

Separation anxiety in families with emerging adults

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Abstract

In several developmental theories separation anxiety has been identified as an important feature of close interpersonal relationships. Most often, separation anxiety has been examined in the context of mother-child dyads in infancy. Increasingly, however, it is recognized that separation anxiety is also relevant in other relationships (e.g., the father-child relationship) and in later developmental periods (e.g., adolescence and emerging adulthood). The present study aimed to investigate separation anxiety at the family level in families with emerging adults. By using the Social Relations Model, we aimed to determine the extent to which the actor, the partner, their specific relationships, and the family contribute to separation anxiety in dyadic family relationships. A total of 119 Belgian two-parent families with an emerging adult participated in a round-robin design, in which family members reported on their feelings of separation anxiety towards each other. Findings showed that separation anxiety can be represented as a personality attribute (i.e., an actor effect) and as a specific feature of the mother-child dyad. Further, findings indicate that separation anxiety is also characteristic of the father-mother marital relationship and of the family climate as a whole. Implications for the meaning of separation anxiety and clinical practice are discussed.

Keywords: Separation anxiety; social relations model; family relationships; emerging adulthood

Separation anxiety was described in early psychoanalytic writings as a basic human disposition involving concerns about the loss or absence of significant others (Benedek, 1970; Bloom-Fesbach & Bloom-Fesbach, 1987; Freud, 1926). In several theories, including attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973) and object relations theory (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975), separation anxiety is considered a salient feature of close relationships. Possibly because these theories emphasized the role of separation anxiety in infancy and early interpersonal relationships, separation anxiety has been mainly studied in dyadic relationships and in the context of the mother-child dyad in particular. In this study, we investigated separation anxiety at the level of the family as a whole, thereby relying on the Social Relations Model. Moreover, we examined separation anxiety in an older target group than is typically the case, that is, families of emerging adults. As this is a time when young people make the transition to adult life and become more independent from parents (Tanner, 2006), it is believed highly relevant to investigate separation anxiety in families of emerging adults.

Separation Anxiety in Family Relationships

On the basis of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973) and object relations theory (Mahler, et al., 1975), it has been argued that processes involved in parent-child separation are critical for an individual's psychosocial development. Difficulties in processes of separation, including separation anxiety, have been described most often in the context of the mother-child dyad. Also, historically the focus of attention in literature on separation anxiety has been on infants and young children (Hock, McBride, & Gnezda, 1989). According to Bowlby (1973), for instance, separation anxiety is experienced by all living creatures in response to separation or a threat of separation from an attachment figure. From his ethological perspective on attachment, separation anxiety and associated separation behaviors in infancy are considered normative and adaptive for the survival of the individual and the species. Separation anxiety typically starts to manifest at about 8 months, with a peak around 13 months, and a decrease from 30 months onwards (see also Hock & Lutz, 1998). When separation anxiety is excessive and persists beyond infancy, this may signal deficiencies in the quality of the

parent-child relationship (e.g., preoccupied attachment) and it may forecast separation anxiety disorder and poor adjustment and ill-being later in life (e.g., Bernstein & Borchardt, 1991; Brumariu & Kerns, 2010; Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005; Lavalley et al., 2011).

Increasingly, it is being argued that separation anxiety is relevant in later developmental periods as well. Separation-related concerns are likely to surface again when a child reaches the phase of adolescence and emerging adulthood and makes the transition from a dependent adolescent to an independent young adult. For instance, the process of leaving the parental home during emerging adulthood is a real-life separation experience that might be experienced as challenging (Bartle-Haring, Brucker, & Hock, 2002; Mayseless, Danieli, & Sharabany, 1996). It has been expected and found that the way how people cope with such separation experiences depends on their attachment representations (Bernier, Larose, & Whipple, 2005; Mayseless, et al., 1996). Experiences of separation, such as leaving the parental home, may be stressful and may activate the attachment system. Mental representations of attachment relationships that were built on the basis of experiences with significant others would in turn affect the way in which an individual responds behaviorally and emotionally to separation events. Securely attached individuals indeed have been found to cope better with the home-leaving experience than the insecurely attached (Bernier et al., 2005; Mayseless et al., 1996).

Probably because developmental theories have historically stressed the primacy of the mother's role in early infant caregiving, research on separation anxiety has focused on the mother-child relationship and on children's feelings of separation anxiety towards the mother in particular. Attachment theory can however also provide a conceptual base for understanding mothers' feelings of separation anxiety towards the child. That is, feelings of separation anxiety activate an instinctive maternal tendency to provide protection and increased physical proximity to the child when confronted with a separation event or impending danger (Bowlby, 1973). However, it is not until the 1980s that maternal separation anxiety was thoroughly investigated. Maternal separation anxiety was conceptualized as an unpleasant emotional state tied to the separation experience characterized by

expressions of worry, sadness, or guilt associated with mother-child separation (Hock et al., 1989; Hock & Schirtzinger, 1992). Maternal separation anxiety has been viewed as a rather stable personality disposition that is elicited in a mother's separation from her child (Hock et al., 1989). Several studies have provided evidence that separation anxiety is a traitlike aspect of the maternal personality instead of a type of state anxiety, with maternal separation anxiety for instance being found to demonstrate relatively stable interindividual differences across time and across situations (DeMeis, Hock, & McBride, 1986; Hock et al. 1989). Maternal separation anxiety has also been shown to be associated with negative self-representations (Hock & Schirtzinger, 1992), low self-esteem (McBride & Belsky, 1988), and depressive symptomatology (Hock & Schirtzinger, 1992; Hock, Schirtzinger, & Lutz, 1992). In laboratory settings, separation anxious mothers were found to demonstrate more intrusive and autonomy-restrictive behavior towards their child (Berger & Aber, 1986; Stifter, Coulehan, & Fish, 1993).

