

The Relationship between Individual's Perception of Father's Parenting and Formation of Object Relations and Defense Mechanisms

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Abstract: *This study investigated the association between Iranian university students' perception of their fathers and their object-relation and defense mechanism. Participants were 438 students between 18-22 years from Allameh Tabatabaee University, who agreed to fill the Fatherhood Scale out (Dick, 2004), Bell object relation inventory and defense mechanism style, and defense style questionnaire (DSQ-40). Using stepwise regression indicated that positive Parental Engagement significantly would be able to predict alienation (ALN) and mature and immature defense mechanisms. Positive paternal engagement & negative paternal engagement significantly predict alienation (ALN) and mature defense mechanism. Furthermore, negative paternal engagement can predict insecure attachment (IA) and egocentrism (ECG). The good provider role subscale of fathering scale can predict social incompetence (SI) of object relation factors and neurotic defense mechanism. This subscale with negative paternal engagement can predict Social incompetence (SI). As a result, current study emphasize on the critical role of fathering in forming object relation and defense mechanism during development. In this processing, fathering as a facilitator lead to appropriate representation of reality in child mental structure. So, he can practice proper object relations and mature defense mechanism.*

Keywords: *perception of fathering, object relation, defense mechanism.*

Introduction

Information and communication technology is one of the most important influential factors on changes Psychologists have always been trying to figure out how the individuals' past lives have affected their current behavior and relations. One of the issues that have been traditionally studied in psychoanalysis is the relational issues such as the child-parents relationships during the oedipal period. It can be said that object relations theorists examine the formation and early differentiation of psychological structures (the inner image of oneself or another person or the same theme) and the advent of such internal structures within interpersonal situations. Object relations theorists emphasize on the individual's perception of self and his relations with others by concentrating on the early life relations and their lasting effects on individual's psyche as internal object relations (St. Claire, 2007). The basic premise of object relations theory towards personality is that the primary images of oneself, others, and external environment which are kept in one's psyche and can form the way a person receives and responds to others. Object relations theorists usually investigate how the internal residues of past relationships (often distorted images of reality) which have been formed in early life and can affect current experiences and relations (Zhang & Chen, 2010). This view is well-documented that family characteristics such as family roles, communication patterns, and emotional spaces strongly can affect the individual's performance growth (Andersen, LaVoie, Dunkel, 2007)). The importance of early childhood experiences and effect of parent-child relationship on the child personality growth and his socializing were introduced in Freud system firstly and impressed the following researches on child

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growth and parent-child relationships particularly. Freud's beliefs that father plays a pivotal role in a child's psychic growth and effects must be investigated in the wider social framework (Zhang, 2011). These results have impressed the researches on father-child relationship over the last 40 years (Lamb & Lewis, 2010). In object relations theories father has considered as a secondary person who keeps the mother-child relationship, then enters the relationship and develops his communication with the infant. In fact, father, by taking the role of "second other" provides the ground for the infant to feel safe while getting away from dependency on the mother (Sieber, 2008). Moreover, Father makes the infant familiar with the real world which includes various individuals, objects, and subjects by creating an emotional bond and attraction (Etchegoen, 2002). In this regard, Lamb & Lewis (2010) have described the father as a secondary issue. In this case, father is the first issue that helps to enter the infant's inner world from the outer world. This process is highly important in achieving the complete object relations network (Target & Fonagy, 2002).

On the other hand, one of the primary functions of object relations is to regulate interpersonal emotional experiences. Individuals are seeking for social support to cope with emotional stress (Mikulincer, Shaver, Bar-On & Ein-Dor, 2010). Given that stress leads to tension, emotional, and psychical arousal in individuals, hence person tries to reduce stress in any way. In psychoanalytical theory it is believed that in order to cope with anxiety people widely use unconscious strategies and defense mechanisms (Mansour & Dadsetan, 2001).

