

**The Self Under Siege:**  
**Chapter 2**  
**A Developmental Perspective**

There are those who say that man will never find a way to be scientific about himself. I believe this is as shortsighted as his own emotionality.... I think the differentiation of self may well be one concept that lives into the future. It merely begins to define how one human life is different from all those in the immediate environment.

Kerr and Bowen (1988, p. 385)

Introduction: Separation and Differentiation

Life can be conceptualized as a series of progressive weaning experiences as originally described by Otto Rank (1936/1972). It begins with birth, then continues with separation from the breast, from the mother, from parents, the first day of school, leaving home, getting married, pregnancy, becoming a parent, saying goodbye to one's children as they leave home, becoming a grandparent, and it ends with one's death, the ultimate separation. As we evolve as individuals and become more independent, we become aware of moving away emotionally from some sense of security in the family. Each separation experience creates a new situation that is both exciting and frightening. It heralds growth and new frontiers but at the same time symbolizes the loss of parental support, which fosters separation anxiety.

A distinction can be made between the concepts of separation and differentiation: the former refers to physical distance or geography whereas the latter refers to distinguishing oneself as a unique individual. In this sense, leaving home is very different from forming a separate identity or individuating. A person may seek independence by leaving one's family of origin but will most likely maintain destructive parental attitudes

and prohibitions that are binding and that negatively impact the emergence of one's personal freedom or independence (Note1).

Differentiation is a universal struggle that all human beings face if they wish to fully develop themselves as individuals. The process of differentiation encompasses four tasks. A person needs to: (1) break with internalized thought processes, i.e., critical, hostile attitudes toward self and others; (2) separate from negative personality traits assimilated from one's parents; (3) relinquish patterns of defense formed as an adaptation to painful events in one's childhood; and (4) develop one's own values, ideals, and beliefs rather than automatically accepting those one has grown up with.

In this regard one must identify one's critical, self-destructive attitudes, understand their source, and challenge them by changing the relevant behaviors. People must come to the understanding that they do not have a fixed identity. They have the power to identify and alter features of their personalities that they find negative or unpleasant. Later, as individuals develop their own values and ethics from within, they can begin to "chart the course of their lives in a manner that is both harmonious and well integrated" (Morrant & Catlett, 2008, p. 350). Differentiating from parental introjects and psychological defenses based on the emotional pain of childhood is essential not only for neurotic or seriously disturbed individuals; it is a central developmental issue in every person's life.

Our distinctive DNA code is the organic basis of our personal identity or self (Note 2). Very early in life, this innate distinctiveness gives rise to our awareness of being separate and alone. This sense of aloneness stimulates a desire for affiliation or belongingness as a survival mechanism. It is impossible for the newborn to begin to develop a self or identity in a vacuum. The self emerges only in relation to another person or persons (Note 3).

Developmental psychologists as well as neuroscientists emphasize that the

development of the neonate's brain and personality is "environmental-dependent" that is, the growth and development of the self are completely dependent upon inputs from the environment, specifically upon stimuli from other human beings (B. Perry, 2001, Schore, 2003b; Siegel, 1999; D. Stern, 1985). Our need for social affiliation and attachment is expressed through the pursuit of love and personal contact; however, when this need is not fulfilled in childhood, we often choose to rely on fantasy processes to compensate for the emotional deprivation we experienced at the time (Firestone, 1985).

#### Positive and Negative Environmental Inputs That Impact the Development of the Self

From the beginning, the parental environment has a profound impact on the baby. In an optimal setting, infants encounter attuned responses from caring adults that promote a feeling of safety which in turn facilitate learning and the further development of the "core" self. These positive inputs originate in interactions with parental figures who are able to provide their children with a secure base from which to explore their world as they grow and develop. Ideally, parents would be warm, affectionate, and sensitive in feeding and caring for their offspring and offer them control, direction, and guidance as well.

Unfortunately, even in a relatively benign atmosphere, a certain amount of damage occurs because of the infant's heightened reactivity to sensory inputs, e.g., overstimulation and/or under-stimulation (D. Stern, 1985) (Note 4). The prolonged dependence of the human infant on his/her parents for physical and psychological survival provides the first condition for defense formation. According to Guntrip (1961), the infant's need for "reliable maternal support" is so absolute and failure to provide it so nearly universal that "varying degrees of neurotic instability...are the rule rather than the exception" (p. 385).

Because the infant or young child lacks worldly experience and a sense of proportion and because of the size differential in relation to the parents, the same events

that might seem relatively trivial or insignificant to adults are often highly dramatic to the child. The desperate need for love and care from a parental figure makes negative experiences appear more exaggerated and dangerous from the child's vantage point. Anger or irritability on the part of parents may actually be seen as life-threatening from the child's perspective, but register only on the periphery of parents' awareness (Note 5). As Winnicott (1958) observed, seemingly innocuous interactions with an insensitive parent can seriously impinge upon the child's "going on being." Even "good-enough" parents, who can be characterized as effective in relation to their child-rearing functions, have certain limitations and deficits that are damaging to the child's emerging self.

The extreme sensitivity of the child to harmful influences that are practically imperceptible to an outside observer is documented in the first author's film, *Invisible Child Abuse* (Parr, 1995). The film offers many examples of relatively healthy individuals who were nevertheless seriously impaired in certain aspects of their development by innocent or not so innocent hurtful actions on the part of their parents. In the film's conclusion, I (R. Firestone) say:

The fact is that all the participants in the film were scarred in ways that negatively impacted their development in the incidental process of growing up. Because of the lack of understanding of children and parent-child relationships, subtle forms of emotional abuse largely go unnoticed or at the least are misunderstood.

It's a certain kind of insensitivity, a certain kind of "lack of feeling"-- basically not seeing the child as a person with tender emotions and a vulnerable nature. These are not the kind of thing that most parents or people would even think were that hurtful until you actually see the damage done to the individuals involved and observe their limitations in how they conduct their lives.