On the basis of attachment theory, it has been suggested that specific childhood experiences with the parents, stored in internal working models of relationships, contribute to the origin and intensity of maternal separation anxiety (Bowlby, 1973). Consistent with this hypothesis, women with higher levels of separation anxiety reported more negative recollections of early parental caregiving, including rejection and discouragement of independence (Lutz & Hock, 1995). Although maternal separation anxiety has been described as a personality attribute arising in part from individual experiences with mothers' own parents during childhood, it was proposed that aspects of the child's functioning might also contribute to mothers' level of separation anxiety. McBride and Belsky (1988), for instance, found that mothers are more separation anxious when the child has a more difficult temperament.

Because separation anxiety has most often been studied in infants and young children and because separation concerns were considered to be rooted at least partly in the sociocultural mandates regarding the maternal role (Hock et al., 1989), it is logical that separation anxiety was mainly ascribed to mothers. Yet, to gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics of separation anxiety in families, research should also include fathers' concerns about separation. Fathers are more involved with

childcare than they used to be and this might be particularly the case in later developmental periods, including adolescence and perhaps also emerging adulthood. Hence, it has been argued that separation anxiety would also be relevant in father-child relationships. Research has supported this hypothesis as fathers were found to report separation anxiety to the same extent as mothers (Deater-Deckard, Scarr, McCartney, & Eisenberg, 1994; Hock & Lutz, 1998). Specifically in adolescence and emerging adulthood, some recent research suggests that separation anxiety relates to interpersonal functioning and well-being much in the same way in fathers as in mothers (e.g., Hock, Eberly, Bartle-Haring, Ellwanger, & Widaman, 2001; Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Duriez, & Goossens, 2006). However, there is also some research to suggest that the meaning and origins of separation anxiety may be different in men and women. An empirical study on separation anxiety in mothers and fathers, for instance, indicated that paternal separation anxiety was most influenced by their wives' separation anxiety, suggesting that the primary source of their concern may be situated at the level of the marital relationship (Hock & Lutz, 1998).

The notion that separation-anxiety might also be relevant in the marital relationship, and not only in parent-child relationships, has received some support in attachment-based research. It has been shown, for instance, that attachment anxiety (which involves features of separation anxiety) in adult romantic relationships is consistently associated with adverse relationship experiences and outcomes. Particularly for men, attachment anxiety in the partner relationship has found to be related with negative experiences and with lower overall relationship satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Kane et al., 2007; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, 1990). In sum, there is some evidence that paternal separation anxiety is particularly relevant at the level of the marital relationship. In contrast, maternal separation anxiety seems to be relatively more embedded within beliefs about traditional role-related responsibilities and more strongly influenced by personality attributes, recollections of parental caregiving, and characteristics of the child (Hock & Lutz, 1998).

The Present Study

Given the increasing recognition of the relevance of separation anxiety beyond the mother-child dyad, the present study aimed to investigate separation anxiety at the level of the family as a whole. This aim was pursued in families of emerging adults involved in the process of home leaving. Although research on separation anxiety in infants and early childhood is abundant, there are far fewer studies on separation anxiety in older target populations (Hock et al., 2001). However, as emerging adulthood is a time when families face challenges with respect to separation-related issues, separation anxiety might be salient. Particularly, the imminent leave-taking from the parental home might trigger feelings of separation anxiety in both emerging adults (Seligman & Wuyek, 2007) and parents (Bartle-Haring, et al., 2002). Different from previous studies that focused primarily on one specific dyad in the family (e.g., the mother-child relationship), the present study investigates separation anxiety from a family systems perspective. This allows us to examine whether separation anxiety is characteristic of individuals, specific dyads, or the family as a whole (Cook & Kenny, 2004).

In addition, we compared families with coresiding emerging adults and families with emerging adults living away from the parental home. Mean-level differences of separation anxiety were evaluated as well as differences in the patterns of individual, dyadic, and group level separation anxiety in family relationships. Research has suggested that the transformation towards a more adult-like and mutual parent-child relationship would be complicated when emerging adults continue to coreside with their parents (Aquilino, 1997; Flanagan, Schulenberg, & Fuligini, 1993). These difficulties might manifest, among other things, in feelings of separation anxiety. Therefore, it is possible that mean levels of separation anxiety in family relationships are higher when emerging adults still live in the parental home. Moreover, it was explored whether the family dynamics involved in separation anxiety are different when emerging adults coreside with their parents or live away. Aside, this hypothesized association between separation anxiety and emerging adults' residential status might go in two directions. That is, high levels of separation anxiety in family relationships could make emerging adults more prone to continue to live

with their parents (i.e., selection effect). Yet, continued coresidence with parents during emerging adulthood could also intensify the levels of separation anxiety in family relationships (i.e., socialization effect).

The Social Relations Model

We applied the Social Relations Model (SRM; Cook, 1994; Kenny & La Voie, 1984) to investigate the family dynamics that determine separation anxiety in families of emerging adults during the home-leaving process. The SRM is rooted in family systems theory (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Framo, 1965; Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974), which emphasizes the importance of regarding the family as an interacting system of individuals and relationships. Family systems theorists suggest that behavior or characteristics of an individual family member can affect the whole family as a system and the subsystems within the family, and the other way around. The SRM is a statistical model for studying interpersonal perception and behavior that takes into account this notion of interdependence of components within the family system. Hence, rather than focusing on one specific dyad in the family, the SRM treats the family as the unit of analysis and uses a round-robin design in which each family member reports on his or her relationship with the other participating family members (Cook, 2005).