In classic psychoanalytical theory, defense mechanisms are defined as the opposing forces to instinctive impulses and drives (Cramer, 2000; Afzali, 2008). Defense mechanisms play an important role in understanding different responses to environmental stress. Defenses transform the relationship "self", "object", thought, and emotion. Any cognitive action is an effort for emotional regulation of relationships (Ali Bakhshi, 2006). Several studies have supported this hypothesis and it has been found through the researches that physical and mental health of individuals is significantly associated with their defense mechanisms (Bond & Perry, 2004). Some of the object relations theorists such as Kohut (1977) emphasize that the function of defense mechanisms is to keep and maintain object relations without suffering from anxiety. What makes these defenses a part of ego performance is the representation of object and the relationship between the external world and the intra psychic processes (Freud, 1936). Since object relations in adulthood are in fact childhood representations of parents that have been reflected once again, according to what have been described, true perception of factors influencing the formation of object relations and defense mechanisms is highly important. One of the most important factors that influence the formation of developmental evolution is the initial experiences of an individual with his parents because the analytical psychologists believe that child-parent relationships greatly affect the individuals' growths.

Although in theory, the role of father as the first external object is one of the most important factors discussed in the formation of next object relations in an individual – as mentioned earlier, it is considered as one of the most important developmental tasks during the evolution period (Niemic, Ryan & Deci, 2010) there is still little information about the relationship between individuals' object relations in adulthood and the father's existence method. The question is that which characteristics of their fathers have been linked to the formation of their object relations in individuals who had father during the growth? Few empirical researches have investigated the matter in terms of object relations. Several studies on the object relations have approved of the significant relationship between the father participation and involvement and the positive psychological outcomes even after controlling the mother's role. In the recent decades, object relations theories in the area of psychoanalytical theories have focused on the formation and early differentiation of psychological structures (internal notions of ego and id or object) and the emergence of internal structures in interpersonal situations (St. Claire, (2007). Researchers have shown that the absence of father can traumatically affects the structure and formation of object relations network (Liebman & Abell, 2000). A mutual relation between father and son can deeply affect the infant reaction to himself and his inner world throughout his life (Blos, 1984).

According to what was described and the importance of investigating the first parent-child interactions and given the fact that a healthy relationship requires the use of more mature defense mechanisms to ensure both the quality and quantity of the relationship, parental method can play a significant role in the formation of object relations process and any problem in its process can create serious problems in the course of development (Malden, Wiley-Blackwell Pleck, & Hofferth, 2008). Therefore further researches are needed for better perception and recognition of this important developmental phenomenon. Consequently, the present research will investigate the parental role in the formation of object relations and defense mechanisms considering the child's primary relationship with the surrounding world.

Research Method

The population of this cross-sectional research includes all undergraduate students who were 18 to 24 years old among 438 students of Allameh Tabatabaei University in Tehran in 2012 and 2013. This range of age is conventionally known as the late adolescence (Afzali, 2008). In terms of gender, 292 participants were female and 146 were male students. In terms of demographics, 90% of subjects were single, without any psychiatric illnesses, and the last child of three-child families. 80.8% of the mothers of the studied group were housewives and 29.7% of fathers were self-employed. The highest frequency in group belonged to mothers with diploma and fathers with diploma and bachelor degree. More than 50% of households had income less than one million Tomans.

Data Collection Tools

Bell Object Relations Inventory (BORI)

Bell object relations inventory (21) is a part of 90-item Bell object relations and reality testing inventory (BORRTI) which is a kind of self-reporting tool to assess object relations aspects. The inventory is standardized for both clinical and non-clinical populations and has been used in many researches in the field of interpersonal relations, diagnosis, and prediction of psychopathology. Bell object relations inventory includes 45 items which are answered as true or false and presents an accurate and credible assessment of object relations through four subscales including alienation (ALN), insecure attachment (IA), egocentricity (EGC), social incompetence (SI). The questions in the questionnaire are answered in this manner that the respondent selects the true or false response for each item based on the offered guidance. Based on the questionnaire answer key, the true option receives score 1 and for some others the wrong option gets score 1. The sum of scores related to each subscale questions determines the rejection score in each one of them (1995). The reliability and validity of the questionnaire, Bell et al. (1986) reported that since the tool is able to differentiate clinical population and have a high degree of discriminant validity. Moreover it has high correlation with other psychological vulnerability assessment tools; an acceptable concurrent validity has been estimated for it. The internal consistency estimates through alpha coefficient and Spearman-Brown split half coefficient for four object relations subscales ranges from 0.78 to 0.90 (Huprich & Greenberg, 2003). In the present research the Cronbach's alpha for the test was 0.75.

Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ)

Defense style questionnaire (DSQ) measures defensive behavior through empirical evaluation of conscious derivatives of defense mechanisms in everyday life. The questionnaire is made based on the hierarchical model of defenses (San Martini et al., 2004). The new version (DSQ-40) was developed by Andrews et al. (as quoted by Sinha and Watson, 2004) in 1993 including 40 questions on Likert's 9-point scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and evaluates 20 defense mechanisms at three levels of mature, neurotic, and immature defenses. Andrews et al. considered several criteria to modify the previous questionnaire and to assess the validity of structure, criterion, and the reliability of each item and finally reported that the correlation between mature, neurotic, and immature factors in retest was 0.97, 0.93, and 0.95, respectively. The alpha coefficient of defense mechanisms and styles were reported from 0.80 to 0.32 and the correlation between two running roads from 0.85 to 0.38. Defense style questionnaire (DSQ-40) was investigated and normalized in Iran by Heidari Nasab et al. (2006). Defense style questionnaire was validated through retest and calculation of Cronbach's alpha. The alpha coefficient and reliability in the study groups reported separately in high schools and university

students and the gender of sample group and also the defense styles show that the highest total alpha is observed in male students (0.81) and the lowest total alpha is observed in female students (0.69). In defense systems, the highest alpha belongs to immature defense (0.72) and the lowest one belongs to neurotic defense (0.50). Moreover, the highest alpha between two halves belongs to male students and the lowest alpha belongs to neurotic-like style. All correlations related to running the questionnaire twice in the studied group are significant compared with the critical values. According to the results it was found that defense style questionnaire in the studied groups had appropriate reliability. The Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire in the present research is 0.74.

Fathering Scale (FS)

The English form of fathering scale which is designed by Dick (2004) includes 9 subscales. The scale consists of 64 items as descriptive statements measuring four areas: real event that have occurred in relation to the subject's father, the subject's perception of his own father, his feelings towards his father, and father's emotional response. Since Cronbach's alpha value in the 311-subject of Dick's sample is equal to or more than 0.80 in all cases, the rate of obtained reliability in the English form is high. The internal consistency of each subscale is between 0.80 to 0.96 and the internal consistency in 7 subscales is more than 0.85. The standard error of measurement in different subscales ranges from 0.32 to 0.83. The obtained alpha values indicate appropriate internal consistency (Dick, 2004). The Persian form of fathering scale which is validated and translated into Farsi by Famini (2011) in this research includes 53 items as descriptive statements. Based on his perception of his relationship with his father during the growth, the participant should specify his responses on a 5-point Likert scale from never to ever. Some items are scored reversely and higher scores indicate more positive involvement of father. The scores below 160 indicate that from the father's point of view. Father has seldom interaction with his child by positive behavior while the scores above 212 indicated father that had positive interaction with his child. To obtain the validity, the heuristic factor analysis instruments were used with main component analysis method and the results demonstrated that four factors could totally justify 40.224% of the variance. The Cronbach's alpha in the research was equal to 0.96 for fathering scale and 0.96 for the subscale of positive emotional response and moral role, 0.85 for the positive presence of father, 0.67 for supplying, and 0.79 for the negative presence of father. In Famini's research the reliability coefficient of fathering scale in test-retest method in a two-week interval was obtained to be 0.92 and the reliability of the subscales of positive emotional response and moral role, positive presence, supplying, and negative presence of father was respectively 0.94, 0.95, 0.84, and 0.88.

The research hypotheses were tested by correlation test and stepwise regression analysis.