Parental Ambivalence

Parents have a fundamental ambivalence toward themselves that is also manifested in a basic ambivalence toward their offspring. These conflicting feelings and attitudes coexist within all people in all societies (Firestone, 1990a; Hrdy, 1999, 2009; Rohner, 1986, 1991) (Note 6). In research conducted in 35 cultures, Rohner (1986) examined parents' attitudes and found that they existed on a continuum ranging from parental warmth and acceptance to indifference, rejection, and hostility. Both positive and negative attitudes could be measured *intergenerationally* (in both parent and child). The patterns of parental rejection assessed by Rohner and his associates included hostility and aggression, dependency, emotional unresponsiveness, negative self-evaluation (negative self-esteem and negative self-adequacy), emotional instability, and a negative world view (Firestone & Catlett, 1999).

Just as parents indicate positive and negative feelings toward *themselves*, they display both tender, nurturing impulses *and* hostile feelings toward their children. Mothers and fathers have a natural desire to love and nurture their children; however, at times, they harbor unconscious resentment and anger toward them--both profoundly affect their children's ongoing development. Because negative, hostile feelings toward children are generally socially unacceptable, parents are resistant to seeing these aggressive feelings in themselves and attempt to deny or suppress them. However, the negative side of parents' ambivalence is expressed in both critical attitudes and punitive behaviors that the child is highly sensitive to.

In addition, people who are inward, withdrawn, or self-protective tend to be limited in their ability to adjust to the responsibilities of parenthood. For example, a parent may pass on his/her self-protective way of dealing with life by being either overly protective or neglectful in relating to his/her child.

Children are also extremely sensitive in relation to how their parents feel toward *themselves*. They feel relaxed and secure in an environment in which their parents have

positive regard for themselves. However, if their parents have low self-esteem, strong feelings of inferiority, or unresolved feelings of loss or trauma from their past, children intuitively sense their parents' state of mind and feel threatened in their own security (Firestone 1990a).

A parent's ambivalent feelings and attitudes--his/her state of mind--are picked up by the infant or child at the neuronal level, via brain-to-brain communication, during feeding, play, and other social interactions (Cozolino, 2006; Schore, 1994; Siegel, 1999, Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). According to Cozolino, the growth of the infant's brain "depends on interactions with others for its survival" (p. 6).

When good-enough parenting combines with good-enough genetic programming, our brains are shaped in ways that benefit us throughout life. And the bad news? We are just as capable of adapting to *unhealthy* environments and *pathological* caretakers. The resulting adaptations may help us to survive a traumatic childhood but impede healthy development later in life. Our parents are the primary environment to which our young brains adapt, and their unconscious minds are our first reality. (p. 7)

### Emotional Hunger

Most parents believe that they love their children even when their child-rearing patterns would be described as angry, indifferent, neglectful, or even abusive. Parents' internal image or fantasy of love allows them to imagine that their actual behaviors are affectionate and caring. In addition, they often confuse their own intense feelings of need and anxious attachment for genuine love. They fail to make a distinction between emotional hunger, which is a strong need caused by deprivation in their own childhoods, and genuine feelings of tenderness, love, and concern for their child's well-being.

Emotional hunger may be expressed in anxious over-concern, over-protection, living vicariously through one's child, or an intense focus on appearances. Parents who

behave in this manner exert a strong pull on their children that drains a child of his or her emotional resources. The residual effects of parental hunger on adolescent and adult personalities are often evidenced in an inward, self-protective orientation toward life, fear of success, severe anxiety states, or passive-aggressive tendencies (Firestone, 1990a).

#### Parental Withholding

Many parents inhibit or hold back their affection and other positive qualities from their loved ones, particularly their children, despite their best intentions to love and care for them. Because of their own defenses, they are often also unable to accept love and affection from their children. To be refractory to a child's loving responses is especially damaging in that it denies the child a sense of him/herself as a feeling, loving person (Firestone & Catlett, 1999).

The child who is being withheld from is left feeling emotionally hungry and tends to form an anxious/ambivalent attachment to the withholding parent (Note 7). In many cases, children who are hurt in this way stop wanting affection (become self-denying). At the same time, they tend to hold back their natural feelings of love and affection toward their parents. They unconsciously block the flow of their natural feelings, increasingly rely on fantasy for satisfying their needs, and develop a defensive posture toward life for the purpose of keeping real experiences predictable and manageable and maintaining their psychological equilibrium, however negative it may be.

#### Attachment, Attunement, and Misattunement

The newborn needs close contact with a consistent caregiver to ensure its survival and adequate protection from separation experiences and other stimuli that might overwhelm its immature system. According to Bowlby (1982), attachment develops out of an evolutionarily determined behavioral system within the infant that functions to keep it in close proximity to an adult, protects it from harm and intense anxiety states, and later facilitates its exploration of the environment.

The formation of an optimal or secure attachment is largely dependent on the parents' responses to cues or signals from the infant indicating its needs. When parents are sensitively attuned to the baby, they adjust the intensity and emotional tone of their responses to accurately match the child's feeling state and needs. Obviously, no one can ever be completely consistent in adjusting his/her responses to these cues; in fact, research has indicated that attuned interactions occur in only one out of three of parent/infant exchanges (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

Interactions with well-meaning but emotionally immature parents who themselves have suffered a good deal of unresolved personal trauma and loss in their own upbringing are detrimental in innumerable ways to the healthy growth and development of children (Cassidy & Mohr, 2001; Main & Hesse, 1990). In general, parental deficiencies lead to both harmful, insensitive treatment and repeated failures to repair disruptions in attuned interactions between parent and child. These conditions intensify the child's feeling of isolation and fear of abandonment. In such circumstances, children are diverted from what would have been their natural *developmental pathway* and they go on to lead primarily defended lives (Note 8).

Bowlby (1988) proposed the concept of developmental pathways based on the biologist, C. H. Waddington's (1957) theoretical model and distinguished it from the Freudian concept of libidinal phases. In explaining this concept, Bowlby wrote:

At conception the total array of pathways potentially open to an individual is determined by the make-up of the genome. As development proceeds and structures progressively differentiate, the number of pathways that remain open diminishes.

A principal variable in the development of each individual personality is, I believe, the pathway along which his attachment behavior comes to be organized and further that that pathway is determined in high degree by the way his parent-



figures treat him, not only during his infancy but throughout his childhood and adolescence as well. (p. 65).

