

# IDENTITY CONSOLIDATION AND INTERNALIZING AND EXTERNALIZING PROBLEM BEHAVIORS IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE

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Externalizing and internalizing problems as measured on the Youth Self Report (YSR; Achenbach, 1991a) among early adolescent boys and girls were related to the conceptual level (CL; Blatt, Chevron, Quinlan, Schaffer, & Wein, 1988) with which children described their mothers and fathers. Scoring of these descriptions using the Children's version (CORI; Waniel, Besser, & Priel, 2006) of the Object Relations Inventory (ORI; Blatt et al., 1988) indicated that higher CL in descriptions of mother than of father was significantly related to the intensity of externalizing problem behaviors in boys. Conversely, higher CL in descriptions of father than of mother was significantly related to the intensity of internalizing problems in girls. These results are discussed in terms of the process of identity consolidation and its relationship to the emergence of problem behaviors in early adolescence.

*Keywords:* early adolescence, gender, parental representations, externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, identity formation, psychopathology

... I can already see what a big part has been played in my work by the urge to find and to appreciate the ordinary good mother. Fathers, I know, are just as important, and indeed an interest in mothering includes an interest in fathers, and in the vital part they play in child care. . .

—Winnicott  
(1957, p. 124)

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Though little is known about the factors that contribute to the development of internalizing and externalizing disorders in children, gender differences in the rates of externalizing and internalizing disorders emerge in early adolescence (Cohen et al., 1993; Fleming & Offord, 1990; Rutter, 1986; Walden & Garber, 1994). Girls have a greater tendency to have internalizing problems while boys report higher levels of externalizing difficulties. The present study explores the role of impairments in the formation of a consolidated identity, defined as a discrepancy in the conceptual level of a child's narrative descriptions of each of his or her parents, to reports of behavioral and emotional problems in early adolescence. We address the relationships of differences in the developmental level with which the child represents mother and father and the role of this discrepancy in the prediction of problem behavior in early adolescence. Concepts from psychoanalytic, cognitive-social, and developmental theory suggest that in early adolescence (ages 11–13) a child should have greater coherence in the representation of the same-sex than in the opposite sex parent; and that this identification primarily with the same-sex parent should be related to better psychological health and lower levels of behavioral and emotional problems.

Mental representation is a central theoretical construct in psychoanalytic theory and research, in cognitive science, and in developmental psychology. Investigations in these areas suggest that children transform early interactions with primary caregivers into cognitive-affective schemas of self and others that regulate and direct subsequent behavior (e.g., Ainsworth, 1969, 1982; Beebe, 1986; Blatt, 1974; Blatt & Lerner, 1983; Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1975; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988; Kernberg, 1976; Kohut, 1971; Lichtenberg, 1985; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Piaget, 1945/1962; Stern, 1985). The study of object relations and the construction of the representational world provide psychoanalytic theory and research with an experience-near clinical theory (Fonagy, 2001; Stern, 1994). This theoretical development within psychoanalysis involves a shift from one-person psychology, that assumes a closed biological system comprising energy transformations, drive discharge, and tension thresholds, to an open-system relational model that focuses on interpersonal interactions and their transformation and internalization in cognitive-affective schemas (Blatt, 1974; Blatt & Lerner, 1983; Blatt, Wild, & Ritzler, 1975; Kernberg, 1976; Kohut, 1971; Loewald, 1960; Lyons-Ruth, 1998; Mahler et al., 1975; Mitchell, 1988; Stern, 1991; Winnicott, 1965). From this perspective, cognitive-affective schemas of self and other bear the imprint of significant interpersonal interactions and express the developmental level and other important aspects of psychic life (e.g., impulses, affects, drives, and fantasies) (Beres & Joseph, 1970; Blatt, 1974; Sandler, 1994; Sandler & Rosenblatt, 1962). These schemas develop over the life cycle and have conscious and unconscious cognitive, affective, and experiential components. They can be veridical representations of consensual reality, idiosyncratic or unique constructions, or primitive and pathological distortions that suggest psychopathology (Blatt, 1974, 1991, 1995; Blatt & Lerner, 1983; Howes, 1999). Cognitive-affective schemas become templates or prototypes that structure how one thinks and feels about others and about oneself (Ainsworth, 1982; Blatt, 1974; Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton, 1985, 1990; Lichtenberg, 1985; Main et al., 1985; Stern, 1994). These schemas both derive from and determine the experience of the self in the interpersonal world (Beres & Joseph, 1970; Blatt & Lerner, 1983). These observations in developmental psychology and psychoanalytic developmental theory are consistent with the focus in cognitive science, information processing, and social cognition on the development of schemas of self and others as heuristic prototypes that determine social interaction and behavior (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Blum, 1986; Brewer & Nakamura, 1984;

Erdelyi, 1985; Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Gardner, 1985; Horowitz, 1989; Mandler, 1988; Markus, 1977; Nelson & Grundel, 1987).

Studies of social cognition have examined the relationship of interpersonal behavior to relational schemas, including self-schema, schemas of others, and a relational schema or interpersonal script (Baldwin, 1992; Baldwin & Meunier, 1999). Studies of social cognition have increasingly examined the function of these relational schemas (Baldwin, 1992) or cognitive representations of self and significant others (Damon & Hart, 1988; Rudolph, Hammen, & Burge, 1995) in the processing of social information. Social-cognitive and object relations perspectives both distinguish between qualitative dimensions (thematic content) and structural or cognitive organizational aspects of mental representations (Blatt, Chevron, Quinlan, Schaffer, & Wein, 1992; Shields, Ryan, & Cicchetti, 2001). Whereas structural dimensions are assumed to reflect basic cognitive organizing principles that are often procedural or implicit, qualitative or thematic dimensions are assumed to capture episodic or explicit aspects of children's caretaking experiences and the affective tone of parent-child relationships.

