



Publication Date: 4 October 2023

DOI: 10.24946/IJPLS/20230410

International Journal of Prenatal & Life Sciences, ISSN: 2945-011X, DOI: 10.24946/IJPLS

## **Title: Separation Facilitated by Objects in the Theories of Freud, Piaget, and Winnicott**

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Article

### **Abstract**

This article explores the acquisition of "object constancy" and the process of separation from the caregiver, focusing on the theories of Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Donald Winnicott. These three perspectives illustrate how children employ objects to navigate separation. A case study highlights the significance of trust in object constancy during development.

### **Keywords**

object constancy, separation, transitional object, transitional phenomena, caregiver

### **Introduction: Separation and Object Constancy**

The transition from a state of complete dependency on the caregiver to recognizing the caregiver as a distinct entity is a fundamental developmental milestone for children. This process, occurring typically between the ages of one and two, hinges upon the concepts of "object constancy" and "separation."

Object constancy, a term initially introduced by Hartmann (1), denotes a stage in the development of object relations that encompasses both the libidinal and cognitive aspects of a young child's attachment to the caregiver. "Separation," as conceptualized by Mahler (2) as "Separation-Individuation," represents a developmental phase during which the infant gradually distinguishes themselves from the caregiver, gains awareness of their separate identity, and attains relative autonomy (3). Object constancy imbues the child with a sense of security and comfort akin to what the actual caregiver provided in the past (2).

Winnicott (4) introduced the idea of a recognition phase, wherein an object is perceived as "not-me," laying the foundation for the separation process. By engaging with an object, the infant achieves a degree of independence from the caregiver, allowing them to establish a sense of self-presence and responsiveness even in the caregiver's absence.

Benjamin (5) emphasized the importance of both the caregiver and the child being subjective and independent. This developmental task, as per Benjamin, revolves around striking a balance between independence and acknowledging the existence of others. The mother plays a pivotal role in

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fostering the child's independence by making herself available while recognizing the child's independent identity. This delicate tension between self-autonomy and recognition from others is inherent in human development (6). Maternal subjectivity, rather than external force, is critical in facilitating separation (6).

Separation naturally triggers anxiety and aggression, inherent in the process of growth and individuation. Full subjectivity enables individuals to withstand these challenges and allows for complete differentiation (5).

## **Object Constancy**

The paper examines the acquisition of "object constancy" and the process of separation through the lenses of three theorists: Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Donald Winnicott.

### **A. Sigmund Freud: The "Fort-Da" Game**

In his work "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (7), Freud recounted an observation of his 18-month-old nephew. When the child's mother abruptly left him, he experienced frustration. To cope with this separation, the child engaged in a game using a wooden reel and string. He would throw the object behind a curtain, causing it to disappear, only to pull it back while exclaiming "o-o-o." This repetition allowed the child to assert control over his frustration and communicate to the parents that he could handle their absence. Freud stated, "The child in his play seems to say to the object: 'All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself'" (7). This "fort-da" (: gone-there) game helped the child compensate for the mother's absence and grasp the continuity of object constancy (7).

### **B. Jean Piaget's Theory of Object Permanence**

Piaget's theory (8) is rooted in meticulous observations of his own children. He posited that object permanence, the understanding that *objects continue to exist even when not directly perceived*, is achieved by the end of the sensorimotor stage, lasting from birth to two years of age. According to Piaget, this concept is pivotal in developmental psychology (9). The child must recognize that objects possess an independent existence in space, irrespective of their actions. As the child advances through six developmental stages, they progressively comprehend that objects continue to exist when out of sight. This realization marks the commencement of symbolic thinking and the recognition of permanent object existence (10).

Piaget and Inhelder (8) underscored the significance of emotional and social factors in child development, as they drive intellectual growth. They emphasized the interconnectedness of emotional motivation and cognitive processes. In Piaget's framework, a child's ability to control space, causality, and time is vital for coping with separation, particularly from the caregiver.

### **C. Donald Winnicott: Transitional Object and Phenomena**

Winnicott (4) proposed the concept of transitional objects, typically soft items or cot covers, that represent the caregiver or breast. These objects serve as a bridge between the child's inner and outer worlds. They are neither wholly internal nor external but rather the infant's first "not-me" possessions. In healthy development, interest in transitional objects wanes over time, facilitating separation (p. 10). Transitional phenomena constitute a hypothetical space between the infant and the caregiver, where the object is recognized as "not-me." This space allows for creative play, eventually evolving into an appreciation of cultural heritage. It facilitates ongoing movement between connectedness and separateness, between identity and differentiation, as well as

maintaining an infinite number of intermediate hues (13). It emerges in the first year of life when the child invests ordinary objects with personal significance. Through separation from the caregiver, the child gains independence, fostering a sense of presence and responsiveness even in the caregiver's absence. This stage is necessary for the initiation of a relationship between the child and the world and for the child to discover their own personal existence, which together lead to building up what might be called a "continuity of going-on-being" (11). The process is pivotal for the child's development of aloneness and connection (11). The creation of potential space between inner and outer reality marks a critical juncture in human development (12), impacting future relationships and one's capacity for solitude (11).

### **Case Study – The Man with Teddy Bears**

This case study serves as an illustration of the potential consequences when the concept of object constancy persists throughout an individual's life.

The subject of this study was a man residing in my neighborhood, married with two sons. He possessed a formidable intellect, boasting higher education and a wide range of knowledge across various domains. However, his interpersonal demeanor was characterized by introversion, criticality, and impatience.