Table (1): Pearson correlation coefficients Between Fathering Scale and Component of Object Relations

Variable	M	SD	Alienation	Insecure attachment	egocentricity	social incompetence
Positive emotional response and the role of moral	85.94	36.57	-0.070	0.015	0.036	0.019
positive Presence	22.00	4.41	-0.116**	-0.055	-0.084	0.018
supplying	15.46	6.98	0.029	0.031	0.083	0.132*
negative Presence	18.44	5.31	0.241*	0.108**	0.167*	0.181**
Overall score	137.06	55.11	-0.22	0.028	-0.025	0.002

* $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$

As in Table 1 can be seen, father's positive presence has negative and significant relationship with alienation of object relations, therefore by increasing in father's positive presence, alienation factor would be reduced. On the other hand, supplying has positive relationship with social incompetence; this means by increasing supplying, social incompetence would be increased. Also father's presence has positive relationship with all of component of object relations (Alienation, Insecure attachment, egocentricity, social incompetence).

Table (2): Pearson correlation coefficients between object relations and defense style

Variable	M	SD	Alienation	Insecure attachment	social incompetence	egocentricity
matured	42.19	8.74	-0.150*	-0.199*	-0.126**	-0.065
Neuroticism	44.20	9.44	-0.015	0.035	0.004	0.085
immature defenses	119.86	20.29	0.187*	0.153*	0.123**	0.266*

* p< 0.01 , ** p< 0.05

According to the Table (2) defense mechanisms was developed by small scale alienation. Moreover, there is a significant negative relationship between insecure attachment and social incompetence. In contrast, immature defense mechanisms have positive relationship with all of the object relations' subscale including Alienation, Insecure attachment, social incompetence, and egocentricity). In the following table factors that had no connection with role of factors were eliminated and to determine the contribution of perceived parental separation defense mechanisms and other factors, factors were entered into the regression equation and the stepwise linear regression analysis was used.

Table (3): summarizes the stepwise multiple regression analysis to predict paternal scale factors of Object Relations

alienation								
Predictor variables	R	R2	ADJ. R2	S.E	B	β	T	sig
Model 1								
positive Presence	0.116	0.013	0.011	0.086	-.195	-.116	-2.27	0.024
Model 2								
positive Presence				0.084	-.137	-.081	-1.62	0.105
negative Presence	0.255	0.065	0.060	0.069	.316	.229	4.57	.000
Insecure attachment								
Predictor variables	R	R2	ADJ. R2	S.E	B	β	t	sig
negative Presence	0.108	0.012	0.009	0.043	0.02	0.09	2.11	0.035
egocentricity								
Predictor variables	R	R2	ADJ. R2	S.E	B	β	t	sig
negative Presence	0.167	0.028	0.025	0.042	0.149	0.167	3.31	0.001
social incompetence								
Predictor variables	R	R2	ADJ. R2	S.E	B	β	T	sig
Model 1								
Supplying	0.018	.000	-0.002	0.013	-.195	0.018	0.383	0.724
Model 2								
Supplying				-.031	-.137	-.042	-.801	0.424
negative Presence	0.185	0.034	0.029	0.140	.316	0.194	3.65	.000

Table (3) Includes part of discriminating variables in predicting presence of positive elements of object relationships in the first model was able to explain 11.3% of the variance in the father's role. Also, based on the results in the second model, positive and negative presence are able to predict alienation (F=13.17; P<0.05). Thus, scale of father's role, positive and negative presence predictive ability is 22.9% of the variance of alienation. In this model, other factors were removed due to inability to account for significant variance of father scale. Therefore, as contents of table factors which predict presence significant negative factor also insecure attachment relationships and significant level of 0.05 (F=4.47) and insecure attachment is able to account for 9% of the variance. Negative presence father is also able to predict a significant factor in relation to the subject's role and with significant level of 0.05 to F=10.98 and explained 16.7% of egocentricity's variance. In the case of alienation with respect to the contents of the table, the model is able to account for 1.8% of the variance of the providers of social inadequacy. Also, the data in the second model, negative presence and supplying are able to predict alienation (F=6.75 = F; P<0.05). Thus, the factors which are related to fatherhood scale suppliers can predict the presence negative and 19.4% of the variance is related to social incompetence.