### Early Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a period in which many changes take place in the lives of children and their families. Although adolescence has been traditionally viewed as a time of storm and stress (*Strum und Drang*), this appears to be more the exception than the rule (Coleman, 1993; Steinberg, 2001). Nevertheless, adolescents are faced with many challenges, the resolution of which can be influential in their development. One of the most important challenges in adolescent development is the negotiation of the child's position within the family and the maintenance of a warm and supportive relationship with parents (Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000) that contribute to a consolidation of identity formation. An important factor determining successful identity formation is the quality of adolescents' working models of their attachment to their parents.

The relevance of internal working models of attachment during adolescence is illustrated by numerous studies linking the quality of the attachment relationship to several indicators of adolescent psychosocial functioning, such as identity development (Lapsley, Rice, & FitzGerald, 1990; Samuolis, Layburn, & Schiaffino, 2001) and psychological well-being (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Barnas, Pollina, & Cummings, 1991; Raja, McGee, & Stanton, 1992). In addition, constructive attachment seems to inhibit deviant development, including problem behavior (Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Blatt, & Hertzog, 1999). Several studies have showed that adolescents who have warm, loving, intimate relationships with their parents are less likely to exhibit problem behavior (Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Dekovic, 1999; LeCroy, 1988). Conversely, low quality of attachment has been associated with higher incidences of problem behavior (Laible et al., 2000; Marcus & Betzer, 1996; Raja et al., 1992).

According to psychoanalytic and developmental theories, the primary task of late adolescence is identity consolidation with increasing independence from parents (Blos, 1962, 1979; Deutsch, 1944, 1973; Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1905/1953; Galenson & Roiphe, 1976; Ritvo, 1976). Deutsch and Blos are prominent among those who describe adolescence in terms of a "loosening of affectionate ties," "emotional disengagement," and "severing" of family bonds. These issues are considered particularly important for girls in adolescence, for whom the maturational demand is the transformation of the early dependent mother-daughter relationship (Blos, 1962; Deutsch, 1973; Jones, 1948;

Lampl-de Groot, 1927, 1960; Ritvo, 1976; Ticho, 1972a, b) into a mature identification with mother. The developmental demand for boys is to break the dependent ties with mother in order to establish a mature identification with father. Idealization of the opposite sex parent at the expense of establishing a consolidated identification with the same-sex parent in early adolescence can lead to limited identity consolidation and adolescent maladjustment in both girls and boys. Processes of separation and individuation are important during adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Blos, 1967, 1979) as are the development of more mature and differentiated relationships with parents, thus attachment and identification may be parallel, and at times opposing, processes in adolescent development. Nonetheless, research findings suggest that individuation and growth in autonomy are facilitated by secure attachment to parents (Avery & Ryan, 1988; Ryan & Lynch, 1989) and by the consolidation of identification with the same-sex parent.

Accordingly, in the present study we assessed children's representations of each of their parents assuming that achievement of an accurate, stable, differentiated, integrated, and conceptual representations of both parents (congruence) indicates a consolidated identity formation, while incongruent representations in which the representation of the opposite sex parent is more differentiated and consolidated than the representation of the same-sex parent would be associated with behavioral or emotional problems in early adolescence.

### Behavioral or Emotional Problems in Early Adolescence

Behavioral and emotional difficulties in adolescence are often classified into two broad categories: internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression, somatization) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, delinquency) syndromes (e.g., Achenbach, 1991a, b). Both internalizing and externalizing problem behavior increases in prevalence during adolescence (Roberts, Andrews, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990; Moffitt, 1993), but numerous studies document gender differences in psychopathology: girls generally report more internalizing symptoms (Cohen et al., 1993; Fleming & Offord, 1990; Rutter, 1986; Walden & Garber, 1994) and boys more externalizing symptoms (Allgood-Merten, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990; Horwitz & White, 1987; Huselid & Cooper, 1994; Offord, Boyle, & Racine, 1991; Payne, 1987; Whitley & Gridley, 1993). But studies that focus on these two types of problem behavior (e.g., Mathijssen, Koot, & Verhulst, 1999) typically have not addressed the relationships between these two types of disturbance and patterns of interpersonal attachment.

### Assessment of Aspects of Mental Representations

Object representations become increasingly differentiated, integrated, and accurate with maturation; they proceed from amorphous, global representations, to a somewhat differentiated emphasis on part properties and functions, to representations that are highly articulated and integrated (Blatt, 1974). Representations range from perceptual images of objects immediately present in the perceptual field to symbolic evocation of absent realities. Developmentally earlier forms of representation are based primarily on action sequences associated with need gratification, intermediate representations are based on specific perceptual and functional features, and latter forms of object representation are more symbolic and conceptual (Blatt, 1974). The development of conceptual or symbolic representations is achieved in the later stages of separation-individuation in adolescence;

and with this achievement, the child is now capable of empathy, of taking the perspective of others (Feffer, 1970; Piaget, 1945/1962), and of reflective functioning (Fonagy, Target, Steele, & Steele, 1998). More mature levels of object representations are part of the development of operational thought (Feffer, 1970; Piaget, 1945/1962; Werner & Kaplan, 1983). Various forms of psychopathology in adults involve differential impairments of the schemas of the representational world that occur as a consequence of serious disruption of the relationship between child and caregiver (Blatt, 1991, 1995).<sup>1</sup>

### Prior Research on Mental Representations in Adolescence

Empirical studies have addressed representations in middle childhood and early adolescence, mainly from a social-cognitive perspective, and have found that positive self-representations are associated with better adjustment and diminished symptomatology (Baumeister, 1990; Damon & Hart, 1988; King, Naylor, Segal, Evans, & Shain, 1993; Segal & Blatt, 1993). Studies of children's representations of their relationships indicate an association between qualities of relational schemas and adjustment in middle childhood (Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Baldwin, 1992; Frank, Pirsch, & Wright, 1990). This research documents significant associations between the content of children's representations of parents and their adjustment in middle childhood (Segal, Westen, Lohr & Silk, 1993), and between structural aspects of maternal representations and children's cognitive development in nonclinical samples (Avery & Ryan, 1988).