If a parent is able to successfully repair disruptions in attuned interactions with the child, the child gradually learns to regulate his/her emotions. Repair involves the parent acknowledging the disruption, taking responsibility for it, and providing a reasonable explanation for what happened which would validate the child's reality. The child is then able to make sense of his/her emotional reactions and can begin to construct a coherent narrative of the event. When parents admit their error and try to make restitution, their child is also less likely to blame him/herself, idealize the parent, or internalize an image of being the "bad child" (Note 9).

#### The Impact of Misattunement on the Child's Developing Brain

Preliminary studies in the neurosciences suggest that children as young as one year are able to accurately perceive a parent's purpose or intent from his/her facial expression and tone of voice, perhaps even in the absence of other, more overt expressions of aggression (Cozolino, 2006; Schore, 1994, 2003a, 2003b; Siegel, 2001) (Note 10). During a misattuned or otherwise frightening interaction with a parent, an infant can detect, through specialized cells in its brain (the mirror neuron system), the parent's emotional state and intentions at that moment in time (Iacoboni, 2007; Rizzolati, Gallese, & Fogassi, 2001) (Note 11).

According to Badenoch (2008), "With the discovery and exploration of *mirror neurons* in the last decade, we are becoming aware of how we constantly embed within ourselves the intentional and feeling states of those with whom we are engaged" (p. 37). For example, Siegel (personal communication, 2009) speculated about what an infant or young child might experience during a fear-provoking interaction with an angry parent. Taking the role of the infant in this scenario, Siegel said:

What this looks like from my mirror neuron point of view is you [the parent] come at me, really angry and you're terrifying me with your fury. Now I see your intention. You may not want this intention to be there, but it is. Your intention is to hurt me. Even though it's not your global intention, at that moment, you have it because of your own unresolved trauma. And I look at you and my mirror neuron grouping makes the assessment that the intention of this caregiver is to do me harm.

What is a child supposed to do when his mirror neurons, like sponges, are soaking up the intention to be harmed by the one who's supposed to protect? He fragments. And in that fragmentation is dissociation of the usual continuity of the self.

Research studies in interpersonal neurobiology indicate how the child's developing mind adapts to a parent's feeling state and intentionality (Cozolino, 2006; Siegel, 2004; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003) (Note 12). The data tend to support my (R. Firestone) conceptualization of the process of introjection and its role in the transmission of negative parental attitudes, abusive child-rearing practices, and blatant or more subtle forms of neglect from one generation to the next (Note 13). It has become increasingly clear that the way parents interact (or fail to interact) with children becomes hardwired in their children's brains, often before they are even capable of formulating words to describe what they are experiencing (Schore, 2003a).

#### The Formation of the Self and Anti-Self Systems

*The weak and undeveloped personality reacts to sudden displeasure...by anxiety-ridden identification and by introjection of the menacing person or aggressor.*

Sandor Ferenczi (1933/1955, p. 163)

When parents are out-of-sync with the child, particularly when they become angry, punitive, or emotionally unavailable, the child stops identifying with him/herself

as the frightened, helpless victim and identifies instead with the angry or avoidant parent. This identification partly alleviates the child's fear, yet it also leads to a split in the personality portrayed by R. D. Laing (1960) as follows, "The splitting is not simply a temporary reaction to a specific situation of great danger, which is reversible when the danger is past. It is, on the contrary, a basic orientation to life" (p. 83).

During those interactions, which are terrifying from the child's perspective, children disconnect from themselves and cease to exist as a real self, as a separate entity. In identifying with the punishing or neglectful parent, they incorporate not only the anger or resentment that are being directed toward them, but also any other emotion the parent is feeling at the time, such as guilt or fear. The child takes in a complete representation or internal image of the parent's emotional state at that specific moment. The reason children incorporate these angry, hostile aspects of the parent into themselves is that it is too threatening for them to see the danger as coming from the very person they are dependent upon for survival. Because of their pressing need for love and their utter helplessness during their formative years, children must see their parents as adequate, good, or caring and concerned, and deny any of their inadequacies, weaknesses, or lack of caring and concern for their well-being.

Rather than acknowledge that they are at the mercy of an out-of-control or negligent parent, children come to see themselves as at fault, worthless, and "bad" (Arieti, 1974; Bloch, 1978; Harter, 1999). Similarly, rather than perceiving their parents as incapable of loving them, children come to see themselves as unlovable. This idealization of parents is an essential element of the self-parenting system; "to parent oneself successfully in fantasy, one must maintain the idealized image of one's parent" (Firestone, 1997a, p. 88).

Fonagy, et al. (2002) has described his conceptualization of the defense of identifying with the aggressor in explaining how failures in parents' attunement or

“affect-mirroring” lead to the formation of an “alien self” within the child. Fonagy has asserted that:

The alien self is present in all of us, because transient neglect is part of ordinary caregiving; it is pernicious when later experiences of trauma in the family or the peer group force the child to dissociate from pain by using the alien self to identify with the aggressor. Hence the vacuous self comes to be colonized by the image of the aggressor, and the child comes to experience himself as evil and monstrous.... [Later, there is a] vital dependence on the physical presence of the other as a vehicle for externalization [projective identification]. (p. 198)

In general, children incorporate their parents not as they are most of the time, but as they are at their worst (Note 14). When faced with parents’ overt or covert aggression or indifference, children try to make the best adaptation possible in order to maintain some form of rationality. However, their efforts to remain intact produce a division within the self or personality (Firestone, 1997a) (see Figure 2.1, Division of the Mind).

[Insert Figure 2.1 here]

We refer to this as the “division of the mind,” a primary split between forces that represent the self and those that oppose it. These propensities can be conceptualized as the self-system and the anti-self system, respectively. The two systems develop independently; both are dynamic and continue to evolve and change over time. They are susceptible to influence from significant people throughout in one’s adult life (Firestone, 1997b).

The self system consists of the unique characteristics of the individual, including biological, temperamental, and genetic traits, and his/her harmonious assimilation of the parents’ positive attitudes and traits. Parents’ warmth and nurturance, as well as their ability to repair misattunements, support the development of vital functions of the prefrontal cortex in the child’s brain: body regulation, attunement, emotional balance,

response flexibility, empathy, self-knowing awareness (insight) fear modulation, intuition, and morality (Siegel, 2007, 2010). The effects of ongoing psychological development, further education, and imitation of other positive role models throughout an individual's life span continue to contribute to the evolution of the self system.

