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Born into a Jewish family in Sopron, Hungary, Margaret Mahler (1897–1985) is one of the founding pioneers in psychoanalytical theory and practice. She is most noted for her separation-individuation theory of child development, which emphasizes identity formation as occurring within the context of relationships. After immigrating to the United States in 1938, Mahler's work as a child psychiatrist informed her theory regarding the interplay between our internal (psychological) development and our external social environment. This approach was considered scandalous within her professional community, which tended to minimize sociocultural and relational contributors to our sense of self. Her conceptual framework regarding the nature of attachment relating, specifically our need for both closeness and distance, is imbedded in many theoretical constructs regarding attachment, interpersonal relationships, family, and broader social system functioning.

In her separation-individuation theory of child development, Mahler hypothesized that the process of becoming—of *separating* (differentiating out from our perceptual and emotional fusion with others) and *individuating* (developing concrete autonomous skills and abilities)—occurred through a lifelong process of connecting and separating. Like the ebb and flow of a tide, each person continually needs to relationally "move in," experiencing self within the context of "we" (*symbiosis*). Likewise, we continually need distance, to "move out" to reestablish connection to self as an "I" as we synthesize the good, bad, and indifferent of current relationships or explore new roles, relationships, and challenges.

The cycle nears its conclusion as we feel the tug to move back toward connection, but with skepticism, fear, or resentment. This ambivalence is anchored by our dual encounter with the exhilaration of self-mastery and autonomy (as well as the comfort of disconnection in reaction to disappointment) and the joy of love, of knowing others, and of being known (as well as the despair of loneliness). The process of overcoming this ambivalence occurs as we move back in, gradually making peace and honoring these competing drives and experiences, accepting that we need distance from and connection with imperfect others, even as they need the same from our imperfect selves. As we relax into and accept the strengths (the good) and limits (the bad) of self and other, deeper levels of care and trust are made possible. This informs the internalized attachment schemas forming our core sense of self, a safe harbor in the presence of anxiety in all its varying forms and intensities throughout life.

The cycle begins again within our ongoing and new relationships. Each iteration and developmental stage reflects and provokes identity formation, which in turn allows for a continual evolving of our ability to engage in reciprocating relationships and manage the anxieties associated with them. Mahler believed that our capacity to understand and live with a both-and rather than an either-or response to this ebb and flow influences our level of health or distress as individuals and a society.

As children progress through their first and subsequent iterations of connecting, separating, and reconnecting, Mahler offered a nuanced application of what a parent's relational attunement may look like in any given moment within the child's current cycle. Each of Mahler's six development stages—(1) normal autism, (2) symbiosis, (3) differentiation, (4) practicing, (5) rapprochement, and (6) object constancy—suggests thematic attachment behaviors, varying along a continuum from a more hands-on to a hands-off approach. However, the affective and cognitive stances remain the same: one of openness and embrace of the child's need or challenge. The child's developmental level, current context, and personality inform the actual attachment-based response.

For example, in the earliest stages (Stage 1, normal autism, to Stage 2, symbiosis) of the infant's first and most foundational iteration, the child needs a high level of reassuring and affirming connection expressed physically and verbally in between moments of needed breaks from affective or physical engagement. The parents' job is to welcome the child's dependency needs and varying moods. A third-grade student revisiting these stages after a tough day at school or a bad nightmare may need extra hugs or time together doing activities of special meaning. Meanwhile, adolescents often experience new depths of symbiosis with a reciprocating peer. But they still need to frequently nestle in, though on their own terms; the attuned parent reads those moments and responds accordingly.

As the toddler takes the first steps away from the parent or the adolescent prepares to move away from home emotionally and physically, both are entering the substages of separation-individuation (Stage 3, differentiation; Stage 4, practicing; Stage 5, rapprochement; and Stage 6, object constancy). Attachment behaviors begin to look different as steps of autonomy are supported without parental judgment or abandonment, and moments of reconnection are not forced or disparaged. Here, the attentive parental stance is with arms open, allowing the child to venture away even while keeping a watchful eye: The toddler begins to crawl away from the lap of the parent, while the adolescent wants extended curfews and increased privacy. Those same hands provide a welcoming embrace when the child returns with whatever affective need drives the refueling, whether excitement over new discoveries, anger at limitations, guilt or shame due to failure, or just longing for the embrace of a loved one. The toddler's return may have been precipitated by a bump on the head or the need for reassurance after the first of many power struggles to come. The adolescent may seek reconnection after a betrayal by a peer or an encounter with law enforcement. Hence, attachment behaviors include relationally moving in and moving out in response to the developmental need and circumstance of the relational other.

Mahler's developmental model has practical applications beyond child development. Her cycle of symbiosis to object constancy is easily applied to numerous types of relationships, for example, adult intimacy, the embrace of a new belief system or community, and mentor–mentee relationships, such as the supervisor and supervisee. New relationships with people, organizations, or ideas often include a honeymoon period in which we experience symbiosis. The need to reconnect with previous interests and relationships or to focus on other tasks of the day, or emerging awareness of the imperfections of the new person, place, or cause begins the separation-individuation process. We remain connected, in deeper or perhaps a more limited form, as we come to terms with the positive and negative elements in the self, the other, and the relationship.

The challenges of connection and separation are evident in systems theories such as David Olson's cohesion construct within the circumplex model and Murray Bowen's differentiation concept within general systems theory. Similar to Mahler's concept of whole-object relating, Bowen maintains that our lifelong challenge is to move out from fusion, experienced as either enmeshment or disengagement, and into differentiation.

On a societal level, Mahler's hunch regarding the universal struggle between connection and autonomy, and the tendency to "split" (be cut off from some element of human experience as a defense) rather than to engage in whole-object relating, can be observed within a culture as it struggles with the concepts of community and individuality. This struggle is most evident in the macrosystem values shaping its political, economic, military, education, and religious systems.

Mahler's own life reflects her relational challenges, navigating between symbiosis and object constancy. Her childhood was dominated by a rejecting mother and a doting father, who appeared to treat her as a substitute mate or the son he never had. Despite her success as a physician in Europe and the United States during an era of overt and persistent sexism, she also lived in fear for her life due to her Jewish identity; her father died shortly after Germany's invasion of Hungary (1944), and her mother died a year later in an Auschwitz concentration camp. Her adult relationships with friends, colleagues, and students have been characterized as either overly connected or highly conflictual. She was both loved and disliked, both celebrated and feared.

It is easy to speculate that Mahler's experience of deep longing for embrace in the face of rejection inspired her professional work with children and the birth of her developmental theory. Regardless, her life and work invite us to observe in self and others the lifelong challenge to become a self within the context of a relationship and to see the humanity in that struggle as we continually navigate our own needs for connection and separation.

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