Research on early adolescence identifies the fundamental role played by attachment to parents (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Toth & Cicchetti, 1996). Ryan and Lynch (1989) defined attachment to parents as a positive developmental process that facilitates the development of autonomy in the context of ongoing supportive relationship with parents. Mental representations of constructive caring relationships facilitate psychological development because they enable individuals to maintain a level of integration even when environmental and interpersonal support is unavailable (Behrens & Blatt, 1985). Excessive dependency, or extensive or premature detachment from parents, can result in impairments in the ability to use family relationships as a constructive interpersonal environment. Moreover, a secure attachment style, based on positive internal working models of early relationships, has been found to significantly predict adaptive functioning (Fonagy & Target, 1997; Hesse, 1999).

Though the exploration of children's representations of their parents has provided understanding of basic developmental processes, research on representations of relationships in middle childhood and early adolescence has mainly addressed the child's representations of mother and father separately, or focused on the relations between representations of mother and symptoms or level of psychological adjustment. Less is known about relationships between basic aspects of representations of each of the parents in relation to a child's gender (i.e., relative differences in the representations of mother and father by girls and boys) and the contributions of these relationships to psychological adjustment in early adolescence. The study presented here approaches these issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent empirical work on early childhood development address mutual affect regulation between mother and infant as a central process in the formation and developmental sequence of early object representation (Stern, 1989; Beebe, Lachman, & Jaffe, 1997). Consistent with these observations, Blatt and colleagues (e.g., Diamond, Blatt, Stayner, & Kaslow, 1991) have more recently developed an additional procedure for assessing other structural dimensions of object representation, the Differentiation-Relatedness Scale, but this scale has not yet been adapted for use with children.

This study examined the relation between the cognitive developmental level (Conceptual Level, CL; Blatt et al., 1988) of children's descriptions of each of their parents on the Object Relations Inventory (ORI; Blatt et al., 1988) and measures of psychosocial functioning in early adolescence. The CL of representations was assessed in this study with an adaptation of the original conceptual level scale (Blatt et al., 1988) that was developed by Waniel, Besser, & Priel (2006) for the evaluation of younger children's descriptions of their parents. The CL's rating assesses the description in terms of its level of cognitive organization, which can range from sensorimotor (parent is described in terms of providing or failing to provide need gratification [level 1]), concrete perceptual (parent is described primarily in terms of manifest physical features [level 3]), external iconic (parent is described primarily in terms of manifest activities [level 5]), internal iconic (parent is described by more internal attributes such as values and feelings [level 7]), and finally a conceptual level (parent is described in more complex ways, including at different levels or over time; different aspects or qualities of the parent are integrated into a complex description [level 9]).

*Hypothesis 1:* Significant positive association was expected between the CLs with which children describe their mother and their father.

*Hypothesis 2:* Though the CLs of descriptions of mother and father are expected to be significantly associated, the CLs with which boys described their fathers are expected to be higher than the CLs with which they described their mothers. The converse was expected with girls: Girls' descriptions of their mothers are expected to be at higher CLs than their descriptions of their fathers, thereby indicating appropriate development in the consolidation of identity formation.

*Hypothesis 3:* Consistent with prior findings, externalizing symptoms are expected to be higher among boys than girls while internalizing symptoms are expected to be higher among girls than boys.

*Hypotheses 4:* Boys who have a higher CL in their description of their mother than their father are expected to exhibit more externalizing problem behavior. And girls who have a higher CL in the description of their father than their mother are expected to exhibit more internalizing problem behavior. That is, we expect that impairments in the development of a consolidated identity formation to be associated with reports of externalizing behavior problems in boys and to internalizing problem behaviors in girls, respectively.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 97 children (62 girls and 35 boys) aged 11–14 with a mean age of 12.14 years ( $SD = .66$ ), recruited from the 6th and 7th grades of a large, public, middle school in a metropolitan community in New York State for whom readable descriptions of mother and father were available. Prior to the students' participation in this study, parental consent was obtained.

### *Measures and Procedure*

Participants were asked to write descriptions of their mother and father, with no further specification provided. The spontaneous answers to these questions constituted the narratives that were coded.

We evaluated the cognitive developmental level of children's representations of their mother and father using the Conceptual Level Scale (CL) of the Children's Object Relations Inventory (CORI) developed by Waniel, Besser, & Priel (2006), an adaptation of the CL score of the Object Representation Inventory (ORI) developed by Blatt and colleagues (Blatt et al., 1979, 1988) for evaluating descriptions of significant others by adolescents and young adults.

*Conceptual-Level Scale (CL).* The 9-point scale, based on developmental cognitive and psychoanalytic concepts, was used to evaluate the cognitive-developmental, or conceptual, level of the descriptions (Blatt, 1974; Blatt et al., 1979). Two independent judges, blind to the subjects' self-descriptions as well as to other aspects of the subjects, rated the descriptions of mother and father. In scoring this dimension, the two judges achieved an acceptable level of interrater reliability ( $r = .96$ ) on a comparable group of children. The Interrater Intraclass correlation reliability coefficients (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) for CL-mother and CL-father were .90 and .92, respectively. When scores of the two judges were not identical, the mean score was utilized.

CL scale points were as follows:

1. Sensorimotor-Preoperational Level (1). Persons are described primarily in terms of the gratification or frustration they provide. There is little sense that others exist as entities separate and independent of their direct effect on the subject's pleasure or pain.
2. Concrete-Perceptual Level (3). Persons are described primarily in concrete, literal terms, usually on the basis of physical attributes and features. Emphasis is placed on external physical characteristics and appearance.
3. Iconic Levels (5 Through 7):
  - a. External-Iconic Level (5): Persons are described primarily in terms of manifest activities and functions.
  - b. Internal-Iconic Level (7): Persons are described primarily in terms of their thoughts, feelings, and values, rather than their physical characteristics or activities. The description primarily involves internal psychological dimensions.
4. Conceptual Level (9). Using a range of levels, the description integrates external appearances and activities (behavior) with internal dimensions (feelings, thoughts, and values). Apparent contradictions are resolved in an integrated, complex, coherent synthesis.