One's personal goals--the basic needs for food, water, safety, and sex; the desire for social affiliation, achievement, and life-affirming activity; the expression of love, compassion, generosity, etc.; and transcendent goals related to seeking meaning in life--are all aspects of the self system. Positive environmental influences allow the evolving individual to formulate his/her own value system and to develop the ability and courage to live with integrity, that is, according to his/her ethical principles.

The anti-self system refers to the accumulation of negative introjects, that is, the build-up of internalized parental hostility and cynicism that represents the defensive aspect of the personality. This "alien self" develops as a defensive response to the destructive side of parents' ambivalence: their rejection, hostility, neglect and unresponsiveness. In addition, parents' emotional hunger, over-protectiveness, ignorance, and lack of understanding of a child's nature negatively impact his/her development. Moreover, many parents unconsciously dispose of traits they dislike in themselves by projecting them onto their children, and their children internalize these projections as part of their self-concept. The anti-self system is also affected by other negative events that can occur early in life: birth trauma, accidents, illnesses, traumatic separations, and the actual loss of a parent or sibling (Firestone & Firestone, in press).

The defensive process operating within the anti-self system is influenced primarily by interpersonal pain, which is reinforced and compounded by the suffering inherent in the human condition (e.g., poverty, economic recession, crime, natural disasters, illness, physical and mental deterioration, and death). Once the defensive

solution is formed, people protect it at the expense of limiting their lives and goal-directed pursuits.

This antagonistic part of the personality predominates to varying degrees at different stages throughout the life span. Depending on which system or state of mind is ascendant in the personality--self or anti-self--a completely different point of view will be expressed. Individuals are very dissimilar when they "feel like themselves," which is generally more relaxed and likable than when they slip into the anti-self system and are more reactive, hostile, or toxic to those around them. Often when a person is under stress, there is a breakdown in the self-system, and the anti-self prevails. As R. D. Laing (1960) observed:

A most curious phenomenon of the personality...is that in which the individual seems to be the vehicle of a personality that is not his own.... There seem to be all degrees of the same basic process from the simple, benign observation that so-and-so 'takes after his father,' or 'That's her mother's temper coming out in her,' to the extreme distress of the person who finds himself under a compulsion to take on the characteristics of a personality he may hate and/or feel to be entirely alien to his own. (p. 62)

In this statement, Laing described the component of the anti-self that develops through the processes of introjection and imitation. To preserve the imagined fusion with the idealized parental figure, children unwittingly imitate their parents' undesirable traits and behaviors. The imitative process represents an attempt to cover over what would be a more realistic perception of parental weaknesses and inadequacies. In protecting their parents' image, children displace their (the parents') real inadequacies and negative traits onto other people, and perceive them as more hostile or untrustworthy than they are. In addition, children tend to emulate and internalize their parents' negative, pessimistic views about life, which gradually correspond to their own distrust of others. Their

identification with the idealized parent is strong, whether or not the family situation is frightening or punitive. However, the more that children feel powerless and victimized, the stronger their identification with their parents and their need to idealize them.

### The Fantasy Bond

Early in the developmental sequence, the infant experiences a primitive anxiety reaction when he/she is exposed to traumatic events or a sense of aloneness or separation. Some of these experiences are inevitable in childhood, for example, when the mother leaves the room for a few minutes to warm the baby's bottle. Lacking any realistic sense of time, the baby feels abandoned for what seems to be forever. Alone, hungry, and desperate, the infant screams in frustration, fear, and protest. It attempts to cope with the painful separation anxiety and hunger pangs by utilizing its emerging powers of imagination to create an internal image of the mother, or more specifically, the mother's breast, in its mind.

The reaction to excessive frustration, separation anxiety, and personal trauma is to seek fusion. The image of being merged with the mother, the fantasy bond, in some measure heals the fracture brought about by separation and alleviates anxiety and frustration by partially gratifying the infant's emotional and physical hunger (Firestone, 1985). Indeed, the antidote for real separation is imagined fusion (Note 15).

This fantasized connection, together with rudimentary self-nurturing, self-soothing behaviors, such as thumb-sucking or rubbing a favorite blanket, becomes part of a self-parenting process that leads to a false sense of self-sufficiency. Infants and young children are able to develop this posture of pseudo-independence and omnipotence because they have introjected an image of the "good and powerful" parent into the self, and feel that they need nothing from the outside world. However, at the same time that they find comfort and security from the introjection of the parent, they have necessarily

also incorporated the parent's rejecting attitudes and hostile views toward them and come to see themselves through unfriendly eyes.

The self-parenting process is composed of a self-nurturing component and a component that is self-accusatory and attacking. Both components derive their special character from the internalization of parental attitudes and responses. Children learn to treat themselves much as they were treated by their parents, that is, both nurturing themselves with self-aggrandizing thoughts and self-soothing addictive habit patterns, and punishing themselves with self-critical thoughts and self-destructive behavior.

The degree to which the child, and later the adult, comes to rely on these self-parenting behaviors and fantasy processes is proportional to the degree of stress, frustration, and emotional pain that he/she experienced during the formative years. Extensive research has shown that the cumulative number of aversive incidents (neglect, abuse, witnessing violence, poverty, etc.) experienced by children is directly proportional to the severity of their physical and mental health problems as adults. In one study, Felitti, et al. (1998) reported "a strong graded relationship between the breadth of exposure to abuse or household dysfunction during childhood and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults" (p. 245). In addition, these researchers specified self-soothing addictive behaviors, including smoking, alcoholism, and drug abuse, as mediating factors between the original aversive experiences and elevated rates of early mortality.

The extent and specific kinds of maltreatment experienced by children may also be reflected in the specific types of attachment patterns they form with the parent or caregiver, for example, whether they develop an insecure/anxious, or insecure/avoidant, or disorganized attachment to their caregiver (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). According to J. Solomon and George (2011), "A recent meta-analysis of the conditions under which disorganized attachments [considered as more pathogenic than two insecure categories]



are most likely points strongly to families in which there has been maltreatment or where there is high cumulative stress” (p. 14).