Table (4): shows the stepwise multiple regression analysis to predict paternal scale of defence mechanisms

matured defense mechanisms								
Predictor variables	R	R2	ADJ. R2	S.E	B	β	T	sig
Model 1								
positive Presence	0.104	0.011	0.008	0.103	.209	.104	2.03	0.043
Model 2								
positive Presence				0.102	.157	.078	1.53	0.126
negative Presence	0.199	0.039	0.034	0.084	-.283	-.171	-3.37	0.001
Neurotic defense mechanisms								
Predictor variables	R	R2	ADJ. R2	S.E	B	β	t	sig
Supplying	0.186	0.035	0.032	0.090	-.33	-.186	-3.69	.000
immature defense mechanisms								
Predictor variables	R	R2	ADJ. R2	S.E	B	β	t	sig
positive Presence	0.128	0.016	0.014	0.237	-.60	-.128	-2.52	0.012

As table (4) shows variable in the prediction model is the first component of the positive elements of defense mechanisms able to explain 10.4% of the variance in developed father's defense mechanisms. Also, the data in the second model illustrate the presence of positive and negative to predict ($F=7.80$; $P<0.05$) factor of alienation. Thus, between scales of father's presence, positive and negative presence predicts 17.1% of variance. According to the Table of Contents, the suppliers are able to predict neurotic defense mechanisms. There are significant and significant level of 0.05 to $F=13.64$ and are able to explain 18.6% of the variance which is inversely neurotic defense mechanisms. On the other hand, positive presence is able to predict significantly immature defense mechanisms by ($F=6.37$) and significance level of 8.12 to 1.4% of variance explained immature defense mechanisms in contrast.

Results and Discussion

According to the results, there is a relationship between parental perception of an individual from his father and object relations. As mentioned in the research literature, many theorists have insisted that the absence of father at early ages and during the oedipal stage will affect the formation and evolution of feelings about ego, object relations world, internal communication patterns (Lee, 2004) and consequently in later relationships will influence the dominant communication patterns of child with outside world (Liebman & Abell, 2000). Moreover, According to the obtained results there is a negative significant relationship between positive presence of father and alienation in object relations. Alienation is related to lack of communication in relations, unstable and superficial relationships, serious difficulties in establishing intimacy, anger and hostility towards others and loneliness and isolation. The positive presence of father can reduce these factors and negative presence of father can increase them (Bell, 1995). In general, it can be said that positive presence of father can regulate the individual's relations and make it possible for him to move across a spectrum, so that at the end of the spectrum there is an extreme separation and at the other end there is intimacy and integration. What is important for an individual's mental health is to be able to keep a healthy distance in his relationships, so that he will neither suffocate due to being too close nor will die due to being too far. The positive presence of father can help him express his anger and have insight about his own purposes and abilities that are prerequisites for experienced relationship with others where there is both distinction and interactive communication. Finally, father contributes to the development of triple relationship between psychological independence, formation of independent ego, and separation from parental dependent behaviors (Holmes & Huston, 2010). On the other hand, according to results of data analysis, there is positive significant relationship between egocentricity and negative presence of father. Accordingly, such people are likely to experience more concerns in establishing interpersonal relationships towards being loved and accepted by others (Lee & Kwon, 2001).

Although communication is very important for such people's psychological status such as concern, feeling guilty, jealousy, and anxiety and can cause the development of maladaptive and repetitive patterns such as excessive dependence, adherence, and self-destructive behavior in their relationships. For them, separation, loss, and loneliness are difficult and intolerable and are highly sensitive to the possibility of being left alone and seek to ensure the full support and intimacy of others. Low levels of

emotional engagement leads to objects dissociation and the rupture with parents is associated with anger. In fact the individual separates from the object and goes towards completely different thing for compensation, but the separation is filled with rage not maturity (Bell, 1995). The positive presence of father promotes individual's emotional abilities and lessens excessive needs of environmental verifications and supports. The results also show that there is a positive and significant relationship between the negative presence of father and egocentricity. Accordingly such individuals organize their relationships based on supplying their own needs so they spend a little emotional energy for others and are often busy with their own personal goals, and their communication pattern includes suspicion and mistrust of motives of others, manipulating and taking individual advantage of relationships and abusing others to achieve their own personal goals. They express little sympathy in their interpersonal relationships and show the least concern and awareness towards others' feelings and impressions. Bishop and Lane (2000) have reported that absence of father, physically and mentally will affect the process of ego formation and object relations network harmfully.

