

# **‘Mother, please! I’d rather do it myself!’ Maternal intrusiveness, daughters’ guilt, and separation as related to college adjustment<sup>1</sup>**

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## ABSTRACT

We examined the effects of maternal intrusiveness, guilt, and psychological separation on 109 women’s college adjustment. An adapted measure of maternal intrusiveness was found to be related positively to self-hate guilt and negatively to college adjustment. A new measure of appropriate maternal concern was associated with higher separation guilt. These findings suggest that adolescents with intrusive mothers may not be unhappy to leave home, but have more difficulties when on their own; those with appropriately concerned mothers may be guilty about leaving, but actually do better. Students low in guilt were more independent and better adjusted than their guiltier counterparts.

Recent work, including that from our laboratory, has produced evidence that good college adjustment may result from a balance between separation/autonomy from and continued connectedness to the family (Edwards, 1997; Hoffman, 1984; Lapsley, Rice, & Shadid, 1989; Shilkret & Vecchiotti, 1997). However, how these two psychological phenomena, autonomy and attachment, are related is quite complex. We propose that development of autonomy requires mastery of potential guilt about leaving family behind or surpassing loved ones when the student believes that her independence or accomplishments might upset or harm family members (Weiss, Sampson, et al., 1986; Weiss, 1993; Shilkret & Nigrosh, 1997). Excessive guilt about autonomy might even interfere with college success and/or adjustment: for example, the student who thinks that leaving home is abandoning divorcing parents and falls behind in classwork, or another one who thinks that doing things independently at college is leaving out a mother who has always seemed to need to be overly involved in the child’s schoolwork.

We further proposed, based on theoretical models (e.g., Chodorow, 1978) and recent empirical work (e.g., Lapsley, Rice, & Shadid, 1989), that the mother-daughter relationship is often particularly intense, involving subtle, even unconscious, negotiation of continuing involvement as the daughter moves toward independence. We do not think that relations between fathers and daughters or sons, or between mothers and sons, are less important or complex in many instances; but the mother-daughter relationship is a good place to start in an investigation of parenting, guilt, attachment, and autonomy.

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Furthermore, the variable of maternal control has had a venerable history in developmental psychology. Similar to the idea of maternal control, we were interested in mothers' over-involvement in their daughters' lives. A recent study with elementary school children (Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001) showed that "intrusive support" (checking or helping with homework when children don't ask for help) can improve children's school performance (though not beyond peers whose mothers are not intrusive), but can foster both success and failure for low-achieving students. That is, over-involvement can be a double-edged sword. The child may be helped by the parent's concern (and her actual assistance). But, we would suggest, the longer-term risk can be the child's coming to believe that the mother (a) has little confidence in her; and/or (b) needs the child to be low achieving in order for the mother to be involved with her (or for the mother to be lively, non-depressed, and so on, depending on the circumstances).

Therefore, we tried to distinguish between mothers' intrusive over-involvement versus appropriate concern. We thought of intrusive parenting as imposing the parent's own needs and desires to be involved in the daughter's life, rather than fostering a more reciprocal relationship, or even allowing the daughter to initiate and significantly control the interaction. We thought that intrusiveness in development, and especially in adolescence, would have detrimental effects for the adolescent's experience and achievement of separation, and on her adjustment to the college environment. In contrast, we expected that appropriate concern (mother's involvement in less invasive ways) would have less detrimental or even positive effects on the daughter's ability to separate from her mother and her ability to adjust to college.

Our model defines guilt in the control-mastery sense of irrational unconscious beliefs about doing something harmful or being disloyal to a loved one (Weiss, Sampson, et al., 1986; Weiss, 1993). We expected, as other of our studies have found, that guilt would be related to college adjustment. Intrusive parenting presents a particular risk for developing this sort of guilt, in that it can lead the child to believe that her mother needs to be a part of her life. Therefore, in the daughter's mind, the daughter's setting limits and moving toward independence is disloyal and will distress or cause harm to the mother (termed "separation guilt"). In contrast, we expected that daughters with appropriately concerned mothers would be less prone to separation guilt. We see guilt as the underlying link between earlier parenting experiences and eventual college adjustment and its failures.

## METHOD

One hundred nine traditional aged (17-24 years) college women completed 5 Likert-type self-report questionnaires. To assess daughters' experiences of their relationship with their mothers, we modified a measure developed by Olver, Aries, & Batgos (1989). They introduced two new scales, Permeability of Boundaries and Self-Other Differentiation. The Self-Other Differentiation scale (11 items), which we did not modify, was regarded as a general autonomy measure, tapping the sense of a separate self (e.g., "I find it hard to decide how I feel about something until I've discussed it with those close to me"; "A chance criticism from a friend will deeply upset me"; "I feel uncomfortable if my best friend disagrees with an action I take;" all these reverse-scored).

