

Maternal Experience of the Separation-Individuation Process in Infants who Attended or Did Not Attend Daycare

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Abstract

This study investigated the maternal experience of the separation-individuation process in the first year of life. In particular, it aimed to investigate the particularities of this process when the infant attends or does not attend daycare, based on reports of the mothers. A multiple case study was conducted involving six mothers and their infants, among whom three attended daycare and three did not. The mothers were interviewed when their children were 6 and 12 months of age. The qualitative content analysis of the maternal reports revealed that the infants experienced the separation-individuation process, as described by Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975/1977), regardless of whether they attended daycare or not. The mothers reported differences in the feelings regarding their separation from the child, which revealed more suffering among those whose infants did not attend daycare. The results suggested that the separation-individuation process is an important intrapsychic phenomenon, both for the infant and for the mother, and was occurring as expected in the cases investigated, regardless of whether the infant attended daycare or not.

Keywords: Child daycare, separation-individuation process, emotional development.

A Vivência Materna do Processo de Separação-Individuação de Bebês que Frequentavam ou Não a Creche

Resumo

Este estudo investigou a vivência materna do processo de separação-individuação mãe-bebê no primeiro ano de vida. Em particular, buscou investigar, a partir do relato materno, as particularidades desse processo quando o bebê frequenta ou não a creche. Foi realizado um estudo de caso múltiplo envolvendo seis mães e seus bebês, entre os quais três frequentavam a creche e três não frequentavam. As mães foram entrevistadas no 6º e 12º mês de vida dos bebês. A análise de conteúdo qualitativa dos relatos maternos revelou que os bebês vivenciavam o processo de separação-individuação conforme preconizado por

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Mahler, Pine e Bergman (1975/1977), independentemente de frequentarem ou não a creche. Contudo, a análise apontou diferenças nos relatos das mães quanto aos seus sentimentos relacionados a se separar dos filhos, sendo que revelaram mais sofrimento entre aquelas cujos bebês não frequentavam a creche. Os resultados sugerem que o processo de separação-indivuação mãe-bebê se constituiu em um fenômeno intrapsíquico importante, tanto para o bebê como para a mãe, e foi ocorrendo como o esperado, entre os casos investigados, independentemente do bebê frequentar ou não a creche.

Palavras-chave: Creche, processo de separação-indivuação, desenvolvimento emocional.

La Experiencia Materna del Proceso de Separación-Individualización en Bebés que Asisten a lo Jardín Infantil o No

Resumen

Este estudio investigo la experiencia materna del proceso de separación-indivuação madre-hijo en el primer año de vida. En particular, se trató de investigar, desde la cuenta de la madre, las peculiaridades de este proceso cuando el bebé asiste a la guardería o no. Fue realizado un estudio de casos múltiples em que participan 6 madres y sus bebés, incluyendo 3 en guarderías y 3 no. Las madres fueron entrevistadas a los 6 y 12 meses de edad de los bebés. El análisis de contenido cualitativo de los informes maternos reveló que los bebés han demostrado que responden al proceso de separación-indivuação según lo recomendado por Mahler, Pine y Bergman (1975/1977), independentemente o no de asistir al jardín infantil. Sin embargo, el análisis mostró diferencias en las cuentas de las madres sobre sus sentimientos relacionados con separar a los niños, y reveló más sufrimiento entre aquellos cuyos bebés no estaban asistiendo al jardín infantil. Los resultados sugieren que el proceso de separación-indivuação se convirtió en un fenómeno intra-psíquico importante, tanto para el bebé como para la madre, y estaba sucediendo como era de esperar, entre los casos investigados, independentemente de el bebé asistir o no al jardín infantil.

Palabras clave: Jardín infantil, proceso de separación-indivuação, desarrollo emocional.

The separation-indivuação process (1st individuation) described by Mahler et al. (1975/1977) refers to an intrapsychic phenomenon that occurs between 4 and 36 months of the child's life and covers two aspects: separation, which refers to the child's exit from symbiotic fusion with the mother; and individuation, which implies psychic acquisitions that allow the child to assume its own characteristics. This process starts at the apex of the mother-infant symbiosis and is divided into four sub-phases: differentiation (4 to 9 months), practicing (10 to 16 months), rapprochement (17 to 24 months) and consolidation of the individuality (25 to 36 months). Considering the age of the infants followed in the present study (6 to 12 months), the first two sub-phases will be highlighted as the indicators of separation-indivuação.

The differentiation sub-phase begins around the fourth month of the infant's life, which becomes more alert during waking periods, allowing it to direct itself toward the outside world. This sub-phase is characterized by the decrease in the infant's dependence on the mother's body, which until then was total. The firmness of the trunk makes it possible for the infant to distance itself bodily from the mother and thus to recognize her tactically and visually as a partner in the symbiosis, and not as part of its body. According to Mahler et al. (1975/1977), the infant, when it admires the characteristics of its mother's face, begins to compare her with the faces of other adults. If the symbiosis occurs properly and the child develops the basic sense of confidence, it will show greater curiosity in the examination of strangers. Otherwise, the examination of other

adults can transform into acute anxiety with regard to strangers.