The CL scale has been used extensively in prior research with adolescents and adults, and a well-established database indicates its reliability and validity (e.g., Blatt et al., 1979; Bornstein & O'Neil, 1992). The construct validity of the CL scale of the ORI is supported by research on associations between dimensions of parental descriptions and different indices of psychopathology (Blatt, Wein, Chevron, & Quinlan, 1979; Bornstein & O'Neil, 1992; Levy, Blatt, & Shaver, 1998), as well as by research on changes of representations during the course of long-term, intensive psychodynamically oriented treatment in seriously disturbed late adolescent and adult inpatients (e.g., Blatt, Stayner, Auerbach, & Behrends, 1996; Blatt, Wiseman, Prince-Gibson, & Gatt, 1991).

Research has shown that the children's version of the CL scale has high reliability and validity with children's samples (Avery & Ryan, 1988; Priel, 2005; Priel, Besser, Waniel, Yonas-Segal, & Kuperminc, in press; Priel, Kantor, & Besser, 2000; Priel, Melamed-Hass, Besser, & Kantor, 2000; Priel, Myodovnick, & Rivlin-Beniaminy, 1995; Priel, Seksig-

Bitton, Waniel, Myodovnik, & Rosen, 2002; Waniel et al., 2006). Associations have been found between dimensions of parental representations and measures of self-perception, peer evaluation, and symptomatic behavior in a population of children (Avery & Ryan, 1988; Priel, 2005; Priel et al., 1995). Additionally, maternal representations have been found to discriminate between adopted and nonadopted children (Priel et al., 2000). Recently, a longitudinal study demonstrated the utility and psychometric properties of the Child Object Representations (CORI), including factorial structures, test-retest reliability and predictive validity (Waniel et al., 2006).

*Symptomatic behavior.* Children's problem behaviors were assessed using the Externalizing and Internalizing Problems scales of Achenbach's Youth Self Report Form (YSR; Achenbach, 1991a, b), a well-established standardized child-report questionnaire designed to assess behavioral or emotional problems in children between 5 and 18 years. The YSR has been used widely with normal and clinically referred youth and has adequate reliability and validity in assessing a broad range of behavioral and emotional problems experienced by youth. Participants rate how well each of 112 items describe them over the past 6 months on a 3-point scale (0 [not true]; 1 [somewhat true]; 2 [very true or often true]). Scores are computed, according to procedures developed by Achenbach (1991a, 1991b), for externalizing problems (delinquent and aggressive behavior) and three syndromes indicative of internalizing problems (withdrawn, anxious-depressed, and somatic complaints). The YSR has high concurrent validity ( $> .80$ ) and is associated significantly with criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders criteria (Achenbach, 1991a, b; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). In the present study, internal consistency coefficients (i.e., Cronbach's alpha scores) of .80 and .82 were obtained for the Externalizing and Internalizing Problems scales, respectively.

YSR was group-administrated in classrooms; makeup sessions were conducted for absent students. A member of the research team introduced the questionnaire, and each item was read aloud by the teacher to control for reading comprehension. Ten dollars per participant were donated to the school's student activity fund; participants were also treated to snacks at the end of the assessment session.

## Results

### *Overview of Results*

The findings will be presented in three sections:

1. Correlations and overall mean differences in the CL of descriptions of mother and father;
2. Congruency between the CL of the descriptions of each of the parents;
3. Child's gender and CL Congruence (CLC) score and their relation to child's report of internalizing and externalizing problem behavior on the YSR.

Each of these three sections of data analysis is introduced by an italicized subhead and is followed by a narrative exposition summarizing the statistical findings.

### *Parental Conceptual Levels: Correlations and Mean Differences*

In the present sample, CL-mother and CL-father scores were significantly correlated ( $r = .52, p < .0001$ ) in the total sample and also for boys ( $r = .50, p < .002$ ) and for girls ( $r =$

.53,  $p < .0001$ ). A  $2 \times (2)$  MANOVA, with Gender (boys vs. girls) and Conceptual level of descriptions of parents (mother and father) as a repeated measure, was conducted on the Conceptual Level scores. Results of this MANOVA indicated nonsignificant differences between the CL of mothers and fathers ( $F[1, 95] = .12$ ;  $p = .73$ ,  $\eta_p^2$  Effect size [Partial  $\eta^2] = .001$ , Observed Power = .06) as well as nonsignificant differences between girls and boys in the overall levels of the CL with which they described their parents ( $F[1, 95] = 1.71$ ;  $p = .19$ ,  $\eta_p^2$  Effect size [Partial  $\eta^2] = .02$ , Observed Power = .25). Finally, the Gender  $\times$  Figure interaction effect was also found to be nonsignificant ( $F[1, 95] = 1.52$ ;  $p = .22$ ,  $\eta_p^2$  Effect size [Partial  $\eta^2] = .02$ , Observed Power = .23). Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the CL of the descriptions of mother and father by girls and boys.

*Narrative summary.* No significant differences were found between the CL with which girls and boys described their mother and father, or between girls and boys in the overall level of CL with which they described their parents.

### *Conceptual Level of Descriptions of Parents: Consolidation of Identity Formation*

Consolidated identity formation was defined as the congruency between the CL of the descriptions of each of the parents. This variable was computed by determining whether standardized residual scores of CL-mother were higher or lower than that of CL-father.<sup>2</sup> This new variable, Conceptual Level Congruence (CLC), was used in the analyses of the 58 participants who had CL-mother  $>$  CL-father and 39 participants who had CL-mother  $<$  CL-father. The distributions of the frequencies of the CLC in girls and boys were not significantly different: 59.7% of girls ( $n = 37$ ) and 60% of boys ( $n = 21$ ) had CL-mother  $>$  CL-father and 40.3% of girls ( $n = 25$ ) and 40% of boys ( $n = 14$ ) had CL-mother  $<$  CL-father.

*Narrative summary.* The distributions of the frequencies of boys and girls for the Conceptual Level Congruence (CLC) were not significantly different. Moreover, results indicated that both boys and girls usually had a higher level of CL in their descriptions of mother than in their descriptions of father.