The self-parenting process becomes the core psychological defense, and the child comes to be increasingly dependent on it as a way of compensating for whatever was missing in the primary relationship with his/her parents. The introjected parental image takes on the significance of a survival mechanism in the child’s mind. It prevails as a part of the child’s evolving personality and interferes with the emergence of a separate identity. Illusions of fusion that originally reduced the child’s anxiety impair the adult’s ability to differentiate from self-limiting internalized parental influences.

#### The Impact of the Child’s Evolving Awareness of Death

The wish for fusion and merger denies the reality of separation and, thus, the reality of death. (James B. McCarthy, 1980, p. 201)

Early separation experiences and interpersonal pain in the family lead to the formation of psychological defenses to ward off anxiety, frustration, and distress. Later in the developmental sequence, these defenses are intensified, confirmed and become rigidified when the child first becomes aware of death. Usually between the ages of 3 and 7, children discover the fact of mortality, first their parents’ and then their own (Firestone, 1994b).

The awareness of their parents’ vulnerability to death impacts young children in two ways: (1) On a survival level, the anticipated loss of the parental figure fills them with feelings of terror associated with being abandoned in their helpless state, unable to physically survive on their own. (2) On an emotional level, the prospect of losing the source of warmth, affection, and love evokes deep sadness and pain.

The anticipated death of one’s parents is so traumatic that the child desperately relies on the fantasy bond to maintain an illusion of connectedness that gives him/her a sense of pseudo independence and a perceived ability to deny the truth of his/her parents’

ultimate fate (Note 16). Later, when children are faced with their own mortality and the fact that there is no recourse, the realization completely shatters their world (Firestone & Catlett, 2009a). Their illusion of self-sufficiency is destroyed and they experience overwhelming anxiety. They are confronted with the tortuous truth that their life, which once seemed so permanent, is only temporary. Everything dies, the stars die, and so will the child. Death is separation for eternity. As Lifton (1979) wrote: "Separation is the paramount threat from the beginning of life and can give rise, very early, to the rudiments of anxiety and mourning.... Still extremely dependent upon those who nurture him, the child continues for some time to equate death with separation" (p. 68).

Unconsciously children deny the reality of their personal death by regressing to a previous stage of development, to a phase before death was a reality to them. While they accept the idea of death on an intellectual or conscious level, from a deeper psychological perspective they attempt to escape from a situation that they recognize as hopeless by holding on tenaciously to the familiar defensive solution. Thus, the fantasy bond or self-parenting process is strengthened, and becomes more deeply entrenched as a core defense when the child confronts the death issue (Note 17).

#### Defenses against Death Anxiety

In their attempts to deny or negate the fact of death, many children transfer their fears of dying into obsessive thoughts about "bad guys" or monsters that are out to harm them. Some children regress and become more infantile or engage in forms of magical thinking. Others become distrustful, hostile, or distant toward their parents and others. Perhaps more significant is the phenomenon that children learn to imitate the habitual, defensive behaviors and lifestyles that they observe their parents utilizing in an attempt to deny their own existential realities. For example, a child may emulate his/her parents' avoidance of death by adopting their belief in an afterlife, or their belief that death only happens to old people or bad people or to people who don't take good care of themselves.

They may sense their parents' reluctance to talk about the subject and become silenced themselves, suppressing their questions about the subject and eventually colluding with them in denying the reality of death.

The fantasy bond provides children with an illusion of immortality that helps dispel their existential terror. The imagined fusion with parents, as manifested in introjected parental traits, attitudes and behaviors, remains the most powerful and effective means for denying awareness of death throughout an individual's life. Although these defenses come into play to prevent children's fears of death from surfacing, these feelings are still preserved in the unconscious. Whenever these imagined connections are threatened, the underlying death anxiety is reactivated. People tend to revert to a defensive posture before their anxiety becomes fully consciousness (Arndt, Greenberg & Cook, 2002; Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Solomon, 1999) (Note 18).

In our experience, we have observed a direct relationship between death fears and attempts to re-connect with the introjected parent. The observable manifestations of this trend include: (1) the individual beginning to exhibit some of the undesirable traits and behaviors of his or her parent; (2) the individual experiencing an increase in self-attacks and distrust of other people; (3) the individual feeling more like he or she did as a child, stuck in a familiar negative identity; and (4) the individual intensifying real time contact with actual family members and tending to back away from close associations in his/her current life that have proven to be more respectful, warm and loving.

Once children become conscious of mortality, their defenses go beyond an attempt to protect themselves from interpersonal hurt or rejection. Now, the core defense is also directed toward protecting against the anxiety and dread surrounding their newfound knowledge of death. From this point on, the principal fear underlying a person's resistance to change and differentiation is usually associated with the painful awareness of one's finite existence and essential aloneness in the world. How a person

deals with this existential crisis is a primary determinant of the course of his/her life. The enemy of differentiation is the awareness of death.

### The Core Conflict

There is a core conflict within each person which centers on the choice between contending with painful existential realities or avoiding them. The question is whether to live with emotional pain or to escape into an unreal world. We are all presented with this fundamental dilemma and face a no-win situation. The resolution of this conflict toward a more defended way of life has a profoundly detrimental effect on an individual's emotional health and overall functioning. First, there is a considerable loss of freedom and a diminution of personal experience. Second, anger, which is a natural response to frustration, shame or anxiety, is obscured and tends to be internalized or projected outward. Internalized anger leads to self-denigration, whereas its projection onto others leads to a sense of victimization and counter-aggression, or eventually to a paranoid focus on other people or events.

Third, the defended individual is not well integrated and as a result cannot communicate honestly. For example, if people fail to acknowledge their genuine wants and priorities, then they deceive both themselves and others about their true intentions. If they fail to pursue the goals they claim to want, then their behavior contradicts their expressed wants. This form of internal inconsistency accounts for the prevalence of duplicitous or mixed messages in both personal communications and in society at large, statements that confuse each individual's sense of reality. Lastly, the defended person's life is distorted by a desperate clinging to addictive attachments and a reliance on self-soothing, self-nourishing habit patterns, which contribute to strong guilt reactions. Because defensive patterns spread and eventually become habitual, there is a progressive debilitation in broad areas of functioning. People not only lose energy and develop

symptoms of distress, but they also lose the ability to identify the underlying causes of these symptoms (Firestone, 1997a).