The second sub-phase, called practicing, starts when the infant is about 10 months of age and juxtaposes with the previous sub-phase. There is an expansion of the infant's motor capacities and, consequently, it increases the exploration of the environment around it. According to Mahler et al. (1975/1977), this sub-phase is characterized by the narcissistic involvement of the infant in its own abilities, in its body and in the investigation of the environment around it. This gives it what is called imperviousness to frustration, making it more tolerant of knocks, falls, and other frustrations it may suffer. Due to the narcissistic investment, the infant ventures further away from the mother and becomes engrossed in its activities for long period. However, from time to time, it returns to her to receive emotional replenishment, acquired through physical contact with the mother. Locomotion indicates the end of the rupture of the symbiotic mother-infant unit, established in the first months of life, which would represent the child's psychological birth. This refers to the infant's ability to become a separate person from the mother, by acquiring the start of the identity of the self (Mahler, 1979/1982).

It should be noted that separation-individuation is an important achievement in childhood development, however, it is related to the development of the mother herself. Becoming a mother also involves going through a process of separation-individuation, termed the third individuation (Colarusso, 1990), considered to be a continuous process of elaboration of the self and of differentiation from objects that occurs in adulthood. The young adult in the process of transition to the third individuation is considered to be intrapsychically alone, cut off from his/her childhood attachments, however, without having established a relationship of such intensity as a possible substitute for the infantile objects, such as the spouse and children. According to Colarusso (1990), from the development process, this normal isolation of the young adult that fills the void of the real or intrapsychic separation from the infantile objects is directed

towards the establishment of the parental role, that is constituted as the central question of the third individuation. As emphasized by Colarusso (1990), aspects of the process of infantile separation-individuation are re-edited at various points throughout the life cycle, such as in relation to one's parents in adolescence and early adulthood (Aslan, 2013; Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2011; Koepke & Denissen, 2012) and with the child at the moment that the parenthood is constituted (Bellini, 2008; Diamond, Heinicke, & Muntz, 1996).

It can be emphasized, therefore, that the separation-individuation process of the children described by Mahler et al. (1975/1977) has implications for the individuation of the parents themselves, and especially for the mother, who was also the focus of the present study. According to Colarusso (1990), there is a resignification of the relationship that the new parents established with their own parents, as well as the psychic return of the remnants of their infantile separation-individuation process. These aspects suggest that the mother-infant separation-individuation is complex, as it involves not only the infant's psychic world, but also that of its mother.

Resuming the aspects described by Mahler et al. (1975/1977), it is important to note that the separation-individuation process theory refers to the context of maternal care given to infants. The authors did not study other forms of care, especially daycare, in order to investigate possible particularities in the separation-individuation process associated with the fact that the infant remains away from the mother for many hours a day in an environment of collective care, performed by different educators.

In fact, national and international studies published on the subject between 2005 and 2017, based on the theory of Mahler et al. (1975/1977), are rare, according to a survey conducted in the SciELO, PsycINFO and PubMed databases. Some tend to focus on the transition to motherhood and fatherhood, concomitant with the second individuation, which occurs in adolescence; or associated with the third individuation, which requires a structured adult identity in order for

the woman and man to experience parenthood (Kins, Soenens, & Beyers, 2012; Koepke & Denissen, 2012; Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005). However, few investigated aspects of the first individuation (of the infant) and its concomitance with the third individuation (of the mother), in order to understand this mutual experience, the focus of the present study.

Studies are found among these that investigated the separation-individuation process, when the infant attended daycare. For example, a study by Bossi, Soares, Lopes, and Piccinini (2014) aimed to investigate the adaptation of 13 infants to daycare during the sub-phases of the separation-individuation process, namely differentiation (4 to 7 months), practicing (10 to 15 months) and rapprochement (19 to 21 months). Mothers and fathers of Porto Alegre (RS) responded to interviews about the period of adaptation of the infant to daycare. The data revealed that different reactions of the infants (crying, sickness, refusal to feed) and parental feelings (insecurity, distrust, calmness) were present in the three sub-phases investigated. Depending on the context, these reactions and feelings contributed as much to encourage, as to hinder or prevent the infant from adapting to the daycare. The results revealed that, regardless of the sub-phase investigated, the safer and more satisfied the parents were about the adjustment, the more they were able to offer emotional support to the infant. This made it possible, in a certain way, for the daycare to become a reference for the child and allowed the continuation of its separation-individuation process, even far from the mother.

Bellini (2008) also investigated the maternal experience of the separation-individuation process, accompanying four mothers from Porto Alegre (RS), from the first year of life until before the infant entered early childhood education in the second year of life. The results revealed that until the end of the infant's first year, the mothers expressed a desire to return to their own independent space, as if the growing individuation of the infant impelled the mother to rescue her individuality. This even allowed the moth-

ers to take the decision to place the infants into daycare.

In this way, it can be emphasized that, throughout the development process, both the infants and the mothers themselves acquire the psychic capacity to separate and individuate. This is also highlighted in the study by Lopes et al. (2007), which aimed to investigate maternal feelings regarding the development of the children, especially the new infantile acquisitions at 12 months of age. The 28 mothers who were interviewed revealed that, as the infants developed in their independence, they also wanted their children to be freer and they stimulated their withdrawal behaviors. This shows an infant seeking its individuation with respect to the mother, and a mother who encourages this movement on her part.

It should also be mentioned that the growing demand for daycare places the importance of investigating aspects related to the separation-individuation process in this context. According to the School census of fundamental education (*Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira* [INEP], 2014), between 2007 and 2013, there was an increase in the number of enrollments in daycare centers in Brazil of around 42%. According to the Observatory of the National Education Plan - PNE (2016), 29.6% of children aged 0-3 years were enrolled in nurseries in 2014. The goal is that, by the year 2024, 50% of the children in this age group will have access to early childhood education.