### *Child's Gender and CLC Relation to Child's Report of Problem Behavior*

In order to examine the role of a consolidated identity formation (Conceptual Level Congruence, CLC) on externalizing and internalizing symptoms in boys and girls, two  $2 \times 2$  MANOVAs were performed with Gender (boys vs. girls) and CLC (mother's  $>$  father's vs. mother's  $<$  father's) as the independent variables. In the first MANOVA, Internalizing Problems was the dependent variable; in the second MANOVA, Externalizing Problems was the dependent variable.

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<sup>2</sup> The  $z$ -score transformation is especially useful when seeking to compare the relative standings of items (individual raw score) from distributions with different means and/or different standard deviations. The  $z$  score for an item indicates how far and in what direction that item deviates from its distribution's mean, expressed in units of its distribution's standard deviation. Accordingly, we first calculated for each subject the  $z$  score for CL-mother and CL-father, and then used the standardized residual to estimate the direction and the difference in standard deviation between CL-mother and CL-father.

Table 1  
*M and SD for Mother and Father Conceptual Levels for Boys and Girls*

Child's gender	Conceptual level					
	Mother		Father		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Girls	4.77	1.32	4.90	1.08	4.83	1.20
Boys	4.63	1.52	4.41	1.40	4.52	1.45
Total	4.72	1.38	4.72	1.22		

*Child's Gender and the Relation of CLC to Internalizing Problems*

Results of this MANOVA, consistent with reports by Achenbach (1991a, 1991b, 1992), indicate significant gender differences indicate that girls reporting significantly more internalizing problems than boys ( $F[1, 93] = 18.28; p < .00005, \eta_p^2$  Effect size [Partial  $\eta^2] = .16$ , Observed Power = .99). A tendency for significant differences was found for the CL Congruency ( $F(1, 93) = 3.62; p < .0601, \eta_p^2$  Effect size [Partial  $\eta^2] = .04$ , Observed Power = .47), with participants having CL-mother < CL-father reporting more internalizing problems than participants having CL-mother > CL-father. Finally, a significant Gender  $\times$  CL Congruency two-way interaction effect was obtained ( $F[1, 93] = 7.48; p < .0075, \eta_p^2$  Effect size [Partial  $\eta^2] = .07$ , Observed Power = .77).

Probing the significant two-way interaction, we found that girls with CL-mother < CL-father reported significantly more internalizing problems than girls with CL-mother > CL-father ( $F[1, 93] = 14.93; p < .0002$ , Cohen's  $d = .96$ , effect-size  $r = .43$ ). No significant differences were found in internalizing behavior between boys with CL-mother < CL-father and boys with CL-mother > CL-father ( $F[1, 93] = .27; p = .60$ , Cohen's  $d = .20$ , effect-size  $r = .10$ ). Finally, girls with CL-mother < CL-father reported significantly more internalizing problems than did boys with CL-mother < CL-father ( $F[1, 93] = 20.51; p < .00002$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.54$ , effect-size  $r = .61$ ).

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of Internalizing scores for the four CLC groups. Figure 1 presents the significant Gender  $\times$  CL congruency interaction effect.

Table 2  
*M and SD for Internalizing Problems for Boys and Girls, and Conceptual Level Differences for Mothers and Fathers (CLC Groups)*

Child's gender	Conceptual level					
	Mother > father		Mother < father		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Girls	14.22	9.29	22.32	7.43	17.48	9.42
Boys	11.52	6.12	10.07	8.43	10.94	7.05
Total	13.24	8.33	17.92	9.72		

Note. CLC = conceptual level congruence.

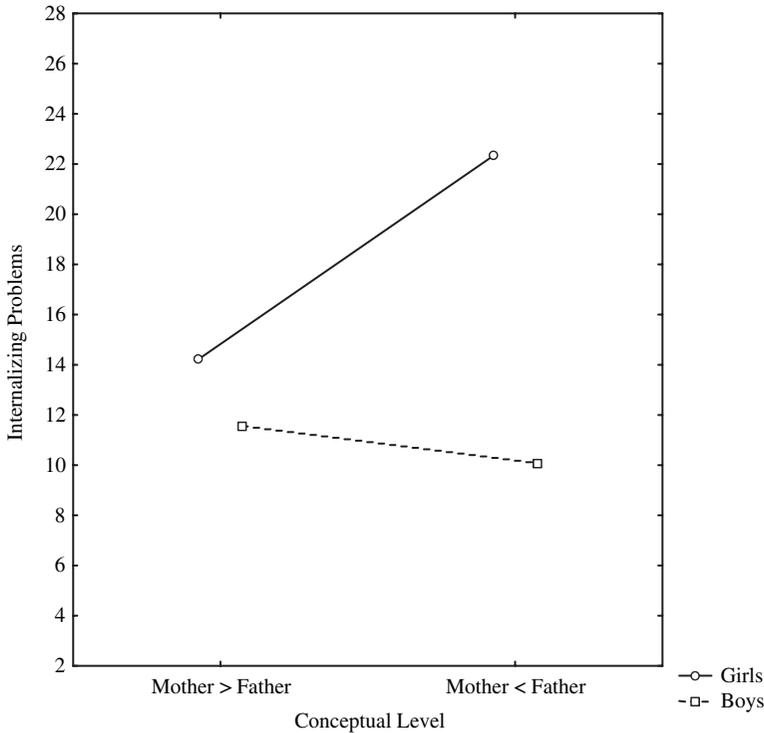


Figure 1. Interaction effect of a child's gender and incongruence in parental CL on a child's internalizing problems.

*Narrative summary.* As indicated in Table 2, and as illustrated in Figure 1, girls whose descriptions of their fathers were higher on the Conceptual Level scale than descriptions of their mothers reported significantly greater internalizing problem behavior. This effect was not observed in boys.

#### *Child's Gender and CLC Relation to Externalizing Problems*

Results of the MANOVA for externalizing problems, consistent with Achenbach's findings (1991a, 1991b, 1992), indicated significant gender differences, with boys reporting significantly more externalizing problems than girls ( $F[1, 93] = 15.07; p < .00019, \eta_p^2$  Effect size [Partial  $\eta^2] = .14$ , Observed Power = .97). Significant differences were found for the CL Congruency ( $F[1, 93] = 10.60; p < .0016, \eta_p^2$  Effect size [Partial  $\eta^2] = .10$ , Observed Power = .90), with participants having CL-mother > CL-father reporting more externalizing problems than participants having CL-mother < CL-father. Finally, a significant Gender  $\times$  CL congruency two-way interaction effect was obtained ( $F[1, 93] = 8.43; p < .0046, \eta_p^2$  Effect size [Partial  $\eta^2] = .08$ , Observed Power = .82).