According to the SRM, the relationship of one family member to another is a function of four systematic sources of variance: (a) an actor effect, (b) a partner effect, (c) a relationship effect, and (d) a family effect (Kashy & Kenny, 1990). An actor effect refers to a consistency in a person to show or report certain behavior across multiple relationships (e.g., a general, trait-like tendency to feel separation anxious towards other people). A partner effect refers to the extent to which the characteristics of a particular partner consistently elicit certain thoughts, feelings, or behavior from others (e.g., a general tendency to elicit feelings of separation anxiety in different family members). A relationship effect refers to the unique adjustment of one person to another within a specific relationship and in a specific direction (e.g., separation anxiety expressed by the mother towards the child). Finally,

the family effect refers to characteristics that are on average shared across family members (e.g., a separation anxious family climate).

The purpose of SRM is to isolate and measure these different sources of variance that affect interpersonal relationships. This approach allows us to attribute the variance between families with respect to separation anxiety across different family relationships to the effects of actor, partner, relationship, and family. For instance, at the individual level, the model can indicate whether separation anxiety in family relationships of emerging adults typically refers to a personality attribute of mothers (actor effect), or whether it is rather elicited by characteristics of certain family members (partner effect). At the dyadic level, SRM effects can reveal whether separation anxiety is primarily or uniquely typical of the mother-child dyad—as is sometimes assumed in the literature—or whether separation anxiety is also a feature of other family relationships, including the father-child relationship and the marital relationship. At a group level, SRM effects might point to differences in mean family level of separation anxiety across families. In a second step, meaningful correlations among the SRM components, referring to the degree of individual and dyadic reciprocity, can be specified (Kashy & Kenny, 1990). Individual reciprocity (i.e., actor-partner reciprocity correlation) reflects the extent to which a family member who is generally separation anxious also elicits separation anxiety from other family members. Dyadic reciprocity (i.e., relationship reciprocity correlation) indicates the degree to which a family member, who experiences unique separation anxiety within a specific relationship, is also experienced by the partner within the same relationship as being separation-anxious. Finally, using multigroup comparisons, we additionally explored if the SRM effects were possibly different in families with coresiding emerging adults in comparison to families where emerging adults live away from the parental home.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Our study sample comprised 119 intact Belgian families (i.e., both parents living together) with an emerging adult aged 24 to 26 years. We deliberately focused on emerging adults in their mid twenties because we wanted to compare a group of emerging adults who live with their parents with a substantial group of emerging adults who live fully independently. Recent demographics indicated that it is not until the age of 25 that approximately half of the Belgian young men and women have left the parental home (Vettenburg, Elchardus, & Walgrave, 2007). Somewhat more than half of our sample (i.e., 61%) comprised families with an emerging adult living permanently in the parental home. The other 39% were families where the emerging adult lived independently, meaning that the child rarely or never stayed over in the parental home anymore. The average age for the participating mothers and fathers was 51 years ($SD = 3$ years) and 53 years ($SD = 4$ years), respectively. Both mothers and fathers had an average level of education of approximately 14 years. Emerging adults were on average 25 years old ($SD = 11$ months) and slightly more than half of them were male (i.e., 56%). Of the total sample, 65% were highly educated (i.e., post-secondary education). Only 10% were still students at the time of data gathering, whereas the majority (80%) was currently working. Over half (i.e., 56%) of the participating emerging adults were involved in a partner relationship. A comparison of the emerging adults in both types of residential statuses on these background variables revealed that emerging adults who lived in the parental home were significantly younger ($F(1,118) = 8.44, p < .01$), more often male ($\chi^2(1) = 5.01, p < .05$), and less often involved in a romantic relationship ($\chi^2(1) = 11.93, p < .001$) than their independently living peers.

The data for the present study were collected by undergraduate students who took part in a course on developmental psychology. Each student was asked to contact one family. Questionnaires were administered to the participating family members (i.e., both parents and the emerging adult) during a home visit. Data were collected using a round-robin design in which each family member reports on

his/her behavior, perceptions or feelings towards the other participating family members (Kenny & La Voie, 1984). This procedure resulted in data on 6 family relationships. That is, the emerging adult reported on his/her separation anxiety towards both parents, and both parents evaluated their level of separation anxiety towards their emerging adult child, and spouse.

Measures

Separation anxiety was measured using a selection of items from the Anxiety About Distancing (AAD) subscale of the Parents of Adolescents Separation Anxiety Scale (PASAS; Hock et al., 2001). The PASAS is a measure that was initially developed to assess parents' emotions with their adolescent's increasing independence and imminent leave-taking. The AAD-subscale reflects parents' feelings of discomfort or loss with their perceptions of their adolescent's independence and increasing affiliation with others. We selected 17 items of this scale that could be administered in a round-robin design in families with emerging adults. Items were somewhat rephrased so that all participating family members could evaluate how separation anxious they were with respect to the other participating family members (see Appendix for the complete scale). As such, a score for each of the six dyadic relationships could be obtained. Each of the items is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). One of the items had to be reverse-coded such that high scores on this scale demonstrated more separation anxiety. Cronbach's alpha of the separation anxiety scale in the different dyads, presented in Table 1, showed good internal reliability.