Finally, there is a positive and significant relationship between social incompetence and father's negative presence and supplying. Such people are less willing to communicate with others and usually avoid communication and shyness and nervousness are their main features and they are skeptical in their relationships (Bell, 1995). Many studies have emphasized that in families with lower socioeconomic levels, adverse outcomes are observed in child development processes. Salari (1995) found in his research on children who were under the auspices of Aid Committee that adverse economic conditions is the main factor causing behavioral disorders in children which is more important than having or not having father. Such children are deprived from the reinforcement that other children receive and suffer from various problems such as depression, so they are not able to develop constructive communication and interaction. Roy and Fugua (1983) showed that sufficient social-economic support system by father might adjust the negative effects of children's academic performance. It seems like that social support for such families helps them deal with the problems associated with raising children more efficiently (Shinn,1978; Roy &Fugua,1983). Moreover, since social support always acts as a reliving, adjusting, and even enhancing factor against the problems, number of research on children who have lost their fathers in war (martyrs' children) or children whose parents are not able to meet their economic needs due to injury or illness show that positive circumstances of support networks of such families and providing social and economic supports by relevant social institutions make children feel more secure and the psychic problems observed in them are not significantly different from other children problems (Reno,2004). The research shows that absence of each parent can disturb children's psychic balance physically or mentally and can have adverse effects on children's natural growth (Niemic, Ryan & Deci, 2010).

Over the past decades the importance of the father's role is well-documented in the family and children's mental health. In addition to the mother's role (Lamb, 2010), father has an important role in the family and his presence is very efficient in emotional-social development of children. Fathers who have positive and effective relationships with their children, spend more time with them, and have warm and friendly relationships with their children have children with fewer behavioral problems, more socially acceptable behaviors, and higher schooling adequacy and educational development (Amato, Gilbreth, 1999). The presence of father beside the child since from early childhood years leads to development of attention and concentration, emotional discipline and social cognition in children (Parke, McDowell, Kim, Killian, Dennis, Flyr, Wild, 2002) and results in the increase of compliance and decrease of aggression in boys and reduction of anxiety and depression in girls and boys (Earls,1990). Absence of father as an environment variable can have special effects directly and indirectly on general growth and different aspects of child behavior in physical and mental health, and educational performance (Heidari Nasab, 2006). The results of studies show that absence of father will weaken and enfeeble children in many aspects of life particularly achievement motivation, superiority and interest in learning skills, perseverance, and tolerance of negative events of life. It also lowers self-esteem and such children show less tolerance towards delaying the needs, so their social coping skills are lower and have higher frequency of anxiety, depression, and neurologic events (Kasen,Cohen, Brook, Hartmark, 2003; Mott, Kowaleski, Menaghen, 2004; Alan,2005).

The results of demographic data in the present study show that about 80% of the mothers of the subjects in the sample group are housewives with diploma or lower education degree which can impress the individuals' perception process because as Lacan states the mother's job or education can also play the role of father and contribute to breaking the symbiotic space between mother and child (Plantin, Olukoya & Ny, 2011). On the other hand, more than 50% of the sample group subjects belonged to families with the income below one million Tomans which could have biased the results; that is, the present sample reflects the characteristic of a specific socio-economic class and the results cannot be generalized to the entire population. Furthermore, the use of self-assessment scales and the impossibility of quality assessment might have led to the increase of bias in the responses of sample participants.

Given that the present study mainly focuses on analytical theories, using methods such as profound interviews can provide more detailed information about the discussed structures. Second, in the present research the father scale was used and in order to know the father more accurately in Iranian culture, it is recommended to use this scale in future studies. Furthermore, since there are various subcultures in the Iranian society it is recommended to investigate the role of culture and ethnic and cultural beliefs in fathers' parenting methods and their effects on mental health aspects in future research. Third, with respect to the role of mother in the formation of an individual's perception of father's parenting, it is recommended to investigate this factor in future studies. According to the findings of the research, some training programs seem to be necessary to teach the importance of fathers' parenting. Obviously, the results of such training programs will have direct effects on the access of the youth to more efficient levels of defense mechanisms and relations and also on the increase of the overall health of the society.

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