GYÖRGY GERGELY

REAPPROACHING MAHLER:
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON NORMAL AUTISM, SYMBIOSIS, SPLITTING AND LIBIDINAL OBJECT CONSTANCY FROM COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

Introduction: Mahler and her critics

Margaret Mahler's separation-individuation theory\(^1\) exemplifies one of the first systematic attempts within psychoanalytic theory\(^2\) to integrate clinically derived analytic conceptualizations of early psychic development with existing empirical evidence from infancy research, on the one hand, and with detailed longitudinal observations of the mother-infant relationship, on the other. This pioneering attempt heralded the currently growing theoretical and research interest to anchor modern psychoanalytic approaches to development within the framework provided by recent infancy research on cognitive and socio-emotional development, attachment theory, and developmental psychopathology.\(^3\)

---

Mahler's work has provoked a great deal of critical discussion both from the point of view of research on early normal development and of current models of the developmental origins of adult psychopathology. Most of these criticisms focused on three central aspects of Mahler's theory, namely, the early phases of normal autism and normal symbiosis, and her characterization of the rapprochement period.

One important line of attack was empirically based and it rejected several of Mahler's central proposals on the basis of their incompatibility with current results of infancy research. Thus, demonstrations of the young infant's selective attentiveness towards and prewired capacity to process functionally relevant aspects of the external environment starting from birth were seen as refuting the classical notion of an initial stimulus barrier that was an integral structural aspect of Mahler's notion of an initial phase of normal autism during the first two months of life. Similarly, the existence of early perceptual mechanisms of self-other differentiation was argued to be incompatible with Mahler's concepts of initial undifferentiation and symbiotic fusion characteristic of the phase of normal symbiosis lasting until six months of age. In the same vein, recent empirical research in attachment theory has been interpreted to show that the typical behavioral "ambi-

---