Probing the significant two-way interaction, we found that boys with CL-mother > CL-father reported significantly more externalizing problems than did boys with CL-mother < CL-father ( $F[1, 93] = 14.82; p < .00022$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.44$ , effect-size  $r = .59$ ). No significant differences were found between girls with CL-mother < CL-father and girls with CL-mother > CL-father ( $F[1, 93] = .09; p = .77$ , Cohen's  $d = .08$ ,

effect-size  $r = .04$ ). Finally, boys with CL-mother > CL-father reported significantly more externalizing problems than girls with CL-mother > CL-father ( $F[1, 93] = 28.69$ ;  $p < .000001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 1.35$ , effect-size  $r = .56$ ).

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations of Externalizing scores for the four CLC groups. Figure 2 presents the significant Gender  $\times$  CL congruency interaction effect.

*Narrative summary.* As indicated in Table 3, and as illustrated in Figure 2, boys whose descriptions of their mothers were at a higher level on the Conceptual Level scale than their descriptions of their fathers reported significantly greater externalizing problem behavior. And this effect was not observed in girls.

### Discussion

A vast literature has accumulated on the role of mental representations or cognitive-affective schemas in children’s psychological well-being. Few studies, however, have assessed the role of identity consolidation as reflected by discrepancies in the developmental cognitive level in children’s mental representations of mothers and fathers. The current investigation highlights the importance of examining the effects of the gap in the structural organization of children’s representation of their mother and father and its relationship to symptomatic behavior.

#### *Gender Differences in Parental Representations*

The conceptual level at which children describe their mother and father are similar, 59.79% of the children in our sample described their mother at a higher conceptual level than they described their father (60% of the boys and 59.68% of the girls). These findings are consistent with research that has found the mother tends to be the preferred attachment figure in Western cultures (Lamb, 1981; Lytton, 1980), especially in younger children. These findings are also consistent with previous findings in attachment theory and research that indicate little difference between males and females in their overall attachment to each of their parents (Armsden, McCauley, Greenberg, Burke, & Mitchell, 1990; Main & Weston, 1981).

Table 3  
*M and SD for Externalizing Problems for Boys and Girls, and Conceptual Level Differences for Mothers and Fathers (CLC Groups)*

Child’s gender	Conceptual level					
	Mother > father		Mother < father		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Girls	11.51	8.68	10.92	6.93	11.27	7.97
Boys	22.95	8.23	12.57	5.96	18.80	8.95
Total	15.66	10.11	11.51	6.56		

*Note.* CLC = conceptual level congruence.

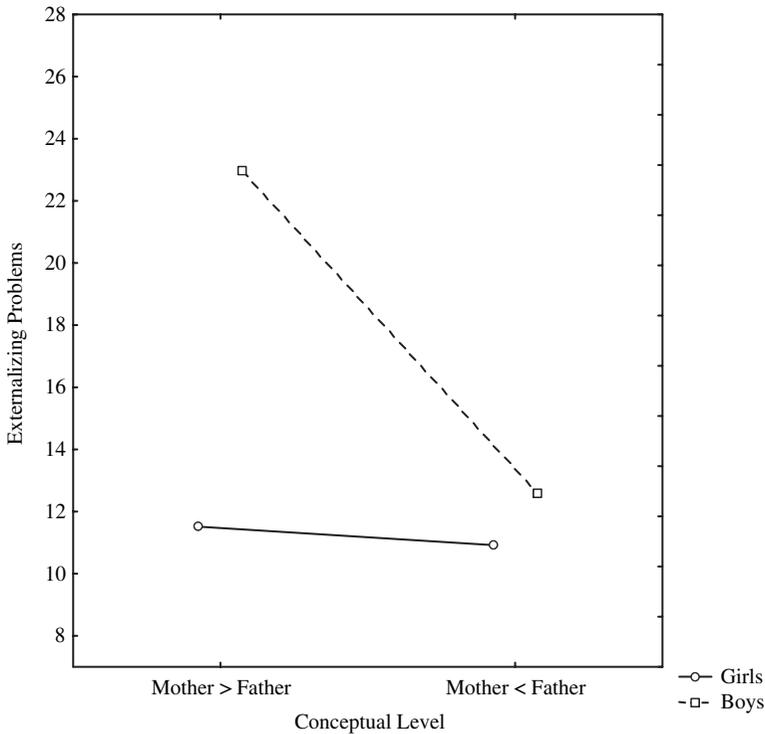


Figure 2. Interaction effect of a child's gender and incongruence in parental CL interaction effect on a child's externalizing problems.

### *Gender Differences in Behavioral or Emotional Problems*

In terms of symptomatic behavior, our results, consistent with prior findings (e.g., Achenbach, 1991a, 1991b), found significantly more internalizing problems in girls and significantly more externalizing problems in boys. These findings are consistent with numerous studies that indicate that gender differences in psychopathology are well established by early adolescence. Specifically, girls report more internalizing symptoms and psychopathology, such as depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints. Boys, on the other hand, demonstrate more externalizing symptoms and psychopathology such as delinquency, aggression, and conduct disorder (Achenbach, 1991a, 1991b; Allgood-Merten, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990; Horwitz & White, 1987; Huselid & Cooper, 1994; Offord et al., 1991; Payne, 1987; Whitley & Gridley, 1993). These gender differences in internalizing and externalizing disorders emerge in early adolescence (Cohen et al., 1993; Fleming & Offord, 1990; Rutter, 1986; Walden & Garber, 1994).

