delays or disabilities - also known as 'borderline phenomena' (Mahler, 1971). Understanding these nuances is crucial for educational therapists, early interventionists, and early childhood educators. These professionals play a pivotal role in fostering environments that accommodate the unique developmental timelines of special needs children. By applying Mahler's theoretical insights to know and understand these atypical conditions, they can better anticipate and address the emotional and behavioral responses of children as they strive for autonomy. This knowledge equips practitioners to create supportive strategies that not only facilitate smoother transitions through developmental stages but also strengthen the caregiver-child bond, enhancing the child's overall emotional resilience and social competence. Furthermore, incorporating Mahler's theory into practice helps in identifying atypical developmental patterns early, allowing for timely interventions that can significantly improve long-term outcomes. Thus, the

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[1] '*Borderline Phenomena*' generally refers to a range of psychological or psychiatric symptoms and behaviors that are associated with borderline personality disorder (BPD), which is a mental health disorder characterized by instability in mood, behavior, self-image, and interpersonal relationships. The borderline phenomena can include: (1) Emotional instability: Individuals with BPD often experience intense and rapidly shifting emotions. They may feel very happy one moment and then become extremely sad or angry shortly after; (2) Impulsive behavior: People with BPD may engage in impulsive behaviors such as substance abuse, reckless driving, binge eating, or unsafe sex without considering the consequences; (3) Unstable relationships: Individuals with BPD often have tumultuous relationships marked by idealization and devaluation of others. They may have intense, but unstable, relationships with friends, family members, and romantic partners; (4) Distorted self-image: People with BPD may have a distorted sense of self, often feeling empty, worthless, or unsure of who they are. This can lead to frequent changes in goals, values, and career choices; (5) Fear of abandonment: Individuals with BPD often have an intense fear of being abandoned by loved ones, which can lead to desperate attempts to avoid real or perceived abandonment; (6) Identity disturbance: Many individuals with BPD struggle with a sense of identity, feeling uncertain about their values, goals, and interests; (7) Dissociation: Some individuals with BPD may experience dissociative symptoms, where they feel disconnected from reality or from their own thoughts, feelings, and actions. These phenomena can vary in severity and may overlap with symptoms of other mental health disorders. Treatment for BPD often involves psychotherapy, such as dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), which helps individuals learn coping skills to manage their emotions and behavior more effectively.

separation-individuation theory not only enriches the understanding of developmental processes in young children but also underscores the importance of personalized, empathetic, and informed approaches in early childhood education and therapeutic interventions.

2. WHAT IS SEPARATION IN MAHLER'S THEORY?

Separation in early childhood development refers to the experience of a child being apart from their primary caregiver, typically a parent (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2019; Owusu-Bempah, 2014; World Health Organization, 2004). This concept is crucial as it relates to the child's emotional and psychological growth. It also constitutes the first part of the separation-individuation development process in young children.

Below are the key factors suggested by the authors that play their respective important roles in this first part (i.e., separation) of the separation-individuation process:

- *Developmental Context:* During early childhood, children form strong attachments to their primary caregivers, usually their parents (Jacobson & Wille, 1984). These attachments are foundational for a child's sense of security and trust. When separated from their caregiver, a child may experience separation anxiety, which is a normal part of development.

- *Separation Anxiety:* This anxiety typically peaks between the ages of 8 and 18 months (Hock, McBride, & Gnezda, 1989; Jacobson & Wille, 1984; Kelmanson, 2012) and gradually decreases as the child grows older and develops a better understanding of object permanence - the realization that objects and people continue to exist even when out of sight. Signs of separation anxiety include crying, clinging, and distress when the caregiver leaves. It is a natural and temporary phase that, when managed appropriately, can foster resilience and independence.

- *Psychological Impact:* Properly managed separation helps children develop coping mechanisms and self-soothing techniques (Huguette, 2021). It teaches them that they can endure short-term discomfort and adapt to new situations (Balaban, 2006). Conversely, prolonged or poorly managed separation can lead to issues such as increased anxiety, attachment disorders, or difficulties in social and emotional functioning.

- *Parental Role:* Caregivers play a critical role in mitigating the negative effects of separation. Providing consistent reassurance, maintaining a predictable routine, and gradually increasing the duration of separations can help children adapt more comfortably (Balaban, 2006; Rees, 2010). Effective communication about the caregiver's return and involving children in enjoyable activities during separations can also ease their anxiety (Pincus et al., 2005).