Because this scale is used for the first time to measure separation anxiety outside the parent-child dyad, it was further validated by relating it to other measures of well-being and relationship quality. Correlations analyses demonstrated that separation anxiety was associated in similar directions with overall well-being (e.g., more depressive symptoms) and relationship quality (e.g., lower differentiation, higher dependency-oriented psychological control) across all assessed family dyads.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the separation anxiety scores across each of the six family relationships in the total sample are presented in Table 1. Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations separately for families where emerging adults live in the parental home and for families where emerging adults live independently. Analyses of variance (One-way ANOVA) indicated only one effect of living situation, that is, an effect on separation anxiety in the mother-child relationship. That is, mothers whose child still lived at home reported on average more separation anxiety towards their emerging adult child compared to mothers whose child had left the parental home.

SRM Analysis

First, we performed an SRM analysis on the covariance matrix of the total sample. The purpose of the analysis was to explore the degree to which separation anxiety in each of the six assessed family relationships can be explained by characteristics of the actor, the partner, the relationship, or the family as a group, by partitioning the variance in the relationships into these four components. The different variances were estimated simultaneously in Lisrel 8.72 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996), as SRM analysis is essentially a confirmatory factor analysis in which the SRM effects are the latent variables (see Cook, 1994; Kashy & Kenny, 1990).

In a three-person family round-robin design, there are six unidirectional measures of separation anxiety. These observed measures served as the indicators for the latent variables. The observed measures of relationships where a family member is the actor served as the indicator variables of that person's actor effect. Analogously, observed measures of relationships where a family member is the partner were indicators of the individual's partner effect. For the family effect, all six relationship measures were used as indicators. By contrast, no such multiple indicators were available for the latent variables that represent the six relationship effects. However, to identify relationship effects as separate from measurement error, at least two indicator variables are needed. To obtain two indicators, we

worked with parcels in which the mean from half of the items of the separation anxiety scale were used as one indicator of each relationship and the mean from the other half of the items served as the second indicator. In this case no correlated errors are specified (see Cook, 1993, 1994). In our measurement model, all factor loadings were fixed at 1.0 and factor variances were estimated. These variance estimates indicate whether separation anxiety in family relationships reflects actor, partner, relationship, and/or family effects. Individual and dyadic reciprocity correlations were initially trimmed from the tested model, because a three-person family SRM-model has insufficient degrees of freedom to estimate all SRM-effects (Cook, 1993).

In principle, variances should always be positive. However in our primary estimated model, the variance of all three partner effects were slightly negative and nonsignificant (i.e., -.01). Therefore, the variances of the partner effects were fixed to zero. It was deemed acceptable to drop the partner effects from the model, as a chi-square difference test indicated that the fit of the model without the partner effects did not differ significantly from the model including these partner effects [$\Delta\text{SBS-}\chi^2(1) = 1.33$, ns]. According to Cook (1994), this means that these parameters are not important and that the tested models can be simplified by dropping them.

In a second step, reciprocity correlations were added to our model. Dyadic reciprocity correlations were estimated by correlating the relationships effects of the two individuals within the dyadic relationship. Individual reciprocity correlations were not estimated because partner effects were fixed to zero and reciprocity correlations are only interpretable when they are based on two effects whose variances differ significantly from zero (Cook, 1994). Figure 1 displays an overview of the SRM model that was finally estimated. Data screening of the observed indicator variables (i.e., the parcels) indicated that assumptions of normality were violated both in terms of skewness and kurtosis, $\chi^2(2, N = 119) = 18.08, p < .001$. Therefore, we used the asymptotic covariance matrix as input and checked the SBS- χ^2 to evaluate model fit. In addition, we inspected the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root-Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardized Root-Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

According to Hu and Bentler (1999), combined cutoff values close to .06 for RMSEA and .09 for SRMR indicate good model fit. A CFI with values of .90 or higher reflects acceptable fit (Bentler, 1990). An evaluation of these goodness-of-fit statistics revealed that the fit of the SRM model was satisfactory: $SBS-\chi^2(53) = 76.85$, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .07. Variance estimates for the SRM-effects are presented in Table 3. Statistically significant variances indicate that effects of actors, relationships, and families are important for the level of separation anxiety experienced within family relationships. Figure 2 presents the relative contribution of these different SRM components to the variance in separation anxiety experienced in a specific dyadic relationship. For example, the variance in mothers' feelings of separation anxiety towards their emerging adult son or daughter is composed of actor variance across mothers, partner variance across emerging adults, relationship variance across mother-to-emerging adult relationships, and family variance. When calculating the total variance (i.e., error variance included) in the dyadic feelings of separation anxiety, the percentage explained by each SRM component can be calculated easily. For mothers' separation anxiety towards the emerging adult, the total variance comprises the sum of the variances for mothers' actor effect (.11), emerging adults' partner effect (.00), the mother-emerging adult relationship effect (.17), the family effect (.03) and the error variance (.13 + .07; i.e., the error variance associated with the two parcels of the separation anxiety measure in the mother-emerging adult relationship). This sum equals .51. Hence, mothers' actor effect explains about 22% of the variance ($.11/.51 = .216$), mothers' unique relationship accounts for 33% of the variance ($.17/.51 = .333$), and the family effect for about 6% ($.03/.51 = .059$). There was no partner effect. The different bars in Figure 2 represent the variance in feelings of separation anxiety in each of the six family relationships; the colored parts of the bars represent the contributions of the SRM components for each dyad. The total amount of variance explained by the different SRM components in the different family dyads ranged between 49% and 61%.

All actor effects were found to be significant, which indicates that there are substantial personal differences in the degree to which individuals feel separation anxious towards other family members in

general. Some emerging adults, mothers, and fathers experience more separation anxiety towards all family members than other emerging adults, mothers, and fathers. Actor variance explained 22 to 39.5% of the total variance in separation anxiety in the dyadic family relationships. Although the size of the actor variance was comparable for emerging adults, mothers, and fathers, actor effects contributed somewhat less in the level of separation anxiety experienced by parents compared to emerging adults.