In stark contrast to his challenging relationships with others, this man harbored an extensive collection of teddy bears, encompassing a diverse array of varieties. Remarkably, he lavished these bears with profound affection, treating them with a devotion that extended to crafting clothing for them. In his eyes, these teddy bears transcended mere playthings; they held an esteemed place within his household. When visitors arrived, he proudly introduced his cherished bears as if they were his own offspring. Within his family circle, no one dared to dismiss them as mere toys.

The origin of this narrative, the man's expansive collection of teddy bears, can be traced back to his early years. At the age of nearly two, he possessed a particular teddy bear of great significance. Tragically, a severe outbreak of a contagious disease prompted his mother to make a fateful decision – she opted to incinerate the beloved bear due to concerns it might transmit the illness. This decision deeply affected the young boy, leaving behind an enduring trauma that continued to haunt him throughout his life. In search of solace and compensation for this traumatic loss, he turned to the obsessive accumulation of teddy bears.

In this poignant case, the concept of the Transitional Object, as articulated by Winnicott (4), did not fade with time. This man found it challenging to place his trust in the constancy of objects, hindering his ability to initiate the separation process. For him, the bears served as a form of compensation, an attempt to fill the void left by an unresolved childhood trauma.

As Winnicott himself noted in his description of a boy with bears (4), there were doubts about the possibility of curing this man. He grappled with dissatisfaction, depression, and self-imposed isolation. Ultimately, he chose to end his life, succumbing to the weight of his unresolved emotional turmoil.

### **Discussion**

This article elucidated how children utilize objects to navigate the process of separation from their caregivers. The acquisition of "object constancy" and separation was examined through the perspectives of three influential theorists: Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Donald Winnicott. These theorists have contributed significantly to our understanding of how children utilize objects to cope

with separation and develop a sense of self. In this discussion, we will explore the key insights and implications of their theories, as well as consider the relevance of these ideas in contemporary contexts.

Sigmund Freud's observation of the "fort-da" game in his nephew offers a compelling glimpse into the child's psyche during moments of maternal separation. The game, involving the disappearance and reappearance of an object, symbolizes the child's attempt to assert control over the mother's absence. Freud's interpretation of this play as the child's declaration of independence—saying, "I'm sending you away myself" (7)—underscores the child's capacity for resilience in the face of separation.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud's insights shed light on the importance of symbolic play in helping children process and overcome the anxiety associated with separation. The game allows the child to express their emotions, manage frustration, and ultimately affirm their existence even in the absence of the caregiver. This understanding has enduring significance in clinical psychology and psychoanalysis, as it highlights the therapeutic potential of symbolic play in addressing separation-related issues and fostering emotional resilience.

Jean Piaget's theory of object permanence extends our understanding of separation in child development by emphasizing the cognitive dimensions of this process. According to Piaget, object permanence marks a pivotal cognitive milestone, enabling the child to recognize that objects continue to exist even when out of sight. This recognition, achieved through six stages of development, is central to the child's capacity for symbolic thinking and the differentiation of self from others.

Piaget's work underscores the intricate interplay between cognitive development and emotional experiences during separation. The child's ability to understand the permanence of objects plays a critical role in their ability to cope with the absence of the caregiver. From a developmental psychology perspective, Piaget's insights highlight the significance of cognitive readiness in managing the emotional challenges of separation. Furthermore, his ideas continue to inform contemporary research on child development and cognitive psychology.

Donald Winnicott's contributions to our understanding of separation are grounded in his concepts of transitional objects and phenomena. These notions introduce a psychoanalytic perspective that bridges the inner and outer worlds of the child. The transitional object, often a soft item, becomes a symbol of the caregiver, facilitating the child's transition from complete dependence to relative independence.

Winnicott's work underscores the importance of these transitional experiences in building a sense of self and fostering resilience in the face of separation. The notion that the child can creatively invest ordinary objects with personal meaning and find comfort in their presence offers valuable insights for psychotherapists and educators working with children.

### **Contemporary Relevance and Evolving Contexts**

As we consider the applicability of these theories in contemporary contexts, it becomes evident that children today face unique challenges and opportunities. The rapid advancement of technology, the pervasive influence of artificial intelligence, and changing family structures all shape the experiences of children as they navigate separation and object constancy.

For instance, the introduction of smartphones, tablets, and virtual interactions has altered the landscape of childhood experiences. Children now have access to digital transitional objects, such as

favorite apps or virtual companions. These digital objects, while different from traditional transitional objects, serve similar functions in providing comfort and continuity in the absence of caregivers. However, they also introduce new dimensions of dependence and autonomy, raising questions about their long-term impact on child development.

Moreover, evolving family structures, including single-parent households, same-sex parents, and co-parenting arrangements, require children to adapt their coping mechanisms regarding separation and object constancy. Understanding how these changing family dynamics influence child development is an area of ongoing research and clinical interest.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the theories of Freud, Piaget, and Winnicott have significantly advanced our understanding of how children employ objects to navigate the complexities of separation and develop a sense of self. These theories offer valuable insights from psychoanalytic, cognitive, and psychotherapeutic perspectives, and their enduring relevance is evident in contemporary discussions of child development. As we continue to explore the impact of evolving environments and family structures on children's experiences, these foundational concepts remain crucial for clinicians, educators, and researchers striving to support healthy development and resilience in children.

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