- *Educational Context:* In educational settings like daycare or preschool, separation helps children learn to trust other adults and engage with peers, fostering social skills and independence (Catalano et al., 2004). Teachers and caregivers can support this transition by creating a warm and welcoming environment, acknowledging the child's feelings, and maintaining open communication with parents.

From this abovementioned perspective, separation is a significant aspect of early childhood development (Battaglia et al., 2016; Rutter, 1979), influencing a child's emotional resilience and capacity to handle future separations. With sensitive handling, it can lead to positive developmental outcomes, fostering a secure and confident child.

From the perspective of Mahler's psychoanalytic theory of separation-individuation (also see Blum, 2004; Edward et al., 1992), the term 'separation' is referred to the process by which an infant begins to differentiate themselves from their primary caregiver, typically the mother. This process is crucial for the development of a sense of self and autonomy (Mullin, 2007).

Separation involves both physical and psychological aspects. Physically, it entails the infant gradually becoming more independent from the caregiver, such as exploring their environment, moving away from the caregiver, and eventually engaging in activities on their own. Psychologically, separation involves the development of a distinct sense of self, separate from the mother or primary caregiver (Mullin, 2007; Ryan et al., 2015).

Mahler et al. (2008) identified several substages in the process of separation, including the following the normal symbiotic phase, as briefly described below:

2.1 *Normal Symbiotic Phase*

In the early months of life, the infant and caregiver are seen as one unit, with the infant being unable to differentiate themselves from the caregiver (Pine, 1986). There is a sense of symbiosis and fusion between the two.

2.2 *Separation-Individuation Phase*

2.2.1 Differentiation subphase

Around six months to a year of age, the infant begins to recognize themselves as separate from the caregiver (Augustyn et al., 2009). They start to explore their environment more actively and may show signs of distress when separated from the caregiver.

2.2.2 Practicing subphase

During this phase, typically occurring between one and two years of age, the infant becomes more mobile and begins to explore their surroundings more autonomously (Augustyn et al., 2009). They may wander away from the caregiver but still regularly return for reassurance.

2.2.3 Rapprochement phase

Around the age of two, the child experiences ambivalence toward their newfound independence (Gergely, 2000; Mahler, 1972b). They may alternate between seeking independence and seeking reassurance from the caregiver. This phase is characterized by a push-pull dynamic in the child's relationship with the caregiver.

2.4 *Consolidation phase*

By around three years of age, the child has developed a more stable sense of self and is more comfortable with their independence (Baltes & Silverberg, 2019). They can engage in activities on their own while still maintaining a secure attachment to the caregiver.

Overall, separation in Mahler's theory is a complex process that involves both physical separation and psychological differentiation from the primary caregiver. It is essential for the child's healthy development of autonomy, self-identity, and the ability to form healthy relationships with others later in life.

3. WHAT IS INDIVIDUATION IN MAHLER'S THEORY?

Individuation in early childhood development refers to the process by which a child develops a distinct identity separate from others, particularly from their primary caregivers (Karpal, 1976). This process is crucial for the formation of a personal sense of self and autonomy (Mahler & McDevitt, 1982). Individuation involves a series of stages where a child gradually becomes aware of their own individuality and capabilities.

The concept of individuation was notably explored by Mahler (1963) from her psychoanalytic perspective of the separation-individuation theory. According to Mahler (1972a), this process unfolds primarily in the first three years of life and can be divided into four subphases (Mahler & Furer, 1963; Pine, 2004):

3.1 Differentiation (5-10 months)

In this stage, infants begin to distinguish between themselves and their mothers. They start to explore their surroundings and show curiosity about the external world, indicating an initial understanding of being separate individuals.

3.2 Practicing (10-16 months)

As children learn to crawl and walk, their physical mobility allows them to explore further away from their caregivers. This newfound independence fosters a sense of individuality as they actively engage with the environment on their own terms.

3.3 Rapprochement (16-24 months)

During this period, children experience a conflict between the desire for independence and the need for reassurance and closeness from their caregivers. They might exhibit behaviors such as frequent checking back with their caregivers while exploring. This phase is critical for developing emotional self-regulation and coping mechanisms (Mahler, 1972b).

3.4 Consolidation or Object Constancy (24-36 months)

Children achieve a more stable sense of self and others, realizing that relationships remain constant even when caregivers are not physically present. This understanding supports the child's ability to feel secure in their autonomy while maintaining emotional connections.

Individuation is fundamental for a child's emotional and psychological development, influencing their self-esteem, decision-making abilities, and relationships throughout life. Successful individuation leads to a balanced sense of independence and connectedness, which is essential for healthy social and emotional functioning.