As indicated before, partner effects could be dropped from the model. This means that how separation anxious an individual feels towards another family member does not depend on characteristics of a specific partner. Stated differently, all emerging adults elicit about the same amount of separation anxiety in family members and the same applies to mothers and fathers. Hence, partner effects explained 0% of the total variance in separation anxiety in the different family relationships.

Three relationship effects were detected, as three of the relationship variances were found to be significant: (a) a relationship effect for emerging adult feelings of separation anxiety towards the mother, (b) mother's separation anxiety towards the emerging adult, and (c) father's separation anxiety towards the mother. This means that the extent to which an individual experiences separation anxiety in these specific family relationships is determined by factors unique to that relationship. The contribution of the relationship variance to the total variance in separation anxiety in all family relationships varied between 6% and 33%. Relationship effects contributed most to the mother-child relationship, indicating that separation anxiety is particularly characteristic in that specific relationship. Except for the father-child dyad ($r = .25, p < .01$), dyadic reciprocity correlations were nonsignificant. However, given that the relationship variances of the emerging adults' separation anxiety towards the father and the father's level of separation anxiety towards the emerging adult were not significant, the dyadic reciprocity is not further interpreted (Cook, 1994).

Finally, the significant family variance indicated that there are between-family differences in separation anxiety. Hence, differences in experienced level of separation anxiety in family relationships can also be explained by the mean family level of separation anxiety across families. The family effect

explained between 6% and 9% of the total variance in separation anxiety in the dyadic family relationships.

Multigroup Comparison

In a final step, we examined whether SRM effects were different in families with emerging adults living permanently in the parental home ($N = 73$) compared to families where emerging adults live away from the parents ($N = 46$). A simultaneous multigroup analysis showed that the fit of a constrained model, in which all variances were fixed in both groups ($\text{SBS-}\chi^2(131) = 158.58$, $\text{CFI} = .97$, $\text{RMSEA} = .06$), was not significantly worse than the fit of a model where all variances were estimated freely in the two groups of families ($\text{SBS-}\chi^2(106) = 130.03$, $\text{CFI} = .97$, $\text{RMSEA} = .06$): $\Delta\text{SBS-}\chi^2(25) = 28.63$, *ns*. As a result, it should be concluded that the SRM components that explain the variance in separation anxiety in families of emerging adults are not significantly different depending on the residential status of the emerging adult.

Discussion

Separation anxiety is often considered as a relationship feature that is particularly salient for the mother-child dyad in infancy and early childhood (Bowlby, 1973; Mahler et al., 1975). The present study aimed to broaden this perspective, first, by examining separation anxiety in emerging adulthood, a time when both parents and children face challenges involving separation-related issues (Aquilino, 2006; Tanner, 2006). Second, instead of concentrating uniquely on the mother-child relationship, separation anxiety was investigated at the family level. This approach allowed us to clarify the family dynamics that determine separation anxiety in dyadic family relationships (Cook & Kenny, 2004). The results of the present study indicate that separation anxiety is indeed to some extent a typical feature of the mother-child relationship. However, other dynamics contributed to the level of experienced separation anxiety as well.

Separation anxiety in family relationships was found to differ considerably depending on characteristics of the actor. This means that some family members are in general more separation

anxious in family relationships in comparison to other family members. Such individual differences in experienced separation anxiety support the notion that separation anxiety is a relatively stable personality disposition. A couple of previous studies suggested that separation anxiety was mainly intertwined with personality in mothers and to a lesser extent in fathers (e.g., Hock & Lutz, 1998; Hock & Schirtzinger, 1992). Somewhat contrary to these findings, the results of the current study suggest that separation anxiety is a trait-like characteristic of mothers, fathers, and emerging adults alike. An important direction for future research is to confirm these relatively stable interindividual differences across time and situations with a longitudinal design and to examine more systematically the origins of these trait-like differences. It seems likely that early caregiving experiences and subsequent attachment representations as well as temperament factors contribute to the trait-like individual differences in separation anxiety observed in this study. Further, it seems likely that these actor effects, which reflect a general tendency to experience separation anxiety in family relationships, may also generalize to close relationships outside the family (e.g., relationships with close friends, emerging adults' romantic relationships). Furthermore, highly separation anxious individuals might be at risk for emotional ill-being as previous research with mothers revealed that separation anxiety was positively associated with low self-esteem and depressive symptomatology (Hock & Schirtzinger, 1992; Hock et al., 1992; McBride & Beslky, 1988). Hence, clinicians should be alert to characteristics of separation anxiety in individuals as these may have negative repercussions for personal and interpersonal adjustment.

In addition to being a personality attribute, separation anxiety was also found to be characteristic of specific family relationships. In line with traditional assumptions in the literature on attachment and separation (Bowlby, 1969, 1973), separation anxiety was found to be a relatively unique feature of the mother-child dyad. Such relationship-specific effects were found in both directions of the mother-child dyad (i.e., from child to mother and from mother to child). However, we found no evidence of reciprocal processes, suggesting that mothers and children do not reinforce each other in their feelings of separation anxiety towards one another, at least during emerging adulthood. This finding

does not preclude the possibility that mothers and children reinforced each other's separation anxiety during earlier developmental stages. The relationship-effect also contributed to a significantly larger portion of variance in the mother-child relationship (i.e., 33%) than in the child-mother relationship (i.e., 12%), which indicates that separation anxiety is particularly a unique component in the relationship a mother has with her child. These results provide support for the fact that mother's instinctive tendency to protect her child tends to result in feelings of anxiety when confronted with an actual separation or threat of separation from the child, as postulated by Bowlby (1969, 1973).