Considering the above, the aim of this study was to investigate the maternal experience of the mother-infant separation-individuation process in the first year of life. In particular, it was sought to investigate, from the maternal report, the possible particularities of this process when the infant attends the daycare or not.

Method

Participants

The study included three mother-infant dyads whose infants attended fulltime daycare

(eight to ten hours a day) and three mother-infant dyads whose infants did not attend daycare and were mainly cared for by the mother. At the beginning of the study, the infants were 6 months of age and, at the end, 12 months, a period corresponding to the sub-phases of differentiation and practicing of the separation-individuation process (Mahler et al., 1975/1977). The mothers (26 to 41 years of age) had incomplete higher education to graduate education, were primiparous and lived with the fathers of the infants. The daycare attended by three of the infants was for employees of a federal university, and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale -ITERS-R (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2003) evaluated it as “good”, indicating that it provides what is expected for the development of the child.

The participating dyads were selected among the members of the project “Impact of daycare on childhood socio-emotional and cognitive development: longitudinal study from the sixth month of life of the infant to the end of the preschool years – CRESCI” (Piccinini, Becker, Martins, Lopes, & Sperb, 2011), the aim of which was to investigate the impact of daycare on the social-emotional and cognitive development of children from their sixth month until the end of the preschool years. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul - UFRGS and the participants signed the consent form. For the purposes of the present study, the first six dyads interviewed by the first author of this article were selected from the CRESCI Project.

Design, Procedure and Instruments

The longitudinal, multiple case study (Stake, 2006) design was used to investigate the maternal experience of the mother-infant separation-individuation process in the first year of life and the particularities of this process when the infant attended daycare or not. For the purposes of this study, the two initial phases of data collection of the CRESCI Project were considered, at 6 and 12 months of age of the infants. Several data collection instruments were used in each phase,

however, only those that were used to respond to the aims of the present study will be highlighted here.

Following the steps of the CRESCI Project, the mothers were contacted via telephone and/or e-mail and were invited to participate in the study. A first meeting was scheduled for the signing of the consent form by the mother and the completion of the Family Demographic Data Sheet (*Núcleo de Infância e Família/Projeto CRESCI [NUDIF/CRESCI]*, 2011a). This is a structured form composed of questions related to the demographic data of the mother and father of the infant, such as age and schooling, among others; as well as to the infant, such as gestational age at birth and birth weight.

Next, a second meeting was held to respond to two interviews: Interview on the experience of maternity - 6th month (NUDIF/CRESCI, 2011b): composed of blocks of questions that address, for example, the experience of motherhood and the decision to place the infant in daycare (e.g., How are you feeling as a mother? Why did you choose to put (or not) the infant into daycare?); and the Interview on the moments of mother-infant separation – 6th month (NUDIF/CRESCI, 2011c): composed of blocks of questions that address the experiences of separation between the mother and the infant at 6 months, based on the concepts of Mahler et al. (1975/1977; e.g. How is it for you to leave him/her with other people? How does the infant react in these moments of separation? How do you feel and respond?). For the mothers whose infants attended daycare, the Interview on the adaptation of the infant to daycare was carried out (NUDIF/CRESCI, 2011d), one month after entering the daycare, which is composed of blocks of questions that investigate the adaptation period and its effects on the infant and on the family (ex. How were the infant’s first days in the daycare? How was the adaptation? How has he/she interacted with you after entering the daycare?).

In the next phase, at 12 months of age of the infants, the mothers responded to adapted versions of the two interviews applied in the previous phase (NUDIF/CRESCI, 2011e, 2011f). All the interviews were structured, applied in a

semi-directed way, individually, in the place of preference of the participants. They had an average duration of 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed.

Results

The data were submitted to qualitative content analysis (Laville & Dionne, 1999) with the aim of investigating: (1) the maternal experience of the mother-infant separation-individuation process in the first year of life; and, (2) the particularities of this process when the infant attends daycare or not. Two categories of analysis were considered that represent the sub-phases of the separation-individuation process (Mahler et al., 1975/1977): (a) Separation-individuation and sub-phase of differentiation (6th month), which refers to the first sub-phase; and, (b) Separation-individuation and sub-phase of practicing (12th month), which refers to the second sub-phase. In each category, the reports of the experience of motherhood and aspects related to the emotional development of the infants in each age group were highlighted. For the three infants attending daycare, the adaptation and experience in the nursery were also examined. The following are the main findings of the three cases of the infants attending daycare, followed by the three cases of the infants who did not attend daycare. The names used to represent the mothers and infants are fictitious.

Case 1: Martha (mother) and Vinicius (attending daycare)

Separation-individuation and differentiation sub-phase (6th month). In relation to the experience of motherhood, Martha defined herself as an “attentive”, “responsible”, “loving” mother who stimulated the independence of her son. She further emphasized that becoming a mother gave her “a greater goal in life”. Another aspect highlighted was the fact that she enjoyed being with her son and seeing the progress of his development, however, also wanted to resume her work routine: “While I enjoy being with him, I also miss work”. Regarding the child’s emotional development, Martha emphasized her

perception that Vinicius was able to express satisfaction when playing games and dissatisfaction when he realized that he was not receiving attention from his mother: “*He does not like it when he goes too long without attention, . . . he starts to make a serious face and kick his legs*”. She also mentioned that she perceived Vinicius as very curious, since he interacted with what was within his reach. Regarding the adaptation to the nursery, Martha pointed out that she did not feel guilty about putting her child in daycare, since she knew that in this context he would be cared for and stimulated in his development: “*I do not feel guilty . . . because I think it’s going to be a good environment for him*”. She pointed out that the management of the educators during the adaptation allowed her to perceive, in Vinicius, no marked behaviors of estrangement. Thus, Martha was available in the nursery during the adaptation period, however, did not need to be called: “*They [the educators] are not agitated, they talk in their language, they play games, and that helped the process a lot*”. She pointed out that after a month in the daycare, she realized that her son was well-adapted. This was identified through behaviors such as going to the educators’ lap when they arrived at the nursery and not being anxious to leave when Martha came to pick him up.