### *Imbalanced Parental Representations and Behavioral or Emotional Problems*

The main finding of the current study indicates increases in problems reported on the YSR in children with higher CL in descriptions of the opposite sex parent. This finding suggests that boys' risk for externalizing problems and girls' risk for internalizing problems are a

function of impairments in their level of identity consolidation. Higher CL in descriptions of mother than of father was significantly related to the intensity of externalizing problems in boys; and conversely, higher CL in descriptions of father than of mother was significantly related to the intensity of internalizing problems in girls.

Increases in gender congruent problems on the YSR in girls and boys with higher CL in their descriptions of the *opposite*-sex parent are consistent with formulations about the role of identity formation in early adolescence and its associations with the emergence of problem behavior. In contrast, higher CL in the description of the same-sex parent reflects a more consolidated identification and therefore better psychological functioning and adjustment as assessed on the Achenbach YSR.

Recent findings from clinical and developmental attachment research indicate that the lack of coherence among different representations of relationships (representations of mother and father, for instance) is associated with increased aggression among young children (Fonagy, 1996). Our findings that incongruent representations of parents is associated with behavioral or emotional problems are also consistent with earlier findings indicating that behavior problems in adolescence are related to specific difficulties in developing a stable and positive ego identity (e.g., Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002).

#### *Parental Representations and the Consolidation of a Sense of Identity; Identity Formation and Child's Adjustment*

Most observers of development agree that the elaboration and consolidation of a sense of identity is a lifelong process, and one of the preeminent tasks of adolescence. The psychological birth of the infant begins with the emerging separation and individuation as the young toddler begins to move away from the mother and to develop concepts of the self, of others, and of the future (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Early identity formation begins with a mother's differentiated responses to her infant's behavior. The child begins to experience and perceive the self in different contexts vis-à-vis these differential responses of the mother as well as with other figures. Identification develops further in the gradual recognition of participating in the family interpersonal matrix. The self becomes increasingly enriched in middle childhood through reflected appraisals of family unit and its sociocultural expectations. Identity formation is greatly strengthened in the middle school years as the child moves out of the family context into peer and community relations and begins to internalize the values of the culture and its shared social, cultural, and religious values. A new and increasing sense of urgency in sculpting a sense of self arises in adolescence as new social and cultural expectations demand choices and commitments in increasingly larger arenas. Thus, identity development begins early in life and becomes more pronounced as the adolescent becomes more self-conscious about his or her different relationships and potential changes in his or her value system (Steinberg, 1996).

Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development emphasizes that the development of an identity is based on the mastery of earlier critical stages. If essential capacities are acquired during childhood, the child will be able to handle the physical, emotional, and social pressures inherent in the adolescent period. But diffusion in identity formation can create turmoil that will be expressed in behavioral disturbances. Thus, our study extends Erikson's formulations by proposing that an essential element of establishing adequate identity formation in early adolescence involves a consolidated identification with the

same-sex parent, while later adolescence should involve more balanced and integrated representations of both parents (Erikson, 1968). Primary involvement with the representation of the opposite sex parent in early adolescence suggests some disruption in identity formation and, thus, the possibility of behavioral or emotional problems. Longitudinal research on attachment (e.g., Sroufe, 1999, 2000; Sroufe, Carlson, Levy, & Egeland, 1999) reveals that early childhood security of attachment has far-reaching implications than infant temperament or later family or peer relationships. Throughout childhood and adolescence, attachment history of children predicts success in school, as well as the presence of psychopathology and conduct problems (Sroufe, 1999, 2000). Indeed, research has shown that experiences of poor quality caregiving seem to be related to the development of negative representational models of attachment figures as well as the self, which in turn are related to negative behavioral outcomes (Sroufe, 1989, 1997). From preschool through adolescence, children with insecure attachment histories were more likely to have behavioral and emotional problems (e.g., Warren, Huston, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997). The results of our study indicate that children who have an imbalance in the organizational structure of their representations of their parents are also vulnerable to psychological and behavioral disturbances. Thus, future research should be directed toward the longitudinal investigation of what happens to these children in later adolescence and young adulthood, especially in their identity formation and in their capacity to form sustained intimate interpersonal relationships.

Research on gender-related processes of identity formation has been controversial and has changed in the past decades. Before 1980, achieving an identity was studied as a separate process for males and females. In other words, each sex was thought to attain an identity differently, and different research methods were used to evaluate identity formation in males and females (Muus, 1996). Males and females were never directly compared in these early studies. Since 1980, however, researchers have given more attention to studies comparing gender differences in identity formation. These recent studies have shown that in most traditional domains, males and females follow a similar pattern of identity formation; and that the timing of identity formation appears to be about the same for both sexes. These recent studies also indicate that the personality correlates of identity status tend to be the same for females and males (see Muus, 1996).

Although the process of identity formation is similar in both sexes, females and males differ in the role of two fundamental categories: *autonomy* and *attachment*. For males, identity is usually focused on separation and autonomy. Female identity, on the other hand, is usually more focused on attachment and intimacy (Blatt, in press; Blatt & Blass, 1990, 1996; Steinberg, 1996): "Masculinity is defined through separation, while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy, while female gender identity is threatened by separation" (Gilligan, as cited in Browne, 1987, p. 77).<sup>3</sup>

One reason that male identity development is focused more on autonomy is that boys have to achieve separation from the primary caregiver, the mother: "For a boy, the path toward development lies not in the continuation of attachment, but in the separation from

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that this formulation of differences between male identity as focused on autonomy and female identity as focused on attachment should not be regarded as an absolute categorical distinction, but rather as expressing dimensional or relative tendencies. However, it is should also be noted that even when stated in relative rather than absolute terms, these distinctions might be more applicable for the analysis of heterosexual gender development and not as applicable for homosexual gender development.