4. WHY SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION THEORY IS IMPORTANT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

Margaret Maher's separation-individuation theory is a seminal framework in early childhood development that elucidates how infants gradually achieve a sense of individuality while still maintaining connections with primary caregivers, typically their mothers. This theory, rooted in psychoanalytic tradition, provides critical insights into the intricate processes by which a child's self-concept and independence are formed.

Maher's theory divides the separation-individuation process of SIP into four distinct subphases: differentiation, practicing, rapprochement, and consolidation (Mahler & Furer, 1963). Each of these is briefly described below:

1. *Differentiation* **(5-10 months):** During this phase, the infant begins to distinguish themselves from their mother. Physical movements, such as turning away or exploring the mother's face, signify the start of recognizing their separate existence.

2. *Practicing* **(10-16 months):** As the child starts to crawl and walk, they explore their environment more independently. This newfound mobility enhances their self-confidence and sense of agency, marking an expansion of the self away from the mother.

3. *Rapprochement* (16-24 months): The child becomes more aware of their vulnerability and the complexities of independence. This phase is characterized by a desire to return to the mother for reassurance and safety, reflecting an internal struggle between independence and dependency (Mahler, 1972b).

4. *Consolidation* (24-36 months and beyond): By this phase, the child achieves a stable sense of individuality. They understand that they are separate from their mother but can maintain an emotional bond. This balance fosters a secure foundation for future relationships and self-reliance.

Maher's theory is crucial because it underscores the dynamic interplay between autonomy and connectedness in early development. It highlights the importance of a responsive and supportive caregiving environment that can adapt to the child's shifting needs for independence and reassurance. Understanding this process helps caregivers and professionals support healthy emotional and psychological growth in children. Recognizing the phases of separation-individuation aids in addressing developmental challenges early on, ensuring a more robust foundation for the child's future emotional and social well-being.

5. WHAT MAHLER'S THEORY OF SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION MEANS TO EACH OF THE THREE PROFESSIONS

Margaret Mahler's theory on separation-individuation (or SIP) is a cornerstone in understanding early childhood development, particularly in how children develop a sense of self and autonomy (Mahler & McDevitt, 1982). Mahler emphasized that this process is vital for a child's emotional and psychological health, unfolding through predictable stages: (i) differentiation, (ii) practicing, (iii) rapprochement, and (iv) consolidation or object constancy.

The four subphases of the SIP outline how children transition from a state of oneness with their primary caregiver (especially, the parents and early childhood educators or preschool teachers), but it can also extend to include early interventionists and educational therapists for young children with special needs) in order for these young ones to recognize themselves as separate individuals with their own identity, as follows:

1. ***To the Educational Therapists:*** For educational therapists, Mahler's theory provides a framework to understand the underlying causes of developmental and behavioral issues. By recognizing the stage a child is in, educational therapists can tailor interventions that address specific needs as well as serve as a catalyst in promoting separation-individuation (Edward, 1976). For example, if a child is struggling with independence, an educational therapist can create activities that foster self-reliance and emotional resilience.

2. ***To the Early Interventionists:*** Early interventionists benefit from Mahler's insights by being able to identify atypical patterns in the separation-individuation process. Understanding these stages helps in detecting early signs of developmental delays or emotional disturbances. Early intervention can then be more precisely targeted, promoting healthy attachment and self-development from a young age. This is crucial in preventing more severe issues later in life.

3. ***Early Childhood Educators:*** For early childhood educators, Mahler's theory of separation-individuation underlines the importance of creating a supportive environment that balances the need for security with opportunities for independence. Educators can use this knowledge to design classroom activities that encourage exploration and autonomy while providing emotional support (Norris, 1991). Recognizing the emotional fluctuations during the rapprochement phase, for instance, can help early childhood educators to be more patient and empathetic, thereby fostering a secure and nurturing learning environment.

Overall, Mahler's separation-individuation theory offers a profound understanding of early development, enabling professionals to support children more effectively through tailored strategies that promote healthy emotional and psychological growth. This holistic approach is essential for nurturing well-adjusted, independent, and resilient individuals.

6. APPLICATION OF MAHLER'S SEPARATION-INDIVIDUATION THEORY IN THE SPECIAL NEEDS CONTEXT

Margaret Mahler's separation-individuation theory, which focuses on the process through which an infant separate from the primary caregiver and develops a distinct individual identity, has profound implications for children with special needs. This theory highlights the phases of normal autism and normal symbiosis phases (Mahler, 1952, 1965) as well as the subphrases of separation-individuation, i.e., differentiation, practicing, rapprochement, and consolidation (Mahler, 1952), each of which can be affected by the presence of developmental or physical challenges. Should there be any form of impairment or developmental delay in any of the phases and subphases, one can expect some forms of disorder or disability (e.g., autism, childhood psychosis) to be present.