Separation-individuation and practicing sub-phase (12th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Martha defined herself as a mother concerned with her son’s safety and development, however at the same time “light”, in the sense of not worrying too much when he became ill or challenged her at times when she said “no”. The moments of reaction of Vinicius to the “no” were emphasized by Martha as a challenge to her maternity, since it placed her in the position of needing to impose limits on her son, without intimidating him:

So the mother has the patience and guidance to say no so that the child learns to have a limit without being afraid. I think one of the most difficult things of being a mother is knowing how to guide the child.

Concerning her son’s emotional development, Martha mentioned that she thought Vini-

cius was more dependent on her than at 6 months of age, because he constantly demanded attention. She highlighted the expectation that developments in locomotion and eating would make the child less demanding of her. However, when asked if he performed activities without needing help (e.g. picking up his favorite toy), Martha mentioned a positive response and emphasized her son's pleasure in performing such activities: *"He can take, for example, a book or a piece of his clothing and he looks very satisfied"*. She also mentioned Vinicius's behavior when encountering strange people or places and highlighted his ability to explore, although he perceived them in a more *"shy and reserved"* way. With regard to the occasional small frustrations that Vinicius suffered in exploring the environment (e.g. a fall), Martha pointed out that he tended to express displeasure, however, was easily calmed and continued in his exploration. In relation to playing, Martha pointed out that she sometimes noticed that Vinicius needed to return to her, either to encounter her or to play with a toy: *"He returns, sees where we are. Sometimes he picks up and gives us a toy, so we have to play with him"*. Referring to the experience of the infant in the daycare, Martha pointed out that Vinicius spent about 10 hours a day at the nursery, four days a week. She evaluated the school that her son attended in a positive way, emphasizing the good care given to the children. In addition, she highlighted the adequate communication established with the educators, in order to receive information about the child's day with them: *"I talk there with them, we go there and ask how his eating was, how the day went"*.

The joint analysis of the maternal reports indicates the experience of motherhood marked by the pleasure of being with the child and, at the same time, the desire to return to work, which created the need for greater distance between mother and infant. During the period investigated, Martha began to face other concerns, stimulated by the child's own development, such as the need to impose limits. The reports related to the child indicate behaviors that signify the maternal perception of a satisfactory experience of the separation-individuation process in the first

year of life, such as the curiosity to explore the surrounding environment, pleasure in carrying out activities more independently and tolerance of small frustrations throughout the development process. Finally, with regard to the entrance and experience of Vinicius in the nursery, reports predominated that emphasized this environment as suitable for the child and the good communication with the educators. This seemed to contribute to the satisfactory experience of the mother and the child with the daycare.

Case 2: Lygia (mother) and Erico (attending daycare)

Separation-individuation and differentiation sub-phase (6th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Lygia mentioned that she did not imagine that this experience would be so satisfying and reported that she was feeling *"completely fulfilled"*. She defined herself as a *"very good"* mother and highlighted the positive relationship with her own mother: *"My mother has already passed on so many good things for us, she bought up us so well. So I wanted to pass this on too"*. With regard to her son's emotional development, Lygia highlighted his personal aspects, perceived by her, that presented themselves as favorable to the satisfactory relationship between mother and infant, as he was calm, smiling, and interacted with his parents. It was also highlighted that Erico had already responded when called by name and that, a few days previously, he had begun to sit without support. With respect to the behavior faced with strange places and people, Lygia emphasized the perception that her son did not show concern, but that he would observe the environment and, later, continue with his pattern of interaction: *"He does not get worried, but keeps looking at everything, looking to recognize the environment, then acts normal"*. Regarding the child's adaptation to the daycare, Lygia mentioned that she felt a *"tightness in the chest"* because she did not know how he would react in the early days. Nevertheless, the adaptation of Erico took place through fewer hours in the first moments and Lygia had to be available in the nursery only on the first day. This adaptation, which occurred during the first

month in the institution, was perceived by Lygia as satisfactory, since Erico showed happiness when he was taken to the daycare: *"I'll go to the school to get him today and he'll make a party, he'll shake his feet, he'll shake his hands and we'll leave"*.

Separation-individuation and practicing sub-phase (12th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Lygia emphasized that the way she perceived the appropriate development of her child for his age was something that indicated that she could satisfactorily perform the maternal role: *"Oh, I think I try to do what I can, I think I'm doing well, even for his development. We have a feedback, seeing that he is well"*. Regarding the emotional development of her son, Lygia emphasized that she perceived more independent behaviors on his part, and defined him as *"mischievous at home"*. She mentioned that Erico showed pleasure in the activities that he performed independently and that she stimulated him in his achievements. Regarding the possible small frustrations that her son suffered when exploring the environment, Lygia emphasized that she noticed him manifesting displeasure when he wanted something that he could not take. However, when he suffered a fall during the exploration of the environment, he ignored this and continued playing: *"He often ignores [the falls], sometimes I even think 'my God, he's going to cry!', But no! He carries on"*. Lygia further emphasized that while playing, Erico sometimes needed to return to her to show some object and establish interaction. Regarding her experience of her son's in the daycare, Lygia reported that Erico spent about eight hours and 30 minutes a day at the nursery for five days a week. She mentioned that she perceived the daycare as important for her son's development, especially for his socialization. According to Lygia, the relationship with adults and children, as well as the imitation of other older children, allowed Erico to develop new skills:

This socialization helps a lot, I think the contact they have is very important . . . Now at mealtimes, they are already giving them the cutlery, and seeing other children, who are a little older than him, he does this too.