the early caregiver, and in the definition of himself as different, masculine, and independent” (Browne, 1987, p. 77; see also Blatt, 2006). Socialization to separate from mother involves a shift from being dependent to being autonomous, to become focused on achievement rather than on intimacy and to shift the primary object of identification from mother to father (Blatt, 2006). As a result, a male may have a conflicted response to dependency and intimacy, and instead define himself primarily through his achievements (Steinberg, 1996). In contrast, identity development for a young girl is based less on autonomy and more on attachment. A young girl is encouraged to maintain identification with caregiving “to become more invested and more competent at forming intimate relationships” (Steinberg, 1996, p. 321). As a result, many girls establish and consolidate their identity primarily through attachment relationships with intimate partners: “Not only are females concerned with their own sense of self, but they are more concerned than males with the impact of their self on significant people in their lives” (Muus, 1996, p. 74). Therefore, for some females, identity and intimacy are interrelated (Muus, 1996). Caregiving relationships can be a source for the development of a self-concept. Nancy Chodorow (1978), considering the developmental paths for boys and girls, discusses identification with the same-sex parent and incorporation of aspects of that parent’s personality and attitudes into the developing self-concept. Chodorow emphasizes that girls define themselves as females within the context of their primary attachment with the mother, while boys have to separate from the mother to develop as males (Chodorow, 1978).<sup>4</sup>

Children’s capacity to construe symbolic and integrated representations of both parents, but especially of the same-sex parent, is an essential aspect of the separation and individuation process, and of identity formation. Our finding regarding the impact of a disruption of this process on child behavioral symptoms corroborates basic psychoanalytic assumptions about the importance of the development of integrated representations. As suggested by Fonagy (1996), externalizing behaviors for boys and internalizing behaviors for girls may be an expression of incoherent representational processes. Thus, the findings of the present study indicate a similar mechanism for the development of behavioral symptoms in early adolescence in girls and boys; discrepancies in parental representations, especially impairments in the development of the representation of the same-sex parent, can be a source of vulnerability.

*The Interplay Between Parental Representations, the Parent-Child Relationship, and the Child’s Behavioral or Emotional Problems*

A large body of evidence suggests that positive parent–child relationships are critical for psychological development (Licitra-Kleckler & Waas, 1993; Marcus & Betzer, 1996; Windle, 1992). Galambos, Sears, Almeida, and Kolaric (1995), for example, found that

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<sup>4</sup> A developmental model regarding gender differentiation such as Chodorow’s, that is now almost a received view in psychoanalytic thinking, that boys have to shift in their identifications (i.e., from mother to father) but not their object choice (i.e., with a female) while girls have to shift in their object choice (i.e., from mother to father) but not in their figure of identification (Blatt, 2006), needs to be reexamined particularly in the study of identity development in homosexual individuals. For example, identity development in gay and lesbian early adolescents may be intact even though their identity development is based on cross gender identification, and may be a more complex and difficult developmental process because of psychological and social pressures. These important matters warrant further empirical investigation.

maternal acceptance of boys and paternal acceptance of girls were negatively related to child behavior problems; interestingly, maternal acceptance of girls and paternal acceptance of boys were unrelated to behavior problems. These findings suggest that adolescent and parent genders interact in complex ways to influence adolescent behavior. Accordingly, incongruent parental representations could reflect impaired parent-child relationships that in turn affect the child's emotional well-being and result in behavioral or emotional problems. This possible mechanism deserves further investigation. Barber (1997), for example, has noted that consistent positive emotions, stemming from a sense of relatedness with significant others are associated with the development of social skills as well as with a sense that the world is safe and predictable. Such a sense of security is crucial for identity formation because it facilitates an adolescent's ability and willingness to explore various options in establishing his or her own occupational, vocational, religious, and sexual identities. In secure parent-adolescent relationships, parents provide structure with enough flexibility so that adolescents can securely engage in identity exploration and establish autonomy without sacrificing relatedness (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994). Authoritarian parenting typically leads to identity foreclosure, whereas indulgent or neglectful styles lead to identity diffusion (Steinberg, 1996). Further studies should include assessment of parenting styles and their possible role in children's mental representation of their parents as mediators in the associations between parenting style and child psychological adjustment.

#### *Limitations of the Current Study*

Although the current results clarified the associations among a child's gender, the discrepancies of his or her mental representations of parental figures, and symptomatic behavior, the limitations of the current research must be noted. First, these data were based on self-report measures that are susceptible to response bias, even though the scoring of CL would be less vulnerable to these issues. Future research should examine child's symptomatology and mental representations using other measures (e.g., informant ratings). Second, the current results have established a correlational link between aspects of mental representations and symptom dimensions, but no causal statements can be made due to the correlational nature of these findings. Prospective research that follows participants over time is required to shed light on the causal associations between child's mental representations and adjustment and the extent to which they combine to predict *vulnerability*. Prospective research would also tell us whether the current findings are specific to internalizing and externalizing symptoms or to other forms of maladjustment as well such as eating disorders or symptoms of anxiety, and whether gender-incongruent identification will have impact on subsequent psychological development in general and especially in young adulthood and the formation of sustained, intimate interpersonal relationships. Finally, the role of stress is another potentially important variable to consider in this type of longitudinal investigation. One possible direction for future research would be to examine how the quality of the parent-child relationship, and its expression in the child's representation of each of the parents, may moderate the effects of divorce on the child's symptomatic behavior. Finally, future research should be directed to trying to develop a version of the Differentiation-Relatedness Scale of the ORI that could be applicable with children and explore further the hypotheses and findings of the present study.

### Summary

Our overall findings confirm that child symptomatic behavior is elevated among children having discrepancies in the mental representations of parental figures that reflect incongruence in the child-parent gender configuration. The results further illustrate the need to focus on mental representations and cognitive affective schemas, and their roles in providing the templates or prototypes that organize social interaction and interpersonal behavior. Thus, the findings of the current study highlight the potential benefits of further research that focuses on internal working models in the study of child adjustment and maladjustment. Our findings indicate a relationship between children's working models or representations of parents and their psychological well-being. The imbalance noted in children's representations of parents and its role in children's emotional adjustment might also represent a broader link with children's system of affect regulation. The findings of this study indicate that discrepancies in the structural organization of the representation of parents in early adolescence, creates vulnerabilities to psychological and behavioral problems. Future longitudinal research should address the impact of the discrepancies in representation on psychological development, on further development of problem behaviors and on more general psychological functioning, especially on processes of identity formation and the development of sustained intimate interpersonal relationships in later adolescence and young adulthood.

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