In contrast, less defended, more differentiated individuals have a greater potential to experience all of their emotions, including an increased capacity to feel the joy and happiness of life, and a higher tolerance for intimacy. Yet at the same time, they have a heightened awareness of the inevitability of loss through death. They are also more vulnerable to the pain inherent in living and appear to be more sensitive to events that impinge upon their well-being. People who are relatively undefended feel more integrated, are better able to live more fully and authentically, and tend to be more humane toward others (Morrant & Catlett, 2008).

In contemplating the choice between living defensively and living with a minimal amount of defensiveness, one is faced with a number of salient questions: Why should one invest in close relationships, devote oneself to humane pursuits and transcendent goals when all will be lost in the end? Wouldn't it make more sense to put these disturbing matters aside and numb oneself to the realities of ageing and death? Why not cut off these torturous feelings, defend oneself and put ideas about death and dying out of one's mind?

The problem is that people cannot selectively avoid emotional pain and suffering without losing their real feeling and uniqueness as separate individuals. Making the defensive choice dehumanizes the individual and, as noted, results in a corresponding loss of personal identity. In addition, people cannot be innocently defended; their defenses hurt other people, especially those closest to them.

### Conclusion

Each individual is unique. Differentiation from the negative attitudes and undesirable traits of one's parents and other significant figures in one's childhood is essential for optimal functioning. In the course of a person's development, experiences of

personal trauma and separation anxiety lead to fantasies of fusion and psychological defense formation. This defensive fantasy process is reinforced by the child's developing awareness of death. From that time forward, death anxiety is the driving force behind the defense system; as such, it presents the core resistance to change in psychotherapy and to movement toward higher levels of differentiation.

No parental environment is perfect and families vary considerably in terms of the emotional damage they impose on their offspring. The more trauma children experience, the more they rely on the fantasy bond and imagined fusion. In this sense, parental misattunement, particularly during the early developmental years, is a primary determinant of how much an individual will suffer from the presence of psychopathology and from an inability to differentiate.

The imagined connection to one's parents leads to the incorporation and introjection of the parents' points of view. Whereas parents' positive traits and attitudes are easily assimilated and identified with, the negative aspects of their point of view function as an alien element of the personality, the anti-self system. This malevolent portion of the self is maladaptive and self-destructive, and at its extreme end, suicidal.

The resultant effect of these diverse forms of programming on the ability to maintain one's unique outlook and set of values is powerfully undermining. Few people survive the process and succeed in remaining creative, independent, and inner-directed versus outer-directed. Yet to fulfill one's personal destiny and to make full use of one's life and lifetime, one must make every effort to differentiate. One must brave the anxiety and sense of aloneness which are inevitable in living as a separate individual; the reward of doing so is experienced in maintaining a liking and respect for oneself and in the satisfaction of living an honest, autonomous and meaningful life.

1. Separation and individuation have long been conceptualized as linked in the sense that the degree of separation was seen as proportional to the degree of individuation. According to classical psychoanalytic theories of separation-individuation, as articulated by Blos (1967): “In order to achieve individuation, the adolescent has to let go of the internalized childhood image of the parent” (cited by Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005, p. 90). Researchers Kroger and Haslett (1988), F. Lopez, Watkins, Manus, and Hunton-Shoup (1992) and Lucas (1997) have tested hypotheses to determine “whether the degree of separation from the parents is predictive of the degree of identity development [or individuation]” (Meeus, et al., 2005, p. 91). However, Meeus and colleagues have proposed that “separation and identity development are two processes, which run in parallel” and reported findings from a large study (2,814 Dutch adolescents) to support their hypothesis (p. 91).

2. As noted in Chapter 1, interactions between the genes and the environment as well as *epigenetic* influences need to be considered in determining the phenotypic makeup of the infant and in investigating how both nature and nurture impact the emerging self. According to Meaney (2010) “The recent integration of epigenetics into developmental psychobiology illustrates the processes by which environmental conditions in early life structurally alter DNA, providing a physical basis for the influence of the perinatal environmental signals on phenotype over the life of the individual” (p. 41).

Jacobson (2009) has asserted that “Emerging lines of research from epigenetics suggest that not only can nature alter nurture, but nurture, in turn, has the power to modify nature.... Environmental experiences, particularly those related to stress, have the capacity to alter biological and genetic mechanisms associated with increased risk of problem behavior” (p. 2). Based on three decades of research with animal and human subjects, Tremblay and Szyf (2010) have concluded that:

Epigenetic mechanisms are especially important because they provide a powerful explanation for maternal transmission of behavior disorders that extend beyond the traditional genetic transmission explanations. The mother, through her maternal behavior, can affect DNA methylation of critical genes in the offspring. (p. 497)

Citing Harlow's studies of monkeys and their wire mothers as well as research with Vervet and Rhesus monkeys who were cross-adopted, Champagne (2010) and Jacobson (2009) have provided us with numerous examples of epigenetic effects in primates. Also reported were findings from post-mortem brain imaging studies of human subjects conducted by McGowan, et al., (2009) demonstrating epigenetic changes in the brains of patients who had committed suicide. These researchers found "DNA hypermethylation of the rRNA promoter region in the hippocampus" (Jacobson, p. 2) of patients who *suffered child abuse and neglect* and who died by suicide as compared with those who experienced sudden, accidental death. This finding supported "the hypothesis that epigenetic changes due to social and environmental experiences are related to behavioral traits" (Jacobson, p. 2). Also see Champagne's (2010) research on the effects of low childhood SES [socioeconomic status] on gene expression that "may increase the likelihood of physical and psychiatric illness" (p. 306).

3. Contact with another person or persons is one of the prerequisites for the development of the self. See Steeves (2003), who argued: "The burgeoning consciousness of the infant will not necessarily 'develop' into human intentionality on its own, but rather requires the presence of a Significant Other who is human" (p. 13-14).

Lockley (2011) has observed that "Rare cases of feral children and abnormal development severely compromise the quintessential human traits of language, self consciousness and their experience of the world.... Without language and self consciousness, the child's psychological experience would not be fully or healthily



human” (para 3). In *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, D. Stern (1985) clarified how the infant’s “emergent self,” through repeated interactions with the mother or primary caregiver, gradually evolves into a “core self,” and later, a “subjective self” and lastly, a “narrative self” which emerges around three years of age. Similarly, L. Stern (1991) pointed out that “Some theorists emphasize the self as fundamental for relationships (e.g., Erikson, 1963) while others emphasize relationships as fundamental for the self (e.g., Kohut, 1977; Winnicott, 1960[1965])” (p. 112).