Although separation anxiety has been mainly investigated in parent-child relationships, the results of the present study indicate that feelings of separation anxiety can be also characteristic in partner relationships as we found a significant relationship effect for the father-mother relationship. This relationship effect signifies that the father's feelings of separation anxiety towards his spouse are determined by factors unique to that relationship. The fact that concerns about loss and absence are typically directed from fathers to mothers instead of the other way are rather counterintuitive with gender stereotypes about romantic relationships. It is somewhat consistent, however, with research pointing out that men not involved in a romantic relationship feel lonelier than women (Stroebe, Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Schut, 1996). Men also seem to adjust less well to living on their own after divorce, whereas women tend to bounce back more easily from divorce (Forste & Heaton, 2004; Wang & Amato, 2000). These results could in part explain why men are more separation anxious in their partner relationships compared to women. Future research on romantic relationships is warranted to further explore males' feelings of separation anxiety towards their partner.

Finally, a small family effect was found to contribute to separation anxiety in relationships in families with emerging adults. This means that differences in family characteristics affect the extent to which separation anxiety is experienced towards other family members. Hence, some families may be characterized by a separation anxious family climate, such that family members feel generally more separation anxious towards one another than in other families.

Taken together, these results indicate that, at least in the context of families with emerging adults, feelings of separation anxiety are determined by personality attributes, specific relationships and characteristics of the family as a whole. No partner effects were found, which means that feelings of separation anxiety are not affected by characteristics of a partner. These results are somewhat contrary to previous research, which indicated that maternal separation anxiety in infancy is determined by characteristics of the child, such as the child's temperament (Belsky & McBride, 1988).

In a final set of analyses, we explored whether the family dynamics that determine separation anxiety in family relationships are different in families where emerging adults coreside with the parents in comparison to families where emerging adults live away. A multigroup analysis revealed that the SRM components that contribute to the level of separation anxiety experienced in family relationships are not significantly different in families with coresiding emerging adults than in families where emerging adults live fully independently. This finding meshes with emerging evidence that dynamics of separation anxiety are still relevant even when the child has physically left the parental home. Kins et al. (2011), for instance, found that parental separation anxiety was related to psychologically controlling parenting and to subsequent disturbances in emerging adults' separation-individuation. This pattern of associations was not moderated by emerging adults' residential status, indicating that the intrapsychic and interpersonal ramifications of separation anxiety continue to exist after emerging adults have separated behaviorally from their parents.

By obtaining a clearer understanding of the different dynamics that contribute to separation anxiety in families of emerging adults, the results of the present study provide potentially valuable information for clinical practice. Previous research has indicated that parental separation anxiety has negative implications for the child's development towards more independent and mature-like functioning (Bartle-Haring et al., 2002; Hock et al., 2001; Kins et al., 2011) and for the child's general well-being (Soenens et al., 2006). As a result, high levels of separation anxiety in parent-child relationships may warrant therapeutic intervention. Given that different processes were found to influence separation

anxiety in family relationships, clinicians who work with emerging adults and their families should direct interventions at the individual, relational, and family level. Individual therapy sessions could for instance concentrate on the adjustment of the general internal working model that triggers feelings of separation anxiety when confronted with actual or anticipated loss. Additional collective therapy sessions could focus on tackling separation anxiety within the mother-child dyad and in the family as a whole. Although a certain degree of separation anxiety in close relationships is considered functional and normative (Bowlby, 1973), such feelings might become particularly problematic when they are expressed in a controlling and intrusive way as a means to keep the child within close physical and emotional proximity. Individuals that are by contrast more comfortable with the need for both closeness and distance in relationships with close others might be able to maintain intimate relationships in a more volitional way. They enjoy being there for others when needed and serve as a source of security. Although they too might experience and express feelings of separation anxiety, this sadness is not communicated in a compelling way as a means to force the other to stay within close boundaries. In their measure of separation anxiety in parents of adolescents — of which we used a selection of items in the present study — Hock et al. (2001) differentiated between these two aspects of parents' separation concerns; with Anxiety About Distancing (AAD) referring to the controlling and intrusive type of separation anxiety and Comfort with Secure Base Role (CSBR) to a more volitional and appropriate way to express feelings of separation anxiety.

Limitations

Although this study revealed several interesting findings about the different family dynamics that contribute to separation anxiety, some limitations should be noted. First, the present findings are based on a homogeneous sample of intact two-parent families with emerging adult children. Future studies should investigate whether the present findings can be generalized to different types of families than the nuclear family as well as to families with younger children. Furthermore, as this is a self-

selected sample, the levels of separation anxiety in family relationships may be relatively low. Hence, it remains to be examined whether our results can be replicated within a clinical context.

Second, findings of this study are based on a separation anxiety measure that was initially developed to measure parents' anxiety about their child's separation. Although we selected only the items that were appropriate to assess in a round-robin family design, future SRM family assessment using instruments that are more accustomed to measure separation anxiety within other family subsystems as well, could be warranted. It is for instance likely that the meaning of separation is different for children towards their parents and between spouses, with themes of jealousy probably being more salient in the latter relationship. As a result, other items might be needed in order to tap into separation anxiety within all the relationships embedded in the family. Future research is needed to replicate the current findings using alternative measures of separation anxiety.