Lygia evaluated the daycare in a positive way and emphasized how well her child was cared for in this context: *"Wow, its very good. We see that they [educators] take great care at all times, at mealtime, when playing, so I'm very satisfied"*. She also stressed the good communication between her and the educators, in order to receive information about her son's day: *"Every time I get there, at the end of the day, to get Erico, they always tell me what he did during the day, how the meals went, if he cried a little bit"*.

The joint analysis of the reports indicates the experience of the maternity marked by personal fulfillment and the identification of Lygia with her own mother. Throughout the period investigated, she came to realize her competence as a mother from the achievements of the child in his process of development. The reports associated with the child indicate the maternal perception of a satisfactory experience of the separation-individuation process, which could be identified through the behavior of Erico, such as observation of strange environments and subsequent interaction, and greater independence in the first year of life. Finally, in relation to the child's entrance and experience in the daycare, the reports highlighted the perception of Erico's rapid adaptation and gains in terms of development, such as socialization.

Case 3: Ruth (mother) and Clarice (attending daycare)

Separation-individuation and differentiation sub-phase (6th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Ruth described being a mother as *"wonderful"* and stressed that she did not imagine the intensity of mutual love between mother and daughter. In the same way, she reported that all the investment she gave to Clarice made her physically tired, however, this was not a difficulty in the motherhood: *"I'm having a lot of work. And sometimes it causes physical tiredness. But its no difficulty, nothing that I can't handle"*. Regarding her daughter's emotional development, Ruth emphasized the good relationship between parent-infant and her perception that Clarice already differentiated between each of her parents: *"And we have the*

impression that she already knows who is who . . . when she says 'papa' she already knows this is the father and when she says 'mama' that this is the mother". She also reported that her daughter was more bodily firm to sit alone and that this contributed, in her understanding, to a greater interaction with the objects within her reach. With respect to her daughter's adjustment to the daycare, Ruth pointed out that this was the "normal course of things", and there was no adverse feeling related to the decision to put her daughter into early childhood education. The adaptation of Clarice was considered satisfactory and happened during the first month in the daycare. The adaptation took place gradually and with fewer hours in the first weeks. Ruth realized that her daughter felt good in the daycare, with the educators being very affectionate and attentive: "I liked that she adapted well, that she felt good there, I felt this. I liked the teachers, who were very attentive".

Separation-individuation and practicing sub-phase (12th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Ruth defined herself as a "devoted" and "affectionate" mother, as well as being "proud" and "in love" with her daughter. She also stressed that she felt secure regarding motherhood, since she had not yet resumed her intense study routine in order to spend more time with her daughter: "I'm feeling good because I have not yet started a study routine. I studied a lot before I got pregnant, and I stopped totally to dedicate myself to Clarice". Regarding her daughter's emotional development, she pointed out that she did not perceive Clarice as more independent, since she needed her parents' presence while playing, and also because she was still breastfeeding. Despite this, Ruth emphasized more independent behaviors on her part: "I think she gets some food, she drinks water, that's right, she gets the cup and drinks". She also mentioned that she perceived that her daughter showed pleasure in the tasks she performed independently, in addition to her growing ability to explore objects and people. Regarding the occasional little frustrations that Clarice suffered when exploring the environment (e.g. falls, not being able to get what she wanted), generally,

she perceived that she ignored this, however, she protested when this involved toys: "In the case of walking, she ignores it. In the case of playing, for example, she fits the lid onto the box, then she can't open it again, she becomes angry, she protests". Ruth also realized that the daughter needed to return to her, while playing, to establish some interaction. Referring to the experience of her daughter in the daycare, Ruth reported that Clarice spent about nine hours a day in the daycare five days a week. She emphasized skills acquired by her daughter, such as the greater facility to learn, and attributed them to the daycare experience. Ruth evaluated the school that Clarice attended positively and highlighted it as being a "top grade" nursery. She mentioned characteristics of the educators, such as being "attentive", and the structure of the nursery, such as having an appropriate number of adults for the children (one adult for every four children): "I think the teachers are very attentive . . . that there are enough of them for the number of children". Ruth emphasized the good communication with the educators regarding Clarice's day with them. For Ruth, this aspect showed that her daughter was considered in her singularities, and not as just another child.

The joint analysis of the reports indicates the experience of motherhood marked by the dedication to her daughter and by the mutual love between the two. Throughout the investigation period, this dedication was maintained and the mother postponed her return to her personal routine of studies. The reports associated with the infant denoted the mother's perception that the separation-individuation process was as expected, marked by Clarice's behaviors, such as differentiating mother and father and showing pleasure in the activities she performed independently. Regarding the adaptation and experience of the daycare, the reports highlighted the well-being of the mother and the daughter in relation to the daycare during the period investigated.