In this section, the authors argued that children with special needs might face distinct challenges during these stages in their separation-individuation process, and they briefly discussed the issues below:

1. *Symbiotic Phase* (0-5 months): During this phase, a child forms a close bond with the caregiver (usually, it is the mother) (Pine, 1986). For children with special needs, this bond can be complicated by medical interventions, prolonged hospitalizations, or physical impairments that disrupt early interactions and attachment processes. These disruptions can lead to issues in developing a secure base necessary for later exploration and independence.

2. *Differentiation Phase* (5-10 months): This phase involves the child beginning to notice the distinction between themselves and their caregiver. Sensory or cognitive impairments can hinder this recognition, making it difficult for the child to develop a clear sense of self versus others.

3. *Practicing Phase* (10-16 months): In this stage, children start to explore their environment. Motor or cognitive disabilities can limit their ability to explore, affecting their confidence and sense of autonomy. They may also face increased dependence on caregivers for mobility and interaction with their surroundings.

4. *Rapprochement Phase* (16-24 months): Children typically oscillate between seeking independence and returning to the caregiver for reassurance (Gergely, 2000; Mahler, 1972b). For children with special needs, this phase might be extended or more intense, as they balance their developmental delays with a desire for independence. Caregivers need to provide consistent support without being overprotective to encourage confidence.

5. *Consolidation Phase* (24-36 months, and it can also go beyond): In this final phase, children achieve a stable sense of individuality and emotional constancy. For children with special needs, this phase might require additional time and tailored support to achieve a coherent self-concept and emotional stability, particularly if they face ongoing challenges in communication or social interaction.

Taking everything as discussed above into account, young children with special needs may require more nuanced and extended support through each phase of their separation-individuation process of development. Caregivers (e.g., parents and grandparents) and professionals (e.g., educational therapists, early interventionists and early childhood educators) should focus on creating an environment that supports developmental milestones, provides emotional security, and encourages gradual independence tailored to the child's unique abilities and challenges. Integrative therapies, consistent routines, and adaptive strategies are crucial in facilitating these children's healthy psychological development.

7. CONCLUSION

Margaret Mahler's separation-individuation theory offers profound insights into the developmental processes of young children, emphasizing the intricate balance between achieving autonomy and maintaining a connection with primary caregivers. For children with special needs, the authors firmly believe that understanding this theory is particularly crucial as it underscores the unique developmental trajectories and challenges these children may face. Mahler's theory outlines distinct phases, such as differentiation, practicing, rapprochement, and consolidation, which are critical for the formation of a healthy self-concept and independent functioning. Recognizing the importance of these stages allows educational therapists, early interventionists, and early childhood educators to tailor their approaches to support each child's individual needs effectively.

For young children with special needs, the separation-individuation process may be atypical or delayed, necessitating a more nuanced and sensitive approach. By grasping Mahler's framework, professionals can identify where a child is within these developmental stages and implement strategies that foster both independence and emotional security. The authors believe this might involve creating a structured yet flexible environment, employing consistent routines, and facilitating safe exploration and social interactions. Furthermore, understanding the emotional complexities during the rapprochement phase can help the professionals (especially educators who are in direct contact with their young charges) support children in managing their frustrations and anxieties related to burgeoning autonomy and the inevitable setbacks they may encounter.

Educational therapists and early interventionists can also utilize this knowledge to work closely with parents, guiding them to provide appropriate support without impeding their child's growth towards independence. This collaboration ensures a cohesive and supportive environment both at home and in educational settings, promoting optimal developmental outcomes. Moreover, awareness of Mahler's theory equips professionals to advocate for appropriate resources and interventions that address the specific developmental needs of children with special needs, ensuring they receive the support required to navigate the separation-individuation process successfully.

Ultimately, Mahler's separation-individuation theory is a vital tool in the repertoire of those working with young children with special needs. It provides a robust framework for understanding and supporting the delicate balance between dependence and independence, ensuring that these children develop a strong, healthy sense of self. By integrating this theory into their practice, professionals can make informed decisions that profoundly impact the developmental trajectory and overall well-being of the children they serve.

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9. COMPETING INTERESTS

10. FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

11. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DISCLOSURE

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