Third, SRM analysis can be performed on families consisting of a minimum of three family members. However, the basic three-person SRM has some analytical limitations because there are insufficient degrees of freedom to estimate all SRM components (i.e., actor, partner, relationship, and family effects as well as individual and dyadic reciprocity correlations). To solve this problem, models can be simplified by dropping parameters that are believed to be unimportant (Cook, 1993). In the present study, we first ran the SRM without reciprocity correlations to find out whether any of the four systematic sources of variance could be dropped from the model. The small and nonsignificant partner effects could be dropped from the model without worsening model fit. By dropping these parameters, we were able to estimate the remaining SRM components without any problem. Hence, stipulating that some adjustments are made, the SRM can be used in family groups consisting of only three people. However, future research would do well to work with two-parent, two-child families. Not only does this resolve the problem of identification, but including another sibling in the dataset also allows for a more valid estimation of the family effect and for a comparison of horizontal (i.e., spouses and siblings) and vertical (i.e., parent-child) relationship within families.

Fourth, our study sample was relatively small to perform a multigroup comparison. Kashy and Kenny (1990) suggested that as few as 50 families are adequate for SRM analysis. By subdividing our total sample size into two smaller groups depending on the residential status of the emerging adult, one of our groups comprised a bit less than 50 families. The use of such small samples may have implications for the robustness of the estimated parameter solution. Future research, including larger groups, should indicate whether there are indeed no differences in the family dynamics that contribute to separation anxiety depending on the emerging adult's residential status.

Finally, studies in other countries than Belgium are warranted to further investigate the role of physical separation from the parents in psychological separation anxiety. Because Belgium is a small country everyone lives within relatively close distance from each other. As such, living away from the parents might still involve high levels of physical contact with the parents. Studies in larger countries, such as the U.S. and Canada—where moving out of the parental home implies a more substantial physical rupture from the parents—are needed before we can conclude that living away from the parental home does not alter the level of psychological separation anxiety and the variance-components of separation anxiety in the family relationships. Taking into account the broader socioeconomic context, it would also be interesting in future research to explore the impact of the current economic crisis in Westernized societies and the elongated period of emerging adulthood that goes with — in terms of putting off different developmental tasks (e.g., leaving the parental home, full-time employment, commitment to a steady partner relationship) — on the family dynamics of separation anxiety.

Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, the present study was the first to examine the concept of separation anxiety from a family dynamics perspective using an SRM approach. Although separation anxiety has been mainly investigated in infancy and within the mother-child dyad, analysis at the family level in families with emerging adults revealed that separation anxiety reflects a personality attribute of all family members as well as a characteristic of specific family relationships and the family as a whole.

The notion that separation anxiety would be particularly salient within the mother-child dyad did receive some support. Interestingly, separation-anxiety was also a unique component within marital relationships, particularly for fathers. As a result, clinical interventions in families with high levels of separation anxiety may want to focus on the individual, relationship, and family level.

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Table 1.

Reliabilities, Descriptives and Correlations of Separation Anxiety in the Six Dyads

	α	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. EA-Mother	.84	2.02	.48					
2. Mother-EA	.89	2.49	.61	.16				
3. EA-Father	.84	2.05	.47	.71***	.20*			
4. Father-EA	.86	2.40	.52	.14	.17	.35***		
5. Mother-Father	.83	3.05	.47	.08	.53***	.10	.26**	
6. Father-Mother	.85	3.02	.51	.02	.13	.13	.64***	.17

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 2.

Means and Standard Deviations of the Separation Anxiety Scores in Families where Emerging Adults Coreside with Parents versus Families where Emerging Adults Live Independently

Relationship	Coresiding		Independently		$F(1,117)$	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD		
EA-Mother	2.00	.48	2.06	.48	.32	.002
EA-Father	2.03	.46	2.10	.49	.67	.005
Mother-EA	2.58	.61	2.35	.60	4.05*	.034
Mother-Father	3.04	.48	3.05	.45	.00	.000
Father-EA	2.45	.53	2.33	.50	1.37	.013
Father-Mother	3.05	.46	2.97	.58	.57	.004

Note: * $p < .05$

Table 3.

Social Relations Model Unstandardized Variance Estimates for Separation Anxiety

Source of Variance	Family member					
	EA		Mother		Father	
	Variance	SE	Variance	SE	Variance	SE
Actor	.13***	.02	.11**	.04	.12***	.02
Partner	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Relationship with:						
EA			.17***	.05	.04	.02
Mother	.04*	.02			.05*	.02
Father	.02	.02	.03	.02		
Family	.03**	.01				