Case 4: Maria Clara (mother) and Cecilia (not attending daycare)

Separation-individuation and differentiation sub-phase (6th month). Regarding the

experience of motherhood, Maria Clara defined herself as “crazy” because she was dedicating herself exclusively to the care of her daughter. She mentioned that she tried to resume work and leave Cecilia with the father, however, she could not stay apart from her daughter, so she chose to stop working: “*I tried to go back to work soon after she stopped breastfeeding, but then I couldn’t stay away all day*”. Regarding her daughter’s emotional development, Maria Clara emphasized that she was quite determined in the things she wanted. She also mentioned that Cecilia was not usually worried about strangers and established a good interaction: “*She is not much of a worrier, you saw that she was very calm with you*”. Maria Clara reported that Cecilia was more firm to sit, which, according to her understanding, enabled her to establish more interactions with surrounding objects.

Separation-individuation and practicing sub-phase (12th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Maria Clara reported that about a month before she had returned to work, with this aspect being perceived as positive for the motherhood: “*Now that I’m working, I’m feeling great. I see that I have more patience, I have more desire to do things than when I just stayed at home*”. Maria Clara worked during the morning, therefore Cecilia was taken care of by a great-aunt with whom she would already spend lots of time. Regarding the emotional development of her daughter, she reported that Cecilia was walking and, with this, she perceived her developing a greater capacity for interaction with the toys. She also stressed that, at 12 months, her daughter asked for her more frequently, which made her perceive her as more dependent: “*She’s more dependent. She calls me 24 hours a day*”. However, she mentioned her daughter’s ability to perform activities without needing help and the pleasure she showed in accomplishing such things. Maria Clara also mentioned the need for Cecilia to come to her and maintain physical contact between one game and another, as well as the ability to calm herself easily when faced with occasional and minor frustrations when exploring the environment: “*She makes a drama, . . . after five seconds it ends*”.

The joint analysis of the reports indicates the maternal imperative of being the exclusive caregiver for the daughter in the first months of life. However, during the period investigated Maria Clara realized the personal need to return to work and allow others to take care of Cecilia. The reports associated with the daughter denoted the maternal perception of a satisfactory experience of the separation-individuation process, demonstrated through behaviors such as the exploration of the surrounding environment and those of returning to the mother in order to resupply herself emotionally.

Case 5: Lya (mother) and Fabricio (not attending daycare)

Separation-individuation and differentiation sub-phase (6th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Lya mentioned that she considered herself a good mother, since she was “caring”, “calm” and “playful”. She also reported that she had not imagined that she would want so much to stay home to take care of her son, and that she was having difficulty returning to work: “*I did not think I would like staying home so much . . . And now it’s getting harder for me to go back to work*”. With respect to her son’s emotional development, Lya emphasized aspects of Fabricio’s development, such as already sitting with support and, consequently, showing more interest in exploring the objects around him. In the same way, she highlighted his characteristics that contributed, in her perception, to a good mother-child relationship: “*He is a very quiet calm, smiling a lot, very playful*”.

Separation-individuation and practicing sub-phase (12th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Lya defined herself as a caring, loving, non-permissive mother. She reported that she was “calm” in relation to motherhood and that she had the help of the family so she could gradually increase her working hours: “*I’m very calm. Now I’m working a little harder than I worked before, but I’m able to stay with him, organize the schedules, I have lots of help from the family*”. Regarding the emotional development of her son, she noticed that Fabricio already showed discontent at moments when he

was annoyed, signaling what pleased and displeased him. She also realized that at 12 months, her son behaved more independently, since he could do certain activities without help. However, she stressed that, although more independent, Fabricio needed to return to her, between one game and another, to maintain physical contact, before structuring a new exploration activity. Regarding the occasional small frustrations her son experienced in exploring the environment (e.g., a fall), Lya realized that he initially reacted, however, calmed himself down when distracted by some other activity: *“But it’s fast, and he calms himself down. We get distracted by something else, he usually calms down quickly”*.

The joint analysis of the reports indicates the maternal satisfaction faced with the care of the child and difficulties returning to the work routine. During the period investigated, Lya allowed herself to increase working hours by receiving help from the family in Fabricio’s care. The reports associated with the son denoted aspects that contributed to the perception of the good mother-infant relationship, such as him being calm and smiling a lot. They also indicated her understanding of the satisfactory evolution of the separation-individuation process, through Fabricio’s behaviors, such as signaling what pleased him or not and the more independent attitudes.

Case 6: Adelia (mother) and Caio (not attending daycare)

Separation-individuation and differentiation sub-phase (6th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Adelia reported that, in addition to being a *“loving”* mother, she was very *“jealous”* of her child with other people: *“I thought I was going to be a loving mother, now I see I am a loving mother, but jealous, you know?”*. She also stressed that for a long time, she wanted to be a *“super mother”*, but with the birth of her son, she wanted to be simply *“a good mother”*. Regarding her son’s emotional development, she reported that at 6 months, she realized that Caio was calmer than in the previous months, when he had presented intense and prolonged crying reactions throughout the day:

“So it was exhausting [the son’s crying in the early months], but now this already passed, he’s calmer”. She also emphasized that the child was already firmer to sit, which allowed more interaction with what was within reach.

Separation-individuation and practicing sub-phase (12th month). Regarding the experience of motherhood, Adelia emphasized that she perceived herself as a *“less jealous”* mother than when he was six months of age. In addition, she mentioned some difficulties in relation to motherhood, especially with regard to her own appearance:

I think I don’t take care of myself and I’m in a moment that I’m not exercising, anyway, I do not do my nails anymore, I do not have that habit anymore. But now there’s a time coming that I think I will have to start doing it again.