4. In describing specific stimuli that impinge on the infant, both overly exciting and aversive, D. Stern (1985) delineated “all the influences that disrupt the organized perceptions of self: overstimulation, situations that disrupt the flow of tonic perceptions that maintain the sense of self (being thrown too high in the air with too long a fall); experiences of self/other similarity that confound the self/other boundary cues; maternal under-stimulation that reduces certain tonic and phasic self-experiences” (p. 199).

5. Stimuli from the environment that are assessed by the infant or young child as either dangerous or “life-threatening” are received and processed through a bi-directional circuitry described by Stephen Porges (2011) in his explanation of the Polyvagal Theory. Porges emphasized that in order for individuals “to effectively switch from defensive to social engagement strategies, the mammalian nervous system needs to perform two important adaptive tasks: (1) assess risk, and (2) if the environment is perceived as safe, inhibit the more primitive limbic structures that control fight, flight, or freeze behaviors” (p. 273). Neuronal perception or *neuroception* describes a process that takes place outside of conscious awareness, “that is capable of distinguishing environmental (and visceral) features that are safe, dangerous, or life-threatening” (p. 273).

6. For a historical-evolutionary view of parental ambivalence, see *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection* (Hrdy, 1999) and *Mothers and Others* (Hrdy, 2009). Hrdy asserted that:

Maternal ambivalence is treated today as if it were a deep secret only just being unveiled.... Far from being surprised or shocked, we should be asking ourselves how we failed to expect these ambivalent emotions in their every nuance. There are good reasons *why* infant demands sometimes seem so insatiable, and there are equally good reasons *why* mothers sometimes find such servitude overwhelming and resist them. There are also sound evolutionary reasons why such tensions would have an important impact on the developing child's view of the other people in his or her world. For what Bowlby termed the baby's "internal working model" of relationships would in fact constitute the best predictor any developing human could have about what to expect. (Hrdy 1999, p. 391)

7. Research in attachment theory has shown that the child whose parent or caregiver is withholding or emotionally unavailable often develops an anxious/avoidant attachment pattern with that parent, whereas children raised by an emotionally hungry, overly protective, or intrusive parent tend to develop an anxious/avoidant pattern of attachment with that parent. According to Hazan and Shaver (1994):

The typical caregiver of an anxious/ambivalently attached infant, observed in the home, exhibited inconsistent responsiveness to the infant's signals, being sometimes unavailable or unresponsive and at other times intrusive.... [Their infants] appeared both anxious and angry and were preoccupied with their caregivers to such a degree that it precluded exploration.... Caregivers of avoidantly attached infants consistently rebuffed or deflected their infants' bids for comfort, especially for close bodily contact.... These infants...avoided contact with their caregivers, and kept their attention directed toward the toys. (p. 6)

Also see "The Social Construction of the Subjective Self" by Gergeley (2007) who noted that sensitive, attuned parents or caregivers tend to "repeatedly present their infants during affect-regulative interactions with empathic emotion displays that imitatively

‘mirror’ their baby’s momentary affect-expressions (including the empathic mirroring of negative affect displays as well” (p. 61). Experiments testing this hypothesis and reactions of infants categorized as avoidantly and ambivalently attached to their mothers are described in Gergeley’s chapter in *Developmental Science and Psychoanalysis: Integration and Innovation* (Mayes, Fonagy, & Target, 2007).

8. During the first 18 months of life, important neuronal connections are being laid down in the infant’s brain, especially in the right hemisphere. According to Schore (2009):

In light of the observations that the emotion-processing human limbic system myelinates in the first year-and-a-half...and that the early-maturing right hemisphere...which is deeply connected into the limbic system--is undergoing a growth spurt at this time, attachment experiences specifically impact limbic and cortical areas of the developing right cerebral hemisphere. (p. 194)

However, according to Badenoch (2008), in the context of a harsh or alarming interaction with a parent: “Stress may cause excessive pruning of neural connections between the hemispheres...making it difficult for this child to generate words for feelings or create a meaningful and containing story of inner experience, especially since Mother lacks the resources to shape her own story or give words to her child’s experience” (p. 136).

9. In repairing a misattunement with their child, parents can talk with him/her about what happened, which allows the experience to become part of the child’s explicit or procedural memory system--part of the “autobiographical” self. Research has demonstrated that individuals who have integrated a coherent narrative of their childhood and made sense out of these misattuned experiences, as determined by the *Adult Attachment Interview* (AAI) (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1984) are more likely to form a secure attachment with their own children (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991).

10. In discussing how infants are able to “read” the intentions of the caregiver, Siegel (2001) noted that:

The mind of the child appears to develop a core manner in which the mental states of other individuals become represented within the neural functioning of the brain.... One form of neural map is the way in which the brain creates images of other minds.” (p. 82) We can propose that within the child’s brain is created a multisensory image of the emerging caregiver’s nonverbal signals. These nonverbal signals reveal the primary emotional states of the individual’s [caregiver’s] mind. (p. 84)

Writing from an evolutionary perspective, Hrdy (2009) proposed that within the brains of early Homo sapiens, a “novel nervous system” probably developed that:

would in turn have been exposed to selection pressures that favored the survival of any child born with slightly better aptitudes for enlisting, maintaining, and manipulating alloparental [substitute caregiver] ministrations. In this way, natural selection would lead to the evolution of cognitive tendencies that further encouraged infants to monitor and influence the emotions, mental states, and intentions of others. (p. 121)

11. Re: mirror neurons: the discovery of mirror neurons has significantly modified our view of human nature. According to Iacoboni (2009):