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

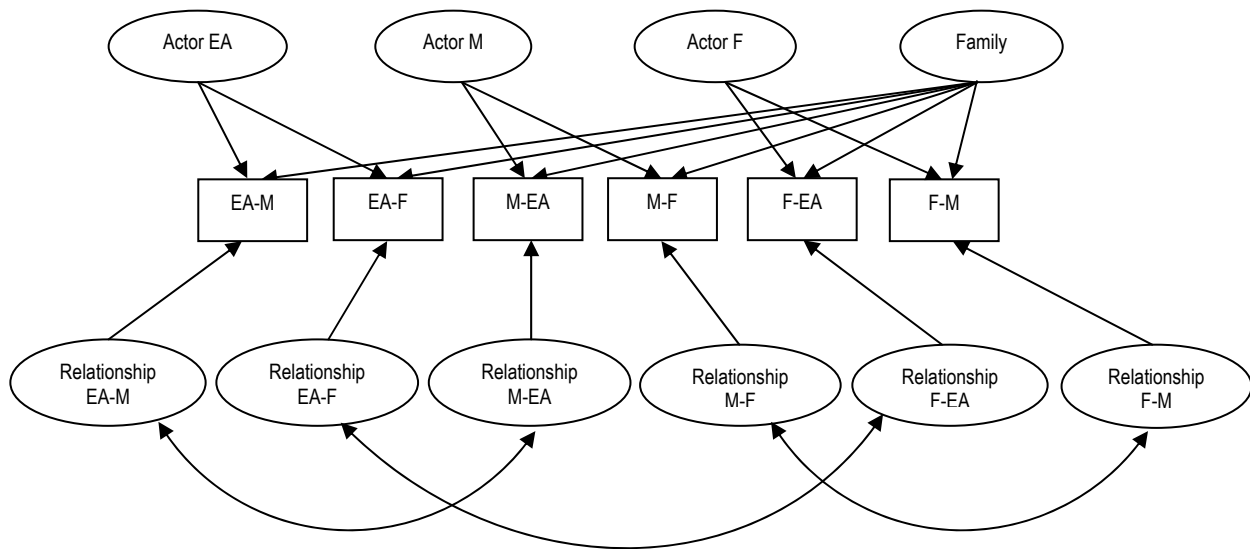


Figure 1. The Final SRM Model tested in Lisrel. EA = Emerging Adult; M = Mother; F = Father. Rectangles represent the observed measures (e.g., EA-M = separation anxiety the emerging adult experiences toward his/her mother); ellipses represent the latent Social Relations Model (SRM) components. Double-headed arrows represent dyadic reciprocity correlations. For reasons of clarity, the figure presents only one of the two indicators of the level of separation anxiety in a given family relationship; the other indicator (i.e., parcel) loads on the same latent factors in a similar matter.

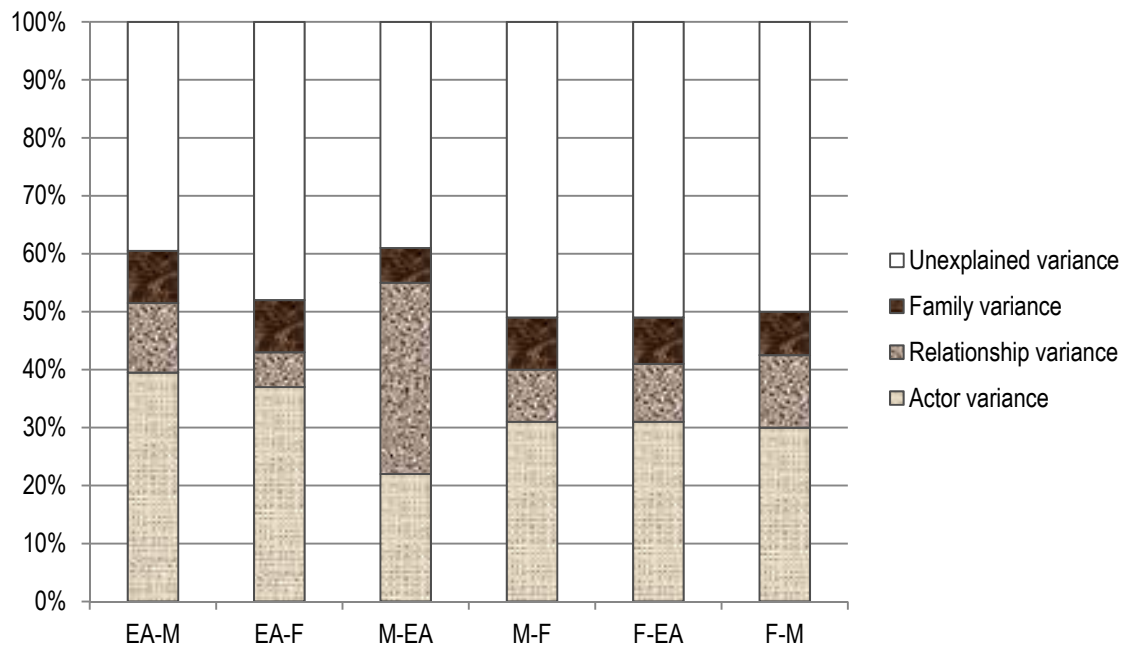


Figure 2. Percentage of Variance Explained by the Social Relations Model Components.
EA = Emerging Adult; M = Mother; F = Father

Appendix

Separation Anxiety Scale

1. *It hurts my feelings when my ... takes his/her problems to someone else instead of to me.*
2. *I feel most content when I know my ... is in the immediate surroundings.*
3. *I feel sad because my ... doesn't share as much as he/she used to with me.*
4. *It doesn't bother me if my ... keeps some secrets about himself/herself from me. (reverse coded)*
5. *I feel sad when I think that my ... does not seem to enjoy being with me as much anymore.*
6. *I get upset when my ... takes the advice of others more seriously than my advice.*
7. *I really miss holding and cuddling my ...*
8. *I feel resentful when my ... withdraws himself/herself instead of spending time with me.*
9. *I dread thinking about what my life will be after my ... would leave my life permanently.*
10. *I am the only one that is capable of keeping my... safe.*
11. *I sometimes feel left out because my ... has such close relationships with others.*
12. *I feel sad when I realize my ... no longer likes to do the things that we used to enjoy doing together.*
13. *I feel very hurt if my ... pulls away from me when I try to give him/her a hug.*
14. *I don't enjoy myself when I'm away from my ...*
15. *I would feel hurt if my ... doesn't come to me for comfort.*
16. *I feel empty inside when I think about my ... not being in my life anymore.*
17. *I would feel left out if my ... asked for advice from others.*

Note: Depending on the family dyad assessed (...) = my mother/father/son/daughter/partner