With this, she reported that sometimes she felt *“overloaded”*, since she assumed many responsibilities faced with the care of Caio, although her husband also took care of the child. Regarding the son’s emotional development, Adelia emphasized that he had started walking, and in this way, in her perception, he had acquired a greater capacity to explore the environment. In the same way, he already demonstrated more intensely what displeased him when having *“a little tantrum”* and *“throwing himself on the ground”*. Faced with the occasional small frustrations that occurred during the exploration of the environment (e.g. a fall), Adelia emphasized differences in Caio’s reactions when he was with her or with his father. She reported that in her presence, she felt that her son tended to cry more than when he was with his father. In the same way, she reported that she perceived that he was more independent in relation to his father, but not in relation to her. Adelia mentioned her concern about this behavior, however, she emphasized that she thought that this referred to her and not necessarily to her son, which indicated her need to individuate herself from Caio: *“I feel worried. But what I mean is, I think maybe, it’s a lot to do with me. I need to start separating myself from him, right?”*. However, she mentioned her son’s ability to perform activities without needing help

and the pleasure he showed in accomplishing such achievements. When asked if Caio needed to return to her between games, Adelia responded affirmatively and reported that this behavior was frequent: *“He comes and gives me something. Now he’s very fond of giving hugs”*.

The joint analysis of the reports indicates the experience of motherhood marked by jealousy of the child and by a reduction of expectations regarding the maternal role. However, at the end of the period investigated, Adelia was less jealous about her son and more interested in taking care of her own appearance. The reports associated with the child denoted the maternal perception of the expected experience of the separation-individuation process in the first year of life. Caio, according to the maternal report, already identified the mother and father and had different behaviors in the presence of one or other parent. This made Adelia more aware of the need for individuation between mother and child.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the maternal experience of the mother-infant separation-individuation process in the first year of life. In particular, it was sought to investigate, from maternal reports, the particularities of this process when the infant attends daycare or not. Regarding the infant, the maternal perception regarding the first individuation was investigated (Mahler et al., 1975/1977), which begins around 4 months and consolidates around 36 months. Regarding the mother, the maternal perception regarding the third individuation was investigated (Colarusso, 1990), which occurs in adults and involves parenthood. For this reason, throughout the text, it is referred to as the mother-infant separation-individuation process, as it occurs concomitantly for the dyad and is mutually influenced.

The results of the present study revealed that, regardless of whether or not the infants attended daycare, the mothers reported a positive experience of motherhood at 6 months of age of the children, despite the difficulties experi-

enced, such as the exhausting routine that caring for an infant imposes. The maternal reports also suggest that the mothers and children had established a strong bond of basic trust (Erikson, 1968/1972), which may have contributed to the infants entering the differentiation sub-phase of the separation-individuation process (Mahler et al., 1975/1977).

Some of the infants started attending daycare in the 6th month of life and the mothers reported that these infants presented good adaptation, based on the respect for the characteristics of the infants and the affective relationship with the educators. As they attended the same daycare, the period of adaptation was similarly organized, with schedules that increased gradually over the days and with the mother present in the nursery to attend to possible requests. The mothers emphasized their understanding that the adaptation occurred quickly during the first month of attendance at the institution. It is plausible to assume that the dynamics and structure of the nursery facilitated the adaptation and the presence of a reference figure for the infant may have contributed to the confidence in the new environment. This seemed to allow a less traumatic separation from the mother (Mahler et al., 1975/1977) and, in a way, made it possible for the educators to progressively become affective figures for the infant. This aspect was also highlighted in the study by Bossi et al. (2014) where it was found that, regardless of the age of entry into daycare, the adaptation was facilitated when there was a reference figure for the child. This would preferably be the parent who was more confident regarding the adaptation of the infant and could serve as an emotional support for it.

In a way, it can be said that the infants’ entry into daycare was an external factor that encouraged the mothers and children to separate and individuate themselves. In general, the mothers did not report difficulties on the part of the infant in adjusting to the daycare. On the part of the mothers, there were also no reports that denoted great suffering faced with the daily separations. The dynamics and quality of care in the nursery contributed to this, which was highlighted in the maternal reports as very good.

For the mothers who did not put the infants in the nursery, some difficulties were reported. The separation-individuation process seems to have accompanied the development of the infant and the mother herself, so that the spontaneous reports of the participants suggested that they did not perceive in their children and in themselves the ability to separate from one another, which refers to the dependence of the infant in relation to the mother/caregiver at 6 months of age.

Despite this, regardless of whether or not they attended daycare, the maternal reports of their infants' behaviors in everyday situations indicated the perception of a satisfactory experience of the separation-individuation process. The development of the infant contributes to this, as it becomes progressively more alert during the waking periods. Also, the acquisition of the developing motor skills, such as sitting, allows the infant to have a broader view of the environment, which increases its interest in new discoveries (Mahler et al., 1975/1977). This blossoming experience allows the child to direct its interest toward objects and to advance in its attempts at separation-individuation.

At 12 months, the reports of the mothers also highlighted a positive experience of motherhood, despite some difficulties related to the constant demands of the children who were venturing into the exploration of the environment. Thus, it was observed that the infants presented, according to the maternal perception, more independent behaviors in relation to the mother, however, this did not mean that they did not need her presence and help to continue their explorations. The same was described in the study by Lopes et al. (2007) in which the mothers emphasized the more active and independent behavior of their children, propitiated by the development of their motor skills, as well as mentioning the greater need for the attention, presence and physical proximity of the mother. These characteristics highlighted by the participants of the present study refer to the achievements acquired during the differentiation sub-phase, already mentioned above. As soon as the infant individualizes itself enough to recognize the mother's face, and as it gains confidence in the provision of maternal

emotional, it turns to the exploration of the external world with greater interest, due to trusting that whenever it needs to return the mother will be available to attend to it (Mahler et al., 1975/1977).