The Permeability of Boundaries scale (17 items) was designed originally to assess maternal involvement and intrusiveness in areas of body and personal appearance (e.g., “My mother inquires about my bodily functions”); property (e.g., “My mother goes through my bureau drawers at home”); space (e.g., “My mother enters my room without knocking”); thoughts (e.g., “My mother tells me how to feel about things before I have said anything on the topic”); and relationships (e.g., “My mother gives me unsolicited advice about my relationships”). The majority of items in this scale addressed mother’s involvement when the daughter was at home. To these, we added 7 items relating to maternal involvement when the daughter was away at college.

More importantly, we divided the items composing this scale (and the new ones) into two subscales, Intrusiveness (all the examples given above were regarded as intrusive) and Appropriate Concern (such items as “My mother inquires about my social activities at college”; “My mother asks to read papers I have written at college”; and “My mother inquires about what I am thinking and feeling”).

Control-mastery guilt was assessed using O’Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson’s (1997) Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ). The IGQ has subscales for guilt about surpassing a loved one (Survivor Guilt); about abandoning or becoming different from a loved one (Separation Guilt); about an exaggerated sense of responsibility for others (Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt); and about lack of compliance with negative parental views of the self (Self-Hate Guilt). See Appendix for examples of this measure.

We also used Hoffman’s (1984) Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI) to assess autonomy from the mother. This measure has 4 subscales corresponding to different aspects of psychological separation as conceptualized by Hoffman: ability to act without parents’ help (Functional Independence); having one’s own attitudes and beliefs (Attitudinal Independence); freedom from need for excessive support and closeness (Emotional Independence); and freedom from guilt, anxiety, and mistrust felt toward the parents (Conflictual Independence). See Appendix for examples of subscale items.

College adjustment was assessed by the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ, Baker & Siryk, 1984, 1989), a widely-used measure of college adjustment that has subscales for assessing academic, social, personal-emotional adjustment, and goal commitment/institutional attachment-the last-mentioned being a measure of commitment to finishing one’s college and accomplishing educational goals. See appendix for examples of items.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Maternal intrusiveness correlated significantly and negatively as expected, and moderately, with three of the college adjustment variables: academic adjustment,  $r = -0.27$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; personal-emotional adjustment,  $r = -0.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; and overall adjustment (the Full Scale score),  $r = -0.26$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Correlations with social adjustment and institutional attachment/goal commitment were also negative but not significant. However, contrary to expectation, Appropriate Concern scores were not significantly correlated with any adjustment variable.

There was not a significant correlation between Intrusiveness and Separation Guilt, but there was a positive relation found between Appropriate Concern and Separation Guilt

( $r = 0.27, p < 0.01$ ). Daughters with mothers they perceive to be highly intrusive may not be unhappy to achieve some distance from them; and this might mitigate whatever separation guilt leaving might otherwise give rise to.

Intrusiveness was positively related, as expected, to Self-Hate Guilt ( $r = 0.28, p < 0.01$ ); Appropriate Concern was not correlated with this type of guilt, also as expected. Self-hate guilt involves negative self-perceptions, which we speculate develop from the child's inability to resist or ignore the parent's negative views of the child (resulting in guilt about being different from or having different views than the parent, including views about the self). It is likely that parental intrusiveness is coupled with criticism—or at least implied criticism—of the child. Thus, we speculate that parental over-involvement can have deleterious effects on a child's developing self-concept, which is a somewhat paradoxical outcome, especially to a parent who views her involvement as for the child's benefit.

Regarding the measures of autonomy and independence, Self-Other Differentiation scores were, as expected, all negatively and consistently related to the guilt measures; this scale was also, as expected, positively and consistently related to the adjustment variables. However, results for the other autonomy/independence measure, the PSI, were somewhat difficult to interpret. Intrusiveness was, as should be expected, negatively correlated with most PSI variables (i.e., greater intrusiveness associated with lesser independence): with Functional ( $r = -0.27, p < 0.01$ ), Conflictual ( $r = -0.39, p < 0.001$ ), and Emotional Independence ( $r = -0.22, 0 < 0.05$ ), but was not related to Attitudinal Independence. Daughters with intrusive mothers seem dependent upon them and have difficulty achieving autonomy, as indicated by this measure. But, Appropriate Concern, for which a positive correlation with independence would be expected, was negatively related to the PSI Functional ( $r = -0.57, p < 0.001$ ), Attitudinal ( $r = -0.30, p < 0.01$ ) and Emotional Independence ( $r = -0.46, p < 0.001$ ) subscales, even more so than was intrusiveness; it was not related to Conflictual Independence (we would expect a positive relation with conflictual independence too—the more caring the mother, the freer the relationship should be of conflict). Perhaps women with appropriately concerned mothers are dependent in some areas; but, unlike those with intrusive mothers, they do not harbor negative feelings toward their mothers (conflictual independence).

Regarding the relation of PSI variables to adjustment variables, Conflictual Independence was the one subscale that related consistently (positively, as expected) to SACQ variables. Several other investigators have also found this one subscale of the PSI to be related positively and consistently to SACQ variables, but not the other PSI subscales (Baker, 1990). We also found, as have many others, inconsistencies regarding the other independence subscales (they all should be positively related to adjustment), suggesting caution in using this instrument in the future.