Traditionally, our biology is considered the basis of self-serving individualism, whereas our ideas and our social codes enable us to rise above our neurobiological makeup. The research on mirror neurons, imitation, and empathy, in contrast, tells us that our ability to empathize, a building block of our sociality...and morality...has been built “bottom up” from relatively simple mechanisms of action production and perception. (pp. 666-667) An fMRI study of imitation and observation of facial emotional expressions (Carr, et al., 2003)

tested the hypothesis that empathy is enabled by a large-scale neural network composed of the mirror neuron system, the limbic system, and the insula connecting these two neural systems. Within this network, mirror neurons would support the simulation of the facial expressions observed in other people, which in turn would trigger activity in limbic areas, thus producing in the observer the emotion that other people are feeling. (p. 665)

According to Siegel (personal communication, 2009) “when you can see an act of intention, you *create a map of that intention the perceiver's own experience. What this tells us is that we are hard-wired to perceive the mind of another being.* But the mirror neuron system works with the superior temporal cortex and other areas to actually do more than just imitate behavior. *It simulates internal states.*”

12. See “Attachment and Self-Understanding, Parenting with the Brain in Mind,” in which Siegel (2004) proposed hypotheses, based on extensive brain-imaging studies, about how attachment relationships shape neural connections in the infant’s developing brain:

This shaping process, for example, may enable parent-child interactions to alter the genetically programmed ways in which the brain matures and sculpts those fundamental processes, such as regulating emotions, responding to stress, remembering our past, and even developing our abilities to empathize with others (mindsight).... In this way, secure attachment relationships may promote resilience and well-being by supporting the integrative capacities of the child’s developing brain. (pp. 29-30)

13. Re: childhood neglect: see B. Perry’s (2002) observations of Romanian orphans who suffered severe neglect during the first year of life and showed significant loss of cortical function in the fronto-temporal areas of the brain. Perry’s observations are similar to those of Schore (2003a) who cited extensive large body of studies in

neurobiology showing that “an impairment of the orbito-frontal cortex is a central mechanism in the behavioral expression of violence” (p. 269). Schore observed that “There is a link between neglect in childhood and antisocial personality disorders in later life.” (p. 268). Schore linked this damage to subsequent aggressive states and violent behavior. According to Schore:

Physically abused infants show high levels of negative affect, while neglected infants demonstrate flattened affect.... But the worst case scenario is, not infrequently, found in a child who experiences both abuse and neglect.... There is agreement that severe trauma or interpersonal origin may override any genetic, constitutional, social, or psychological resilience factor. (pp. 268-269)

With respect to the long-term effects of neglect, maltreatment, and other toxic environmental factors on adult functioning: it has been demonstrated that the number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is proportional to the severity of adult medical and psychological disorders (Chapman, et al., 2004).

14. Re: incorporation or introjection of a parent’s maladaptive point of view under conditions of stress: Two important psychological processes, identification and *introjection*, which are critical in terms of the child’s development, are also responsible for “the inclusion of a systematized ‘parental’ point of view within the self (Firestone, 1988). Neurologically, Lewis and Todd (2004) suggested that in punitive, stressful situations the child may shift his/her attention in a way that facilitates the incorporation of parents’ point of view.

For example, a blend of anxiety and rage felt toward a parent can shift to rage directed at the self, with only a small piece of the appraisal (i.e., its object) being replaced.... The neurological fault line that subserves such changes [may include] the...orbitofrontal and anterior cingulate systems. (Left and right-hemisphere differences may also play a central role in the switching of subjectivities). (p. 53)

In explaining self-determination theory, Grolnick, Deci, and Ryan (1997) have made a distinction between the processes of identification and introjection in relation to assimilating external (parental and societal) values and regulations. For example, they described introjection as resulting in less adaptation and poorer emotional health than identification or integration. For example, in *introjected* regulation:

Externally imposed regulations have been “taken in” by the person but are maintained in essentially their original form. The resulting source of regulation is within the person, but it has not been integrated with the self and is thus a source of tension and inner conflict. Regulation is not perceived as one’s own, but instead as controlling and coercive (p. 141).

15. Re: the fantasy bond: A number of other theorists have elaborated on the concept of the fantasy bond, including Hellmuth Kaiser (Fierman, 1965), Karpel (1976, 1994), Shapiro (2000), Wexler and Steidl (1978), and Willi (1975/1982). See studies by Silverman, Lachmann, and Milich's (1982) who presented subjects with the subliminal message "Mommy and I are One" on the tachistoscope, which functioned to ameliorate severe symptoms in schizophrenic and other less disturbed individuals. Interpretations of the findings from this research have become controversial in the field of psychology. See Chirban’s (2000) findings and interpretations that discriminated between “oneness experiences,” that are progressive and transformative, and “oneness fantasies” that are based on longings for merger with figures from the past and so become generally regressive.

16. Nagy (1948/1959) suggested that children’s awareness of the irreversibility of death develops between the ages of 5 and 9 years. Others place it at an earlier age, between ages 3 and 7, or even earlier (Hoffman & Strauss, 1985; Rochlin, 1967; Speece & Brent, 1984), and Robert Kastenbaum (2000) has cited a case in which this more complete understanding of death appeared to occur in a toddler at the age of 16 months.

17. Sylvia Anthony (1971/1973) reported that many children had a fantasy that reuniting with the mother would imbue them with immortality: "In all these instances, anxiety is clearly about death as separation from the love-object, and the defence has taken the form of a belief or hope of union in death; indeed, unconsciously of a closer union in death than was possible in life" (p. 151). Some children who have suffered unusual trauma and early loss may be unable to successfully rid themselves of morbid thoughts about death and may develop generalized anxiety, panic disorders, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, asthma, or other psychosomatic complaints (Furer & Walker, 2008; Kosloff, et al., 2006; Monsour, 1960; Noyes, Stuart, Longley, Langbehn, & Happel, 2002; Randall, 2001; Strachan, et al., 2007).

18. For example, Arndt, et al. (2002) found that "Death primes that were presented outside of conscious awareness...increased worldview accessibility immediately.... These results support the idea that nonconscious knowledge of mortality is embedded in an associative network that also contains interconnections with beliefs that function to protect individuals from these concerns" (p. 320). Also see "A Dual-Process Model of Defense against Conscious and Unconscious Death-Related Thoughts: An Extension of Terror Management Theory by Pyszczynski, et al. (1999) who pointed out, "People manage their potential for terror without having to actually experience that terror, just as people and other animals can learn to engage in actions to avoid fear-producing stimuli without experiencing the affect that such situations would engender in the absence of such avoidance responses" (836).