The reports of the mothers concerning their children indicate the maternal perception that they experienced the practicing sub-phase of the separation-individuation process in the expected way, regardless of whether the infant attend daycare or not. The ability to move by crawling, dragging itself or walking allowed the infant to explore a much larger environment than it was able to do in the previous months. In this way, the participants emphasized that the children showed pleasure in the activities and discoveries that they realized without the help of the mother. However, the moments of apparently forgetting the mother were momentary, so that the infants needed to share their achievements from time to time, going to the mothers to maintain physical contact before beginning new exploitative behavior. Mahler et al. (1975/1977) pointed out that such behavior would be associated with the need for emotional replenishment on the part of the infant. This allows it to confirm that the mother remains ready to meet its needs, which indicates that it can explore a world farther away from her, without losing her. The ability of the infants to tolerate minor frustrations was emphasized by the participants, which indicated the maternal perception that they were narcissistically focused on dominating their motor skills and exploration. Mahler et al. (1975/1977) mentioned that this narcissistic involvement allows the infant to develop imperviousness to frustration, making it more tolerant of knocks, falls, or other small frustrations that it may suffer, which drives it to explore the surrounding environment.

Thus, although three infants in this study had already been attending daycare for six months while the others were being cared for at home, the mothers did not report many differences in the development of their children in the practicing sub-phase. This suggests that the separation-individuation process can occur in an apparently satisfactory manner, even in daycare contexts, which extends the initial hypothesis of Mahler et

al. (1975/1977), who stated that the separation-individuation process occurs with the presence and emotional availability of the mother. This suggests that the care provided in the nursery attended by these infants may have enabled the holding (Winnicott, 1965/1993) and the support necessary for the separation-individuation process to continue to take place adequately, even with the infant being distant from the mother.

Regarding the mothers themselves, the results of the present study also support what Colarusso (1990) had already mentioned and which has been highlighted in other studies (Bellini, 2008; Diamond et al., 1996), noting that the separation-individuation process of the infant occurs concurrently with a process correlated with the mother. When they perceived the development and individuation of the children, the mothers also wanted to individuate themselves, to return to a structured life beyond the care given to the children. The present study corroborates, to some extent, the results of Bellini's work (2008), which showed that during the infant's first two years the mother expresses a desire to return to a more individualized psychic space in relation to the child. In the study by Lopes et al. (2007), it was possible to observe something similar, since, as the infants demonstrated greater independence, the mothers tended to encourage these moments of withdrawal of the infant.

In the present study, the separation-individuation process of the infant, associated with the individuation of the mother, presented some particularities among the mothers who had an intense routine of daily work and had placed the child in daycare from the age of 6 months. In this context, the individuation of the mother in relation to her infant appeared to be influenced by an external agent, which was the return to work and the entry of the infant into the nursery. However, the fact that the infants attended daycare did not appear to exert a negative influence on the separation-individuation process. Aspects related to the mother-infant affective bond, as well as the characteristics of the daycare and the educators, highlighted as very affective by the participating

mothers, may have contributed in this sense. Respect for the particularities of the infants, as mentioned by the mothers, may have allowed the educators to become a reference for them, which in a way may have facilitated the continuation of the separation-individuation process. Likewise, the presence of a mother-child affective bond tended to allow, even considering the limits of time available for contact with the mother, the emotional replenishment necessary for the infant to satisfactorily continue its development.

Finally, some theoretical and methodological limitations of the present study should be highlighted. For example, the categories investigated regarding the separation-individuation process (Mahler et al., 1975/1977) were accessed from the maternal reports obtained in interviews subject to the limitations inherent in this instrument, particularly when investigating concepts with conscious and unconscious dimensions. Mahler et al. (1975/1977) also worked through means of interviews with mothers, however, she also resorted to extensive hours of weekly observations of the mother-infant interaction. Thus, it is suggested that future studies on this subject should also use observations. In addition, it is suggested to investigate the other sub-phases of the separation-individuation process, not covered in the present study, in order to understand whether the entry into daycare would bring particularities at the time of rapprochement (3rd sub-phase; 17 to 24 months) and consolidation of individuality (4th sub-phase; 25 to 36 months).

In spite of these possible limitations, it is important to emphasize that the present study provides contributions to this area, by involving two distinct contexts for the development of the infant (daycare or non-daycare), investigated longitudinally in the first year of life. This amplifies the findings of the literature, considering the context of daycare permeating the mother-infant separation-individuation process, which was not emphasized originally by the theory of Mahler et al. (1975/1977). The results did not reveal any obstacles to this process, associated with the entrance or not into daycare, with this suggesting the importance of the role

of the educators as facilitators of a process that would happen naturally from the mother-infant relationship and that is actually increasingly permeated by the presence of daycare. Thus, it is important to think about interventions aimed at educators in order to sensitize them to the emotional aspects of the mother-infant-educator relationship and that can contribute to the separation-individuation process of the infant and of the mother that leaves her child in the care of the nursery. In addition, it is also possible to think of brief and focused interventions for the mother-infant dyad, both in cases of infants attending and not attending daycare, in order to accommodate maternal anxieties faced with the psychological implications of the separation-individuation process, for both the infant and the mother herself, and for the mother-infant relationship.

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