As expected, all guilt variables were negatively correlated with all college adjustment variables (the greater the guilt, the poorer the adjustment), as several other of our studies have found with similar samples (Edwards, 1997; Shilkret, 2000; & Shilkret & Vecchiotti, 1997). Also as found in our other studies, Self-Hate guilt correlated very highly (negatively) with adjustment variables, in contrast with Separation Guilt, which, although negatively correlated, was of much lesser magnitude. It could be that separation guilt, being such a common task of college students, finds peer support and thus is not

nearly as detrimental to adjustment as other types of guilt.

Regression analyses suggested that guilt variables were best at predicting adjustment outcome. All guilt variables combined accounted for 28% of the variance in overall adjustment to college, with the most significant amount of this attributable to Self-Hate Guilt. Intrusiveness accounted for approximately 6.7% of the variance in adjustment outcome; Appropriate Concern did not account for any adjustment variance. Thus, there is evidence in this study for the deleterious effect of intrusive parenting on college adjustment, as well as guilt, as shown in our earlier work as well.

The disappointing findings in this study for mothers' appropriate concern (e.g., no relation with college adjustment) we attribute to psychometric problems in that new instrument. First, it is likely that some of the items were viewed by students to be more intrusive than appropriate concern; a change in wording would more clearly indicate the latter (e.g., "My mother is interested to hear about my social activities at college," rather than "My mother inquires about my social activities at college;" "My mother enjoys reading [rather than asks to read] papers I have written in college"). In deriving this instrument from the original Olver, Aries, & Batgos scale, we were primarily focused on kinds of activities (e.g., social activities versus sex life); a change in verb in several instances would result in a purer measure of appropriate concern, as we conceptualize it, as distinct from intrusiveness. Second, there were more items on the Intrusiveness subscale than on the Appropriate Concern subscale; we should have more appropriate concern items in a future version of the measure.

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APPENDIX  
EXAMPLES FROM MEASURES

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ) (O'Connor, et al., 1997)  
67 items, rated on 5-point Likert scales

Survival Guilt (about the effects of one's success on others; 22 items)

I am uncomfortable talking about my achievements in social situations.

It makes me very uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with.

Separation Guilt (abandoning or being different from parents; 15 items)

I feel that bad things happen to my family if I do not stay in close contact with them.

It is difficult to see my parents' flaws.

I am very reluctant to express an opinion that is different from the opinions held by my family or friends.

Omnipotence Guilt (excessive responsibility for others; 14 items):

I worry about hurting other people's feelings if I turn down an invitation from somebody who is eager for me to accept.

I worry a lot about the people I love even when they seem to be fine.

Self-Hate Guilt (about being worthy; 16 items):

I deserve to be rejected by people.

I feel there is something inherently bad about me.

Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI, Hoffman, 1984)  
69 items each for mother and father, rated on 5-point Likert scales  
Scores are subtracted from maximums, so that high is "good" (independent).

Functional Independence (ability to act independently; 13 items):

My mother's wishes have influenced my selection of friends.

I often ask my mother to assist me in solving my personal problems.

My mother helps me to make my budget.

Emotional Independence (lack of need for approval, closeness; 17 items):

I wish that my mother lived closer so that I could visit her more frequently.

I sometimes call home just to hear my mother's voice.

After being with my mother for a vacation, I find it difficult to leave her.

Conflictual Independence (freedom from anxiety, anger, etc.; 25 items):

Sometimes my mother is a burden to me.

I feel like I am constantly at war with my mother.

I wish I could trust my mother more.

I hate it when my mother makes suggestions about what I do.

Attitudinal Independence (has own beliefs and attitudes; 14 items):

My opinion regarding the role of men are similar to my mother's.

My ideas regarding racial equality are similar to my mother's.

My religious beliefs are similar to my mother's.

My beliefs regarding how to raise children are similar to my mother's.

Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ, Baker & Siryk, 1989)  
67 items, rated on 9-point Likert scales.

Academic Adjustment (24 items):

I have been keeping up to date on my academic work.

I have not been functioning well during examinations. (Reverse scored)

Getting a college degree is very important to me.

I am very satisfied with the professors I now have in my courses.

Social Adjustment (20 items):

I am very involved with social activities in college.

I have several close social ties at this college.

Lonesomeness for home is a source of difficulty for me now. (Reverse scored)

I am satisfied with the extracurricular activities available at college.

Personal-Emotional Adjustment (15 items):

I have been feeling tense or nervous lately. (Reverse scored)

I have been having a lot of headaches lately. (Reverse scored)

My appetite has been good lately.

I have been feeling in good health lately.



Goal-Commitment/Institutional Attachment (15 items):

On balance, I would rather be home than here. (Reverse scored)

I find myself giving considerable thought to taking time off from college and finishing later. (Reverse scored)

Lately I have been having doubts regarding the value of a college education. (Reverse scored)

I wish I were at another college or university rather than this one. (Reverse scored)